2025

Conceptualizing success in a school music program where racism and classism intersect

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Dissertation

CONCEPTUALIZING SUCCESS IN A SCHOOL MUSIC PROGRAM WHERE RACISM AND CLASSISM INTERSECT

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

2025

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DEDICATION

For my students,

You have been my greatest teachers. You have shaped my career, challenged my thinking, and reminded me why I love what I do. Your spirit, passion, and creativity continue to inspire me every day. This work is, in many ways, a reflection of all that you have taught me. Your voices are powerful beyond the notes you perform. May they be heard louder than any melody, carrying your strength, dreams, and truth wherever you go. Keep making music, keep striving, and never let the world silence you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is the result of years of dedication, learning, and perseverance, but I did not walk this path alone. So many people have been part of this journey, and I am deeply grateful for their support, encouragement, and patience along the way.

To my parents, Frank and Laurie—thank you for always believing in me. Your love, support, and encouragement have been my foundation. From childhood dreams to this moment, you have been there every step of the way, and I could not have done this without you. To my (step)children—Bella, Giana, and Anthony—you have been my constant source of inspiration. I wanted to show you that hard work, passion, and perseverance can make anything possible. I hope this journey has inspired you to keep learning, dreaming, and chasing your own goals.

To my advisors and mentors—Drs. Vincent Bates, Diana Dansereau, and André de Quadros—thank you for pushing me to grow as a scholar, writer, and educator. Your insights, high expectations, and belief in my work helped shape this dissertation into something I can present with great pride. Your signatures on this document represent not only my achievement but also the invaluable guidance you provided along the way.

To my family members—Chris & Alexandrina, Diane & Nucci, Laura & John, Luke & Jack, Susan & Nancy & Leslie, and my four dearly departed grandparents—thank you for your constant support, no matter the distance. You have been a steady presence throughout this journey, always there when it mattered. Whether near or far, here or gone,

your encouragement, reliability, and hilarity have meant more than I can put into words. To my work colleagues and second family—Robert, Dan, Tom, Reid—you witnessed my trials and tribulations through every part of this process, from the long days to the frustrating nights. You saw the ups and downs, the revisions, the celebrations, and everything in between. Your encouragement, validation, humor, and pranks helped me keep going.

To my best friends—Kristin, Nick, Kala, Ashley, Julia, and the Edgewood 10—thank you for listening, for cheering me on, for tolerating my stress, and for making me laugh when I needed it most. You reminded me that life exists outside of school, and I am grateful for your patience, unwavering support, and reality checks.

And finally, to my husband, Alex—there are no words to fully express my love and gratitude. Thank you for your patience, your understanding, and your unwavering belief in me. You kept things together when I was too overwhelmed to do so. You handled life so I could focus. You have been my rock through it all. I am endlessly grateful.

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic dissertation explores how I conceptualize success in a public-school music program shaped by the intersecting influences of racism, classism, and deficit-based ideologies. Drawing from my experiences as a white, middle-class music educator in a predominantly Black, low socioeconomic status (SES) school, I examine how conventional music education standards, which are grounded in elite Eurocentric traditions, fail to reflect the cultural wealth and artistic expression of students from marginalized communities. Rooted in critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist education, I interrogate the ideological and structural forces that constrain student success and critique the dominance of standardized assessments rooted in Western classical paradigms. Through narrative inquiry and critical self-reflection, I explore alternative, asset-based approaches that affirm student voice, resilience, creativity, and community engagement as valid and powerful indicators of musical and educational success. Based on these findings, I contribute perspectives that may assist other educators in challenging structural limitations and affirming the cultural strengths of their students through more inclusive approaches to music teaching and learning.

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"Without a struggle, there can be no progress" – Frederick Douglass

Introduction

This dissertation is the story of my life-long musical journey, examining the role music education has played for myself as both student and teacher within the context of a predominantly Black[1] and low socioeconomic status (SES) school district. This journey has been filled with success and failure, joy and sorrow, frustration and revelation. I acknowledge at the outset my positionality as a white, middle-class woman who, despite being deeply embedded in this community as both an alumnus and current educator, holds privileges that differ significantly from many of my students. While I have lived near poverty and racial discrimination, these are not my lived experiences. I also recognize that my students possess cultural and personal strengths I do not—assets that are too often undervalued in public education. This tension informs the reflective stance I take throughout this dissertation.

This dissertation centers on the question of how dominant frameworks in music education, particularly those rooted in Western classical traditions, have contributed to the misrepresentation and marginalization of students from racially and socioeconomically minoritized communities. In many school settings, culturally specific

[1] This dissertation will capitalize "Black" as a racial group due to the united sense of identity and culture among people who identify as Black (Daniszewski, 2020). The term "white," however, will be presented in the lowercase, as there is less commonality of history and culture within this racial group, and to avoid reinforcing systemic inequalities and injustices (Daniszewski, 2020).

musical expressions are excluded or devalued in favor of elite Eurocentric curricula, performance standards, and adjudication criteria. These practices can overlook the lived experiences, creative strengths, and musical identities of students whose backgrounds fall outside these dominant traditions, resulting in a disconnect between students and the curriculum. By critically examining how these dynamics have shaped my own teaching experiences in a majority-Black, low SES district, I aim to explore alternative, asset-based approaches that center student voice, honor cultural relevance, and challenge traditional definitions of success in school music programs.

Through autoethnography, I strive to engage in critical introspection, utilizing reflective writing based on current and past experiences while examining themes of social justice and quality of life within my experiences with music education (Ellis et al., 2011). As such, this study also presents an opportunity to focus on the triumphs that are happening in a music classroom within a school district too often portrayed through deficit narratives regarding academics, economics, safety, culture, and school climate.

The asset-based stance I seek to promote in this dissertation grew through many years of teaching in which I experienced bouts of personal negativity, depression, and burnout. For 20 years, constant criticism from colleagues and others affected how I viewed my work and professional choices. Colleagues and administrators transferred often to other schools, and they offered alternative paths for me to follow in education. I listened carefully to the narrative that was being played around me where I consistently heard that the students I had were unable to learn because of their home environments, financial instability, and poor work ethics. This deficit-based perspective, well-

documented in education research (Valencia, 1997), perpetuated harmful assumptions about my students. Over time, I recognized a degree of inadequacy in these narratives, perceiving that they often reflected biases rooted in whiteness and class privilege. I began to question not only these narratives but also the sources of my own assumptions.

Initially, my teaching was overshadowed by exhaustion, negativity, and burnout, driven by persistent criticism and a pervasive lack of recognition for student achievements. For example, most concerts were not attended by administrators, yet critiques of the music program still appeared at board meetings—reflecting a broader pattern of outsider judgment based on assumptions rather than engagement. Similarly, young musicians diligently working in elementary school to play the recorder endured dismissive comments from adults, including teachers and parents, who remarked how atrocious sounding the recorders were and how glorious it would be when music lessons ended. In retrospect, I recognize how these attitudes may have reinforced a culture of invalidation and trivialization—but also how the recorder itself, rooted in elite European traditions, may not have been the most meaningful or culturally relevant instrument for honoring my students' musical identities. This experience prompted deeper reflection on how pedagogical tools can unintentionally undermine rather than affirm students' cultural wealth. These experiences speak to a broader culture of burnout that often affects educators in low-SES schools, especially when student efforts go unrecognized. Within a system that privileges standardized measures of success, both students and teachers are at risk of being overlooked, even when meaningful learning and growth are occurring.

I have always been passionate about how music education can amplify students' voices, nurture a sense of belonging, support socioemotional growth, and honor diverse cultural identities, particularly for those who have historically been underserved or marginalized. I did not want anyone hindering that feeling of musical accomplishment due to the potential ignorance, artistic biases, politics, or disinterest of other adults. Without external reinforcement, teaching often felt like going through the motions with little meaning. As long as the job was done and students passed their classes, employers considered that successful, but frustration remained as I perceived accomplishments as going unrecognized. Others rarely acknowledged how remarkable and culturally rich the students were or how music education helped them express and celebrate their identities. Negativity seemed to overshadow positivity, and shifting this perception became a priority. Many students appeared to be navigating complex challenges and emotions, which I may have misinterpreted as cynicism at the time.

Over time, these experiences compelled me to begin rethinking my own approach, shifting away from externally driven validation toward a deeper appreciation for the inherent strengths, engagement, creativity, and resilience my students already possessed. Initially, my teaching was influenced by a belief—common among educators at the time—that it was my responsibility to help students overcome perceived deficiencies and to achieve validation through traditional measures of success. However, through ongoing reflection, I also recognized that my perspective was limited and evolving. Rather than positioning myself as someone tasked with correcting deficits, I began to see my role as affirming and amplifying the rich cultural assets, lived experiences, and existing talents

my students brought to the classroom. Immersing myself fully into the student community became essential—not just to help them realize their potential within traditional academic frameworks, but more importantly, to validate the inherent worth, dignity, and creativity they already embodied. I began to embrace diversity and collaborated with students to build an inclusive environment grounded in support and respect.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my understanding continues to evolve. This reflection aligned with the critical theory approach I later encountered in the work of Regelski (2020), who argued that music education should not simply reproduce dominant cultural values but instead support students in making informed, contextually grounded choices that reflect their lived realities. This pedagogical shift parallels the movement in education research away from deficit frameworks and toward asset-based models such as culturally sustaining pedagogy. Rather than seeking to compensate for what students lack, this approach calls educators to recognize the cultural wealth that students already bring into the classroom and to build learning environments that affirm those identities.

My own position as a former student and now a teacher within this district gives me a unique vantage point, although I also recognize that my personal experiences differ significantly from most of my students in an important way. I have not experienced racism or classism. However, witnessing systemic inequities—such as funding disparities, media portrayals, disciplinary practices, and curricular decisions—particularly in schools with predominantly Black and low socioeconomic status student populations,

has significantly shaped my evolving understanding of my role as an educator. These experiences have prompted an ongoing reconsideration of what it means to teach responsibly and equitably in such contexts. While this dissertation reflects a deepening sense of responsibility and advocacy, it is also part of a continuing journey to more fully understand how to support and affirm the communities I serve.

It became clear to me at the time that without focusing on positive occurrences—no matter how small or seemingly unimportant I might perceive them to be—lasting in the field would be unsustainable for me professionally. Once the enormous number of what I considered to be small victories happening in the classroom became the focus, my mental health, well-being, and productivity improved. I also felt that student engagement improved, ultimately leading to what seemed like much larger victories. As my teaching philosophy evolved, I also began to shift from attempting to "fix" perceived deficits to recognizing and affirming at least some of the assets students already seemed to possess. Rather than framing students primarily as needing rehabilitation or reform, I began to look for and see their inherent strengths, curiosity, and capabilities. Now, teaching in a thriving music department with no substantial budget, resources, or technologies, I witness students actively demonstrating creativity, leadership, and collaboration in ways that traditional academic measures may not fully capture or appreciate. Rather than conforming to dominant norms, students leverage their existing strengths and cultural knowledge to navigate and enrich our music classroom. Racial and economic boundaries between students are consistently broken. For example, in my school, interracial peer tutoring occurs regularly, Black students are frequently cast as leading actors in

traditionally white musical theater roles, students collaboratively prepare for elite regional choir auditions through peer coaching during lunch periods and by arranging shared transportation, and nearly all music students participate in fundraising efforts that raise thousands of dollars, making class trips and supplemental music lessons accessible when they would otherwise be financially out of reach. In our music classroom, everyday moments of creativity, collaboration, and growth often challenged deficit-based assumptions. While these experiences have been affirming for me, I have also seen students take pride in their work—suggesting they, too, recognized the value in what we were building together. These examples challenge dominant definitions of musical success, which often rely on external validation, formal adjudication, or alignment with Western classical norms. From the lens of culturally sustaining pedagogy, they reflect authentic student engagement, cultural relevance, and collaborative identity formation—core indicators of success that often go unrecognized in formal standards.

I am working to develop an asset-based perspective as I also strive to understand intersections between race and class and what it means for students and teachers alike to be successful in music education. In this dissertation, I conceptualize success through my own experiences as a music student, teacher, and researcher, including my perceptions of the achievements, experiences, and interests of students. Traditional measures of success, according to Button (2010) are built around the effectiveness of teaching, which can be pupil oriented, evaluation oriented, management oriented, and subject oriented. The subjective nature of defining, identifying, and gauging success aligns with the critical nature of music education, where interpretation can be tailored depending on the

composer, performer, director, or listener. In a low SES and racially diverse setting, definitions of success presented eventually in this dissertation offer a departure from norms based on state and national standards of achievement. Instead of relying on academic success indicators such as grades and GPA—which often reflect dominant cultural norms and systemic privilege rather than meaningful learning (Bourdieu, 1986)—success became reconceptualized through culturally relevant expression, emotional connection, identity affirmation, and active, authentic engagement in music-making. An asset-based approach can foster an environment built upon inclusion, camaraderie, and mutual respect, enhancing socioemotional growth, improved dispositions, identity acceptance, and behavioral engagement (Palardy, 2019).

The school district discussed here is very dear to me, and this dissertation is extremely personal; the music program that I once thrived in—largely due to the privileges afforded to me as a white, middle-class student—is now mine to lead, to hopefully build for future students and teachers in ways that are more inclusive, culturally affirming, and responsive to the diverse strengths of the school community. The school district described in this dissertation emerged from a complex historical context, following a Civil Rights lawsuit aimed at integrating previously segregated communities. While the district was created with equity-driven intentions, it has continuously faced challenges including enrollment decline, negative media portrayals, and a persistent stigma attached to its predominantly Black, low SES demographic. The public press has been relentless in highlighting perceived deficits, emphasizing a lack of safety, low test scores, high dropout rates, and violence. Actual headlines from the most recent news

articles[2] include, “School district increases security after shooting,” “District grapples with school fights and community violence,” “School dismisses early due to online bomb threat,” “Students learning remotely after video circulates showing 6th graders waving firearms,” “District introduces plan to cut staff as extra funding runs out,” and “Two seniors killed in shooting.” Usually, their reports are based mostly on elements of truth, and the bad press over the years has significantly increased the outside view that there are major problems within our school system. The dominance of these headlines contributes to a public discourse that reinforces stigma and distorts perceptions of what occurs within the school. When media narratives focus primarily on crisis, they shape not only external reputations but also internal self-concepts among students, educators, and community members—further entrenching deficit-based assumptions. Because this is a public school district, there is constant scrutiny on how this school compares to other schools by measured reports such as state achievement test scores, graduation rates, truancy statistics, and college acceptance percentages. It is commonplace to hear policy makers and stakeholders like parents and community members divided on what is best for the children and the school. A simple internet search of the school name will bring up link after link of media coverage, school board meeting recordings, and videos made from student phones uploaded onto social media. News channels and papers pick up stories about campus disturbances, local shootings by teenagers, outrages about dropped

[2] To protect the privacy of individuals and institutions, all names of people, schools, and locations have been masked or replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, references to legal cases, court orders, and other sensitive documents are cited in a general format (e.g., [Court Order], 1981) rather than providing specific case details. Similarly, news articles that reference identifiable individuals or institutions have been anonymized or cited in a general format to maintain confidentiality while preserving the integrity of the research.

curricular courses, teacher furloughs, tax increases, budget cuts, and how many suspensions administrators served to the Black student body.

Through an *etic* or outsider's perspective, the dominant narrative emphasizes negative events—school violence, low academic performance, and high dropout rates—often ignoring the district's profound successes in sports, arts, and community-driven initiatives. However, the *emic* or insider's perspective from certain teachers, leaders, community members, and students paints a different picture about what is considered a deficit. Those of us who accept and admire the community, school, and students at face value are arguably in a better position than others to work productively and positively toward all goals and have a deeper understanding of the assets of racial and class diversity within a school setting and the successes that can arise. A more thorough internet search reveals another side of the district—one often overshadowed by sensational headlines. Stories such as "District awarded federal partnership to bring STEAM learning to all," "Teens discuss violence and equity ahead of student summit," "High school students bring smiles on 'World Kindness Day,'" and "Awards recognize top high school musicals: District wins big" speak to the vibrancy and promise that exist within this community. These headlines are more than tokens of good news; they reflect the deeply rooted strengths and cultural wealth of the students and families in this district.

The district's celebrated musical theater program is more than just an extracurricular activity—it's a cultural institution. Students grow up attending the productions and often aspire for years to be part of them, admiring the high school performers as local celebrities. Earning a role is a significant accomplishment, as the

program draws from a large pool of dedicated, talented, and artistically expressive students. Its consistent regional success—measured through numerous awards and nominations—is not simply the result of strict direction or high expectations, but also of the unique cultural strengths students bring. Many possess an intuitive sense of performance, emotion, and storytelling shaped by experiences in community celebrations, church choirs, spoken word events, and family gatherings. These cultural roots, combined with a strong peer-driven culture of excellence, foster performances rich with energy, nuance, and authenticity. The musical theater program thrives not in spite of the community, but because of it.

My intent with this dissertation is to analyze how evidence of success is abundant within this low SES school district where race and class intersect, specifically in the music programs. The theoretical framework for this study is *critical theory* as outlined in music education by Thomas Regelski (2020). Positioning the study within this framework provides a "critical way of examining *what is* and then by extension *what could be* for music education" (Giroux, 1983, p. 8). Through a critical theoretical lens, I interrogate traditional standards and measures of success, not to reinforce deficit perspectives, but to expose how these standards often position students from marginalized backgrounds as deficient. Because I'm looking at a complex cultural environment and intersections of race and class relative to my position teaching at a low SES school with a majority Black student population, I am also looking through two other asset-based theoretical lenses that stem from and expand on critical theory: *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (Paris & Alim, 2017) and *antiracist pedagogy* (Taylor et al., 2023; Yancy, 2023; Yosso, 2005).

Critical theory, as articulated in music education by Regelski (2020), provides a foundation for questioning dominant norms, problematizing traditional standards, and envisioning more equitable possibilities for music education. CSP (Paris & Alim, 2017) builds on this foundation by insisting that education not only respond to but actively sustain students' cultural and linguistic identities. Antiracist pedagogy (Taylor et al., 2023; Yancy, 2023; Yosso, 2005) further sharpens this lens by foregrounding systemic racism as a central concern, challenging educators to dismantle white supremacy in both content and practice. Together, these frameworks allow me to interrogate how normative definitions of success reflect racial and cultural hierarchies, and to imagine classroom practices that affirm student identity and promote justice-oriented change. They offer a multifaceted lens for understanding and reimagining success in music education. Critical theory raises foundational questions about power, tradition, and the function of schooling. CSP extends this inquiry by foregrounding the need to sustain student cultural identity through curriculum and pedagogy. Antiracist pedagogy calls for direct confrontation with systemic racism and the roles educators play in either reinforcing or dismantling racial inequity. While each framework has its own emphasis, their shared commitment to justice, cultural affirmation, and student voice makes them highly complementary and collectively generative for the work of this dissertation.

I will consider alternatives to traditional music education standards for success that have historically stigmatized low SES and majority Black schools, teachers, and students as deficient. In the process of analyzing how I frame success, it remains possible to discover more notions of success I did not consider or reconceptualize perceptions

where I may have been mistaken. Looking critically at my own practice and perceptions as a music educator may yield results that either run parallel with or counter to my beliefs. Critical theory shapes the narrative of this dissertation by encouraging educators to support students in making informed, contextually grounded choices (Regelski, 2020). As a white, middle-class woman teaching in a majority Black, low SES school, I recognize the limitations of my positionality. Empowerment sometimes means stepping aside—creating space for student leadership, cultural expression, and community-rooted forms of musicking. This raises questions about whose knowledge and traditions are centered in school music. Would success take a different shape if the program were more student-directed—or if it were led by a teacher whose race or life experiences more closely reflected those of the students? What if staff notation and Western classical ensemble norms, for example, were replaced by more culturally sustaining practices? This dissertation examines how my perspective shapes what I see and how I strive to expand or revise that vision.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline operational definitions and the background for the study; outline the research problem, purpose, and research questions; and then review the rationale.

Operational Definitions

Some of the terms used in this dissertation are difficult to define, their meanings may vary significantly from context to context, and they may be highly contested. For the purposes of the present study and aligning with the practice of autoethnography, I outline

my own informed conceptualizations of the following terms: success, socioeconomic status, urban, standards, and culture.

Success

All music teachers presumably want to be successful in one way or another. For me, success once meant strong performances and program recognition. For my students, success might look like self-expression, belonging, and being valued. Recognizing where our definitions align—and where they diverge—has challenged me to rethink whose success I'm centering. Defining success, however, can be a tumultuous task, as the term is subjective and can have multiple meanings to many different people. In sports, success could refer to winning a game. For employment, it could mean securing a job or receiving a pay raise. In education, the term could mean achieving objectives and reaching targeted standards. In music education, success could mean earning a sticker on a practice chart, improvising a passage with acceptable notes and rhythms, or receiving an award at a festival. There are seemingly endless ways to describe success as each setting and standards are unique and music educators routinely engage in ensuring the success of their students, regardless of conditions. Success in education can be defined generally as any achievement attained by students (York, et al., 2015). For this dissertation, I will interpret success broadly as anything that could be construed as an individual, collective, or programmatic achievement in the music programs in which I have and continue to be involved. These success indicators can range from academic and performance-based to the artistic or socio-emotional (Frierson-Campbell, 2006; Madden et al., 2014). Music-related success may be recognized in different ways by different

people in various contexts, and music education experiences provide many platforms to see these accomplishments to fruition (see Baker, 2012).

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) can include levels of income, educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class (American Psychological Association, 2021). SES is a widely used covariate in educational data analysis due to its strong correlation with educational outcomes (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010). Middle and high SES schools have been found to have students with high occupational and educational aspirations living in healthy societal conditions with optimal financial security, resources, healthcare, and quality of life (American Psychological Association, 2021). Schools are typically identified as low socioeconomic status when a majority of students come from families whose household incomes are below the federal poverty threshold, are experiencing homelessness or transitional housing, receive less access to social and cultural capital, or qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010). A school with a *Title I* label (schools receiving federal funding based on high percentages of low-income families) would be a prime example of a low SES school. Data from a nationally mandated educational report showed that 45% of Black students attended low SES schools, which reflects the overrepresentation of minority students in high-poverty public schools (National School Boards Association, 2020). These low SES schools are often under-resourced, which can negatively affect the academic progress and outcomes for students (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008).

Urban

In academia, many subjects and contexts in low SES schools have a geographical focus and are often presented as "urban." This terminology will sometimes be referenced throughout this dissertation, mostly to connote geography, but also to relay the work of previous researchers who conducted studies in highly populated, low SES school contexts. Most of the urban studies referenced here from previous researchers characterize the context as densely populated, but also with most families living in poverty and struggling academically. It should be noted that the term "urban" can be problematic due to the transitory nature of the word and its varying regional and contextual applications, just as "inner-city" is a politically charged term and not abundantly used anymore in scholarly research (Doyle, 2012b). Urban is sometimes a euphemism and often used as a code for poor, minority, and less likely to succeed (Farmer, 2015). However, urban has other connotations that can also imply a setting of sophistication, such as a private school in a metropolitan city center or a symphonic concert hall (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). For this paper, I will be transparent regarding specific connotations when using the term urban and I will also refrain from using it as a descriptor of low SES because of the negative stigma and deficit perspectives it can imply. My only references to urban will remain mostly geographical or to discuss a work cited from a previous researcher.

Standards

The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) has created national standards which conceptualize musicianship in four artistic processes. All students

receiving a music education throughout the nation are expected to display evidence toward the following standards (National Association for Music Education, 2021):

1. Creating Music
2. Performing Music
3. Responding to Music
4. Connecting to Music

The NAfME standards provide, in great detail, a complete guideline of standards for each grade level, kindergarten through 12th, tailored to specialized music classes, with objectives and curriculum development adding to more specific goals for benchmarks. The aforementioned standards are overall targeted guidelines set forth by executive leaders and are considered recommendations. Most state standards for music have been developed based on the national standards as a model of excellence with authenticity and credibility (Lehman, 2021). Moreover, many state music standards are equally as rigorous and detailed and are requirements for educators and must be included in mandatory lesson plans and curriculum guides as directed by school leaders.

The professional music curriculum is structured around both national and state standards, which serve as a guiding framework rather than a rigid blueprint. The student population to which these standards apply is diverse in race and class, with marginalized students making up the majority. As a Title I school, the collective student body falls well below state levels of measured achievement in core academic subjects, as documented in public reports. Similar patterns are observed in music education, where students often struggle to meet the prescribed benchmarks outlined by national music standards.

Many music educators strictly adhere to national and/or state standards and consider them critical to objectifying success in the classroom. However, these standards are largely rooted in Western classical music traditions, privileging students with access to formal training and reinforcing cultural hierarchies in music education (Bradley, 2015; Hess, 2017; Robinson, 2022). In practice, standards have often felt ineffective. While the broader structure provides useful categories, the detailed grade-level expectations are frequently unrealistic for students who enter the program with minimal prior music education. The challenge is not just in the standards themselves but in how they intersect with external performance expectations—particularly adjudication criteria used in festivals and competitions.

Adjudication sheets, such as those from state music educator associations reveal a distinct focus on performance-based criteria rather than alignment with formal curricular standards. These assessments prioritize tone, intonation, balance, blend, technical accuracy, stage presence, and adherence to traditional Western classical music aesthetics. What is rarely acknowledged is the presence of unwritten standards—expectations that go beyond musicianship and into cultural norms of behavior, presentation, and demeanor. Ensembles that do not conform to these expectations may receive lower ratings, not necessarily because of musical deficiencies, but due to implicit biases embedded within adjudication culture.

This discrepancy between written and unwritten standards complicates the definition of success in music education. A band or choir may perform technically well but receive lower marks for failing to demonstrate what adjudicators deem as

"appropriate" posture, facial expression, or engagement—elements that are often subjective and rooted in Western classical traditions. These implicit biases, reinforced by adjudication criteria, disproportionately impact students from marginalized backgrounds who have not been socialized into these norms (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011).

Despite these challenges, the curriculum remains aligned with the four major components of the national standards (creating, performing, responding, and connecting to music), but diverges from there so as to personalize the objectives for students from year to year to initiate success, not failure. Success in the classroom is not about whether students can meet arbitrary benchmarks but about growth, engagement, and meaningful participation.

State and national standards are technically recommendations, yet state mandates require their inclusion in lesson plans. This requirement often creates an internal conflict—they are included out of obligation, yet they are not always realistic measures of achievement. The reality is that many students are academically and musically below the expected levels, making it impossible to hold them accountable to a framework designed without their unique challenges in mind. Instead, the focus is on adapting curriculum and teaching strategies to provide the most enriching educational experience possible—one that fosters growth not just musically, but academically and socioemotionally as well.

Culture

The term culture is broad with many different conceptualizations. To narrow the scope, Masemann (2013) defined culture as being "concerned with actions, ideas, and

artifacts which individuals in the tradition concerned learn, share, and value" (p. 109). Culture can be described as the social structures and individual habits from people who learn, exchange, and appreciate practices, concepts, and artifacts derived from their heritage (Masemann, 2013). Culture is an expansive concept that encompasses all aspects of life, including thought, relationships, language, and symbols (Masemann, 2013). For many, culture is specific to the relevant social environment (Yosso, 2005). For the purposes of this study, intersectionality adds complexity and the term "culture" will fluctuate between several different traditionally binary social groups, each containing their own varying levels of diversity: low SES groups/individuals, high SES groups/individuals, Black people, white people, those within the school community, and those outside the school community. In the past, people may have been prone to conceptualize culture hierarchically as "high-brow" or "low-brow" and to make assumptions based on who may have been worthy of certain cultural experiences (Levine, 1990). In this dissertation, I adhere to a flat or relativist approach to culture.

Background/Context

I am an alumnus and faculty member in a school district that was established in the early 1980s by merging five previously existing school districts that served 12 municipalities together after a Civil Rights lawsuit was filed claiming that the prior neighboring districts segregated its Black and white students (see Figure 1 in Appendix). The new and united singular school district was a social experiment in some ways and was charged to serve all students together in one racially and socio-economically diverse, inclusive school community. The district has gone through many reconfigurations over

the years. For instance, when I went to school, there were nine buildings, but because of a decrease in enrollment the district currently consists of one high school, one middle school, and three elementary schools still serving students located in all 12 towns (see Figures 2 and 3 in Appendix). School transportation became the means of desegregating the student population by rezoning which towns attended which schools to ensure an even cross-section of students by race and class. Recognizing that predominantly white communities and predominantly Black communities do not equate respectively with affluence and poverty, race and class are now very blended in this school district, even with many of the 12 towns remaining racially segregated. Some towns, however, have moved more toward integration over the years and have become less segregated. Today, decades after the merger, using public census data, the district could be characterized as serving four towns that are predominantly white and middle-class; one town that is predominantly white and lower-class; three towns that are predominantly Black and lower-class; one predominantly racially diverse (both Black and white) and middle-class; and three predominantly racially diverse and lower-class. It is also important to note that all the towns had less than five percent of the population listed as other races or economic classes, and so in this dissertation I will continue to refer to the primary, albeit binary, focal groups: Black and white, middle-class and lower-class. These towns would all be considered generally small, ranging from 1,600 to 8,600 residents. The district itself, with 12 towns, encompasses 13.5 square miles. The current student population is approximately 3,500 spanning pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, according to the district's student index. The entire district is considered low SES and Title I, with all

students able to receive a free breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner. Current data from the state department of education shows the demographics of the student body as approximately 70% economically disadvantaged, 25% special education, 4% gifted, 4% experiencing homelessness, 65% Black, 25% white, 9% representing two or more races.

This multi-district merger brought many people together and celebrated realizations that local communities can collaborate and that different learning styles can propel the entirety of a group. According to printed newspaper accounts at the time from school leaders, teachers, and community members, there were mixed viewpoints about the merger. Positive accounts recall how richer community students went to poorer community schools and white students went to Black community schools, which led to more racial and socioeconomic diversity and inclusion. Students were exposed to culture outside of their own towns and had new experiences that otherwise may not have occurred had the merger not happened. There were some negative outcomes from desegregating the school district, however. According to other newspaper articles[3] reflecting accounts following the merger, combining the separate school districts resulted in a loss of teachers and administrators. Some were let go because jobs were unavailable in the newly formed district and some left because they did not believe in the merger. Many parents were outraged because of the transportation situation where students were bussed across different townships to their new school regardless if a local school was

[3] To protect the privacy of individuals and institutions, all names of people, schools, and locations have been masked or replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, references to legal cases, court orders, and other sensitive documents are cited in a general format (e.g., [Court Order], 1981) rather than providing specific case details. Similarly, news articles that reference identifiable individuals or institutions have been anonymized or cited in a general format to maintain confidentiality while preserving the integrity of the research.

closer. A parent was quoted from a newspaper article written about the merger regarding the transportation situation: “Why am I being bused somewhere else when I could walk?” To which an administrator replied, “If we let our kids walk, we would be out of compliance for a whole host of civil rights issues because we would have a segregated district.” The new district lost many families and enrollment decreased immediately. Some families moved out of the communities and others enrolled their children in private or charter schools to avoid attending the desegregated district. Black students attending a newly formed school of inclusion likely experienced implicit and explicit racial biases and discrimination. Similarly, students from low SES backgrounds likely encountered economic biases, stereotyping, and exclusion by wealthier peers. It is critical to recognize that students occupying intersecting identities—such as Black students who are also experiencing poverty—face compounded layers of marginalization, navigating both racial and socioeconomic prejudices simultaneously. Former administrators and school leaders reported that even though the new district was experiencing “white flight,” protests, and outrage from its own community members, it stood the test of time, and many strides have been made on all fronts that include diversity, equity, access, and inclusion.

All students were apt to encounter new cultures and unfamiliar social circumstances. Lower achieving students were given additional supports to enhance their academic potential. Students living in poverty were given access to meals and activities at no cost, including both recreational and academic programs that would otherwise be financially out of reach. More Black students were enrolled into honors and AP classes to

enrich their scholarly potential. A mother was interviewed in a local newspaper when the district formed. She joined the PTA and was the only Black parent in the group: “I was told to make sure my kids took advantage of the advanced classes. That was something new for me, and it turned out well for my children.” Additionally, desegregation created more opportunities for students to learn from a racially diverse teaching staff, which, in some cases, allowed Black students to see themselves reflected in their educators. However, as Milner (2012) cautioned, racial representation alone does not guarantee cultural understanding or shared lived experience—particularly when socioeconomic differences persist, even among racially similar individuals.

More recently, team building has emerged as a defining strength of this district, particularly evident in its football and musical programs. The consistent success of the football team—having secured five regional and three state championships—may reflect not only athletic talent but also deep-rooted community values surrounding perseverance, collaboration, and public recognition of achievement. A newspaper printed a study that reported the district had produced the most recruits of any high school over the last 35 years. They have sent over 69 players to NCAA Division I and Power 5 conferences. Our local news channel reported, “Millions of kids play football every year, but only .09 percent actually reach the NFL. In its brief history of 30-some seasons, my district has produced 14 NFL players.” These accomplishments may not align directly with state and national standards, yet they serve as indicators of success. Likewise, the annual spring musical has received 120 awards and 240 nominations in the region’s most prestigious high school musical theater competition—the very program that serves as the model for

the national *Jimmy Awards* in New York City. Graduates of the performing arts department have gone on to achieve remarkable success, including earning Tony Awards, securing Broadway credits, and pursuing distinguished careers in the performing arts.

Despite these significant achievements, the district continues to face challenges related to enrollment, academic performance, and public reputation—challenges often fueled less by student ability than by persistent biases among administrators, educators, and broader systems of power. Since its inception, and more intensely in recent years with the amplification of digital media, negative public discourse about the district has escalated. Parents, administrators, students, policy makers, media outlets, and individuals outside the community often participate in what amounts to collective "trash-talking," which perpetuates deficit perspectives without full awareness of the district's complexities or strengths. Online reviews and comment sections frequently reflect these attitudes, casting blame on students and teachers while often ignoring the institutional shortcomings that shape educational realities. One graduate, for example, wrote, "The teachers simply don't care at all and don't even try to offer help. The students don't even care about [their] future and won't amount to anything. This school gives kids the bare minimum to graduate." A parent similarly wrote, "Bad things like assaults and fights occur here. Kids are afraid to use the restrooms. Administration wants to avoid being called out on suspensions and expulsions so they turn a blind eye. Don't buy a house here unless you can afford private schools." Additional public reviews include statements such as, "You work for the community to protect children, not harm them," and "The way Black kids are treated at this school is disgusting and harmful." These headlines reflect a

pattern: a dominant narrative that highlights crisis while ignoring context. Public discourse tends to reduce the district to a series of failures, without acknowledging the structural conditions behind these challenges or the community strengths that persist in spite of them.

When comparing neighboring districts, this district is continually linked to standards that consistently seem to privilege white and middle-class students. There are achievement gaps that exist between Black and white as well as high and low SES student scores on standardized tests. Black students are suspended at a rate five times more than white students. The graduation rate and college acceptances are far lower than national statistics. Biases within the system and among teachers, staff, administrators, and community members are readily apparent. The supporters for the district who remain positive and engage in meaningful conversations about the successes and triumphs of the school seem to be few and far between. And even these remaining few may harbor unexamined biases.

Biased community members, teachers, administrator, policy makers, journalists, and more have produced and reinforced negative stigmas that have adversely impacted students over the past 40 years. The student body is usually publicly perceived as underserved and underachieving, stereotyped with countless pejorative terms based primarily on the socioeconomic status of the district. The faculty, including myself, has faced criticism for racial and implicit bias in the classroom, as well as for professional inadequacy and low test scores—concerns that are often intensified by comparisons to neighboring districts. These critiques raise difficult, necessary questions about who is

best positioned to teach in antiracist ways, particularly in schools serving predominantly Black and low-income students. Those critiques are magnified when compared to neighboring districts on factors like academics, leadership, school climate, campus safety, and college acceptance rates. For every adverse incident that occurs on school property, the district is subjected to a public blast of criticism almost immediately afterwards. It appears to be a unilateral opinion from stakeholders and onlookers that the district has many obstacles to overcome that include reducing fights and suspensions, improving academics, and merging the cultural communities within the townships and school halls in order to reduce the stigma. Many people, including myself, however, feel that these perceived deficits do not need to define this school, this community, or these students and faculty. What are often labeled as personal shortcomings—such as behavioral issues or economic hardship—are better understood as symptoms of broader systemic inequities. The real deficit lies not within the students, but within the systems that marginalize and constrain them.

Throughout this autoethnography, I offer my perspective as a lifelong stakeholder in this district—as a former student, community member, and current faculty member. Having attended and now teaching music in the same high school, I hold an immediate and nuanced understanding of the inner workings, public perceptions, and lived realities that often contrast sharply with external stereotypes. As a white, middle-class female educator working in a predominantly Black, low-SES school district, I acknowledge that my positionality shapes my interactions, observations, and interpretations. Recognizing this, I strive to approach my research with humility, aiming to critically reflect upon my

own assumptions, privileges, and biases while actively listening to and learning from my students. My emic perspective provides a valuable situational context that complicates and challenges dominant narratives frequently rooted in deficit thinking, but it is not the same emic perspective many of my students have. Thus, the reflections and insights presented throughout this dissertation are grounded in my experiences, informed by ongoing dialogues with students and colleagues, and consciously attentive to the complexities of race, class, and cultural dynamics within our educational environment, but my perspectives still represent a position of privilege that always brings with it the possibility of latent racist and classist assumptions.

There are many stories, memories, and past events to recall and retell. As I was developing the concept for this dissertation, several questions arose such as:

1. What are the perceived deficits or challenges that students and I are experiencing in this school?
2. How do the perceptions of deficits or challenges hinder our academic and music performances?
3. Why are these deficits or challenges considered as such?
4. What would I consider a musical success in the classroom?
5. Are there non-musical success indicators during classes?
6. Are there any generally perceived deficits that could be considered assets in this context?
7. What pedagogical strategies am I employing to foster success?
8. In what ways am I addressing student needs?

9. Do I know enough about students to address their needs?
10. What is my own culture and how does it relate to student cultures?
11. How do I perceive the similarities and differences between our cultures?
12. How does my own culture affect how I view students and how I teach?
13. What are my own stereotypes, biases, and assumptions and how do they affect teaching?

Examining possible answers to these questions may lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon of success in the low SES music classroom—how I perceive such success relative, how the community and profession perceive success, and how my perceptions may or may not align with those of the students or community. One could argue that because people hold different socioeconomic and racial statuses within society, leading to a mix of cultural and material differences, diverse traits may be viewed as deficits or assets depending on one's viewpoint. For instance, many individuals from low SES backgrounds exhibit higher levels of compassion and lower levels of competitiveness (Templeton, 2011), which can be advantageous within their community, but might not be an advantage in competitive music education settings. What may be considered a deficit in one environment, in other words, could be seen as an asset in another.

My experiences have led me to begin the journey of adjusting my own deficit perspectives and shifting toward asset-based teaching. Examining this phenomenon through autoethnography allows for the expression of viewpoints while using the theoretical framework of critical theory, along with culturally responsive pedagogy and antiracism theories, to analyze the social structures, cultures, and oppressions that

continuously intersect. These theories have had a direct correlation to my past and current experiences and may allow readers to draw insight from the distinct issues at large in these social contexts as outlined here.

Reflecting deeply on my own assumptions and biases has been a significant aspect of this research. Rather than presenting myself as uniquely capable of interpreting student lives, I recognize the limits (and strengths) of my emic perspective and have actively sought feedback from Black scholars and individuals from low SES backgrounds to refine my analyses and conclusions. This reflective process underscores the need for humility, ongoing learning, and constant reexamination of how race, class, and positionality influence my teaching practice and research. This awareness could lead to enhanced potential to provide access and experiences with quality music education for all students within this context. Moreover, the field is inundated with literature and negative stigma from the deficit perspectives that exist within and regarding low SES school music programs. Critical reflection through autoethnography may be useful in supporting claims that asset-approaches to music education can support reconceptualizations of success in low SES contexts, specifically those serving low SES minoritized students.

Research Problem

Success in school music programs is often defined by Western classical performance standards and formal curriculum benchmarks (Benedict, 2006). Expectations such as reading staff notation, ensemble etiquette, and tone production reflect elite Eurocentric values, privileging certain musical traditions while marginalizing others (Hess, 2015; Bates, 2019). This bias extends to adjudication

practices, where unwritten cultural norms—such as stage presence and stylistic interpretation—favor students socialized in elite Western traditions (Bradley, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). These implicit standards contribute to disparities in access and recognition, disadvantaging students from underrepresented backgrounds. Opportunities and resources for achieving success within these "standard" frameworks can be limited in low SES schools (Doyle, 2012a; 2014). Furthermore, music students and teachers are typically stigmatized as deficient when unable to reach targeted standards (Doyle, 2012b; Erb, 2019).

It is safe to assume that music educators value the success of their programs—for their students' growth and well-being, but also for their own sense of purpose, professional identity, and fulfillment. Yet this raises a critical question: who benefits most from these achievements? As I examine my own teaching in a low SES, majority-Black school, I must consider the ways in which I, as a white, middle-class educator, may derive personal or professional validation from student accomplishments. While it is not inherently problematic for teachers to find meaning in their work, this reflection becomes essential when working in contexts where systemic inequities exist. Asset-based approaches require that I continually interrogate whose needs are centered and whether success is equitably defined and experienced by both students and teachers.

This is particularly urgent in schools that operate under persistent deficit perspectives. Every school functions within its own unique climate, shaped by local procedures, funding, cultural capital, and systemic conditions. Low SES schools are often viewed as deficient across many domains—including music education (Doyle, 2012a).

These perceptions are frequently driven by the effects of structural inequities, such as limited financial resources, student underperformance on standardized measures, teacher attrition, and socio-political instability (Baker, 2012). The association of these challenges with minoritized populations has further entrenched deficit-based thinking in research and practice. Recognizing and naming these structural factors—not as student or community shortcomings, but as manifestations of systemic inequity—is a necessary first step toward reframing how we conceptualize success. By shifting the paradigm from identifying what is lacking to recognizing what is possible and already present, especially in music classrooms, educators can work to redefine success on more just and inclusive terms.

The socioeconomic levels of schools can impact a teacher's perspectives regarding the achievement of their program (Willie, 2001). Objectives become adapted based on the scenario of a teaching assignment and the demographics that comprise each school (Doyle, 2012a; 2012b). School music teachers in low SES schools may offer some differing perceptions of achievement and goals from that which is listed in the NAfME national standard recommendations (Baker, 2012). That is not to say that students in these low SES contexts cannot be high-achieving in standards that privilege other groups. On the contrary, generally accepted music standards and many other objectives are being met including social development, self-concept, and responsibility, but perhaps with varying levels of importance depending on what groups are determining the standards. Higher SES schools typically perform better given that standards often align with white middle-class values, but also due to economic advantages such as private instruction and

high-quality instruments, all of which contribute to inequitable access to music education opportunities (Elpus & Abril, 2019; Harwell & LeBeau, 2010).

Music educators may choose to prioritize musical goals not dependent on economic resources—such as lifelong musical engagement or musical practices that serve social or environmental justice. These aims extend beyond traditional performance benchmarks to include human development, identity formation, and community engagement. Tierney (2020) suggested that broadening notions of success to include less traditional indicators can support students in seeing themselves as achievers on their own terms. This reframing can positively influence a music program's ethos—not by conforming to external standards, but by aligning with the cultural and communal values of the students it serves.

Schools often labeled as "failing" according to narrow academic or performance measures are subject to stigma that reflects systemic bias more than actual ability or potential (Valencia, 1997). What dominant systems label as mediocrity or insufficiency is often a mismatch between community strengths and institutional values. A student who may not excel on a standardized music theory exam might demonstrate profound empathy through songwriting, leadership in ensemble collaboration, or culturally rooted performance practices. Asset-based teaching challenges the dominant frameworks that render these abilities invisible, encouraging educators to see value in diverse forms of expression, communication, and connection.

This approach broadens the conception of success by recognizing a wider range of student outcomes—many of which are deeply relevant but not easily quantifiable. In this

context, success becomes less about compliance with traditional benchmarks and more about relevance, cultural affirmation, and personal agency. Autoethnographic studies, like the present one, offer opportunities to understand how music educators might identify and celebrate alternative indicators of success that resonate with their students' lives, cultures, and communities. Such work helps shift the conversation from remediation to recognition, and from deficiency to dignity.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to consider alternatives to traditional and written music education standards for success, such as state or national standards, that have historically stigmatized low SES schools, teachers, and students as deficient. I will argue from an asset-based perspective that it is the responsibility of music educators, researchers, and policymakers to recognize and validate the subjective, contextual, and situational factors that shape students' musical engagement and learning. These lived realities—when acknowledged and honored—can serve as more equitable and culturally relevant criteria for success than those prescribed by dominant standards, which often reflect deficit thinking and disproportionately marginalize students in low SES and racially minoritized communities (Regelski, 2020). Furthermore, success can be conceptualized both individually and collectively. The specific research questions that will guide the study are as follows:

1. What are the standards I feel obligated to use to measure success in the low SES, predominantly Black school music program where I currently teach?

2. In my experiences as a music educator, how has the dominant culture with its focus on academic achievement required, recommended, and/or implied the centrality of standard measures for success?
3. From my emic vantage point relative to the context of this district, school, and state, what groups appear to be advantaged and/or disadvantaged by generally-accepted state and national music standards?
4. How have I conceptualized, throughout my life, the evolving social, cultural, and material assets in this low SES school district and community?
5. What alternative, asset-based standards could be considered in my efforts to conceptualize, define, and foster success in this low SES school music program?

Rationale

The rationale for this dissertation centers on the belief that music education success should be attainable and visible for all students, regardless of race or class. However, current standards disproportionately marginalize low SES and racially diverse students. Issues related to school context may have an impact on a teacher's perspective and conceptualization of success and/or achievement. For example, scholars suggest that many music teachers experience less teaching success in strenuous or vulnerable contexts with low socioeconomic status, underserved populations, and/or unsatisfactory performance ratings (Abril & Bannerman, 2014; Doyle, 2012a; Lehmberg, 2008). These contexts often have a high rate of teachers displaying beliefs of ineffectiveness, as evidenced by teacher attrition and/or student failures (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Moreover,

when achievement is assessed based on grade-level performance standards, public schools within low SES communities often have difficulties competing with their affluent neighbors at events such as festivals, adjudications, or halftime shows at rivalry football games where performance is put on public display. Prior music researchers have discussed deficits from low SES schools and the issues that can arise for educators and students, for example, suggesting that students living in poverty are unable to succeed at high levels, attend school on a regular basis, and are "problems" that the educational system must overcome (Abril, 2006; Baker, 2012; Eros, 2009; Frierson-Campbell, 2006). Researchers have also developed theoretical solutions that can assist music educators in new tactics and strategies to use to combat some of the deficit perspectives that may be present (Bradley, 2009; Hess, 2017; Murrell, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017; Regelski, 2021).

Research appears to be lacking, however, in studies that address an asset-based approach within these contextual settings. Autoethnographies—especially those situated in low SES school music programs—remain limited, yet they hold promise for contributing first-hand accounts that critically examine day-to-day teaching experiences. Studies situated in low SES contexts that apply frameworks such as critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracism can offer meaningful tools for understanding student backgrounds, community histories, and cultural assets, helping educators navigate the often unpredictable and complex realities of their classrooms (Agger, 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017; Robinson, 2022; Yosso, 2005). Teachers who struggle to meet benchmark standards or who consistently fall short of neighboring districts' performance expectations may feel isolated, demoralized, or professionally stalled

(Doyle, 2012a; 2012b). I understand this feeling. At times, I have questioned the relevance of traditional metrics and the toll such standards take on students and teachers alike. Yet, I continue to believe that success exists in many forms—even when not immediately visible or institutionally recognized. Some indicators may appear non-traditional or be hidden beneath dominant discourses of failure, but identifying and affirming these moments is essential for reframing deficit narratives with attention to diversity, strength, and student potential (Flint & Jaggers, 2021; Lindsey et al., 2010; Templeton, 2011).

In sum, this dissertation emerges from a deeply personal and professional inquiry into how music education can be reimagined to reflect the strengths, identities, and lived realities of students in low socioeconomic and racially diverse school settings. This chapter has introduced my positionality, outlined the historical and cultural context of the district, defined key terms, and presented the central problem, purpose, and research questions guiding this study. Grounded in critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist education, this work challenges deficit-based narratives by centering asset-based perspectives and student voice. The chapters that follow will draw from autoethnographic reflection, classroom experiences, and theoretical analysis to explore what success in music education can look like when traditional standards are questioned and student realities are honored.

CHAPTER TWO: Review of Literature

In this review, I have synthesized literature regarding low socioeconomic status schools, intersections between race and class, deficit perspectives, and asset-based approaches in music and education. The empirical literature in this chapter encompasses a variety of perspectives: research samples of populations based in and out of educational settings, interviews from teachers in and out of low SES contexts, and perceptions from theorists and other research subjects inside and outside music education. Previous researchers and theorists have outlined numerous challenges related to SES and offered suggestions for teachers, music programs, and schools. While it is beneficial to have expert recommendations for student and teacher outcomes in these complicated contexts, there are relatively few first-hand accounts from the teachers who strive daily to develop successful music programs in low SES schools. The field of music education is situated within a nation in which 43% of school districts experience mid-high and high poverty across all urban/suburban/rural environments (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b), yet there are no formal autoethnographies at the present time with these parameters. Without critical, practical approaches and recommendations, researchers in music education risk perpetuating deficit perspectives and reproducing the challenges faced by music educators and students in low SES contexts. Critical theory, the theoretical framework for this dissertation, shapes the narrative overall in the sense that music educators who are self-empowered with critical knowledge can empower students to make informed, rational choices while embracing the subjective, contextual, and situational factors of their environments (Regelski, 2020).

This literature review is divided into four sections, combining music education literature with non-music education literature as needed to provide a comprehensive examination of each topic. The first section focuses on the theoretical framework of *critical theory*, which serves as the overarching foundation along with lenses that compliment this foundation: *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP) and *antiracist pedagogy.* CSP and antiracist pedagogy build on critical theory's principles, working to validate and celebrate students' cultural identities while addressing systemic racism and structural inequities in education (Blakeney, 2005; Paris & Alim, 2014). Together, these frameworks will guide the analysis of how race and class intersect throughout this autoethnography. The second section includes a review of literature pertaining to race and class and the complexities that have been reported when identities and oppressions intersect. The third section encompasses literature concerning deficit perspectives in education that are specific to low SES school contexts, students from low SES families, and the stigma that are associated with race, class, and place. In the final section, I will review literature addressing asset-based approaches in education and reflecting the need for asset-based research and practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is structured around the theoretical framework of critical theory, which provides a foundation for examining and addressing inequities in music education. Regelski (2020) described the role of critical theory in music education as a way of analyzing pedagogical approaches that challenge systemic barriers while considering the complex, subjective, and situational factors that shape educational environments. In this

study, success in music education will be examined through asset-based teaching and learning, which emphasizes students' strengths and experiences rather than focusing on deficits. This perspective aligns with critical theory's objectives of equity and empowerment, particularly in relation to students whose cultural, social, or educational backgrounds are often undervalued by prevailing educational narratives. Critical theory offers a framework for analyzing the underlying biases, values, and assumptions embedded in curricular choices, teaching methods, and measures of success in music education. The application of this framework facilitates the development of more inclusive and equitable practices by enabling music educators to critically assess the power relations that influence music programs and consider alternative approaches that prioritize social justice and inclusivity (Regelski, 2020; Ravitch, 2023).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy and antiracist pedagogy function as practical extensions of critical theory and contribute to its application in educational settings. CSP emphasizes the preservation and affirmation of students' cultural identities within the classroom, ensuring that diverse perspectives are acknowledged and valued in the learning process (Paris & Alim, 2014). Within music education, CSP encourages the inclusion of musical traditions that reflect students' lived experiences. Antiracist pedagogy addresses systemic racism by critically examining curricular content, fostering discussions about race and identity, and working to eliminate disparities in access to resources and opportunities for students from marginalized racial backgrounds. Both approaches encourage critical engagement with established norms and support the implementation of practices that promote equity in music education.

Together, critical theory, CSP, and antiracist pedagogy provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the intersections of race and class within this study. The following sections present an in-depth review of the literature related to these frameworks and their relevance in redefining success in music education within low socioeconomic status (SES) school contexts.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is oriented toward critiquing society in order to prompt change. This compelling theory, emerging in the 1920's from Marxist theory was developed by a group of sociologists who referred to themselves as The Frankfurt School (Coradetti, 2017). In the 1972 foundational text, first-generation critical theorist Max Horkheimer is highly concerned with societal injustice and change agencies; critical theory must offer a strong, holistic critique by incorporating insights from all social sciences. According to Douglas Kellner (2014), critical theory represents the criticism of oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society. Specific dominating, subsidiary features of existing capitalist societies (in this case, the education system) must be acknowledged so that transformative practices can occur and progressive social change can be possible (Kellner, 2003). Zygmunt and Clark (2016) argued that people can bring about change and advance social justice through critical retrospection and the development of personal agency. Further, these two researchers claimed that a theory can only be considered a true critical theory if it is instructive, practical, and conventional. In other words, theory must clarify the social problems that exist, offer solutions, and consider the criticism established by the field (Horkheimer, 1972).

Research rooted in critical inquiry is vast and has expanded because of so many developments of different critical theories: for example, critical pedagogy, feminism, and social constructivism (Bates, 2016). Agger (2013) merged or clustered different aspects or fields of critical theory conceptually under the umbrella of *critical social theory* and argued that it is sometimes necessary to explore and explain historically unequal relationships. Critical social theory is intended to raise consciousness about oppression, expose the roots of injustice, support arguments that social change begins at home in people's everyday lives, and encourage liberation, albeit not at the expense of others' oppression (Agger, 2013; Bates, 2016). Agger posits that the "critical" in critical social theory is the notion that knowledge exists in history and can change its entire course if applied more aptly and critically. It is possible that the entirety of social theory is inherently critical in nature, as it provides an opportunity to consider the world in new ways (Agger, 2013).

Murrell (2016), for example, described social injustices and bluntly stated that we are not taking care of our children in the education system. Murrell drew attention to the disproportionate expulsion, suspension, and criminalization of minority students in city schools, as well as the exclusion, suspension, and placement of these students in special education programs. According to Murrell, recent epidemiological research shows that 71% of children between the ages of two and 17 have experienced at least one form of victimization such as abuse, assault, or crime. Because the role of critical social theory is to raise consciousness about present oppression, CST could assist in arguing that the potential for a better future is contained in the past and present, and that progress is

possible (Agger, 2013).

Music education can provide students with lifelong learning opportunities by fostering musical knowledge and understanding that can be applied to all aspects of life, including those outside of the classroom (Regelski, 2020). Critical theory in music education can address problems that exist such as social injustice, elitism, equity, and access, among others. Regelski (2005) urged music teachers and students to be effective agents of their own histories and personal fulfillment through the habit of critical consciousness and problematizing, which includes questioning orthodox views of the status quo. An ongoing challenge in music education is understanding how critical theory can be effectively applied to practice and real-world problems. Music educators can utilize critical theory to critically examine and address common issues such as the diminishing relevance of traditional music theory in school curricula, the failure of school music programs to cultivate lifelong engagement with music, overly rigid and prescriptive curriculum standards that limit flexibility and inclusivity, and the persistence of outdated teaching methods that are adhered to dogmatically—a phenomenon Regelski (2002) referred to as "methodolatry." Additionally, critical theory provides a framework for challenging ineffective or unethical pedagogical approaches that fail to consider the diverse needs and cultural contexts of students. By applying critical theory in these ways, music educators can work toward more inclusive, responsive and socially just music education practices. In the "Tractate on Critical Theory and Praxis" (2020), Regelski claimed music educators who are self-empowered with critical knowledge become critical educators who, in turn, can help students develop critical knowledge to make

informed musical decisions. Within this conceptual framework, each person is an agent with situational perspectives that are subjective and contextual. For music educators, this includes instructing students to understand the pragmatic outcomes music might provide outside of the classroom.

Social justice is a central concern in contemporary music education that lends itself well for analysis through a critical lens. A critical perspective allows for an examination of how social conditions and power structures contribute to systemic inequities within music education. Leonardo (2004) explored social injustices in education and argued that students must engage with discourses that raise fundamental questions about their social realities. In music education, this involves critically analyzing traditional practices to uncover potential inequities and consider more inclusive approaches. Inspired by Regelski, Bates (2017, 2019, 2021) has emphasized the responsibility of music educators to critique assumptions and established traditions that may disrupt the praxis of music education and reinforce inequities. Bates highlighted how addressing oppression and exploitation requires a thoughtful examination of practices that may inadvertently benefit privileged students while disadvantaging others. Confronting inequality in music education, therefore, necessitates an understanding of the social conditions that lead to disparities and a commitment to practices that promote equity and inclusivity.

Bowman (2007) explored the complexities of social justice in music education through the lens of critical theory, highlighting its multifaceted nature and the challenges it presents for educators. While social justice may appear straightforward – ensuring fair

and equitable treatment and preventing unequal access to privilege, power, or influence – Bowman questioned the underlying assumptions of fairness and whose perspectives shape definitions of justice within educational settings. From a critical theory perspective, such definitions are often influenced by dominant ideologies that reinforce existing power structures and cultural hierarchies. As a result, many music educators, faced with the complexities of social justice, default to traditional teaching methods that align with the status quo, thereby perpetuating systemic inequities. Bowman's theorization of social justice aimed to provoke critical awareness, encouraging music educators to reflect on their practices and consider more inclusive, transformative approaches that challenge prevailing norms. Additionally, Bowman (2007) identified alternative perspectives, such as a Buddhist framework, challenge Western conceptions of social justice by emphasizing an interconnected self that inherently includes others, questioning the relevance of social justice constructs within different cultural paradigms. Through the lens of critical theory, discussions such as Bowman's stress the importance of interrogating existing assumptions and embracing diverse, contextually relevant approaches to achieving equity in music education.

The first North American doctoral dissertation to apply concepts of critical theory directly to music education and challenge the assumptions underlying traditional content methods was written in 1990 by Rose. This study concluded that Western art music is often treated as fixed and objective in conventional instructional methods. To explore this, three perspectives on culture in music education were examined: formal, informal, and community music. Through a comparative analysis, the research considered educator

backgrounds, societal influences, and curricula in practice. Rose suggested that music educators play an active role in shaping both music and culture and that treating music education as an evolving practice can drive progress and disrupt the standard cycle. This case study raised concerns about how imposed traditions, practices, and curricula can be contested and reformed. Ultimately, the researcher recommended that educators incorporate diverse musical traditions to create hybrid approaches that foster more dynamic and inclusive music education practices.

Bowman (1992) critiqued Rose's dissertation and addressed the perceived lack of a concisely articulated problem the subjects were facing. While Rose (1990) stressed the importance of empowering students to make musical choices relative to varying cultures, Bowman described the act of choice as being musically discriminating and argued that students must first be more critically informed and experienced in collaboration. Bowman further critiqued much of the scholarly rigor of this qualitative research, questioning its validity and generalizability. However, Bowman did acknowledge the importance of reading the in-depth perspectives found in the interviews and applauded the effort to look honestly into the political and cultural aspects of music instruction.

Many school music programs find relevance through informal and popular music education, which is where Green (2014) has focused research. Through a collection of essays, Green shared ways that music educators engage in critical theory and practice. Critical theory in music education involves recognizing discrepancies between perception and reality and seeking to enact meaningful improvements based on that understanding. If educators unite in the belief that music has the power to do both good and bad, then our

good efforts are more likely to equalize opportunities for all students to be musically accomplished, musically critical, and musically fulfilled. Green observed that musical values affect musical practices and musical practices in turn affect musical values. An important question may be how music educators can instill the musical values and practices into the consciousness of students to perpetuate this reflexive cycle. Green argued what music education can and should include recognition of the importance of the intersections of social class, gender, and ethnicity in music. Lastly, Green acknowledged that music making is interpersonal, facilitates autonomy, and requires informal and formal training, all while considering an ever-changing humanity.

In sum, critical theory serves as a foundational framework for guiding the data analysis process in this study by providing key principles informing the conceptualization of success in music education. This theoretical lens enables a critical examination of how dominant educational paradigms shape definitions of success and how these definitions may perpetuate systemic inequities. As Regelski (2020) emphasized, music educators must challenge traditional frameworks and embrace pedagogical approaches that account for the subjective and contextual nature of students' experiences. Ultimately, critical theory will provide the foundation for a nuanced exploration of success in music education by examining the intersections of race, class, and pedagogy.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) is a framework that aims to sustain and foster cultural pluralism in educational settings to support positive social transformation (Paris & Alim, 2014). Rooted in critical theory, CSP serves as an approach to curriculum

development in music education that acknowledges and values the diverse cultural backgrounds of students while challenging dominant ideologies that perpetuate systemic inequities. As the dominance of the Western classical music canon persists, CSP offers strategies for incorporating diverse musical traditions, contributing to sustaining the cultural identities of minority students and resisting the cultural hegemony often reinforced by traditional curricula (Good-Perkins, 2021).

The discourse surrounding urban schools and low-income students of color is often characterized by deficit-based perspectives, which position students as lacking essential skills, cultural capital, and support systems necessary for success (Paris & Alim, 2017). Paris and Alim (2017) identified problematic assumptions within public narratives that depict students of color as deficient in language, culture, academic abilities, and moral character. CSP challenges these deficit views by promoting an asset-based approach that requires educators to recognize and affirm the cultural wealth that students bring to the classroom (Souto-Manning, 2019). Rather than comparing students to white middle-class norms, CSP emphasizes the exploration and celebration of students' community heritages and cultural practices within instructional settings (Paris & Alim, 2014). Studies have demonstrated that culturally responsive ethnic studies positively impact students' academic performance and critical thinking skills (Dee & Penner, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Within the arts, CSP offers a structured approach to facilitating meaningful learning experiences that reflect students' cultural realities while also fostering critical consciousness (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Although the term *culturally sustaining pedagogy* was introduced by Paris and

Alim in 2017, earlier scholarship contributed significantly to its foundation. Stovall (2013), for example, critiqued how standardized testing and racialized school policies are designed to manufacture failure in under-resourced communities. Stovall identified how educational systems often invalidate students' cultural identities and knowledge by privileging narrow, standardized definitions of success. These critiques align closely with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of preserving and affirming students' cultural practices, community ties, and ways of knowing. Stovall's analysis highlights the need for pedagogical models that are accountable to communities and grounded in social and political context. Within music education, this perspective supports a shift away from elite, Eurocentric performance standards toward approaches that value identity, expression, and cultural relevance as essential components of student success.

Despite its potential benefits, implementing CSP in music classrooms can present challenges for educators. While Lind and McKoy (2016) primarily address Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), their findings are relevant to CSP, as both frameworks emphasize the importance of cultural representation in the curriculum. They noted that teachers may struggle to translate these principles into practice, particularly when their own cultural heritage and musical preferences influence curricular choices. Questions regarding how a teacher's background shapes their perceptions of what music is worthy of study highlight the complexities of implementing CSP in a meaningful and authentic manner (Lind & McKoy, 2016). Paris (2021) outlined several key principles that educators can use to guide their implementation of CSP, including:

1. Critically centering dynamic communities and valuing their languages, practices, and knowledge within the learning environment.
2. Engaging students, families, and elders as active collaborators in the educational process.
3. Building respectful relationships with the land, local communities, and students.
4. Providing structured opportunities for students to address internalized oppression and challenge dominant narratives.

Paris (2021) emphasized the urgency of embracing movements such as antiracism, abolition, Black Lives Matter, and trans rights in educational spaces. The post-pandemic educational landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and compassionate future through asset-based traditions that sustain community values and identities.

Critical theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing the challenges and opportunities associated with CSP in music education. Zygmunt and Clark (2016) developed a model that applied critical theory principles by engaging educators in community-based experiences to better understand students' cultural contexts. Their model emphasized situated learning, where teachers participate in local cultural events and develop meaningful relationships with students and their families. The study concluded that meaningful connections between educators and communities are essential for transforming teaching practices and fostering social justice in education.

Antiracist Pedagogy

Antiracist pedagogy is explicitly concerned with the analysis of "structural racism, power relations, and social justice" (Kishimoto, 2018, p. 541, as cited in Reinke et al., 2023). It extends beyond merely including diverse content to directly confronting and dismantling systems of racial oppression within educational institutions. As Reinke, Miller, and Glass (2023) explain, it "specifically employs teaching strategies that consider the role of racialized power, privilege and oppression," requiring both critical analysis of society and introspective examination of one's own position within it (p. 4). Importantly, antiracist pedagogy is not outcome-driven in the traditional sense; it is "fundamentally emergent, or focused on learning as an evolving, communal process" (Reinke et al., 2023, p. 4).

Unlike other culturally oriented pedagogies—such as culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive (Gay, 2010), and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014)—which may not overtly center the dismantling of racism, antiracist pedagogy is unapologetically committed to disrupting racial hierarchies and disarming structures that reproduce hegemonic ideals (Reinke et al., 2023, p. 3). It resists surface-level equity initiatives—what Gorski (2019) critiques as "equity detours"—and instead demands continuous reflection, action, and discomfort as part of the learning process.

In music education, this means challenging the dominant frameworks that normalize Eurocentric values and marginalize non-Western and Black musical traditions. Hess (2015) emphasized that antiracism in music education must move beyond surface-level inclusion to actively interrogate how whiteness operates within classrooms—

through the privileging of Western notation over aural traditions, exclusionary audition practices, and the erasure of Black musical contributions.

Just as proponents of culturally sustaining pedagogy strive to provide pedagogical alternatives to dominant Western norms, antiracist educators continue to seek practices that dismantle manifestations of white supremacy in education. Antiracism involves more than making "unbiased" instructional decisions—it requires actively challenging and disrupting the systemic forces that perpetuate racial inequality in schools. This includes critically examining discipline disparities, curricular omissions, implicit biases, and grading practices. As Yancy (2022) notes, antiracist educators must reject the temptation to view themselves as "exceptional" or exempt from the legacies of racism, and instead recognize the deep entanglement of whiteness in the structures of knowledge and power.

Thus, antiracist pedagogy is not only about advocating for justice externally but about cultivating ongoing self-critique and humility internally. It requires educators to acknowledge their own positionality and to understand that dismantling racism involves a continuous, often uncomfortable, process of reflection and accountability. When applied to music education, this work opens space for a broader and more just conception of success—one that values student voice, cultural relevance, and resistance to deficit-based frameworks.

Christopher Emdin's (2016) *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood… and the Rest of Y'all Too* introduced the concept of "reality pedagogy," which emphasizes the importance of honoring students' lived experiences and co-constructing knowledge with them. Drawing from his own background as a Black science educator and hip-hop

scholar, Emdin challenged traditional notions of teaching that position educators as sole knowledge holders and students as passive recipients. Instead, reality pedagogy centers on the principle that students, particularly those in urban and low-income communities, bring with them rich cultural knowledge that must be validated and engaged within the classroom. This approach is grounded in a critical analysis of power dynamics between teacher and student, particularly when race and class are misaligned. Emdin's work is especially relevant to music education in low SES schools, as it requires educators to consider how their own cultural assumptions may shape instruction and limit student engagement. Reality pedagogy affirms that students are not "broken" or in need of fixing, but rather are marginalized by systems that fail to recognize their cultural brilliance. Through dialogue, community-connected practices, and cultural fluency, Emdin advocates for pedagogical relationships that reflect mutual respect, authentic engagement, and shared authority—principles that closely align with the goals of culturally sustaining and antiracist pedagogy.

In a similar vein, Love (2019) argued for an education system that does more than help students survive unjust conditions; it must be committed to cultivating spaces of joy, healing, and justice. In *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Love called on educators to recognize how traditional school structures often uphold systemic racism and devalue the cultural contributions of marginalized communities. She urged teachers to move beyond inclusion toward transformation, rejecting practices that tokenize students of color while maintaining Eurocentric norms. Love's framework emphasizes that teaching for justice involves disrupting practices that harm students and reimagining education as a site for

community affirmation and liberation. For music educators, this means not only broadening repertoire and content but also rethinking what counts as musical success, who defines it, and whose traditions are centered in the process. Love's work underscores that meaningful educational change is not achieved through surface-level reforms, but through sustained commitments to equity, student empowerment, and structural transformation.

Together, Emdin and Love contribute critical insights that help educators reframe their role—not as saviors or reformers working on behalf of students, but as collaborators who support students in expressing their identities and cultivating their own educational narratives. Their perspectives strengthen the argument that traditional markers of success in music education, anchored in Western classical paradigms, must be reexamined in light of students' lived realities and cultural wealth. This shift from assimilation to affirmation reflects the broader goals of asset-based education and provides a foundation for understanding how antiracist and culturally relevant frameworks can reshape music education in meaningful ways.

In *How to Be an Antiracist,* Kendi (2019) redefined the conversation around racism by arguing that every policy and practice is either racist or antiracist, leaving no space for neutrality. He asserts that racism is not simply a matter of personal prejudice or a fixed identity, but rather a dynamic set of ideas and systemic policies that can be actively challenged and changed. Drawing on historical examples and personal narrative, Kendi illustrated how deeply entrenched racist structures have shaped societal institutions, from education to healthcare, and insists that genuine progress requires a

fundamental rethinking of these systems. His framework calls on individuals—educators, policymakers, and citizens alike—to engage in continuous self-examination and to commit to transforming both their beliefs and the institutional policies that perpetuate inequality. By emphasizing that antiracism is an active, ongoing process rather than a passive label, Kendi provided a powerful roadmap for dismantling racial hierarchies, a perspective that resonates deeply with the goals of anti-racist pedagogy in music education and beyond.

Robinson (2024) offered one of the only critical autoethnographies located in this review, using personal narrative to challenge traditional definitions of success for Black students in music education. Writing as a Black male educator, Robinson rejected deficit-based frameworks and instead framed success around student joy, cultural affirmation, and community validation. He described moments of resistance to dominant norms, such as when school administrators dismissed his Afrocentric music curriculum as off-topic or inappropriate, revealing institutional discomfort with culturally sustaining practices. Despite systemic pushback, Robinson highlighted student performances rooted in local Black traditions as acts of celebration and healing, arguing that such moments exemplified authentic success. His presence in the classroom, he wrote, was itself revolutionary in a system not designed for him or his students to thrive. This contribution supported the idea that success in minoritized school communities must be contextualized through student identity and lived experience, rather than standardized benchmarks.

Dumas (2016) provided a compelling critique of how antiblackness shapes education policy and reform discourses. Antiblackness, as defined by Dumas (2016), is

not merely a form of prejudice but a structural condition that positions Black people as inherently disposable and outside the bounds of humanity. Rather than framing educational disparities as an "achievement gap" caused by student deficits, Dumas positioned schools themselves as sites of Black suffering. This reframing exposed how dominant narratives often erase systemic injustice by centering the comfort and interests of white students and educators, while marginalizing Black cultural knowledge and experiences. For example, desegregation policies frequently displaced Black educators and dismantled Black institutions, prioritizing assimilation into white educational norms. Dumas argued that addressing educational inequity requires confronting the structural investments in whiteness that underpin the current system. This perspective aligns with antiracist pedagogy by insisting on the affirmation of Black students' full humanity and advocating for educational spaces that recognize and honor Black life, culture, and intellectual traditions—not as deficits to be corrected, but as vital sources of knowledge and strength.

Whiteness is pervasive in music education, as students, teachers, composers, and curricula overwhelmingly reflect Eurocentric perspectives. After realizing that the education system is failing to exemplify Black music and musicians, Hamilton (2021) observed, "Black music remains underrepresented in schools, resulting in inequities for Black students and Black music educators" (p. 17). The author articulated that deficit models assume that marginalized students and families are to blame for poor academic achievement and that Black students feel alienated due to the absence of representation of Black music in the curriculum. Hamilton noticed improvement while implementing

culturally responsive (sustaining) pedagogies while personally teaching in the classroom. Several courses of action were proposed in this article for engaging more Black students in music education: teaching Black music and offering more Black music courses, engaging Black music educators and musicians, valuing the prior cultural knowledge and experiences that Black students bring into the classroom, fostering student choice and access, and fostering a dialogue on cultural music while gaining knowledge from students.

Many scholars in music education have written about the racial divide between teachers and students (e.g., Bradley, 2012; Elpus & Abril, 2019; Hess, 2021). Music educators reported they feel unprepared to teach in high-minority and low SES schools (Doyle 2012a). Educators may feel a burden of responsibility when openly discussing race in the classroom, such as a white teacher finding it awkward to ask a Black person their opinion (Andrews, 2023). An antiracist framework can help address these challenges by prompting educators to critically examine their own biases and the structural inequities within educational settings. By embracing antiracist principles, educators can transform discomfort into an opportunity for growth and social justice, ultimately working to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate racial disparities in the classroom.

In a publication depicting an antiracist philosophy, Bradley (2003) acknowledged the irony of a white scholar writing about race and privilege. Music educators who seek social change were urged to go beyond “celebrating diversity” by interrogating the racialized nature of society *with* students, where discussions of the past and present will

aid in critical thinking and perhaps eventually achieve the cultural understanding and appreciation of a more authentic multicultural music education. In a separate study, Bradley (2012) found that music educators sometimes interchange the word *race* with *politics,* which problematized the teachers' reluctance to embrace politically charged social contexts and cultures at school. Bradley concluded that educators who present sanitized contexts of music or avoid *political* contexts altogether actually contribute to the ongoing problems of racial inequality and social injustice. The researcher argued that talking openly about race is a crucial step towards social justice through music education. Furthermore, the challenge for music educators becomes how to recognize the concept of race, the complexity of racism, and how the ideology of whiteness can hide within traditional educational narratives and seemingly authentic pedagogical strategies. Taking a serious, introspective look into the issues associated with whiteness is never easy, but it is critical to enabling change (Bradley, 2015).

Hess (2021) researched the presence of whiteness in music education and found even more examples that include giving priority to notation over aurality for musical transmission, exposing students to historically racist practices such as minstrel singers in blackface, promoting standard concert band/orchestra instruments, and requiring that young people sit still and concentrate rather than move while listening to music. In an earlier study, Hess (2017) examined four music teacher's multicultural classroom approaches and considered the problematic side of critical theory in music education. In an attempt at anti-oppressive music teaching, one subject selected classroom materials that did not serve all participants. In fact, the selected material disadvantaged some

students, leading to an examination of the limits of critical pedagogy in music education. Another teacher from this study limited the wholeness of a music education by completely embracing popular and world music cultures while dismissing the Western canon altogether. Ultimately, this researcher warned white antiracist music educators that while society routinely applauds the efforts of being an ally, activists of color face opposition, criticism, or even violence, creating a paradox as a result of their similar work (Hess, 2017). To diminish such critical challenges, Hess suggested putting forward a contextual music education where relationships are drawn between music, culture, privilege, and economics. Hess expressed hope for a future where educators move forward with the awareness that every classroom decision has the potential to either reinforce or dismantle oppression, even among those who strive to be anti-oppressive.

Bates (2019) also raised concerns about the more diplomatic ways white people in general can go about being antiracist and anti-classist. The author argued that white people with a high standard of living might try to hide their own implicit bias by scapegoating poorer white people as being overtly racist. Bates maintained that solidarity amongst all people is critical, regardless of race or class, and specifically to those who critique privilege, power, and oppression.

Moving forward, music teachers will hopefully become representative of the diversity of cultures, musical styles, and perspectives that students bring to the classroom. There is another hope that as more educators join the movement for social justice in music education, more minority and low SES students will participate in ensembles, festivals, and eventually become music teachers (Clauhs, 2021). However, this optimism

can be at odds with CSP; inclusion can be oppressive when music programs center white middle-class or elite Eurocentric values. While antiracist pedagogy offers a powerful framework for confronting racialized inequities in music education, the intersection of race with class introduces additional layers of complexity. In the next section, I explore how the compounding effects of racial and economic marginalization shape educational opportunity, access, and perceptions of success in low SES music classrooms.

Intersections with Race and Class

Issues of race are continually present in music education. Lewis (2022), who stated very clearly for readers that she is a Black, queer, female music education researcher who experienced numerous social injustices that guided her writing, recommended that music teachers be educated on systemic and structural forms of oppression to enable them to adopt equitable practices. Exploring antiracist pedagogy allows music educators to understand how their practice can confront and disrupt structural inequities in education. Bonilla-Silva (2018) studied how racism still exists even though most white Americans claim to not be racist. Color-blindness, that is, denying that race should influence society, can provide a mask to white people appearing reasonable and moral, but still bearing racial thoughts, actions, and beliefs that are controversial. Color-blind racism can become naturalized in curricula, teaching materials, policies, and personal attitudes (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; 2018). Bonilla-Silva argued that racism needs to be perceived as systematic and institutionalized rather than simply as individualized prejudice. Most antiracism scholars concur that talking openly about race is a small but crucial step towards social justice through music education (Bates, 2019;

Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Bradley, 2007; Hess, 2017).

Social class is a contested concept in the United States, having numerous competing definitions, models, and even arguments surrounding its definition. Many Americans believe there are three social classes: rich or upper-class, middle-class, and poor or lower-class. These correlate roughly to this dissertation's references to two classes: low SES (poor) and higher SES (middle-class/rich). In this paper, references to high SES will combine middle-class and upper-class to discern most connections from lower-class, as experiences from poverty are a primary focus. Social class is an umbrella term that includes objective resources such as income, educational background, and parental background, as well as their subjective evaluations of students' place in society (Belmi et al., 2020). SES is a combination of economic and social measurements in relation to others which can include income, educational attainment, financial security, and the biased assessments of social status and social class (American Psychological Association, 2021). Research across all subject areas has shown that SES affects our society deeply. The American Psychological Association (2021) statistics about SES indicate that society benefits from an increased focus on foundational socioeconomic inequalities and the efforts to reduce the gaps between statuses. Unfortunately, music education in low SES schools tend to uphold disparities while sustaining oppressive social systems, beliefs, and behaviors (Bates, 2021). Cultural capital in American music education includes the dominance of Western classical music, which can alienate marginalized students whose cultural backgrounds are at variance with classical music and who are often unable to acquire material resources necessary to keep pace with

privileged peers. Taking a relativist view of culture, Bates (2021) argued that educational systems, via cultural capital, are structured to maintain inequality thus exploiting students rather than empowering them.

Intersectionality is the concept that there are multiple aspects of social life and distinct categories of analysis that exist within each individual (McCall, 2005). For example, an African-American woman's experiences cannot be equated to the experiences of every woman or the experiences of every African-American person. Experiences are multiplicative, where layers of individual identity compound to increase the potential for injustice and mistreatment. Bates (2019) conceptualized intersectionality and the interactions of social and material forces, arguing that oppressions found in music education within race and class can be analyzed individually or in various combinations. Informed educators can acknowledge personal bias and existing ideologies, prompt challenges to inequities found within music education, and inspire change. Race and class commonly intersect through stereotypes such as the perception that minority students attend low SES class schools and white students attend high SES middle-class schools. In some cases, research may focus on race, or implicitly use SES as an indicator of race, while neglecting social class and geography. Bates (2019) warned that sometimes antiracist scholars will look at race through an asset lens and then turn around and see class through a deficit lens. When this happens, we risk racism masquerading as (hiding behind the mask of) classism.

Sánchez-Gatt (2022) employed BlackCrit to examine how intersecting racial and economic marginalization shapes Black students' experiences in music education. The

author critiqued neoliberal and multicultural frameworks that reframe whiteness as universal, noting how educational systems often treat Blackness and poverty as liabilities. Instead, the piece imagined educational spaces where Blackness and poverty are not treated as deficits but as sources of knowledge, creativity, and power. This framework parallels the asset-based approach of the present study, offering a way to rethink how intersecting racial and economic marginalization can serve as a foundation for success in music education.

Robinson (2018) shared a deeply personal account of navigating music education as a Black student from a low-income background, highlighting how race and class shaped his experiences of exclusion. Early training in gospel music, rooted in community and church rather than private instruction, was not recognized as legitimate by the music teachers at school. Instead, Robinson's lack of formal, Western classical training was treated as a deficiency. This story reveals how Black musical traditions are often devalued in school music programs that prioritize whiteness, wealth, and formal instruction. Robinson described moments where he was pushed aside in favor of wealthier white students, even when his musical ability was strong. The author illustrates how assumptions about class and race can compound, leading to double marginalization and lost opportunities. Robinson's reflections point to the need for music educators to critically examine whose knowledge is valued and how systemic privilege continues to shape success in the classroom.

Bates (2019) examined how white individuals approach antiracism and anti-classism, noting that those with a high standard of living may distance themselves from

implicit bias by attributing overt racism to poorer white populations. The study emphasized the importance of solidarity across racial and socioeconomic lines, particularly for those engaging in critiques of privilege, power, and oppression. As the field progresses, the demographic makeup of music educators may become more representative of the diverse cultures, musical styles, and perspectives that students bring to the classroom. Clauhs (2021) suggested that increasing participation in social justice-oriented music education could lead to greater representation of minority and low SES students in ensembles, festivals, and ultimately, in music teaching professions. However, within the framework of CSP, inclusion efforts must critically examine whether music programs continue to center white, middle-class, or elite Eurocentric values, which may reinforce exclusionary practices despite intentions of equity.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2011) contrasted stereotypes of the "ideal student," who is mostly imagined as white and middle-class, with students living in urban contexts. This researcher conceptualized three notions of urban: first, the sophisticated urban space, where predominantly white, upper-class schools reside directly in large metropolitan city centers; second, urban as a place of authenticity, where people of color are at odds with their own authentic identities versus expectations from the media's interpretation of urban; and third, the "urban jungle," a term that conjures imagery of poor communities of color and students perceived as worthless, irrelevant, insignificant, and uneducable. Gaztambide-Fernández reframed the concept of urban as a cultural practice, both limiting and providing opportunities for music educators. This model recognized the importance of place in educational contexts, but also encouraged educators to re-envision what those

spaces represent to the people who live and work there.

Perhaps the most common issue found while synthesizing this intersecting literature has been the mismatch of race between teacher and student in low SES schools. One study found that the majority of teachers come from suburban, upper- to middle-class, and white backgrounds while students were from urban, lower-class, and African-American backgrounds (Doyle, 2012b). Results from this study indicated that teachers in urban music teaching settings had lower expectations of their students, negatively affecting student achievement. Multiple researchers have indicated that teachers often consider their own culture "normal" and their students' culture "foreign," which can lead to racial and cultural disparities making it difficult for students and teachers to build academic relationships (Benedict, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014; van den Bergh et al., 2010). The elementary teachers who participated in Doyle's (2012b) study felt their higher education courses did not adequately prepare them for teaching students with different life experiences and learning styles.

Racially minoritized groups remain underrepresented in college enrollment and in the teaching profession. A study conducted on race in higher general education and offered possible explanations for the lack of diversity in collegiate demographics, including SES, cultural capital, and academic preparation (Simpson, 2001). African-American participants in the study who came from educationally underserved communities may have been less academically prepared than their white peers when arriving at college. Simpson (2021) postulated that these intersectional barriers may impede equitable access to employment opportunities following completion of a music

education certification program. An analysis of scores from the Praxis II licensure test for music teachers revealed that white students pass the test at a significantly higher rate of success than non-white students (Elpus, 2015). Additionally, non-white students were more likely to take the test multiple times with additional personal costs. The researcher postulated that this may be one of the contributing factors to the fact that white, often higher-SES students make-up almost 90% of the new music teachers entering the workforce (Elpus, 2015).

Deficit Perspectives and Low SES Schools

The literature found in this review was plentiful concerning issues in low SES education and music education settings. The following section highlights the contributions of key researchers in this field who have collected data and produced multiple studies showing how music educators may be struggling to teach while facing common factors that are usually seen as educational deficits. Some of these factors may be actual deficits experienced by students and communities while others may be deficit perspectives, as expressed by researchers or study participants. Before moving forward, it is important to clarify connotations of actual deficits versus deficit perspectives.

A deficit is the absence of an attribute, trait, or ability from an individual or system, similar to how a fiscal deficit occurs when spending exceeds revenue. However, determining what constitutes a deficit in education is complex and often relies on measuring individuals against socially constructed norms (Valencia, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Commonly identified educational deficits include low student achievement, increased dropout rates, or the presence of a learning disability; these

standards reflect society's values rather than absolute measures. For instance, while students living in poverty typically struggle with reading in school (Templeton, 2011), a student's difficulty with literacy does not necessarily indicate a lack of ability if other talents, such as musical aptitude, are present. In some households, musical skills and performance may be more highly valued than traditional academic skills like reading. Therefore, what educators often view as illiteracy—a deficit in academic achievement—might not be seen as a deficit within a cultural context that prioritizes musical accomplishment, for example.

Deficit perspectives in education correlate directly to low SES research in education (Valencia, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2006). What is missing from much of this research is the acknowledgment that both participants and researchers may hold privileged positions. In doing so, they might unintentionally reproduce deficit perspectives by comparing low-income contexts to the standard values and ideologies prevalent in music education (Bradley, 2012; Hess, 2015). Most scholarly researchers and music educators are white and middle-class, even in low SES schools with a minority student population (Doyle, 2012b, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The following section reviews literature framing the deficit perspectives in low SES music education contexts, starting with research critical of deficit perspectives and proceeding to examples of studies that perpetuate deficit perspectives.

Low SES schools are often framed individually as a "problem" that needs "fixing" based on the deficit perspectives that exist from benchmark standards, comparative statistics, and negative stigma. Deficit ideologies in low SES schools are

present when policy language includes terms such as “at-risk,” “underachieving,” or “disadvantaged,” when marginalized students are pushed out of mainstream classrooms and into special education classrooms, or when teachers and administrators leave schools and parents relocate their children based on a negative school reputation (Holtz et al., 2023).

Deficit theories have been critiqued as a pseudoscience founded upon racial and class bias (Valencia, 1997). Framing educational practices as social constructs, Valencia (1997) described deficit thinking as a response to the conventions that subject people of color to negative assumptions. According to Holtz et al. (2023), deficit thinking includes six characteristics: blaming the victim, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability, and heterodoxy. Blaming the victim—for instance where Black students are labeled as underachievers or unmotivated—avoids the underlying structural inequalities and adds to the power of the deficit mentality. Communities of color can be held under control by their oppressors (teachers, school leaders, school boards or other government bodies). Researchers can also act as “oppressors” by contributing to a body of research that is steeped in prejudice against people of color, inaccurate methods, and findings that support deficit paradigms around school sites (Valencia, 1997). This pseudoscience is further compounded by social shifts in time where the alleged deficiencies are attributed to poor genetics, less developed culture, or inadequate family structures. Students of color are often classified as either special education students, at-risk students, or behavioral problem students as the oppressors reduce the expectations of their ability to learn. Heterodox views must be examined as a way to deconstruct the features of deficit

thinking, as well as to dismantle the conventional, orthodox frameworks of understanding (Holtz et al., 2023). Many teachers are not adequately prepared to teach in a class with low SES students with diverse needs, as deficit beliefs and practices stem from university preparation programs in which cultural competency is not a priority (Holtz et al., 2023). Placing teachers in non-traditional settings with inadequate training reinforces biases and deficit beliefs (Hoffman et al., 2020).

Bates (2016) has pleaded with fellow music educators to understand how music education and poverty are addressed without reinforcing inequalities. For example, offering music lessons to poor children may seem harmless—charitable even, to provide a music education to those in need—but can be extremely problematic without first understanding the cultural, personal, and social disparities between those offering and receiving such services. In another article, Bates (2021) described how the way students from lower socio-economic classes dress, speak, walk, think, feel, talk, and interact may differ from dominant middle-upper-class attitudes and values, which may be rooted in elite Eurocentric beliefs or practices. Every student's habits are scrutinized by teachers, who may hold a myriad of implicit or explicit biases. Social justice related to class privilege and classism require careful listening, vulnerability, critical discourse, and recognition of one's own biases and privilege (Bates, 2019). The deficit orientation that has become ubiquitous in how many stakeholders, administrators, and practitioners think about low SES school contexts requires further attention.

Deficit perspectives in education can negatively impact teachers' career longevity, especially when these perspectives originate from educators themselves and correlate

with low SES school contexts (Abril & Bannerman, 2014; Doyle, 2012b). High-poverty, urban, and low-income communities experience the highest rates of teacher turnover and staffing shortages, with teachers in these schools being 50% more likely to resign than those in low-poverty settings (Olsen & Anderson, 2007).

School neighborhoods and socioeconomic status (SES) play a critical role in teachers' career decisions. Research has shown that low SES schools with a high proportion of minority and low-income students experience significantly more teacher vacancies, higher state and federal funding needs, lower test scores, and more behavioral disruptions (Boyd et al., 2011). Clotfelter et al. (2006) argued that students in low SES schools are less likely to have tenured, well-qualified teachers, which may further exacerbate educational disparities. In contrast, schools with racial and socioeconomic balance showed higher test scores compared to those with a homogeneous population (Wille, 2001).

Teachers working in low SES schools often report high levels of stress, burnout, low self-efficacy, and job dissatisfaction (Collie et al., 2012; Herman et al., 2017; Martin, 2019). Many students in these environments may be experiencing emotional and behavioral disorders, lack strong school leadership, and feel little sense of purpose in their education (Arms, 2016; Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Simon, 2013). Burnout and praxis shock—the disillusionment that occurs when new teachers realize that real-world teaching does not align with their expectations—can further weaken teacher resilience, potentially leading to early career exits (Ballantyne & Retell, 2019).

Some music teachers in low SES settings report intentionally isolating themselves

as a way to cope with classroom disruptions, environmental noise, and chaos—a coping strategy that may further contribute to burnout and attrition (Sindburg, 2013). Munns et al. (2013) suggested that schools in the poorest communities offer a profound opportunity to observe the complexities and challenges of diverse societies. However, without systemic support, teachers in these environments may struggle to sustain long-term careers in education.

Music programs are influenced by various factors associated with low socioeconomic status (SES), including low enrollment, high dropout rates, limited parental involvement, and challenges in retaining "high-quality" teachers and administrators (Deisler, 2011). Research on music education in low SES schools has highlighted common themes related to resource availability, academic performance, and institutional support. Several studies have examined perceptions of music programs in different SES contexts, often characterizing low SES schools as underserved and under-resourced, while high SES schools are frequently described as having greater access to funding, administrative support, and academic achievement (Albert, 2006; Deisler, 2011; Elpus, 2014).

Erb (2019) conducted a sociological study to examine SES factors that affected participation in music ensembles. Findings indicated that student ensemble participation was influenced by various SES-related factors, including peer-group relationships, community building, travel situations, parental bias, privilege, and local segregation. Deisler (2011) conducted another study comparing common characteristics among successful high school band programs in low-SES contexts. Findings suggested that

factors such as academic ability, parental involvement, home environment, and community all influenced musical achievement and aptitude resulting from school-based and other instructional settings. The study also reviewed previous research on music programs in high-SES schools, which were associated with higher test scores, more distinguished festival ratings, and greater support from administrators, parents, and the community. In contrast, music programs in low-SES schools exhibited lower test and festival scores, reduced support, and inadequate resources.

Albert (2006) examined strategies for enrolling and retaining band students in low-SES school districts. The results suggested that positive pedagogical strategies, culturally relevant ensembles, and student ownership of the ensemble process could support recruitment and retention efforts in these districts. Classroom management was identified as the most problematic issue in music classrooms in low-SES schools (Abril, 2006; Baker, 2012; Eros, 2009). While compiling a profile of an effective urban music teacher, Baker (2012) found that participants identified their greatest classroom challenges as discipline, lack of funding for instruments and private lessons, uninvolved or unsupportive parents, limited music training, limited musical exposure, and unstable home environments. Similarly, beginning music teachers interviewed in Day's (2018) study reported concerns regarding the lack of preservice curricular content related to teaching in urban schools, insufficient external support resources, and inadequate opportunities for individual professional development.

If music educators uphold the belief that every student deserves a music education, then it would be prudent to address what the research suggests: students from

low SES backgrounds may experience an array of obstacles to reaching achievement standards in music programs (Albert, 2006). An asset view would raise questions about what groups might be advantaged and disadvantaged by such achievement benchmarks; the aim, in other words, would not be limited to overcoming deficits. With numerous deficit perspectives held alongside the possibility of actual deficits existing in low SES music education, it is important to understand the need for asset-based techniques and strategies.

Asset-Based Research in Music Education

Asset-based research in education has emphasized recognizing and building upon students' existing strengths, cultural backgrounds, and community resources rather than focusing on perceived deficits or limitations (Torres, 2023). This approach has challenged deficit-oriented narratives that historically portrayed students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds as lacking essential skills, resources, or motivation. Instead, asset-based frameworks have highlighted the diverse knowledge, talents, and cultural wealth that students bring to their education. Asset-based approaches and antiracist pedagogy are not mutually exclusive. In fact, both share a commitment to affirming students' cultural identities and resisting deficit frameworks that normalize whiteness and middle-class norms. Educators adopting asset-based approaches have viewed students' languages, experiences, communities, and cultures as valuable resources to be honored rather than deficits to be overcome.

The term "asset-based approach" has functioned as a general term rather than a singular concept attributed to any single researcher. It has been shaped by various

educational theories, including culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). Scholars from multiple disciplines have contributed to its development, particularly as a counterpoint to deficit-based models that have historically dominated discussions about marginalized students. While no single researcher has been credited with coining the term, it has been widely applied in research on educational equity, culturally responsive teaching, and antiracist pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Silverman et al., 2023). However, while asset-based approaches are useful for affirming student strengths and resisting deficit ideologies, they can be diluted into tokenism or assimilationist practices if not coupled with a structural critique—especially when resilience is praised without addressing the oppressive conditions that demand it (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In music education, asset-based perspectives have intersected with research on culturally responsive pedagogy (Lind & McKoy, 2016) and the role of community and student identity in shaping musical learning experiences. Templeton (2011) found that poverty—often framed solely as a limitation—could cultivate assets such as resilience, tenacity, independence, creativity, and compassion. Recognizing these assets has shifted the focus from remediation to empowerment, challenging long-standing assumptions about success and academic potential.

Yosso (2005) introduced the concept of *community cultural wealth* to challenge deficit-oriented views that positioned marginalized students as lacking necessary skills, knowledge, or motivation. This framework identified six forms of cultural capital—aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant—that have often been

devalued by dominant educational systems. In contrast to traditional models that prioritized white, middle-class forms of capital, community cultural wealth affirmed the legitimacy of knowledge rooted in lived experiences, cultural traditions, and collective resilience. Within asset-based music education, this framework expanded the definition of student success by validating the creative, relational, and community-based ways in which students engage with music. Students who navigated material constraints, supported peers, or infused performance with cultural expression demonstrated multiple forms of capital that remained invisible under dominant standards. Community cultural wealth supported a redefinition of success that centered student identity, artistry, and collective strength, aligning directly with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy and antiracist education.

The asset-based perspective aligns with critical theory, which has long argued that educational inequities must be understood as products of systemic conditions rather than individual shortcomings. Scheurich (1998) asserted that policy "problems" should be viewed as socially constructed and examined within the conditions from which they emerged. This critical perspective has been reinforced by Flint and Jaggers (2021), who found that deficit-based approaches tended to focus on "fixing" students rather than addressing the broader conditions that perpetuated inequality across multiple areas of life, including education, healthcare, employment, and the justice system. Asset-based approaches have sought to counter this deficit framing by emphasizing the importance of belonging, agency, and well-being as essential components of academic success and cultural continuity. Zhu (2020) argued that by engaging deeply with students' lived

experiences, teachers could move beyond cultural stereotypes and investigate the economic, social, political, and ethical factors contributing to the accumulation of "educational debt." Silverman et al. (2023) further documented how individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds—such as students of color and those from low-income households—have frequently been positioned as deficient, with structural barriers to success often misattributed to personal shortcomings rather than systemic inequities.

These findings align with my study's commitment to critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and antiracist education. In music education, CSP has challenged traditional, Eurocentric curricula by affirming and sustaining the cultural practices and musical traditions of historically marginalized communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). Antiracist pedagogy, in turn, has called for educators to acknowledge and dismantle systems of oppression within education by actively resisting deficit narratives and replacing them with affirming, community-centered approaches (Ladson-Billings, 1995). My study builds upon these principles by framing music education as a site of both resistance and empowerment, recognizing that low-SES students bring rich cultural knowledge that should not only be acknowledged but actively integrated into their learning experiences.

Fitzpatrick-Harnish (2015) examined the experiences of five successful urban music teachers who rejected the notion that their students and schools were "less than" others. These educators critically reflected on their own pedagogical practices and customized their approaches to meet the individual needs of their students, recognizing that each student brought valuable cultural experiences and existing musical knowledge

to the classroom. Fitzpatrick-Harnish (2015) proposed a framework for asset-based music education, arguing that all students deserved comprehensive music programs and that the most important resource for educators was their understanding of student strengths. However, while this framework acknowledged inequities and proposed individualized strategies to address them, it did not fully embrace an asset-based lens. Specifically, it stopped short of identifying strengths that arose directly from experiences of poverty and risked maintaining implicit biases by conceptualizing student strengths as overcoming deficits rather than as inherent qualities shaped by diverse life experiences.

A more expansive asset-based perspective has emphasized that poverty and low SES conditions could cultivate strengths in ways that extend beyond individual resilience. Bates (2021) critiqued dominant narratives of success, which often framed individuals as "rising above" deficits, arguing that this framework reinforced the notion that some experiences were inherently obstacles rather than valuable aspects of a diverse social fabric. In a more equitable society, Bates (2021) contended, there would be no predetermined barriers from which individuals must rise; rather, all experiences would be seen as part of a complex spectrum of human potential. However, not all strengths or assets held the same currency in competitive educational and economic systems. Bates (2021) argued that reframing success required recognizing a diversity of strengths and abilities rather than adhering to rigid, hierarchical measures of achievement.

Silverman et al. (2023) outlined three specific asset-based approaches that have contributed to the redefinition of success in education generally: universal strengths, difference-as-strength, and identity-specific strengths. The universal strengths approach

posited that all individuals possessed valuable traits that could support personal and academic success. Silverman et al. (2023) found that identifying and applying these strengths fostered fulfillment, well-being, and motivation. The difference-as-strength approach emphasized how systemically marginalized individuals have drawn strength from their unique backgrounds and experiences. This same study also found that workplaces that embraced diverse sociocultural perspectives saw increased trust, comfort, and performance among marginalized employees (Silverman et al., 2023). The identity-specific strengths approach rejected deficit-based perspectives by affirming that systemically marginalized identities and lived experiences could serve as sources of strength. In educational settings, students from low SES backgrounds who participated in reflection activities that identified their strengths demonstrated increased academic persistence, which correlated positively with academic achievement (Silverman et al., 2023). Despite these insights, research that specifically explores asset-based perspectives in low-SES music classrooms remains limited. However, broader trends in education have indicated that asset-based models provided promising frameworks that could be expanded upon in music education research.

As research continues to challenge deficit-based narratives about systemically marginalized identities, asset-based approaches have become increasingly relevant. Valuing diversity, identity, and community represents a necessary step toward dismantling deficit-based ideologies (Silverman et al., 2023). While existing literature has focused primarily on race and class deficits in education, my study contributes to the field by centering on the strengths of low SES and racially minoritized students within

music education. Collectively, these frameworks—critical theory, CSP, antiracist pedagogy—inform the conceptual lens through which I examine success in a low SES public school music program. They offer both critique and possibility, grounding this autoethnography in a praxis of reflection, resistance, and reimagining. This dissertation will critically examine how traditional success metrics have marginalized certain students while proposing alternative conceptions of achievement that reflect diverse lived experiences. By drawing upon my own experiences growing up and teaching in a low SES community, I analyze how asset-based approaches in music education can redefine success, challenge deficit narratives, and support more equitable, inclusive learning environments.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to consider alternatives to traditional and written music education standards for success, such as state or national standards, that have historically stigmatized low SES schools, teachers, and students as deficient. My goal was to write an autoethnography to critically examine my own conceptualizations of success in music education within the context of my teaching position in a low SES public school with a diverse, predominantly African American, student body.

School Context

The school where I teach does not align with common perceptions of a suburban school district as most people might imagine—white and middle-class. Geographically, the school lies outside of city limits, classifying it as suburban. However, many people who have heard of the school district often describe its context similarly to what Gaztambide-Fernández (2011) referred to as the stereotypical "urban jungle"—a term with racist connotations characterized by Black and lower-class demographics. Regardless of urban, suburban, or rural location, low SES schools, students, and staff face perceived and actual deficits, particularly in music programs, often including limited resources, underqualified teachers, and low academic achievement. Students also confront daily economic and social stressors, unsafe buildings, and trauma (Baker, 2012; Day, 2018; Doyle, 2012a; Farmer, 2015; Fitzpatrick-Harnish, 2015; Frierson-Campbell, 2006; Lehmberg, 2008; Simon, 2013; Sindburg, 2013).

While ultimately conceptualizing success in music education, I also aim to outline and document my encounters with common low SES challenges and how I have

endeavored to maintain an asset perspective on success and achievement, regardless of deficits that may or may not exist in my educational setting. I also anticipate reflecting on moments where I have been unsuccessful maintaining a constant asset perspective. In this study, I will explore how social structures can frame certain qualities as deficits and others as assets, depending on situational context and how I interpret them. For example, most people perceive living in poverty as a harsh challenge and define it as a deficit.[4] A deficit perspective aligns poverty with negative implications, such as substandard housing, hunger, and inadequate social and emotional development (Flint & Jaggers, 2021). Conversely, an asset perspective contextualizes these perceived deficits and frames them in a manner that emphasizes advantages and positivity. For instance, students living in poverty often demonstrate a remarkable willingness to take risks, show resilience in the face of failure, and exhibit a strong sense of independence in their learning (Flint & Jaggers, 2021). Due to my lifelong association with the district, community cultures, and music program, I often perceive assets in situations where others might see deficits. Maintaining a positive teaching perspective has led to a personally fulfilling career and helped build and rebuild school music programs despite any and all perceived deficits.

This is a critical autoethnography in that I will argue that music students who embrace subjective, contextual, and situational factors of their environments can make

[4] Deficit conditions mentioned in this dissertation that people may be experiencing such as poverty, homelessness, hunger, or trauma will not be treated lightly nor with any implications that they are not serious or even life-threatening. In this paper, I will attempt to acknowledge these challenges as deficits or as a deficit perspective while looking for strengths surrounding such conditions.

informed, rational choices in music (Regelski, 2020), which, once identified, enables educators and researchers to conceptualize criteria for success as an alternative to widely accepted standards in contexts that many perceive as inundated with deficit thinking. I will reflect on indicators of success and recognize, from my own vantage point, how building on smaller moments of achievements can lead to a pathway of larger successes. The specific questions that will be asked throughout the study are as follows:

1. What are the standards I feel obligated to use to measure success in this low SES, predominantly Black school music program?
2. In what ways does the dominant culture with its focus on academic achievement require, recommend, and/or imply the centrality of standard measures for success?
3. From my emic vantage point relative to the context of this district, school, and state, what groups appear to be advantaged and/or disadvantaged by generally-accepted state and national music standards?
4. How have I conceptualized, throughout my life, the evolving social, cultural, and material assets in this low SES school district and community?
5. What alternative, asset-based standards could be considered in my efforts to conceptualize, define, and foster success in this low SES school music program?

The remainder of this chapter will include my reasoning for choosing qualitative research, specifically autoethnography, as a methodology, along with an overview of potential limitations to the study.

Qualitative Research and Ethnography

Qualitative researchers use empirical methods to examine complex phenomena that require in-depth reflection (Gall et al., 2006). Lyons, et al. (2013) further contextualized qualitative research within the framework of social justice, highlighting its role in promoting principles such as equity, access, participation, and harmony among culturally diverse populations. There are multiple methodologies for qualitative research, including grounded theory, action research, narrative research, and ethnography. Ethnography is a study of characteristics of a given culture or context. Three major features of an ethnographic research study are discovering cultural patterns, focusing on an emic (insider) perspective, and studying natural settings (Shimahara, 1988). Ethnographic researchers primarily focus on culture, allowing readers to understand elements of the culture even without experiencing it firsthand (Gall et al., 2006). Because I have spent my entire life immersed in this unique school culture, my first-person lived experiences offer an emic perspective. Centering my personal viewpoints and experiences, however, shifts the study from "ethnography" to "auto-ethnography."

Autoethnography

Poulos (2021), provided a definition for autoethnography:

> Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meaning, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (p. 4).

Autoethnography designates the researcher as the participant-observer who describes the world through evocative writing, capturing deep, rich, and full cultural scenes that enable subjective material to be critiqued (Poulos, 2021). Adams et al. (2015) described autoethnography as a tool for examining themes of social justice and quality of life. Most importantly, however, autoethnography is more than a narrative; it is a story with a purpose—the act of social examination and critique to illuminate social interactions (Poulos, 2021).

Several types of autoethnography have emerged relative to the concerns that this form of inquiry can sometimes seem vague and indistinct (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Evocative autoethnographies are designed to elicit emotional responses from readers. Visual autoethnography integrates visual elements like photos, artwork, or videos with a written examination. Analytic autoethnography concentrates on constructing theoretical interpretations of larger social phenomenon (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). This study will be written in the style of analytic autoethnography. Boylorn and Orbe (2016) narrowed this style of writing further in their delineation of *critical autoethnography* as "cultural analysis through personal narrative written through a critical lens" (p. 17). Writers of critical autoethnography intentionally steer the narrative, aiming to critique a cultural analysis of power, hegemony, and hierarchy. Taking a democratic stance, critical autoethnographers may propose remedies for issues related to inequality, oppression, or inequity (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016). By incorporating critical theory, critical autoethnographers engage directly with readers through text.

Analytic, critical autoethnography is the fitting methodology to write about my

direct experiences, reflecting on memory, and discussing social and cultural phenomena from my first-person perspective. I entered the doctoral music education program to learn more about the music education philosophies, theories, and strategies that exist around low SES school programs and student minorities. Writing this dissertation has allowed me to inquire about ways that success can be conceptualized in the context I understand best. I have a career filled with stories and meaningful experiences, along with positive student outcomes, despite any perceived deficits that may or may not exist. I believe that these lived experiences can be valid, valuable, and relevant to the research community. This genre of writing and research connects the personal to the cultural (Ellis et al., 2011). I have been making these connections informally for many years and this paper represents my professional culmination of connecting the personal to the cultural.

As the previous chapter delineated, researchers have extensively studied the challenges and limitations of low SES schools and music programs. However, there is a lack of research focused on lived experiences, particularly in contexts where race and class intersect. In my efforts to outline an asset-based approach to conceptualize success within the low SES context, I have sought to offer an emic perspective imploring teaching strategies such as culturally sustaining pedagogy and antiracist pedagogy to create more inclusive and just learning environments in a music education setting. As Ellis et al. (2011) recommend, layered accounts in this autoethnography will center on my experiences and employ introspection to allow readers to engage with the unpredictable narratives and perhaps feel a connection to the stories being told. Researchers have offered conclusions and implications based on their findings studying

low SES schools and music program deficits, but few have provided ground-level data for applying previous recommendations, most of the research has emerged from a deficit perspective. I will synthesize my lived experience with this spectrum of past research.

This autoethnography is intentionally structured to address research gaps—incorporating lived experience perspectives, examining the practical application of asset-based frameworks, and challenging deficit narratives—by gathering data from a specific situational context and generating new insights into how success can be conceptualized within this low-SES, predominantly Black school. Other methods, such as case studies, surveys, or focus groups conducted with randomly selected participants might not capture the full complexity and intersectionality occurring within the unique contexts associated with this study. The act of self-reflection may lead to new and different understandings of the nature of success for my students in ways that can contribute to a broader discussion on redefining success in music education for low SES students.

The nature of autoethnography supports introspection and retrospective thinking to create a narrative filled with personal significance while advancing the research community's understanding of music education. Ultimately, my aim is for this inquiry to be a resource for music teachers working in low SES, predominantly Black schools who want to cultivate student success and embrace any and all perceived and existing deficits using an asset perspective approach in education.

Considerations of Autoethnography

Several considerations are recommended for "doing autoethnography," a coined phrase which encapsulates the entire research process somewhat combining

autobiography and ethnography (Poulos, 2021). These six considerations have served as a guide throughout the dissertation writing-as-inquiry process: approach, purpose, form, voice, mystery, and impact.

Approach is the technical procedure for the writing-as-inquiry method. Because the research of an autoethnography is ongoing, the writing is ongoing as well. Writing is the most important part of the research process. From the start of my doctoral candidacy, I was considering autoethnography as a methodology and began journaling right away. Small notes and short stories from past memories were a quick way to prepare possible narratives for this paper. I also wrote down important current occurrences as they happened in real time. Notes and scribbles eventually became handwritten journal entries and more detailed timelines of accounted events. Some days were spent writing out major stories and happenings, while other days were spent writing about the cultural and social aspects I experience and have experienced in my life. Moving forward, I anticipated an abundance of writing, small scale and large, digital and by hand, at all times throughout this project.

Purpose frames the goals, intentions, and possibilities of the inquiry and phenomena. The purpose of this study has been to consider asset-based alternatives to traditional music education standards for success, which have historically stigmatized low SES schools, teachers, and students as deficient. Poulos (2021) argued that most autoethnographers write as a means of critically examining and transforming personal or communal experiences, using self-reflection to challenge dominant narratives, generate new understandings, or advocate for change. Having taught in multiple low SES

communities for over 20 years has opened my eyes to so many educational situations that are beautiful, traumatizing, emotional, upsetting, unforgettable, and uplifting…sometimes all simultaneously. The idea that there may be more than just the typical standards of success in a diverse, low SES music classroom might not be original, but much of this thinking remains undocumented, and I believe it is necessary to reach others in similar situations who might not understand how to look beyond the traditional standards of achievement.

Form is how the author makes their way through the writing by setting up a beginning and middle, then ending with coherence and meaning (Poulos, 2021). I begin the narrative portion of this dissertation by retelling my school accounts from kindergarten through 12th grade in the very district that I teach in today, which even then dealt with problems associated with intersections of race and class. I actually have vivid memories of those early years and the thoughts in my mind about what I was seeing and experiencing in school. For the middle of my writing, and a separate chapter, I explore my years during college as a music education major, and then my first experiences as a pre-service music teacher. Another chapter has been devoted strictly to my professional teaching career. These years recall accounts of situational contexts and how many major life decisions were made, the impact I see between race and class in a low SES public school, and of course, how music and teaching impacted my life, specific to the progress and success of my students. These memories are supported by my personal collection of photos, videos, programs, yearbooks, and published articles, all of which constitute artifacts and tangible evidence for this dissertation, though not directly presented.

Poulos (2021) recommended that authors establish a credible voice to create a transformative, powerful, and resonant impact. The audience must believe what is being said and reveal things to show an ethos. Because I have been a student, resident, and teacher, my voice is coming from an emic perspective where I am an insider and immersed in the community and school culture, adding more validity to this autoethnography. To gather emic data, one must experience the culture without being obtrusive, listen as much as possible, get to know how people think, build rapport, and understand history (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). It has been essential that I replicate in my writing the scenarios I experienced to the best of my ability for readers to trust and judge my study as reality. The more detailed my writing, the more authentic my voice has become which establishes further credibility.

Mystery, incorporated into writing, uncovers the surprises that have been stumbled upon during research (Poulos, 2021). I intended for the journey of writing this paper to reveal buried aspects of my life, leading to new realizations—even when they included implicit biases or other difficult truths. Writing reflectively serves as a powerful tool for personal discovery, and recognizing bias enhances credibility, ensuring that introspection fosters critical engagement rather than reinforcing assumptions. Silverman et al. (2023) cautioned that strengths-based researchers must be wary of over-emphasizing resilience, for example, as doing so can shift focus away from systemic inequities and place undue responsibility on individuals to overcome structural barriers. While resilience is important, this dissertation moves beyond narratives of perseverance to also critically examine the broader sociopolitical conditions that shape educational

experiences in a low-SES, predominantly Black school. Grounded in critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist pedagogy, this research interrogates the oppressive systems that create disparities in music education. In the discussion section, I reflect on the discoveries made, the questions that emerged, and the actions taken in response to these realizations.

An important goal of autoethnography is to take readers on a journey with the author, creating a meaningful *impact* through storytelling (Poulos, 2021). Readers are meant to experience the journey alongside the author. The author selects elements of the research to highlight, emphasizing those that may have the greatest impact (Poulos, 2021). The retelling of events through my writing have been intended to (1) advance the story, and (2) help readers follow on a journey with me, into my world. During graduate classes, I felt like my contributions were impactful as my professors and fellow cohort members were always enthralled when I reviewed my school context and the stories I revealed during class discussions. Adding this dissertation to the research community could be impactful to teachers or readers experiencing similar school contexts or those interested in learning more about experiences in a racially diverse, low SES school community. It is my hope that this writing will resonate with readers as truthful, honest, powerful, and impactful.

These six considerations from Poulos (2021) will be used to guide my writing, or "doing autoethnography." I have not always known *where* I am going, but it has been my hope these queries will keep me on a path as to *why* I am going there. Additionally, positioning the study within the critical theory framework can provide a "critical way of

examining *what is* and then by extension *what could be* for music education" (Giroux, 1983, p. 8). The purpose of this autoethnography, as with autoethnographies in general, has been to foster robust questions rather than to provide conclusive answers or broad generalizations (Barrett & Bolt, 2009).

Analysis of Autoethnography

The analysis and discussion chapters of this dissertation explore the intersection of personal experiences and broader theoretical frameworks to examine music education in a low SES, predominantly Black school context. The autoethnography served as a narrative of lived experiences and a reflective exploration of systemic dynamics in music education, using documented memories, photographs, concert programs, and published articles as sources of insight.

In the analysis chapter, I aimed to identify and explore themes emerging from these experiences, guided by theoretical frameworks such as critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and antiracist pedagogy. To systematically examine these themes, I employ a thematic analysis approach, drawing from personal narratives, student interactions, and classroom observations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allows for an in-depth exploration of how traditional educational norms align or misalign with diverse cultural traditions and the implications for students and educators in underfunded schools. Through this process, I identify key findings related to cultural relevance, the limitations of standardized curricula, asset-based approaches, antiracist pedagogical practices, expanded definitions of success, and the role of music education as a tool for social change. These themes potentially emerge from a reflective process where I

analyzed critical incidents, student engagement patterns, and the broader systemic structures shaping music education. By integrating these insights with existing scholarship, the analysis chapter potentially provides a more nuanced understanding of how music education can be reimagined to foster equity, inclusion, and empowerment.

Additionally, this autoethnography includes moments of discomfort and contradiction that are left intentionally intact to allow for a deeper interrogation of my own positionality. Rather than smoothing over mistakes or past biases, I acknowledge them as part of the learning process, with the intention of deconstructing these moments later in the narrative. This approach follows the recommendation of scholars who suggest that autoethnographic inquiry should not shy away from difficult or troubling reflections, but instead use them to provoke insight and transformation (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016; Poulos, 2021).

In the discussion chapter, I reflected further on the findings from the analysis, considering their relevance to the broader research questions posed in this dissertation. Throughout the discussion, I sought to connect these reflections to the guiding theoretical frameworks and to implications for practice and policy in music education. Alternative perspectives on success in education were also considered, with attention to how cultural relevance, equity, and inclusion could redefine existing standards and practices.

Limitations

Like all research, autoethnographies have limitations. Research designs inherently involve trade-offs between ideal plans and practical constraints (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017). In this dissertation, I have focused primarily on my personal experiences and

did not aim to produce findings that could be generalized to a larger research population. However, this study may resonate with readers' own experiences, providing practical insights and relatable perspectives in music education. This resonance could enhance the relevance of the research, offering generalizable conclusions through the shared understanding of systemic challenges and cultural experiences.

As a researcher, I am obligated to safeguard the privacy of the individuals and groups that impact this autoethnography's narrative. I have assigned pseudonyms to all individuals or schools referenced by name. Additionally, while I have reflected on my experiences with students, I have not shared any individual stories that could lead to identification. By focusing on my own journey as a student and teacher, my aim has been to responsibly explore broader systemic and cultural themes through this autoethnography while maintaining ethical rigor.

This autoethnography covers my journey from early childhood through my career in music education. It is impossible to remember every event or interaction, and some memories may have been unconsciously altered or exaggerated over time. While physical artifacts, such as concert programs and photos, have served as evidence to validate many accounts, I acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of writing from memory. To address this limitation, I made every effort to substantiate the authenticity of my reflections and ensure they were as accurate and honest as possible. Nonetheless, the chosen methodology did allow for an in-depth exploration of themes central to this dissertation, such as cultural disconnect, resilience, and systemic inequities, providing insights that other approaches may overlook.

Reflecting critically, I recognize that my positionality as a white, middle-class educator working in predominantly Black and low-SES schools inevitably informs how I interpret and represent the experiences described in this study. My background shapes the lens through which I view student success, classroom interactions, and broader educational contexts. Readers are encouraged to approach this autoethnography with an awareness of its inherently personal and interpretive nature. While objectivity is not the goal of this methodology, the emphasis on critical self-reflection offers a pathway to surface underexplored perspectives and foster deeper understanding. Though my intent is to amplify student voices and highlight the richness of the school community, I remain aware that asset-based framings—if not paired with structural critique—can still be filtered through dominant cultural values. This awareness calls for an ongoing interrogation of how privilege and power influence even well-intentioned educational narratives.

In conclusion, autoethnography, like any research methodology, has disadvantages to consider. Qualitative research can be at risk for participant and researcher biases (Gall, et al., 2006). Uncontrolled factors may render some findings unreliable, and the researcher's central role in analyzing and interpreting data introduces subjectivity. However, these limitations also allow for a nuanced and human-centered exploration of themes. By focusing on lived experiences in racially and economically diverse contexts, this research highlights the potential for alternative narratives centered on student experiences in music education rather than standardized achievement. This approach, while subjective, potentially contributes valuable insights into how critical

autoethnography can inform more inclusive, culturally sustaining, and equitable practices in music education.

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Ethical Considerations

This autoethnographic study was inherently shaped by my positionality as a white, middle-class educator working in a predominantly Black, low-SES public school. As such, I approached the research with a heightened awareness of the interpretive nature of storytelling, the limitations of personal perspective, and the risks of reproducing dominant narratives even within asset-based framings. The methodological emphasis on critical self-reflection was not only a means of engaging with the content ethically but also a necessary tool for interrogating my own assumptions, biases, and experiences as they relate to broader systemic issues.

Recognizing that my interpretations could be limited by my positionality, I engaged in ongoing reflexive writing throughout the research process. Journaling became a key tool for surfacing moments of discomfort, contradiction, and potential bias. This writing was not only retrospective but iterative, returning to earlier entries with fresh perspectives, particularly after engaging with relevant literature or receiving external feedback. These reflective practices supported an evolving understanding of how whiteness, privilege, and institutional power intersect with music education and success narratives.

Cultural identity tensions are a constant undercurrent in my work, as I grapple with reconciling my own background and training with the lived realities and cultural expressions of my students. As a white, middle-class music educator in a predominantly

Black, low-SES school, I often experience internal conflict between my training in Western classical music and my commitment to culturally sustaining pedagogy. At times, I feel torn between adhering to institutional expectations and authentically supporting student identities. These tensions emerge in choices about repertoire, classroom management, assessment, and even in what I celebrate or critique. I frequently wrestle with whether I am truly disrupting dominant narratives or simply translating them into more familiar, palatable forms (Bradley, 2015; Love, 2019).

Likewise, my students confront their own identity tensions in the music classroom. They may feel that their culturally rooted expressions—hip hop, gospel, freestyle poetry, vernacular dialects—are incompatible with what school success looks like (Paris & Alim, 2017). Some experience pressure to suppress cultural markers of speech, dress, or musical taste to be viewed as "serious musicians" or "college-ready." Others fear being seen as "acting white" for excelling in traditionally white-dominated school activities (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). These identity negotiations are often invisible yet deeply impactful, shaping how students engage, resist, or withdraw. By naming these tensions—not as problems to be solved but as conditions to be understood—I aim to make space for more reflexive, justice-driven teaching (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

In naming and reflecting on these identity tensions, I am also acknowledging the interpretive nature of this research. As Bruner (1991) writes, autobiographical storytelling is not merely about recovering the past, but about reinterpreting and reshaping it from the perspective of the present. Our narratives are not static; they are meaning-making acts that evolve alongside our identities and commitments. From this view, the

autoethnographic method used here is not descriptive but critical. Drawing on Boylorn and Orbe's (2021) framing of *critical autoethnography*, I position this work as a mode of inquiry that not only examines personal and professional transformation, but also interrogates the structural conditions that shape how success is defined, for whom, and at what cost. This framing aligns with my goal to move beyond self-revelation toward structural critique, situating my story as one instance of a broader system in need of reimagining.

Given the ethical implications of speaking about students and communities to which I do not fully belong, I took steps to invite feedback from Black colleagues and individuals from low-SES backgrounds. This study included both formal and informal member checking processes. A formal member check was conducted with a trusted educator whose lived experience aligns more closely with the students and community discussed in this dissertation. In addition, I sought feedback from dissertation readers and advisors, as well as colleagues and mentors from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, whose perspectives offered critical insight into how my positionality shaped the work. These contributions, combined with sustained reflexive writing, served as important tools for accountability, helping me navigate potential blind spots and approach the representation of others with greater care and humility. In response, I revised language, acknowledged interpretive limitations, and made space within the narrative to openly wrestle with these critiques. As a result, certain passages intentionally remain unresolved or marked by discomfort, inviting the reader into a co-reflective process that values vulnerability as much as insight.

While the autoethnographic genre centers personal narrative, I am mindful of the danger that such storytelling may unintentionally center the self over the community. Several readers noted that the early drafts risked suggesting a narrative arc of the white educator "saving" students, rather than situating student excellence and community strength as central forces. This critique has prompted a recalibration of narrative emphasis, shifting from a focus on how I made things better to an inquiry into how the field might evolve to better serve students. In so doing, I attempt to decenter my own authority and instead uplift the cultural knowledge, musicality, and lived wisdom of my students and their communities.

Ultimately, this work is not meant to serve as a template for success, but as an evolving reflection shaped by context, critique, and the continuous labor of unlearning. As such, it is situated within the methodological tensions of critical autoethnography: personal yet political, reflective yet incomplete, and always subject to further growth.

CHAPTER FOUR: Becoming a Musician

Growing Up

My story takes place in the suburbs of a larger city in the Northeast United States, where a court of law merged race and class (*[Court Order]*, 1981).[5] The term suburbs, however, might bring to mind images of picturesque townships where schools and communities thrive and excellence in education is expected. These conjured images might also include white students and community members. The suburbs I am writing about differ greatly from the idealized visions often associated with schools and residential communities. Within minutes of each other, there are houses that are condemned, desolate, and newly built or remodeled. After driving a few more minutes in a different direction, there are parks where children play tee-ball and farmer's markets are held, while another few streets away, a swing set is broken on an abandoned playground and people associated with drug activity can be seen hanging out on the basketball courts.

The school district I attended from kindergarten through 12th grade was the product of a court ordered merger of 12 local municipalities that were previously experiencing racial segregation (*[Court Order], 1981)*. Five high schools became one and all students, white and Black, rich and poor, coexisted to form an incredible new desegregated district. The 12 municipalities spanning only 13.5 square miles could not be

[5] To protect the privacy of individuals and institutions, all names of people, schools, and locations have been masked or replaced with pseudonyms. Additionally, references to legal cases, court orders, and other sensitive documents are cited in a general format (e.g., [Court Order], 1981) rather than providing specific case details. Similarly, news articles that reference identifiable individuals or institutions have been anonymized or cited in a general format to maintain confidentiality while preserving the integrity of the research.

more different, each one having unique cultural characteristics. Some could be labeled as rich overall and some as poor. Some Black, some white. At the time of the 1981 merger, the municipalities, also known as boroughs or towns, were homogenous: rich and white, poor and Black, or poor and white. Very few communities varied by racial and socioeconomic composition. Students often used terms like ghetto, snobby, trashy, safe, or dangerous to describe their peers' neighborhoods. Where you grew up became part of every student's personal identity for their entire school career. Your residence labeled you immediately. Telling someone where you were from on the first day of school every year let them know what kind of person you were: what kind of family you had, if you're considered smart or stupid, go on vacations, had to work, if you've possibly done drugs, are tough or a goodie-two-shoes, among many other invasive details. It was all very presumptuous, but part of the daily culture. However, the merger of the schools diversified the student body and to this day I am grateful to be part of that unique experience.

I grew up in a middle-class, predominantly white town. I started to become aware of my privileges and the material advantages I had compared to many of my classmates when I began attending school: I grew up with both of my parents married in the same house, went on summer vacations every year, always had new toys and clean clothes, went out to restaurants, took piano lessons, got a car for my 16th birthday, and was able to attend any college I chose. I assumed to my classmates I was known as one of the "richer kids" and sometimes it was hard to carry that kind of label, especially when most school days I listened to and learned about so many other students dealing with things I

never would imagine going through due to racial prejudices and financial hardships.

My primary school (kindergarten through third grade) was located in my own neighborhood and included Black students, who were bused in from surrounding communities (I knew this because I had never seen any people of color living in the neighborhood before). I looked at my first-grade class picture and counted eight Black students out of a class total of 12. One of my classmates, Antwon, was friendly and outgoing. I remember him always making people laugh during snack time. At home, my parents remarked with surprise about how his name was spelled. They were only familiar with the French spelling, "Antoine." At the time, I didn't question their reaction, but now I recognize how assumptions about names can reflect cultural bias. I noticed that some of my classmates wore clothes that looked older or more worn. A few of those students were Black and I started to link those observations in my mind. But what confused me was that these same kids always brought the best snacks—fruit roll-ups, cookies, juice boxes—and they always shared. I didn't understand how things added up, but something about it stuck with me.

Intermediate school (fourth through sixth grade) was like being transported to a whole other world. Instead of attending the school closest to my home, the merger resulted in my enrollment at the intermediate school located in a low SES community with the highest levels of poverty in the entire district. The bus ride through several different townships gave me my first real glimpse into life outside my own neighborhood. I didn't really leave my own community very often and usually saw the same middle-class white people with my parents at the grocery store or the bank or shopping. Riding

the bus to school became a daily adventure. There were houses of differing sizes and wealth around my neighborhood, but what I saw along the bus ride was deeply disturbing to me as a pre-teen. During the bus ride each morning, we passed rows of small, boarded-up houses with overgrown lawns and broken porches. I recognized that some of my classmates lived in those homes. I remember staring out the window, wondering what their bedrooms looked like or what they had for dinner. I didn't talk about it with anyone, but the pictures stayed in my mind. I didn't yet understand how race and poverty were shaping the realities of my peers—and how protected I was from so many of those experiences. I just knew there was a lot I didn't understand.

When I arrived on the first day at my new school, the bus pulled up and there was a huge metal fence surrounding the building. At the time, I thought the fence was meant to keep students inside. It seemed likely that some students might attempt to leave during lunch or recess. Again, I was too naïve to realize that the fence was there for protection to address community and school safety concerns that troubled the neighborhood. While I was in fourth grade, an incident occurred at the school when the cafeteria got robbed by gunpoint while classes were in session. The staff handled the situation promptly, and I didn't learn about it until days later. That made me think that the fence didn't seem to be too effective anymore, and I started to become afraid and nervous to go to my school. The neighborhood around the school looked rough—cracked sidewalks, old buildings, stray dogs, and empty lots with overgrown weeds. People outside the school often said it was a bad area, but the students I met there were confident and proud to say where they were from. Everyone seemed to carry that pride like it meant something. It surprised me

at first, but after a while, I understood it was just part of who they were.

I remember having thoughts about why it was unfair that I had to go to school in a place where it was dangerous when there was another school closer to my own house. However, regardless of any dangers on the outside, I made some incredible friends inside the school and had nice teachers, none of whom I would have met had I gone to a different building. Friendships, however, basically entailed socialization at school. I don't recall going over to friends' houses outside of my own neighborhood and the families my parents knew. And a lot of these friends lived in the "dangerous" neighborhoods I was afraid of from the bus ride. At this point in my life I was definitely associating danger with poverty and race. Still, my parents never seemed to be alarmed for my safety, and everyone I knew was living through the same experiences, some minus the fear. I told myself I did not have to be scared if they were not scared. If students I knew could manage living in those neighborhoods, and I respected them as friends, I had to respect where they came from as well. I didn't understand how bias could be systemic, or how discipline could fall more harshly on certain students. I thought fairness meant treating everyone the same—not realizing that sameness doesn't account for power. It didn't make sense to me then, and I didn't yet have the words to question it. Only later did I recognize how this perspective aligned with asset-based education, which affirms students' strengths rather than framing their experiences as deficits. Those years provided me with many lessons I would value later in life: evaluating my own bigotry, overcoming judgmental thoughts, and equality in friendships. There were plenty of students I stayed away from at the same time. I never wanted to be around the troublemakers or kids who

were unfriendly.

Junior high school (seventh through ninth grade) was the next phase in my journey. Again, I was transported to a building several communities away instead of the closest one to home. The merger dictated that I go to school in another community, this one known for being majority white and low SES. Since this school was larger and seemingly designed to filter students from my intermediate and elementary schools, I was reunited with many friends from those earlier years. The school's surrounding area was poverty stricken in a predominantly white neighborhood, crime rates were high, and the locals here also bragged about being from this township. However, because of the busing from outlying towns, the majority of the school was Black.

After attending this school for three years, I learned that the students who attended my junior high did not get along with the students from the other junior high school, who were predominantly white and experiencing poverty but also located in a town nearer to my own house. This rivalry, which seemed to be widely accepted as fact, was rarely questioned. I felt like I wasn't allowed to be friends with anyone from the other school, even though many of them lived closer to me. It felt like a betrayal to the people I went to school with, so I isolated myself and never reached out to anyone from the other junior high. I never stopped to think about why the majority of the students didn't get along—I just learned to go with the flow, absorbing the rumors, lies, news reports, and gossip that shaped my interpretation of the truth about these territorial rivalries. At the time, I assumed the divisions were rooted in racial tensions, as many students formed social cliques that were divided along racial lines, aligning with their

respective townships.

This created a confusing reality for me, as a white student attending a mostly Black school, which was itself located in a predominantly white, low-SES neighborhood. I didn't fully belong to either group, making it difficult to navigate friendships and alliances without feeling like an outsider in multiple spaces. I chose not to partake in any of the rivalries, especially since I wasn't from either local neighborhood, but even within my own school, social tensions made day-to-day life difficult—deciding who to eat lunch with, who to walk with down the halls, who to like, and who not to like. These unspoken social rules and pressures created an environment where belonging often felt conditional, reinforcing divisions that no one ever seemed to question.

For me, race had never factored into just being a student going through the daily motions at school—until then. There was a constant sense of competition and judgment from all sides, and I often felt conflicted as a white girl attending the "Black school." I was automatically grouped into a new social circle of students who were different from me, many of whom I had never met before, yet I associated them as cool. I loved being part of this group, even though, by traditional social expectations, I had no reason to belong there. School forced us to coexist in ways that would not have happened otherwise. The idea that a white girl from the "good neighborhood" should have only been friends with other rich white kids was disrupted by my actual reality—one in which my friendships formed across racial and socioeconomic lines. Over time, this blending of cultures became normalized, challenging the idea that certain people belonged in certain spaces. I used to think that being a good student meant following all the rules and

keeping your head down. It would take me years to realize how many stories that version of success leaves out—stories of students whose intelligence didn't fit that mold but who navigated far more than just academics to show up each day.

One thing that the separate cliques and groups could agree on was the bigger rivalry with the other junior high school, the one closer to my house. It was not just a rivalry between schools —which again, my naivety keeps showing—but this rivalry was between actual gangs. I could not believe I was actually attending school with kids who were in gangs. The only experience I had with gangs was from after-school television specials and the national news stories about Crips and Bloods. Well, I learned very quickly that my school was associated with the Crips and the other school was for the Bloods. There was an unspoken rule among students that I had to follow—wearing red was not allowed, only blue was permitted. Word spread very quickly through the halls that anyone wearing red would get beat up and those clothes would be ripped off your body. Race and class had no place in these discussions, meaning that no one cared if you were rich or poor or white or Black when talking about gangs. Everyone abided by the same rules, and it didn't matter who you were or where you came from. It was almost a weird sense of school pride and everyone always wore navy blue (not the school color by the way). I honestly remember not believing any of the gang stuff was true and thinking it was just kids exaggerating and trying to be tough. I was not ready to test my own theory, however, by wearing red to school. No, thank you! In fact, looking back at yearbook pictures, you can see clearly that no students wore red for any class pictures.

One day, a local news story stunned me. A student I had become close with—I'll

call him Aidan—lost his older brother in a shooting near our school. Aidan was funny and quick-witted, always cracking jokes during lunch. The next week, he was quiet and withdrawn, and I didn't know how to react or how to help. That experience opened my eyes to the weight some of my classmates carried with them every day. I learned that day that I had other friends who were in gangs before they were 16 years old, white and Black, mostly from the poorer neighborhoods. And while I did not agree with their choices that involved gangs, I did remain friends with them. Maybe I was scared to walk away, but I remember feeling a thrill of exhilaration to know that I had powerful friends who would have my back if needed. My yearbooks from this school are covered in gang signs and cryptic messages. I was embarrassed to show anyone at home, but at school it was a symbol of popularity and protection in the short term and I was kind of proud that my yearbook was covered in the gang art. There were still rich kids, poor kids, white kids, Black kids—but still no one wore red. The increase in local gun violence resulted in the school implementing metal detectors ([School District Policy Report], 1997). I remember anger filling up inside me again thinking about the injustice I had to go through just to get into my own school's front doors. I had no choice but to abide and eventually became happy that measures were being taken by the school for my personal safety. I never questioned why I got to feel safe. I just assumed everyone deserved that, without asking who actually got it—and who didn't.

Gang talk and the tension of violence that permeated other parts of the school rarely made its way into the music wing. The band, chorus, and orchestra classrooms felt like a separate world, where students were more focused on rehearsing, performing, and

academics rather than territorial disputes or unspoken social rules. While the music department was still diverse in terms of race and socioeconomic background, those most associated with gang activity typically did not participate. Within those walls, conversations revolved around music, upcoming performances, and technique rather than conflicts, fights, or the latest incidents outside of school. The music wing became a refuge—one of the few places where I could go through part of my day without the looming reminders of violence. Within this environment, I found myself forming a new group of friends—people like Hayden, who never stopped singing and loved musical theater, and Adam, a quiet bassist who always showed up early to help take attendance. Our bond grew not just from shared rehearsals, but from laughter during breaks, hallway chats before concerts, and the feeling that we belonged somewhere, even when the rest of the school felt like a maze of divisions.

High school (10th through 12th grade) came next, and the high school building was located one mile up the road from my home, in a higher SES and white neighborhood. The original building was one of the five high schools established prior to the merger. By the time I enrolled, school administration had remodeled, renamed, and desegregated the building. This high school merged together the two junior high schools—and rival gangs—and all twelve municipalities. When I entered high school, the merged district had now been operating with this singular high school for seven years. The school enrolled approximately 65% white and 35% Black students and every type of economic background imaginable. Although the school stood in a high SES suburban area, turmoil filled the building due to rival gangs confined to one building and its diverse

student population and the racial, social, and territorial tensions that accompanied everyone. I continued to enter through metal detectors here and have my bags searched daily, and there were still constant fights in the school which prompted an armed police presence every day. I watched students being arrested as I walked to calculus. I saw drugs being shared in the bathroom between classes. People were always talking about who was going to fight who and where and when.

From what I remember, our school's standardized test scores were among the lowest in the state. Part of the merger plan was to eliminate "tracking"—the old system where students were grouped by ability level ([Author], 2016). The new model integrated all students into mixed-ability classes, aiming to expand access to advanced academic material for those who had historically been excluded under the previous tracking system. This group disproportionately included Black students and students from low-income communities. In theory, this should have helped raise achievement across the board. In practice, I remember a lot of students still struggling. I sat in these types of classes where the teacher spent most of the time reviewing content, trying to bring everyone up to speed. I usually finished my work early and didn't get much attention because I was already doing fine. Some classmates seemed checked out, others tried hard but still fell behind. The teachers kept going, lesson after lesson. No one really said whether the new system was helping, and I didn't ask. I just kept doing my part and staying out of the way. Looking back, I do wonder what those classes meant for the students who had once been excluded from them. Maybe they didn't pass every test, but did they gain something else—confidence, acceptance, a sense of belonging? At the time, I wasn't thinking about

that. I only knew how it felt from my own desk.

My high school didn't have a great reputation. I remember hearing its name on the local news almost every night during dinner—usually in connection with a fight, a police report, or a dropout statistic. People outside the district talked about it like it was a dangerous place. Depending on who I was speaking to, I sometimes felt embarrassed to say that's where I went. It had a bad image, and I didn't know how to respond to that yet. What made it even more confusing was that I actually liked going there. I looked forward to seeing my friends, I respected my teachers, and I found a rhythm that made sense to me. The public narrative didn't match what I was experiencing, and that contradiction stayed with me.

I valued what I had at home even more because I saw what I assumed many others didn't have: dinners with family, stability, and a warm, safe place to study and sleep. My parents were supportive and never spoke badly about my school so I would have a better experience. They never said I couldn't be friends with anyone because of any particular reason. I was very much allowed to formulate my own opinions on life and culture. I had my first boyfriend, who was white, in high school and my parents drove me to his house to visit, which was in a poorer neighborhood, and they would also drive him home after school as well. His mother was never available for rides because she was a single parent who worked in the evenings. My parents never complained and I appreciated them allowing me to figure out things like relationships without any prejudice about who I chose to become involved with. Although, I do remember my mother getting very upset when she had to drop me off at a sleepover for a friend's

birthday party in another different, but very poor neighborhood. The house was badly damaged and on a steep hill and the parent was not warm and welcoming when I arrived. My mom told me she felt nervous pulling away in the car after dropping me off. I was visiting a friend from class, whom I'll call Josie. She had invited a few of us over for her birthday sleepover. Josie was warm and funny, and we shared a love for R&B songs and makeup. Her home life was very different from mine. The house was cluttered and smoky, and I remember feeling unsure about what to eat or how to settle in. Later that night, Josie brought us downstairs to show us a collection of guns stored in the basement. I didn't know what to make of that moment at the time. I stayed friends with her throughout high school, but I never went back to her house again.

As the school year continued, the cliques and racial groupings began to fade as people got used to being all together in one building. Some students were still fighting, usually kids associated with the gangs, but many started to get along better. The juniors and seniors seemed to be well-adjusted already. High school persona soon became less about where you were from and more about who you were and what you had to offer, although no one really ever forgot where anyone came from. A lot of the physical fights at school stemmed back to neighborhood rivalries, drug deals gone wrong, or tensions about who was dating whom. I can look at my high school yearbook with a graduating class of 382 students and name almost every person's hometown and economical status as I go through the pictures. It was embedded knowledge in me growing up through the years.

As I got older, high school started to feel like a place where I could really be

myself. I wasn't tied to one group of friends—I floated between different circles: athletes, musicians, quiet kids, outgoing kids, students from all kinds of neighborhoods and backgrounds. What mattered most was how you treated people. I tried to be kind, and that seemed to matter. There was a lot of bullying in our school, but I stayed away from it. I focused on my classes, which were challenging and set me up well for college. I had strong relationships with my teachers, many of whom I still remember clearly, all the way back to kindergarten. Even though the school had its share of problems, it was also full of people who shaped me. I carry so many memories from those years—good and bad—but always meaningful. The experience taught me to pay attention to character, to challenge prejudice, and to stay grounded in who I am, no matter what surrounds me.

Musical Experiences—School Age

The general music classes I had in school in the 1980s and 1990s were unremarkable. Mostly, students just sat around in circles or rows of seats and sang songs from a music textbook, the title of which I don't remember. The books were in poor condition, with worn pages and damaged bindings. Children would take turns reading pages from what I can only assume was an outdated curricular textbook offering an inadequate representation of music education to classrooms full of diverse learners. I specifically remember singing Oh Susanna!, Camptown Races, Jimmy Crack Corn, Ten Little Indians, and Five Little Monkeys. Due to their historical and cultural context, many of these songs are no longer included in school music curricula. I never played recorders or any Orff instruments. I never learned anything about musical notation or music history. I never created music or played music games. I remember singing a lot of

patriotic songs and being bored in the classes, even though I loved music.

The newly formed district did not effectively implement its vision of inclusion and multiculturalism, as I do not recall any kind of multicultural songs, different genres, or cultural experiences other than traditional mainstream folk songs from music textbooks. Thinking back, my early music teachers, who were mostly older and white, may not have had exposure to newer theories or methodologies of music education. I did not know of any teachers living within the district neighborhoods. Music class primarily involved flipping through a book from one song to the next in a predictable manner. I do recall a couple of my teachers being able to play the piano, which was a nice change to the awful records and tape cassettes we usually listened to on a regular basis in class. I remember in primary school there was an assembly that students participated in standing on the stage and singing along to the canned recording of the Beach Boys tune, “Be True to Your School.” I only sang the “rah-rah-rah-rah sis-boom-bah” part over and over again with tiny pom poms in my hands crafted from art class. Another memory I have from a school music class is from fourth grade, when the whole class actually showed enthusiasm when it came to singing. I remember the class constantly requesting for the music teacher to play “Don Gato” on the piano. The other kids frequently shouted out the “meow meow meow” line with enthusiasm. To this day, I still can sing the whole song from memory. I must have sung it every week in class. With those as the only few real memories from general music classes growing up, it makes me think that nothing really special was happening.

Luckily, I was able to have a supplemental music experience through private

piano lessons that allowed me to flourish and cultivate an intrinsic passion for music. My father was a professional musician and played lead guitar in a local band. I loved sitting on the steps watching them practice in the basement. When the band wasn't there, my dad allowed me to play on the electric keyboard. I must have shown a great deal of interest and potential, because at age 7, I began taking piano lessons from a wonderful teacher who lived down the street. I recognized her as an influential figure, and she played a significant role in my musical development throughout my life. Carol was kind, supportive, stern, and held me to the highest expectations week to week. I never wanted to let her down. She was an elegant and dignified figure, and I greatly respected her. Carol provided a more complete music education I hadn't received at school. I learned music notation and theory, mastered technique, collaborated with other musicians, and figured out that even though piano lessons were difficult, I loved playing. I practiced almost every day—not only to improve for Carol, but also for myself and my family, especially my dad. I didn't want to let anyone down by falling behind, not mastering a passage, or messing up at a recital. There was a lot of pressure. But I never stopped practicing or taking lessons. I knew Carol was a teacher as her day job. I later learned that Carol worked at a school in a lower SES area several towns over. She had a background similar to mine, and I followed in her footsteps in some of my career choices, eventually attending the same university. I now have a cherished necklace Carol made especially for me. She crafted the necklace from the very same baby grand Steinway piano strings I played during my lessons in her home. Every time I wear the necklace, I am flooded with memories of sitting in her living room and showing her my efforts for the week. I am also

reminded how lucky I was to have taken lessons on such a luxurious instrument and to have found this amazing mentor just a few houses down the street. I still have my notebooks filled with my lesson assignments, and music books with stickers I earned from so long ago.

As years progressed and my skills increased with piano, my inclusion in the music department at school changed as well. It became well-known around the school that I was a pianist, and the music teachers utilized that situation effectively. I became the school accompanist, which contributed to my new positive feelings about my participation in the school music classes, which until then weren't very satisfying. In sixth grade, the orchestra director asked me to perform a mini-concerto with the string students for the spring concert. One of the violinists, who I'll call Mia, was shy but incredibly expressive when she played. We rehearsed side by side during lunch periods, and I remember the quiet confidence in the way she handled the music. That concert became a bonding experience for us, and I still remember the sense of pride we both felt when it was over. It was the biggest audience I had ever played for and was extra stressful being filled with my peers and their parents. (A photo from the concert shows the orchestra as being predominantly white, with about 25% African Americans.) Thankfully, I recall the evening being a huge success and I still look for that music today to pass along similar opportunities for other students, but sadly can't find it in any publishing house. That experience bonded me with the other musicians of the school and allowed me to stand out as a soloist where I had never stood out for anything before. From there I became the school accompanist for the choirs, orchestras, and jazz bands. For reference, unlike the

orchestra, the choir and band had a larger representation of Black students participating, approximately 35%, which matched the school demographic at the time. Choir was always the largest ensemble because it was a free activity with no prerequisites such as obtaining an instrument. I felt lucky to be able to participate in all the ensembles because my friends were only able to choose one music class for their schedules. I loved the different kinds of musical experiences, plus I had access to so many new friends and groups in a school where it was often difficult to make new connections with people, many of whom looked different and grew up differently from me. I didn't always recognize how powerful these moments were—students leading, improvising, mentoring one another through music. I'm not sure I would've called it brilliance back then, but I see it that way now.

One of my favorite high school memories was becoming the rehearsal accompanist for the musical production. My school put on award-winning shows and I really had no idea how good they were until I graduated. Tim was the [white] director in charge who was notoriously mean and incredibly strict—all the students were terrified of him—but the results he acquired from a regimented, demanding, and stressful rehearsal schedule were legendary. Many students who participated in Tim's performing arts department went on to have impressive professional careers in performing and producing, several even making it to Broadway and becoming Tony winners. Tim, a veteran teacher, grew up in a predominantly white, middle-class town and was a trombone player. Ironically, he also attended the university where I eventually went, just like Carol. I learned a lot by watching him direct over the years as he became a mentor to me,

specifically the magical way he was strict, yet caring to all students regardless of race and class. He seemed to value students who demonstrated a strong work ethic, dedication, and accepted criticism without defense. I particularly appreciated the respect he showed me as a young musician. He acknowledged my contributions to rehearsals and respected my commitment. I remember being invited to his home for a musical staff meeting. I couldn't believe I was allowed to attend with the adult staff members from school. It really did make me feel like part of the team and raised my own expectations for myself regarding professionalism, even as a teenager.

That is not to say that I was immune to his wrath during rehearsals. I remember one practice where I was attempting to play "My White Knight" from *The Music Man* which started in five flats, moved to five sharps, and back again to five flats. That was the first time I had seen music that shifted keys like that. Needless to say, I botched the rehearsal and Tim screamed at me in front of everyone. I was so upset and practiced like crazy. I became an expert at unusual key signatures after that night. As mean as Tim could be sometimes, he still had the most wonderful relationships with his students. He was idolized and held in the highest regards by students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Former students would often come back to rehearsals to see him, sharing memories of how traumatizing rehearsals were but how amazing the overall experience was and how much they all miss it. Despite his harshness and rage, he epitomized qualities of teacher excellence. I didn't realize at the time, but Tim would indirectly become one of my biggest mentors as an educator, eventually change my career path, and also become a dear colleague and friend.

CHAPTER FIVE: A Prospective Teacher

Piano Teaching

At age 15, I began working at a local music shop that offered private lessons and sold musical equipment. Initially, I worked as a cashier, but my role soon expanded to that of a full-time private piano instructor. The music store stood in a neighborhood outside my school district, where the population was racially diverse and faced low socioeconomic conditions. My first students were enthusiastic, but teaching challenges soon emerged. On Saturday mornings, two young siblings often missed lessons due to an inability to make weekly payments, and another student lacked a piano or keyboard to practice on at home. I enjoyed teaching piano lessons despite these challenges. I became consumed with finding ways to be the best teacher for my current students and the new students who followed. Other teachers and staff at the business often dismissed or gave up on students regardless of difficulties within or beyond their control. I heard them complain and get angry about things kids could certainly not control.

I made it a point to ask myself important questions, such as: What kinds of reward systems could be used to initiate practice? How can concepts be explained better to align with students' understanding? How does this teaching approach differ from others who struggle to maintain their student load, not due to income instability but because of personality clashes? Did age have an impact? Did high school experiences with race and class make a difference? These questions prompted investigations during lessons. Although I was unaware at the time, I was inadvertently applying some principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and antiracist pedagogy, drawing primarily from my lived

experiences, despite lacking formal training.

I utilized the method books that I had studied with Carol, because that's what I was familiar with, and incorporated her teaching techniques into my own approach. I focused on fostering an environment that emphasized kindness and care while maintaining high expectations for performance and respect. Additionally, I integrated popular music choices, such as radio songs or student requests, to keep interest levels high and music relevant. By the age of 16, I accumulated a high caseload of students, evenly split between young children and teenagers.

Teenagers who expressed strong interest in learning piano often discussed their specific objectives. For instance, one student was interested in musical theater and wanted to play the notes from favorite Broadway songs so they could sing along. I worked with them on that goal, also adding chords in the left hand for accompaniment. One teenage student, whom I'll call Elijah, came in each week with hymns he wanted to learn, telling me how they reminded him of singing in church with his grandmother. He was soft-spoken and thoughtful, and the familiarity of the melodies seemed to anchor him. Our lessons became a quiet space where he could play music that already meant something to him. A younger student I'll call Liv didn't have a piano at home but came in every week humming her songs from memory. She proudly showed me how she had figured out the melody of "Let It Go" using a keyboard app on her aunt's phone. She made it a personal challenge to memorize songs without written music, and I began incorporating that strength into her lessons. At the time, I viewed my work simply as doing what I loved—teaching music. I had not yet developed the awareness or

vocabulary to recognize how my own racial and economic background influenced the authority I held in those spaces, or how my early success might have been perceived by students navigating circumstances shaped by systemic inequity.

I structured lessons to include a method book (the same I used with Carol) while prioritizing students' personal goals to enhance motivation. I found considerable success with this system and students progressed quickly. Many students continued taking lessons for years. Retaining students not only ensured attendance but also led to high levels of success and progress in the studio. I began to notice that some of the most meaningful progress occurred with students who were often overlooked or underestimated by others. While some teachers gave up after only a few lessons, I saw potential that sometimes just needed a different entry point. Conversations with other teachers often revealed narrow ideas about what success should look like. Rather than making me feel like I was doing something extraordinary, those moments reminded me that teaching had to begin with listening—creating space for students to show who they were and what they could do. I became aware of social injustice in my environment before I even knew what those words meant. Very quickly I realized I had a teaching niche in music education, and it was special. This focus on specialized instruction for marginalized students became the primary teaching objective, guiding experiences that ultimately provided my pathway to college.

University

Teaching always felt like a calling and consistently aligned with my sense of purpose. I never considered doing anything else for a career. I applied to several

universities. I wanted to attend a school known for their quality music education programs, but piano performance was also extremely important to me. I never considered myself proficient enough to be a professional pianist, and that kind of career was never as appealing as teaching was to me. I decided to pursue a music education degree. I was practicing diligently to prepare for the audition process. I was already accepted into the universities, but I had to audition in person to gain acceptance to their schools of music.

I did not know how my skill level compared to that of the other auditioning students. My only peer competition at that point was with the other students at Carol's studio (I also didn't realize the level of excellence that Carol had most of her students achieving). There was always one girl who was better than me. My perception of my piano skills motivated me to practice more diligently for my college auditions. There were separate requirements for the music education majors and the piano performance majors, where the expectations for performance majors was much higher. Surprisingly to me, I was auditioning at the piano performance level. My first audition was for the school that Carol and Tim attended, which is a local, private university. I actually chose this university as my first audition for a practice run. I had no intention of attending because it was so close to home and I thought I wanted to go away for college. Because I treated this as practice, I was calm and not nervous. I performed successfully in the audition, which led to an invitation to play for the scholarship committee. I learned that only a few students were selected to perform for the committee. This was just the confidence boost I needed to continue auditioning for other music schools. Next, I traveled out of state and my pieces were so well-received by the committee members, a senior professor actually

asked me why I wanted to attend that particular college as a music education major, seeing that I was so overly qualified as a performance major. I actually agreed with him and decided that school did not have the reputable kind of music education program I was looking for. The next audition I had was to another out-of-state university, which was extremely prestigious not only for their performance conservatory, but for their music education program. This was my top choice school. I thought the campus was beautiful, I loved the music building, and I had another successful audition with another scholarship offer. The level of preparation I had for all my auditions surprised me. Years of performing in public relaxed me during times of extreme pressure. Carols' extensive guidance left me well-prepared. I was playing pieces well-beyond the recommended repertoire and metronome scale minimums.

When the time came to make my choice, I went against my top choice school out-of-state and went with my practice school. I chose to attend the school that was closest to home and the alma mater of my mentors, Carol and Tim. The university provided a sense of comfort, and I felt a genuine connection with the institution. This type of relationship was crucial to me, as it aligned with my personal values. The other schools felt a bit cold and disconnected. I wanted a school that resonated with me not only as a musician, but as a person. I liked the fact that my mentors went here. I liked that it was close to home and I wouldn't have to leave my parents or my job that I loved. I believed I made the right choice.

College life matched my initial expectations: upper-class, predominantly white, with a strong religious influence and some pretentiousness. Race was the only identity

marker I shared with the group, and I felt uneasy being in a space where everyone was white. I also felt uncomfortable around rich people and religious people, many of whom were peers in my music education classes. It was hard to relate to everyone's background. But I knew that going to an expensive Catholic university that some of those issues would arise for me eventually. I had absolutely no exposure to religion at home and one of my graduation requirements here was a course in theology. I remember feeling very lost during that class and came out with more questions than answers.

I saw one of the only Black students I encountered at college in an elevator in the liberal arts building. He was close to seven feet tall and I assumed (with bias) that he was a basketball recruit. Students, professors, staff, it seemed everyone was white and upper-class. Although I was only 20 minutes from home, I felt as though I were isolated on a desert island (or ivory tower). I found my classes and the material engaging and rewarding. However, hearing lectures about diversity felt somewhat misaligned with the practical realities I aimed to address. I did have a professor who was a nun and another who was a priest. But, I never had any Black professors at all. Today still, as this dissertation was being written, there were no Black music education professors at this major university.

Still, I enjoyed hearing about my professors' contributions to music education both nationally and internationally, as they were highly respected in the field. Most had multiple degrees and certifications, traveled around the world, were clinicians at festivals, workshops, and other universities, and were sought after as guest performers. However, most of my professors spent only a few years in public education as teachers before

earning their tenure at the university. That never sat well with me. I always thought it was strange to have been taught music education by professors that had so little background actually teaching in schools. Every time I had to teach demonstration lessons for the class, I always compared their examples to my school experiences and almost always decided what they were presenting would not work with the kind of kids I knew. I never questioned them, but took everything with a grain of salt knowing that some of the material I was learning was not practical in some contexts. I deeply respected them and appreciated learning progressive music education techniques that I had never encountered in my own schooling. I appreciated the method courses designed for various music classes and grade levels and the opportunity to learn how to teach multiple musical instruments. I enjoyed gaining higher level skills in theory and digital music programs and conducting. One of my favorite memories was bringing in Dr. Christopher Azzara from the Eastman School of Music for a session on the Gordon Learning Theory. That session was the first time I felt able to connect theory to practice. It also made the world of music education seem bigger somehow, knowing there is so much more to always learn and new theories can be created at any time. I never really theorized music education before, it was always so hands-on to me. I was happy my university professors arranged that experience.

Four years went by quickly and I was engulfed in the world of all things music and loved being surrounded by like-minded people, or so I thought. I received a typical, higher music education where theories, philosophies, and methodologies, and practicum reign supreme. The reputation of the school was to have 100% of music education

students placed with jobs after graduation, and schools sought after the recent graduates. I knew I was getting a quality education because of these statistics. The other local colleges didn't compare in course-offerings, acceptance rates, or post-graduation success. The university prided itself on the number of clinical hours the undergraduates were obligated to complete in local school districts. Freshman year started with about 60 students but only 25 graduated as seniors.

The music education track was a rigorous program. The number of required practicum visits during the freshmen year led to a lot of transfers and changing majors once students realized they did not want to work with children. Clinical hours were required for each semester and for differing grade levels and content areas like choral and instrumental. I could only visit the schools that were on a specific list of approved cooperating teachers. In a portfolio at home, I found my *Clinical Experience Log* form that I had to fill out at each visit. A section allowed me to describe the experience, with boxes to check for elementary, middle, or secondary levels; general, vocal, or instrumental; Caucasian, minority, or mixed; and upper SES, lower SES, or mixed SES. This was promising to see that the school was interested in giving us a variety of diverse clinical experiences. After a few visits, I quickly realized that the list of schools reflected traditional standards of excellence that seemed to value large ensemble sizes, abundant classroom resources, happy teachers who were also university alumni, no disciplinary issues, and idealistic classroom environments. Several forms later, I noticed I was repeatedly checking the same boxes: Caucasian, upper SES. It began to dawn on me that what my university was presenting as a "well-rounded clinical experience" was actually

quite narrow in scope. At the time, I didn't yet know how to articulate what was missing—but I felt it.

Each year, I became increasingly frustrated by visits to these schools because I knew the techniques I was learning would not work in other classroom settings such as the one I grew up in, which is where I wanted to teach. For example, when I learned how to teach group and partner songs, so many of the examples were square dances. An entire portion of my exam study guide was dedicated to describing the steps from a square dance such as promenade, doh-si-doh, swing, corner, etc. I also remember when my own junior high gym class had to devote an entire week to square dancing, and it was horrendous. My friends in junior high refused to participate, made fun of the activity every chance they got, and mocked anyone who attempted to square dance in school. And here I was in college, learning how to teach the square dance. I knew that kind of culture just didn't resonate with the students I wanted to teach and, furthermore, there was so much confusing language to process instantly—seemingly simple things like *inside out*, *parallel lines*, *turning out*, and even *left* and *right*. I anticipated my future students not handling this kind of dancing or directives easily. I was starting to question why so much of what we were expected to teach felt disconnected from the cultural worlds my future students lived in.

Another example is from a worksheet on vocal types I found from my *Voice for Music Education* course, directed at teaching vocal techniques to high school students. The paper describes different vocal classifications with characteristics like tone, range, and agility. It also gives examples of songs to choose for singers. My worksheet suggests

"O wie ängstlich" from Mozart's *The Abduction of the Seraglio* and "Che gelida manina" from Puccini's *La Boheme.* These operatic examples would not be my first choice to suggest to any tenors I imagined teaching in my future classroom.

The college maintained a focus on multiculturalism as a stated priority, but typically only once per course to "celebrate diversity"—and that usually just meant including one song originating from Africa. I found that disheartening. I remember an assignment creating bulletin boards for each month and that only one of them had to include some Black history references. My elementary methods course included folk songs and circle games, and I understood their purpose and the lessons they offered students. I appreciated that some of the songs had African American roots, but at the time, I believed that a classroom of low-SES and marginalized students would not engage with songs that lacked a meaningful connection to their experiences. From my perspective, most of the songs were boring rhythmically with lyrics that either made no sense or just were far removed. Flipping through my textbook, I saw *Row the Boat, Whittington* and *Bye, Baby Bunting*. I wanted to include African American folk songs and hip hop and popular music. My college experience was missing that kind of representation. Returning to my private studio brought a sense of ease and familiarity as I worked with my regular students. Their music preferences, distinct personalities, and unique challenges provided valuable learning experiences that shaped my evolving teaching philosophy.

Student Teaching

Student teaching was scheduled near the end of my undergraduate courses and I felt nervous about my future placements. Many of my peers were actively seeking placements in prestigious schools with highly regarded teachers. All of the schools primarily served upper-class, predominantly white communities. I preferred not to be involved in those conversations. Because I was already pushed into enough idealistic practicum settings, I voiced my preference to be placed in a low SES school context for my student teaching placements. Surprisingly, my professors supported my interest in this type of placement and agreed to my request. I had never been to either of the schools before. I believe my professors expanded their network of cooperating supervisors to arrange this placement.

My first placement was elementary general music in two different schools within the same district. I was elated because they were completely opposite from each other. Half the week, I taught in a wealthy, predominantly white school, and the other half, I taught in a predominantly Black school where all the students faced economic challenges. Observing the differences and similarities between the two placements provided valuable insights. I felt I had finally found my element.

I had a fantastic mentor for this placement who knew how to handle both schools equitably and taught me so much about creating lessons, pacing, and establishing respect between teachers and students of all ages. The high level of student engagement and attention in music class at both schools was noticeable. I noticed how my behaviors shifted depending on the school setting. In the low SES school, I found myself more

relaxed and willing to adapt my approach in the moment, responding to the energy and needs of the students. The experience felt more natural—maybe because it reminded me of the kinds of schools I had attended. At the time, I didn't yet have the language to explain why these differences mattered, but something about the environment made me feel more connected to the purpose behind teaching. The higher SES school seemed like *Pleasantville*, where everything worked out just fine. The setting generally allowed students to sit quietly, follow instructions, and meet expectations. They could do some advanced rhythms and recorder work and waved goodbye when exiting, as expected. Managing the classroom environment at the low SES school required additional strategies due to the noise and activity level. However, my cooperating supervisor had many tricks for classroom management, and this became a non-issue after a few classes. For example, instead of entering the room directly to their assigned spots, taking attendance, and then explaining the class activity, the low SES kids sometimes received an item related to the activity upon entering the classroom (like a scarf or a token), or they proceeded directly into a circle to start dancing without any explanations. Eliminating things like lecturing or long periods of waiting helped alleviate spots where low SES students might have become disinterested or distracted. Over time, the students came to understand that I would be leading a music class designed to be engaging and fun.

At the low SES school, things sometimes seemed to take longer to explain or teach because the class took more time to settle down between directions, behavioral issues arose that needed addressed, or a student just needed to tell you that instant what

they considered the most important thing that had ever happened. Even with some time cut short, each class consistently provided the students with a meaningful musical experience. I learned to expect the unexpected and go with it—don't fight it.

A notable difference between the schools was how the low SES students approached me upon arrival. There were so many hugs, high fives, and smiles entering the music room. The kids at that school seemed to appreciate attention from adults who paid attention to them and respected them. I was student teaching at this placement on September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks were happening in the morning while I was at the high SES building and almost all of the parents came to pick up their children and take them home during the panic. Later that afternoon, when I went to the low SES school, almost all of the children were still in school. No one came to pick them up that day. All of a sudden, I had to be the trusted adult providing comfort and reassurance while there something clearly scary was happening around everyone. I learned so much from that placement about the differences in racial and economic culture that teachers need to be aware of to truly understand students and properly reach them academically and emotionally.

My second placement was high school instrumental music (orchestra) at a low SES, racially diverse, but majority white school. The entire instrument inventory was owned completely by the school. No students furnished their own instruments. I learned a lot from this placement and from my cooperating supervisor who I would consider a music education legend. I honestly can't understand why no one else from my university was fighting over either of my cooperating teachers. They were truly rock stars. This

educator created one of the most successful string instrument programs I had ever seen. The community held the orchestra in high regard, even more so than the band, because of the successful director who built the program from scratch years prior. The school hired multiple band directors, causing the program to suffer, while the orchestra remained stable under a committed leader.

My cooperating teacher organized lessons effectively, and his expertise as a violinist contributed significantly to his students' success. Every rehearsal included live participation, with modeling and demonstration of techniques executed effortlessly. In contrast, my proficiency on string instruments (aside from piano) was at an elementary level. I was dedicated to practicing as much as I could while I was there and the students respected that, even when I pointed out my own mistakes.

One group of girls in the orchestra class had a hard time warming up to me. I was only a few years older than them, and I sensed that my presence felt intrusive in a space where they had already carved out their own identity. One student, whom I'll call Calise, kept her distance and rarely made eye contact during rehearsals. At first, I interpreted it as resistance, but over time I realized it was more about trust than attitude. When I opened up a little about my own background and showed her a few things on the piano after class, her posture began to shift. I learned that she loved R&B and was teaching herself how to play by ear at home. That moment shifted how I approached all my interactions—with more listening, less performance. I learned valuable lessons on how to be respected as a young teacher while keeping boundaries, but building relationships. It was hard to be so close in age and still be respected and trusted. I found that showing

them my skills as a pianist gave me the credentials I needed to be in the room. I studied every night about the string instruments so I could be knowledgeable in class the next day. I studied scores every night to ensure I could answer any questions asked. I didn't want to appear inferior in any capacity. Once I established my credibility, and let the girls know I wasn't going to steal their boyfriends, it became easier and easier to work with high school students. I was able to teach small group sectionals and full ensemble rehearsals on my own, and my supervisor was impressed. I was constantly talking to students not just about music, but about anything and everything. Asking about the students' lives and who they were in and out of school allowed them to respect me more as a person thus leading to a bridge into music education for both of us. Once I established a relationship with the older students, I was able to speak to them on different planes such as music, where I could show them I actually did know a lot and had things to offer them educationally. I remember two students being very impressed with my piano playing, and they came to take private lessons with me later at the music store. The orchestra director invited me back to conduct at the concert, even after my placement had ended, which was a meaningful opportunity for me. The students warmed up, began approaching me energetically, having relaxed conversations, and it was a wonderful way to conclude the student teaching experience.

Graduate School

After I graduated with my degree in music education, I decided I wasn't ready to enter the workforce. I recognized that there were additional areas of knowledge to explore. As a naturally studious person, I chose to continue right into graduate school for

music education. I chose the same university as my undergraduate studies to work with new professors who had strong reputations while still teaching in my private piano studio. As a bonus, the university provided an exception to the elective policy, permitting me to take Applied Piano Studies with my original piano professor for graduate credits. I was pleased to have the opportunity to continue developing my skills in piano performance while undertaking the full course load of graduate classes in music education.

Because of my varied teaching experiences during college—particularly working with students across different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds—I felt drawn to explore how those factors might influence musical learning. I sensed there were layers beyond ability that shaped how students engaged with music. The title of my thesis was *Student Backgrounds: A Music Teacher's Response to Diverse Learning.* I provided two case studies that hypothesized a (Black) low SES music student and a (white) high SES music student had equal musical aptitude, but learned at varying rates, even when presented with similar material. In the study, I shared the story of a student I called Bree, who brought warmth, creativity, and consistency to her lessons. Bree was one of my most consistent students, despite a long list of logistical hurdles. She didn't have a full-sized keyboard at home, and getting to lessons sometimes depended on whether her aunt could give her a ride. But she showed up with a big smile and a quiet determination. Bree's progress highlighted how musical growth can flourish when teaching responds to each student's strengths and circumstances, rather than assuming a singular path to success. Bobby, a student from a high-income household, arrived with every resource available—regular transportation, a Steinway grand piano at home, and pre-paid lessons. Despite

these supports, Bobby often struggled to stay engaged and showed signs of frustration during lessons. He was balancing several extracurricular commitments, and music, while something he liked, didn't always come first. I realized his learning wasn't limited by resources, but by time, interest, and the need for more personalized and flexible lesson planning. Data were collected from a sample of other students through a questionnaire that asked about student backgrounds, home environments, music preferences, and extracurricular activities.

I collected the survey responses from my study and indicated that low SES students reported listening frequently to music like pop and hip hop in their free time and were passionate about their favorite artists. They did not participate in many extracurricular activities at school, but those they were involved in were usually music-related such as marching band, musical theater, or other instrumental music lessons. They also claimed to regularly experience music with their families such as church singing, singing at parties or gatherings, or a relative commonly singing around the house doing or as a lullaby at bedtime.

In contrast, I revealed from the high SES data that students were listening to a wider variety of music genres but only some had musical experiences with their families. This group reported a high number of extra-curricular activities that were not music related, for example, Girl Scouts, skiing, swimming, and gymnastics. The process for the study was to collect data, analyze results, and then redesign piano lessons to show how understanding students from varying SES standpoints could help generate more success in the music classroom.

After completing the field surveys, I revisited the case studies. Bree loved storytelling and eagerly connected each piano piece with a narrative she'd created. When I gave her a piece called *Curious Story* by Heller, she returned the next week with characters, plot points, and voices ready to go. The music had become part of the world she was imagining. Bobby, who had been struggling to find time to practice because of his overcommitment to other extracurriculars, had a different lesson plan. Instead of adding to Bobby's workload, I gave him a more familiar piece that might generate excitement. He wasn't doing well with unfamiliar pieces or the redundancy of scales, so I suggested Beethoven's *Für Elise.* Bobby's expression changed as he recognized the song. When he returned the next week, he reported that he found extra time to practice and even spent time with his mother, who had also played this piece before. They hadn't bonded through music until then and Bobby said he liked watching his mom play. He even showed her the section she couldn't remember.

In the conclusion section of the thesis, I recommended that teachers gather as much information as possible about student backgrounds to create the most impactful lessons, which will benefit students—regardless of SES—and because of SES.

CHAPTER SIX: Professional Teaching Experience

My First Job

My first job as a professional in music education came directly after graduate school and was located in the school district directly neighboring my own. I was teaching just minutes away from where I had grown up and the school districts were almost identical in demographics and cultural contexts. The student body consisted of Black and white students from middle- and lower-class economic backgrounds. The district was about 65% Black and 35% white, with about half the students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. I eagerly accepted this first job because it was ideally located near my home. I had interviewed well, having grown up in a similar school district, which allowed me to relate to the student body on a personal level. I distinctly remember the administrator asking me what I knew about their district, and I shared stories about local sporting rivalries and people I knew in the area. Their line of questioning focused heavily on classroom management, particularly how I would handle disruptive behaviors like students throwing things or leaving the room in anger. I believe my background, including my student-teaching experiences in low-SES schools, contributed to my hiring. I also suspect there were not many other applicants, as the hiring process did not go through multiple rounds of interviews like in other districts.

I accepted the job without applying elsewhere, feeling content with this placement and eager to start. The job was middle school general music, which was not my primary area of expertise. However, as an enthusiastic new teacher, I was excited about embarking on this new journey. I set up my classroom the week before school began,

organized my materials, and met the staff. Meeting the staff proved to be the most intimidating part of orientation. Only a few teachers greeted me warmly. Most kept to themselves and seemed worn down by their work. I overheard frequent complaints—about the broken furniture, the dirty floors, the crumbling walls. There were also comments about the students, with some staff describing them as unmotivated or disrespectful. As a newcomer, I didn't know what to make of it yet, but I could sense a deep fatigue in the building. I also heard frustrations about the administration, which was said to side with parents in all disputes. I imagine the staff saw me, a small, 5'0, white female music teacher, and doubted my ability to last in this environment. While I knew the job would be challenging, I had no intention of quitting or allowing my passion for teaching to be diminished. I was determined to prove myself.

I began my first week of teaching with musical ice breakers, getting to know my students. I had been warned that some of the middle school students might intimidate me because of their size, but that was not the case at all. I greeted everyone at the door and checked in with students during the lesson, offering a pat on the shoulder as they left or wishing them a good rest of the day. Those small gestures helped students feel comfortable around me. I wasn't sure how I'd be received, but they were open, curious, and willing to try what I brought to the room. I had been told to expect constant disruptions, but my experience was different. Students responded to the way I taught—and to the way I treated them. My "secret weapons" were my ability to laugh at myself, staying fashionable (they always noticed my shoes), and impressing them with my musical expertise and piano skills. Within weeks, I was creating my own lessons,

assessments, and games. Students engaged in friendly competition over who could name notes the fastest or identify musical trivia from the 1900's. When I looked back at old assignments, I realized that my students from that first semester had been as advanced as my current high school students by traditional standards of music aptitude.

Things were going well in my first semester until I had a staff department meeting. The music department chair discussed the set curriculum, noting that my lessons did not align with it. I explained that I was never given a curriculum to follow, and immediately felt guilty, fearing I could be reprimanded. Wanting to avoid any trouble, I studied the new materials I had received and reviewed the curriculum week by week. As I sifted through the materials, I found myself thinking, "This won't work… The students will hate this … Why do I have to teach this?" The curriculum felt outdated and disconnected from my students' interests. Some examples that stuck with me were the lessons on composers like Mahler and Berlioz, and the Australian folk song, *Kookaburra*, which included the lyrics, "gay your life must be," and *Naughty Pussycat*, which helped teach solfege. The topics felt distant from anything my students connected to, and even I struggled to find excitement in them. Still, I tried to follow the curriculum, hoping to make it work. As I expected, the engagement dropped. Getting a group of 12- to 14-year-olds to focus on Mahler or Berlioz was a losing battle. They cracked jokes, acted out, or simply shut down. When we reached *Kookaburra* in the curriculum sequence, students shouted the final line loudly, clearly finding humor in the lyric. I found this incredibly uncomfortable, and I realized it might be especially problematic if an LGBTQ+ student was in the class. I began to lose control of the classroom. In response, I changed the lyrics

of *Naughty Pussycat* to *Naughty Kittycat*, refusing to sing it as originally written. Of course, the students quickly reverted to the original lyrics, and the situation became a cycle of frustration. The success I had initially felt was quickly overshadowed by the challenges posed by the imposed curriculum.

After four months of struggling in the position, another job opened up at the district's elementary school, and I applied for the transfer. No one replaced me in the middle school general music position, and my classes were absorbed into the schedules of other music teachers.

At my new job, I taught elementary orchestra for the entire district, traveling to six different buildings for pull-out lessons. I was also expected to give a combined concert at the end of the year. Although managing the travel schedule seemed overwhelming at first, I looked forward to working with younger students. After a tough stretch in the middle school, this felt like a chance to reset and grow in a new way. I was replacing a teacher who had started the elementary orchestra program several years earlier and turned over the program to me with only 25 participating students. I began my first week with minimal expectations, determined to follow the retired teacher's methods and avoid disrupting the established routines of the department. I taught only a few students per day, rotating between schools, and the students were enthusiastic about learning their instruments. The small group sizes meant I could provide individual attention during each 40-minute lesson. Discipline was not an issue, but I did have to navigate scheduling conflicts with classroom teachers.

The orchestra program was part of a low SES, Title I school, but the students who

participated were mostly from families with the means to afford instrument rentals and pass credit checks. While the school itself served a diverse student population, the orchestra reflected a narrower slice—mostly white, higher-achieving students with strong parental involvement. Only a small number of Black students were part of the program. It was clear that financial barriers shaped who had access to this opportunity. The students involved were generally among the top academic performers in their classrooms, excelling in their studies and demonstrating strong parental involvement, as seen through consistently signed practice charts. Each elementary school in the district had its own distinct atmosphere—some warm and welcoming, others cold and uninviting—but the financial barriers to orchestra participation remained a common theme. I spent the rest of the school year working with this group of students, gaining experience as an elementary orchestra director.

Over the summer, I reflected on my role and how I could make the orchestra program more accessible to students who had previously been excluded due to financial barriers. I didn't want the program to be elitist or available only to those who could afford rental fees or meet credit requirements. To address this, I visited local music stores to inquire about instrument donations, reduced rental fees, and the possibility of eliminating credit checks, aiming to extend participation to students from lower-income families. Several shops agreed to collaborate, including the store where I had worked previously. I refurbished donated instruments, using my background in instrument repair to minimize costs. Additionally, I reassessed instructional materials, selecting *Essential Elements* for the upcoming year due to its more modern approach, updated song

selections, and play-along CDs. My music department chair approved the change, and I also created supplemental materials in Finale, incorporating video game themes, TV and movie songs, and holiday favorites to further engage a broader range of students.

The school year began with a busy recruitment campaign. I visited classrooms in third, fourth, and fifth grades to demonstrate string instruments and promote the orchestra. I also collaborated with the elementary band director and participated in an instrument rental information night for parents and guardians. These efforts paid off, and the orchestra tripled in size by the end of my second year. A concert program from this time shows 76 students 20 Black, 51 white, and 5 Asian. Although most students rented their instruments, many took advantage of the no-credit-check option I had established.

As the program continued to grow, so did the diversity of the orchestra. By the end of my sixth year, the orchestra had nearly 200 students, with a 50% Black and 50% white demographic. Students from all racial and economic backgrounds had access to the program, and the students were performing above grade level. I had come to love teaching elementary orchestra and felt that I had finally succeeded in building an inclusive and dynamic program that made music accessible to all students.

Over the years of teaching elementary orchestra, I remembered many success stories. The most prominent, and perhaps traditional, was that of a viola student I'll call Liam who eventually studied at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and became a member of a major symphony orchestra, traveled to Europe, and worked as a professional recording artist in classical music. This student, son of a pastor, grew up in a modest home and was extremely quiet and socially withdrawn as a child. He loved being in the

orchestra, and his parents often shared with me that I had been one of his biggest influences in pursuing music. While his development into a professional musician stood out as a significant success, it was also rare. I didn't have many students pursuing music as a career. I have tried to find meaning in other, subtler success stories from this time in my teaching career.

Dennis, one of my orchestra students, had trouble keeping up with the class and often seemed unsure of how to connect with others. He was quiet and kept to himself, and his progress on the instrument was slow. But music gave him a place to belong. He kept coming back, week after week, and gradually found comfort in being part of the group. Dennis continued playing through high school and eventually became a history teacher. Today, he volunteers his time directing school musicals, sharing his love of music in a way that still matters deeply to him.

While collecting artifacts for this dissertation, I reached out to former students, as well as to former students' parents with whom I remained in contact. I asked whether they had kept any old concert programs or recordings from elementary school. The generous responses I received overwhelmed me. Many had preserved concert programs from their elementary orchestra concerts, some of which were nearly 20 years old. This showed how significant those moments were in their lives. Being part of that music group was meaningful in different ways: for some, it meant mastering an instrument, while for others, it meant making new friends and having fun. For some, it was simply an opportunity to try something new that they might not have experienced otherwise.

After teaching elementary orchestra for about 10 years, I continued my work as

other music teachers in the district began to retire or face furloughs. Unfortunately, the district chose not to replace these teachers due to budget cuts—this district was over $167 million in debt due to poor financial decisions made by a corrupt school board and administration ([*News article*], 2016).

As so many teachers left without replacements, I ended up teaching a large number of elementary general music classes and chorus in addition to my orchestra students. This required me to enlarge my group string lessons to accommodate the expanded schedule. It also meant I had to adapt to teaching general music and chorus again. I accepted the challenge, but it was difficult, especially during my first year. However, after becoming the new music department chairperson, I was able to restructure the curriculum and eliminate some of the practices I had opposed earlier in my career. It was refreshing to be able to use my own materials and teach with more autonomy. I integrated a stronger focus on rhythm and movement into the new curriculum, introducing new songs, games, and dances that resonated with my students. For example, I had students play a circle name game called, "Pizza, Pizza, Daddy-O," in which students created their own dance moves to share—moves that include jumping, clapping, stomping, disco dancing, dabbing, and a variety of *Fortnite* dance moves I cannot fully describe! To teach musical form, I created a holiday game using a familiar Christmas carol, and every time the refrain occurred, there was a paper snowball fight in the classroom. It was chaotic, but the students were eager to clean up in order to play another round. I established boundaries and rules for the lesson, and the students followed them every time. My principal formally observed me teaching this lesson and was amazed to

see the “challenging” students cooperating, taking their turns, smiling and laughing with classmates, cleaning up, singing, and following all my directives while participating and answering questions throughout the lesson.

Another favorite lesson that promoted engagement and accessibility involved complex rhythm reading and recorder performances using backtracks with hip-hop beats. These activities resonated with students by incorporating familiar musical elements, making music class more enjoyable and interactive. The combination of rhythm practice and contemporary sounds helped sustain their interest while reinforcing musical concepts. I was pleased to see this approach foster enthusiasm and success in my general music classes. Unfortunately, I was not seeing the same positive outcomes with my orchestra anymore. As the schedule shifted and group sizes grew to 20 to 25 students at a time, string lessons became increasingly chaotic. Tuning half-size instruments became a time-consuming task, taking up too much class time. Students who didn’t grasp concepts immediately started falling behind, and I couldn’t offer them additional help. I watched as students became frustrated and many quit the program. Overwhelmed with my other responsibilities, it was difficult to balance all the programs. I began to feel stressed and irritable both at work and at home. Furthermore, administration was unwilling to hire additional music teachers or adjust my schedule. My ability to maintain the orchestra program and hold a concert each season did not improve my situation. Although it appeared I was managing everything well, I was actually struggling. Work became a source of stress, burnout, and pressure. I found myself participating in the traditional “bashing of the workplace” conversations in the teacher lounge, complaining to friends

after work, and experiencing poor sleep. My husband noticed a change in my personality, and we often discussed how unhappy I had become at work.

Returning Home

As it happened, I attended a high school festival where I encountered my former teacher and mentor, Tim. He mentioned that he had a job opening at my alma mater and jokingly asked if I wanted an interview. I immediately accepted, and he scheduled it. During the interview, I felt confident about my qualifications for the role, and the school hired me. I believed it was time for a change, and returning to my previous school district felt like the fresh start I needed. In this new role, I was told that I could create my own curriculum based on my past experiences. I would also be collaborating with Tim, who wanted me to serve as his music director for the high school musical program, a program I had always admired. This opportunity solidified my decision, and I left my previous position to return to my home district.

Since graduating, I had seen many changes in the district. I accepted a position as the general music teacher at Thornberry Elementary, a school serving mostly Black students from working-class neighborhoods. Parents were now able to choose which elementary school to send their children to, and most picked the one closest to home. Over time, that seemed to shift the school population, with Thornberry serving more students from historically underserved communities. Thornberry sat in the middle of one of the district's most affluent neighborhoods. Driving past the large homes and manicured lawns each morning, it struck me how different the surroundings were from the realities many of my students faced. Most were bused in from across town, coming

from neighborhoods with very different circumstances. Many of the students I taught came from families navigating financial hardship. Some lived in subsidized housing or relied on assistance programs. I noticed that several students wore the same clothes throughout the week, and signs of stress often surfaced in their behavior. The challenges they carried with them into the classroom were real, even if not always visible.

The school hired me to replace a teacher who transitioned to a high school position after spending about 15 years at Thornberry. I began the school year in March, optimistic about the curriculum I planned to bring to my students. However, I was unprepared for the conditions I encountered. The school environment was challenging: the hallways and classrooms were in poor condition, and the music room, located in a basement with no windows, was in disrepair. The walls had chipped paint, the blackboards were cracked, and the carpeting was worn, stained, and emitted an unpleasant odor. The room had been arranged as a traditional classroom with rows of desks, and the storage cabinets contained worksheets, some music magazines, broken rhythm sticks (posing a safety risk), damaged boomwhackers, and a few cracked xylophones.

My first week with students was overwhelming. Classrooms, hallways, the lunchroom, and the bus all felt loud, chaotic, and unpredictable. There were frequent outbursts, arguments, and moments that turned physical. I wasn't used to this kind of environment, and it seemed like the staff had long since adjusted to a level of intensity that felt brand new to me. Other teachers explained that this environment was typical for Thornberry, which led me to question my decision to switch jobs and wonder how I

would manage in this setting. I tried different management strategies, calming techniques, and energetic music activities, but nothing seemed to stick. It became clear that students had learned to expect a certain kind of experience in music class—and whatever I was trying felt unfamiliar to them. I realized I couldn't change things overnight. I needed to slow down, earn trust, and figure out what made sense for this group.

My revised approach was to complete the remainder of the school year while focusing on building relationships with the students. My goals included learning their names, asking questions to understand their interests, maintaining a positive demeanor, and avoiding a confrontational approach. Those last two months were the hardest I had ever experienced as a teacher. I didn't get through a single full lesson, and no one seemed to notice. I ended the year feeling drained, unsure of how I could make a difference in a setting that felt so far from what I'd imagined.

Starting Over—As a Veteran Teacher

During that summer, I reevaluated my career decisions and considered how to move forward effectively. I knew I was not the type of teacher to allow students to disregard boundaries, nor the type to endure constant dissatisfaction in my role. I spent significant time strategizing about ways to implement constructive changes in the school system, foster an engaging music curriculum, and, most importantly, reignite my passion for teaching music.

At the start of the new school year, I dedicated the first month to reorganizing my classroom for optimal functionality. I restructured the space, removing desks to create an open area for movement. Outdated materials, broken instruments, and items I would not

use were discarded. Although I hesitated at first to get rid of the materials left behind, I knew I needed to create a space that felt fresh and functional. Many of the items were outdated or broken, and clearing them out gave me room to build something new. It reminded me how easy it is in music education to hang onto old tools or routines just because they're familiar—even when they no longer fit the students we serve now. After purging the old, I put up colorful and musical-themed posters, repainted sections of the room, and decorated with music notes to create an inviting and vibrant atmosphere. I networked with colleagues and acquired additional Orff instruments, as well as other materials that fit within my limited budget. By the time I finished, the classroom felt transformed, symbolizing a fresh start.

I taught general music to kindergarten through fourth grade daily, as well as preschool music. For the first week, I introduced the new classroom setup, established rules (integrated into a rhythm game), and led name-learning activities. My aim was to keep students fully engaged to reduce the likelihood of misbehavior. However, these lessons did not initially go as planned.

The students were excited about the way the classroom looked, but their habits and expectations hadn't changed overnight. Many still treated music class like free time, where rules didn't really apply and nothing particularly fun or meaningful was expected. It was clear I needed to shift not just the space, but the culture. I immediately sensed the need to reshape their perceptions. Students generally enjoyed gym and art but disliked music, so I approached the situation by greeting each student personally as they entered, setting a calm tone before class began. While some classes adjusted quickly, others

required firmer discipline and redirection. Some days, I felt like I wasn't teaching music at all. I spent so much time redirecting, calling home, and giving consequences that I started to wonder if students saw me as strict, or worse, someone to avoid. However, by maintaining consistency with consequences for behavior and upholding a positive classroom environment, students gradually began respecting classroom norms. I noticed that, as they found joy in music activities, positive peer pressure supported classroom management. Over time, students became more engaged, and music class transformed from a challenge to a highlight in their school day.

In the following months, I focused on refining my curriculum and gathering resources, but still didn't have classroom management under complete control. There were challenging moments such as incidents with aggressive behavior or disruptive outbursts. There were moments that caught me completely off guard. A kindergartener once picked up a small keyboard and threw it across the room, shattering it on the floor. Another time, a second grader pulled a drum wrench from behind my desk and flung it across the room, narrowly missing my head. These were not just discipline issues—they were signals that something deeper was going on, and I had to figure out how to respond in a way that kept us all safe and moving forward. I watched in amazement as that student laughed about almost harming his teacher. A fourth grader threw desks and books at other students and I had to physically restrain him (for which I was certified) during class in front of the others. I broke up fights in my classroom, the hallways, and in the cafeteria. I attempted to see each incident as a learning opportunity to better understand my students' needs. A significant number of my students had Individualized Education

Plans (IEPs), many of which included emotional support provisions. Studying these IEPs helped me create an inclusive environment, and I paid particular attention to strategies that allowed all students to thrive. Building rapport with students, even in small ways, fostered mutual respect and improved classroom engagement, which became a gateway for providing relevant and meaningful musical experiences.

As an additional role, I also became a bus monitor, riding with students at the end of the day to ensure safety. Other teachers volunteered for an extra paycheck and most complained about the experience. For me, riding the bus provided insights into students' lives outside school. Riding the bus gave me a glimpse into the neighborhoods my students returned to each day. Many lived in low-income housing that showed signs of disrepair—cracked windows, loose stair railings, cluttered porches. Watching them step into these spaces after school filled me with a quiet ache. I wanted school to be a place where they felt safe, seen, and supported. Seeing these circumstances provided perspective on the external factors impacting students' behavior and outlook.

Throughout my time as a teacher at Thornberry, I encountered numerous sensitive situations and was required to report concerns involving students' well-being. I came to understand the importance of creating a supportive environment within the classroom as a temporary refuge from outside struggles. For example, a student in third grade mentioned he had held his older brother's gun. A kindergarten student told a friend about performing a sexual act on someone riding the bus to school. A child in second grade had violent outbursts and screamed he wanted to kill himself. A fourth-grade student took a piece of string from the art room and tied it around his neck and yanked the ends of the rope.

These incidents at Thornberry shook me. I did what I was trained to do—report, follow protocol, stay calm—but each one stayed with me. Those moments changed me as a teacher. They sharpened my sense of urgency and deepened my understanding of what many of my students were carrying with them. They also left marks—quiet ones I still carry.

Through careful observation, I identified patterns in students' behavior that informed my teaching strategies. Students who exhibited challenging behaviors often thrived in activities that allowed them to lead or participate actively such as dancing, circle games, solos, or making choices. Those displaying signs of emotional distress responded well to calming, introspective music activities like discussions about music, composing, and listening activities. This understanding helped me tailor lessons to meet a wide range of academic, cultural, and socio-emotional needs, allowing each student a chance to succeed.

In time, my elementary music classroom became a positive, dynamic space. Students felt supported and excited to engage in music, and I began to see the room filled with energy and enthusiasm. Later in the year, I was assigned to teach one day a week at an alternative education site for students facing serious disciplinary issues. It was considered a final opportunity before expulsion. The building felt heavy the moment I walked in—physically run-down, tightly controlled, and emotionally charged. Nothing I had used successfully in other classrooms seemed to work here. This setting brought challenges I had never encountered before. The environment was marked by security personnel, limited structure, and frequent disruptions. I felt like I taught in a prison. What

made it harder was the fact that this building had once been my intermediate school. Returning there in this new role, under such different circumstances, was disorienting. When I entered through the front doors of the building I was flooded with memories of my own classroom experiences. The iron fence around the back of the school was still there and reminded me of pulling up on the bus as a child, and passing the cafeteria made me think of it being robbed at gunpoint. I lost a lot of confidence as a teacher at this placement. The students were unimpressed by any conversation I tried to have and any of the activities I brought. There were daily physical fights, constant screaming and outbursts, and destruction around the classrooms and halls. There was permanent marker graffiti on walls and chalkboards and several instances where human feces were found outside of the bathrooms smeared on the hallway walls. The building bore the signs of students who had been hurt, pushed out, and, in many ways, forgotten.

During one class, a student named Leo disappeared into the ceiling tiles, escaped through a window, and took off running down the street. I immediately called security and the principal, my heart racing. I remember standing frozen, unsure if I would be held responsible. It was one of the most surreal moments of my career. I was scared and I thought I was going to lose my job. Other occurrences included students breaking most of the instruments I had like xylophones, drums, and rhythm sticks without consequence. There was always a refusal to sing and recorders were used like swords. I adjusted my approach to emphasize positive reinforcement through incentives such as rewards and calls home celebrating small successes. Food, tattoo stickers, and computer privileges were additional incentives. Gradually, students became more receptive to music

activities, like body percussion, team activities, and using electric piano keyboards to make melodies and create percussive beats. In that setting, success looked different. A student waiting patiently for their turn, joining a group activity, or making it through the period without conflict became moments to celebrate. These glimpses of connection reminded me why I stayed.

Home Again—High School Music

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the opportunity to transition from teaching elementary general music at Thornberry to a secondary position at the high school. This role shift aligned with a plan previously discussed with Tim, the department chair, and supported my long-term goal. My established involvement with the high school musical program made the move beneficial for my schedule and my desire to work closely with secondary students. While I valued my position at the elementary level and understood my unique skill-set in that role, I made the challenging decision to part ways with Thornberry and the alternative school, becoming the choir and orchestra director at my alma mater.

High school had changed significantly since I graduated nearly twenty years previously. Enrollment was approximately half of what it once was, with a demographic shift to about 75% Black and 25% white students. The racial diversity of neighborhoods remained, with some exclusively Black, some exclusively white, and some communities that had become more heterogeneous. Driving through the district, I noticed signs that some neighborhoods had changed—torn curtains, cracked siding, and overgrown lawns. The signs of economic stress were visible, though not everywhere. I couldn’t help but

think about how my students were living with these shifts all around them, and what it meant to show up for school each day amid those challenges. While these observations may be influenced by the different perspectives of adulthood compared to adolescence, they highlighted some economic challenges facing the community. Some neighborhoods felt less familiar to me than they once had, and I was more cautious when visiting certain areas at night. I kept in mind that these were the same places many of my students called home, navigating circumstances far more complex than I could always see.

The high school itself had been remodeled, featuring a new gym and auditorium, with enhanced security measures including a gated entrance, metal detectors, and security wands similar to an airport TSA checkpoint. Despite these changes, certain aspects remained familiar. Walking through the halls evoked memories of my own time as a student—using lockers, navigating the lunchroom, and entering classrooms. Many former teachers still taught there, and while enrollment had decreased—most likely due to outside private/parochial/charter/cyber enrollment ([*School website, 2024*])—the school retained its vibrancy. Crowded hallways, lively students, and teachers expressing the familiar weariness reminded me of my high school days.

The school's reputation remained a complex issue. While the football team and musical program continued to attract attention, challenges such as negative academic perceptions and safety concerns overshadowed its image. The media frequently reported incidents within the school community, such as gun violence, drug problems, robberies, and other criminal activities, which fueled public perceptions and often depicted students as disruptive and disengaged. Additionally, tension persisted among school board

members, district administrators, community members, and teachers.

Despite these challenges, teaching music in the school where I discovered my passion for singing, choral accompaniment, and musical theater felt immensely rewarding. Each day, I felt motivated to contribute to the community and share with my students what my teachers had imparted to me. My vision for students included a revitalization of the music programs, which had been impacted by previous teacher turnover and disruptions caused by COVID-19. I often reminisced about the meaningful experiences I had as a high school student, from choir trips and jazz band solos to unforgettable musical theater performances. These moments were instrumental in my growth, and I wanted to provide my students with similar, if not greater, opportunities. However, I inherited a program that required extensive rebuilding. The symphonic music collection was largely unusable, many instruments were damaged, the choral library was unorganized, and music technology classes faced resource limitations. I also started with two small choirs that included some students with limited singing experience or those enrolled by guidance counselors.

My first year at the high school was conducted remotely due to the pandemic, a time in which small victories became essential amidst many obstacles. Online attendance was sporadic, technical disruptions impeded rehearsals, and many choir students felt too self-conscious to submit private singing videos. To enhance engagement, I delivered instruments to students' homes and created instructional videos for singing, drama, and orchestral lessons. Music technology, despite being my least familiar subject, proved to be highly adaptable for the online format, as students enjoyed project-based assignments

that provided a break from core remote classes.

The return to in-person learning the following year felt like a new beginning. Connecting with students in person improved class engagement, though attendance remained an issue. Many students shared that music classes were their primary motivation for attending school, which reinforced my commitment to these programs. With increased departmental stability, choir and theater enrollment doubled, while the orchestra program maintained consistent numbers. The music department was the only one unaffected by course cancellations due to low enrollment, a sign that stability had contributed to increased interest.

Rebuilding the program required intentional efforts to meet students where they were academically and musically. I selected music within their skill range, typically below the national standard level recommended by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME). My choir initially struggled with SATB parts, so I adapted the repertoire to SAB arrangements, which strengthened their confidence. Many students lacked formal music notation training, yet I introduced solfege exercises to provide foundational knowledge of music theory and harmony. Students found success with these exercises, and over time, the ensemble's skill level and confidence grew, allowing for a gradual return to SATB arrangements.

Field trips also became an integral part of the program. I organized annual clinical trips to local universities, where choral professors and undergraduate music education students offered sectionals and professional rehearsals. These trips provided students with college campus exposure and a glimpse into music facilities, fostering interest in

potential college pursuits. Additionally, holiday concerts at the city concert hall, the grand staircase at the county courthouse, and a local airport lobby provided unique performance experiences. Students were visibly proud of their accomplishments, and positive feedback from community members reinforced their efforts and bolstered the program's reputation. One audience member offered to call the school superintendent to offer a rave review.

While concert attire varied due to accessibility, and not all students memorized music, the performances reflected their commitment and enthusiasm. This was a mismatched bunch, but they developed a bond nonetheless. The friendships they formed and their sense of accomplishment in harmonizing together highlighted the importance of these shared musical experiences, which will likely be remembered more for the connections made than for any specific performance requirements like wearing matching outfits.

As my choir students' skills grew and they began tackling more challenging pieces, I decided to introduce solo participation in state choral festivals. Though I had no prior experience with these festivals, other schools regularly participated, so I felt it was an opportunity my group should also have. After ordering the audition music, I was somewhat overwhelmed by the difficulty level. These were classic choral works that were beyond my students' current range—not because of their talent, but because I understood their practice habits and skill levels. The music was obscure, atonal, in a foreign language, and in complex meters; it was unlike the pieces usually explored.

In my classroom, I generally focused on pieces that felt accessible and culturally relevant. I sought melodic, lyrical selections, including spirituals with belting solos and works by non-traditional composers such as women and people of color. The choir sang foreign-language pieces—Latin for vowel formations, Spanish, and occasionally African languages such as Swahili and Nigerian. This festival music, however, was unfamiliar and outside the students' comfort zones. Nonetheless, they prepared diligently; I created rehearsal tracks, held extra practices, and helped students ready themselves to sing excerpts a cappella for the judges. They understood it would be a challenge, yet they worked hard, despite frequently telling me how much they disliked the music and struggled to understand it. On audition day, they went in nervously, but did their best and were relieved once it was over.

Ultimately, only one of my six students was accepted into the festival—Levi, a Black male student with an IEP who had worked incredibly hard to prepare. I knew he had earned his spot through persistence, even though he was most likely admitted as a representation slot, not through the merit-based scores. Still, he handled the experience with grace, and his classmates celebrated him with genuine pride. The festival hosted approximately 115 students and Levi was one of only three Black students in the entire festival choir. He placed lower in the regional auditions but reported that he enjoyed the festival, especially when the whole choir was singing together, and he even made a few friends. However, he experienced some bullying, which deeply upset me. Despite this, he expressed willingness to participate again, though I began to question if the stress and challenges were truly worth it, especially given that the festival appeared to value "token"

representation. I felt the organization could make the festival more inclusive and accessible for students from diverse backgrounds.

Shortly after, I brought two of my orchestra students—a cellist and a bassist—to their first instrumental festival. They had been accepted under the school's representation quota, which ensured each district had at least one student included. Neither had been in a setting like this before, and we worked closely in the weeks leading up to the event to help them feel prepared. The concert repertoire sent was even more challenging than the choral selections. This festival included pieces filled with symphonic classics without any simplified arrangements. The students and I worked through rehearsals, adapting certain sections to focus on achievable goals.

The audition was intense, especially for one student called Carmen who, just before performing, learned that their family might soon lose their home. They had confided in me about a number of challenges—an unstable living environment, inconsistent meals, and the absence of a support system. I had already filed a report as a mandated reporter, but hearing this new update broke my heart. And yet, Carmen still walked into that room and played. Afterward, they told me they had made a mistake in their audition and heard one of the judges laugh out loud. It was humiliating. I was furious—not just because of the unprofessionalism, but because I knew how much Carmen had already overcome just to be there. I wrote to the festival association president that night. To their credit, they responded quickly and assured me that future judges would be trained to maintain professionalism and sensitivity, especially with students participating through school representation.

The festival itself was held at the city's premier symphony hall—a prestigious venue. My students were thrilled to perform on such a stage, though it remained a challenging experience. The experience was mixed. My students felt proud to perform on such a prestigious stage, but they also struggled to find their footing. They didn't bring the same gear as other students—no fancy bass case or stool, and the cello still had tape markings on the fingerboard for guidance. These differences made them feel self-conscious, but they pushed through, finding moments of humor, pride, and connection in the process. Despite these obstacles, my students displayed resilience, finding humor and positivity in the experience, and they made the most of their time at the festival. Music united them, and I was constantly impressed by my students' resilience. Even on their toughest days, they showed up, and together, continued finding joy creating music.

Over time, my students began to trust me with their stories. They opened up about struggles with mental health, instability at home, and situations that no young person should have to face. I never took that trust for granted. It was a privilege—and a heavy one. I have had students who have attempted suicide, used illegal drugs, been pregnant, were kicked out of their home, were sexually assaulted, have been victims of domestic violence and racism, and have been arrested, shot, and sadly even killed. I kept resources on hand for counseling and crisis support, using them far more frequently than I'd anticipated. I have also found relief confiding to students about frightening things that have happened to me as a teacher and how that makes me feel. For example, I once was alerted to look for a student who was hiding with a gun somewhere in the school. The building was in lockdown mode and I opened my storage closet shaking in fear that there

would be a shooter on the other side. More recently, at a home football game, there was mass pandemonium in the stands when crowds began shouting that there was a shooting occurring in the arena. Someone had been shot outside on the street and came into the game screaming for help. The entire audience began pushing and running to escape quickly. I got out with many others through a side exit and was unharmed. One of my students was injured trying to climb a fence in the chaos. Another was knocked down in the stampede near the concession stand. It was terrifying. In the days that followed, we talked about what had happened. Those conversations, though painful, created a kind of closeness between us that I hadn't expected.

In another moment that still feels surreal, my students, my family, and I happened to be at the same amusement park when gunfire broke out. Someone had climbed the fence and opened fire. We all scattered, relying on instincts shaped by years of school safety drills. Thankfully, we made it out unharmed. But even now, it's hard to talk about. These moments—terrifying and life-altering—connected us in ways I never anticipated. I've always wanted my students to know they can talk to me about anything. That I will listen. That they are never alone.

Extracurricular Activities—High School Musicals

I began directing high school musicals in my first year of teaching, a role that quickly became my passion. My interest in musical theater was sparked during my high school years, when I served as the student pianist and was drawn into the world of musical theater by my mentor, Tim. Within a year of starting my first job, I began working as the professional accompanist for high school productions. Over the years, my

involvement grew to include responsibilities as music director, pit orchestra director, and even producer. The scale of high school musical productions always fascinated me; I admired the immense effort and collaboration needed to bring these shows to life and felt proud to be a part of each production team. Watching students' dedication and work ethic throughout the program has continued to inspire me, especially as they take on difficult tasks with unwavering self-confidence, regardless of socioeconomic or racial backgrounds.

Each musical production typically ran from December through May. As vocal director, I held auditions in December to finalize casting before the holiday break, providing students the opportunity to review scripts, learn lines, and get familiar with the material over their time off. Students went through vocal and dance auditions and attended callbacks for lead roles. Auditions were often stressful for students, as competition was high. In January, after returning from break, the musical staff and I conducted a parent meeting to discuss the production schedule and expectations. Although I encouraged all parents to attend, not everyone could make it. Conflicting work schedules, transportation limitations, and other barriers often stood in the way. I learned not to take it personally and kept communication open in other ways. While the staff leaders set firm guidelines, such as requirements for program ad sales, rehearsal attendance, and a minimum GPA, enforcing these policies consistently proved to be a significant challenge. Some students were juggling academic struggles, attendance issues, or disciplinary consequences, which made staying eligible a challenge. I knew they were facing more than what showed up on paper, so I looked for ways to keep them involved

when I could. Some showed little interest in meeting fundraising goals, often failing to contribute even a penny toward expenses, which placed additional financial strain on the program.

Many students encountered barriers that threatened their continued participation in the program, including academic struggles, financial hardship, and unreliable transportation. To support their academic success, I offered tutoring after school and before rehearsals, often working alongside other teachers and staff who were equally committed to helping students stay eligible. When financial constraints made it difficult for students to meet fundraising goals, afford costumes, or cover basic needs, support sometimes came from a patchwork of community members—staff, families, and occasionally myself—contributing what we could to bridge the gap. Transportation challenges were often addressed collaboratively as well, with families, peers, and staff working together to coordinate carpools or provide rides so that students could attend rehearsals and performances without added stress.

The following three weeks focused on intensive music rehearsals, where I taught the entire musical score to the full cast. This period, which I referred to as “music boot camp,” required students to attend evening rehearsals. For students without a way to get home and return later, I opened my classroom after school so they could stay. Some used the time to study, some rehearsed lines, others just needed a quiet place to relax before the evening began. It became its own kind of community. Witnessing their excitement and motivation during these rehearsals was rewarding, reinforcing the positive impact of the musical experience.

Once the initial music rehearsals concluded, I began staging scenes with the stage director, who happened to be my former mentor, Tim. Although he had retired from teaching, Tim continued to direct the high school musical, and it was an honor to collaborate with him as a professional peer. Working alongside Tim was an opportunity for me to learn from a seasoned director, as he displayed exceptional professionalism and a genuine rapport with students. Known for his fiery intensity, Tim would occasionally raise his voice to a roar to emphasize key moments in rehearsal. However, he maintained a gentle, encouraging demeanor that helped students thrive. Tim's approach created a structured environment where each rehearsal night focused on completing specific scenes or songs, and though the process was demanding, students consistently demonstrated resilience.

As performance time approached, the intensity of the rehearsals increased, leading to additional stress for everyone. This period was often marked by heightened tension, as students frequently sought my assistance with personal challenges. Although I faced my own difficulties, such as anonymous reports to administration regarding my tone during rehearsals, I adapted my approach based on student feedback. On one occasion, a student shared that hearing a screaming voice was triggering due to past trauma, leading me to adjust my discipline style. In another instance, I advocated for a student who faced unjust disciplinary action, ultimately involving upper administration to lift the suspension. I was reprimanded by my principal for insubordination during this incident and had to involve my teacher's union. While these situations contributed to my own stress and burnout, I remained committed to supporting my students when they needed someone in their

corner.

After months of rigorous rehearsals and preparations, the production culminated in a series of performances that not only met basic high school standards of theater, but consistently exceeded expectations, captivating audiences filled with parents, administrators, patrons, theater aficionados, and professionals. Their enthusiastic reactions reflected the production's exceptional quality, surpassing what was typically expected at the high school level and seen locally throughout the region. The musical program frequently received recognition at a regional award show, where schools compete in categories similar to those in the Tony Awards, such as Best Musical and Best Choreography. Tim once mentioned that the school's consistent standard of excellence in musical theater had encouraged others to raise their own expectations. Despite perceptions of my school as under-resourced or disadvantaged, my students continuously proved their talent, earning accolades and defying expectations.

One of the proudest moments for me involved Jayna, a student passionate about music theater who, because of their participation in the school musical, successfully auditioned for a prestigious summer intensive in New York City. Although the program was expensive, teachers and family members collaborated to secure community donations, enabling the student to attend. While in New York, they had the opportunity to see a Broadway show, an experience made even more meaningful by their commitment to achieving their dreams despite financial limitations. However, the student encountered prejudice when a peer commented on their financial status while buying a souvenir, "Aren't you poor?" While incidents like this were disheartening, I remained dedicated to

guiding my students through these challenges, helping them develop resilience and self-assurance as they navigated such experiences.

The students who committed themselves to the musical—on top of their full school day and everything else they were managing—showed extraordinary resilience and pride in their work. Their dedication wasn't just about performing. It was about showing up, staying late, memorizing lines, learning choreography, and holding each other accountable. Watching them pour themselves into the production continues to inspire me. Their commitment pushes me to meet them with the same energy, to give more of myself, and to create opportunities that reflect just how much they're willing to give.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Critical Analysis

In this chapter, I offer a critical analysis of my lived experiences as both a student and teacher in majority-Black, low SES public school settings, as set forth in this autoethnography. As an extension of the narratives explored in earlier chapters, this analysis returns to the question that has continually challenged and reshaped my thinking: How have I come to understand *success* in music education, and how has that understanding been shaped by my experiences, my students, and my own identity as a white, middle-class educator working in marginalized school communities? Drawing from themes of race, class, pedagogy, cultural representation, resilience, and advocacy, I reflect on my journey and how traditional metrics of achievement often failed to capture the full scope of what students know, create, and contribute—particularly those whose strengths exist outside dominant educational norms.

As I reflect on the stories told throughout Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I acknowledge that these narratives are not fixed recollections of past events. Rather, as Bruner (1991) suggests, autobiographical narratives are interpretive acts that are shaped by who we are in the present and what we are trying to make sense of now. In this way, my storytelling reflects an ongoing process of self-construction. The meaning I assign to past experiences has shifted as I have become more critically aware of how race, class, and power function within educational contexts. This interpretive perspective is a central feature of autoethnography, which continually revisits and reframes the past through the lens of evolving pedagogical insight.

Rather than centering my actions as final solutions, I examine how my positionality as a white, middle-class educator has shaped my assumptions about success, and how my students have challenged and reshaped those assumptions over time. Their artistry, improvisational skill, and collaborative approaches to music-making pushed me to recognize success not as compliance with prescribed standards, but as the cultivation of identity, agency, and self-expression. What I initially understood as deficits—perceived gaps in training, resources, or academic readiness—were, in many cases, signs that the system itself was failing to recognize students' capabilities and cultural ways of knowing, and that I still had more work to do examining my own assumptions and the biases I brought into the classroom.

This dissertation, and the doctoral degree it supports, are shaped by the lives of students whose knowledge, creativity, and cultural expression have often been overlooked or undervalued by systems that claim to support them but too often function to contain or control them. Their stories appear here not to advance my own, but to unsettle dominant narratives about success in music education and to call for broader, more equitable frameworks. I remain mindful that telling these stories carries risk: the risk of speaking over students, or of unintentionally positioning their experiences as a backdrop to my own growth. That is not my intent. These students are not defined solely by hardship, but that hardship cannot and should not be erased. It is part of who they are, and often a source of humor, insight, and ingenuity. The creativity I witnessed was not in spite of difficult conditions, but often a direct response to them. As scholars like Yosso (2005) and Kelley (2002) noted, communities marked by oppression have long cultivated

rich traditions of resistance, imagination, and cultural wealth. My students' resourcefulness in the face of structural barriers reflects not a deficit to overcome, but a form of knowledge that challenges what counts as success in school music spaces.

As I analyze the structural barriers and pedagogical disconnects that shaped our learning environments, I remain committed to repositioning student voices and experiences at the center of any conversation about what it means to succeed in music education, and I recognize that I still have a long way to go. Grounded in critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist education, this approach challenges deficit-based narratives and affirms a vision of education that validates multiple pathways to excellence—rooted in community knowledge, cultural identity, and lived experience.

To support this critical exploration, I have organized this chapter into four sections: Racial and Socioeconomic Inequities in Music Education, in which I examine how systemic disparities influenced student experiences and my own understanding of inequity; Cultural Diversity and the Pedagogical Disconnect, in which I interrogate the mismatch between school music curricula and students' musical lives; Safety and Resilience in Music Education, in which I explore trauma-informed practice and student strengths; and Advocating for Students, in which I consider how systemic critique and everyday actions can challenge the limitations of traditional educational frameworks.

Racial and Socioeconomic Inequities in Music Education

I vividly recall significant disparities between schools I attended, even though a mandated desegregation plan racially and socioeconomically mixed the student populations; the economic status of each school's neighborhood strongly influenced the

resources and environment students experienced. Schools situated in middle-class neighborhoods felt welcoming and optimistic to me—bright hallways, well-maintained libraries, and teachers who appeared enthusiastic about their work. By contrast, in my view, schools located in lower-income neighborhoods conveyed an oppressive atmosphere, characterized by metal detectors at entrances, cracked floors, and an environment that seemed to me to be focused more on containment than inspiration. What appeared to be stark contrasts aligned with research emphasizing how school infrastructure, teacher expectations, and access to resources meaningfully shape student experiences and academic outcomes (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Kozol, 2001). However, looking back, I realize that these impressions were shaped by my own middle-class background. Research by Destin et al. (2023) emphasized that students' social class backgrounds influence how they perceive and interpret school environments. It is possible that while I felt anxious or alienated in schools that appeared heavily surveilled, other students—particularly those from similar economic conditions—may have felt more at home, familiar with the structures and routines I found unsettling. My experience was not universal, and recognizing that has deepened my awareness of how positionality shapes perception.

As a white student navigating racially and socioeconomically desegregated schools, I lacked the language of critical theory or antiracist pedagogy to articulate what I was witnessing, but I felt the weight of inequality in ways that were deeply emotional. I remember feeling confused and angry—not at the students or even the schools themselves, but at the broader system that treated certain students as disposable. Schools

I attended in middle-class neighborhoods felt safe and full of opportunity to me. Teachers smiled when they greeted students, the hallways were well lit, and classrooms were equipped with working instruments, modern textbooks, and functioning technology. In contrast, schools I attended in lower-income neighborhoods felt guarded and punishing. Walking through metal detectors, seeing broken furniture and peeling paint, I often felt anxious and ashamed, wondering why some students were expected to thrive in spaces designed more for surveillance than for growth.

As I reflected in Chapter 4, I began to understand that my perception of these environments was shaped by my own middle-class background. I interpreted certain conditions as hostile or unjust, while others—particularly students who had grown up in those same environments—may have experienced them differently. Research by Destin et al. (2023) confirms that students' perceptions of school environments vary based on social class. What felt stifling or humiliating to me may have felt familiar, even comforting, to others. Still, I could not shake my early questions: Why did some schools feel like second homes and others like institutions of control? Why were expectations so vastly different between zip codes?

Even as a young student, I sensed there were differences in how teachers treated us. I often felt that my teachers liked me more than some of the Black students in the room, though I couldn't fully explain why. Maybe it was because I did my homework, stayed quiet, or had private piano lessons. Whatever the reason, I noticed that students who looked like me were more frequently praised and encouraged, while many of the Black students—especially boys—were less often called on and more harshly disciplined.

I didn't yet have the words for it, but I felt the imbalance. Those early impressions followed me into teaching. As I began working with students in low-income, racially diverse schools, I found myself challenged to move beyond traditional ideas of achievement. Some students lacked access to instruments or formal training, but brought tremendous musicality, improvisation, and drive. Their successes often went unrecognized by conventional standards, but they made clear to me that what I had once interpreted as deficits were often signs of strength. Over time, I came to understand that my role was not to compensate for what students lacked, but to recognize and nurture the assets they already carried.

Looking back, I now see how the disparities I witnessed in school buildings—polished versus cracked tiles, smiling teachers versus burnt-out ones—mirrored the inequities in how students were treated and assessed. My early sense of injustice helped me recognize that these differences were not just physical, but ideological. As I have grown, so too has my awareness that these systems were not simply broken. In many cases, they were designed to function exactly as they do—to contain, to sort, to reproduce inequality. This realization has reshaped my teaching practice and research, prompting me to redefine what success means in music education and whose success is counted.

It is possible that these differences shaped more than just surface-level experiences; they may have shaped how students saw themselves and the futures they imagined. In more affluent schools, students appeared encouraged to lead, innovate, and pursue dreams. They had access to advanced technology, a variety of extracurricular activities, and teachers who could prioritize individual growth due to smaller class sizes

and greater resources. By contrast, students in underfunded schools often encountered large class sizes, limited opportunities, and lower expectations. Researchers have confirmed that school climate and academic success are strongly influenced by such disparities (Collie et al., 2012; Herman et al., 2017).

My own experience complicates these contrasts. I was fortunate to have teachers who encouraged my leadership and nurtured a belief in my potential. But I now recognize that those opportunities were not randomly assigned. They were shaped by how I was perceived—white, middle-class, compliant, and already trained in music. Many of my Black classmates and those from less economically secure households may not have received the same benefit of the doubt. Their paths were often shaped by implicit bias, lowered expectations, and school environments more focused on discipline than exploration. While it once seemed to me that I had simply found ways to succeed, I now understand that I had been equipped with resources, encouragement, and cultural capital that made that success possible. At home, I was surrounded by the belief that I would go to college, find meaningful work, and have the freedom to make choices about my future. I never questioned whether I would be able to pursue a fulfilling career or choose where I wanted to teach. That sense of possibility—nurtured by family, community, and cultural norms—was a form of privilege that shaped how I interpreted challenges and opportunities in school.

As Kozol (1991) and Ladson-Billings (2006) have documented, schools are not neutral institutions. They are structured in ways that advantage students who reflect dominant norms in behavior, background, and orientation to learning. In hindsight, I can

see how school structures validated my ways of being and learning, while students who navigated school differently were often misunderstood, marginalized, or disciplined. These realizations have reshaped how I understand educational inequity—not just as a gap in funding or access, but as a system that rewards students who already know the rules and penalizes those whose strengths do not align with dominant expectations. It is not just a question of who is given resources, but who is allowed to imagine a future where those resources can lead to real possibility.

Racial tension was always present, even when unspoken. Although I didn't attend affluent, predominantly white schools, I had friends who did and now know adults who work in or send their children there. In these schools, discussions about racial dynamics often felt abstract or detached from lived experience. Yet, in underfunded schools, with mostly Black students, racism was a lived reality that shaped every interaction and opportunity. The schools I attended were unique because they were under a mandated desegregation order, yet this very process heightened awareness of racial tension and bias. In Chapter 4, I described how I grew up witnessing Black and white low-income students being labeled as "troublemakers" or "at risk" by educators who quickly adopted a deficit perspective. These labels weren't just damaging—they became self-fulfilling, shaping how students saw themselves and how others treated them (Lindsey et al., 2010; Yosso, 2005).

Reflecting on this pattern, I have had to confront how I internalized many of the same biases as a student growing up in a system that reinforced racial and class hierarchies. While I excelled academically and found belonging in music, I witnessed

ways in which my peers were discouraged, underestimated, and excluded. In Chapter 4, I described how students—especially those from low-income and Black backgrounds—were often labeled as "troublemakers" or "at risk" by educators who quickly adopted deficit perspectives. These labels were not just harmful; they became self-fulfilling, shaping how students were treated and how they viewed their own potential. Among peers, terms like "ghetto," "white trash," and "rich kid" were not just casual insults. They reflected the social codes that governed our interactions and reinforced an unspoken racial and class order within the school. As someone from a white, middle-class background, I wasn't subjected to the same scrutiny. I was encouraged, praised, and assumed to be capable. That contrast left me with an early, uneasy awareness that school was not the same for all of us—and a lingering sense of guilt that I was given space to grow while others were managed.

This pattern followed me into teaching. As I shared in Chapter 5, I gave piano lessons to students in a low-income neighborhood where I again saw how ability was misread through the lens of access. One student came to lessons with hymns to learn for church, and another asked to work through Broadway melodies by ear. Both students were deeply motivated and musically expressive, but because they lacked formal training and missed lessons due to transportation or cost, they might have been written off in a more traditional music program. I had to check my own assumptions—had I not already begun to recognize the systemic forces at play, I might have mistaken barriers for lack of effort. Those experiences made it clear that inequity was not just structural, but perceptual: who we expect to succeed, and how we define success in the first place, are

shaped by norms that too often mirror whiteness, middle-class values, and formal schooling. Understanding that has changed how I teach, but also how I remember.

I first became aware of how deeply race and socioeconomic markers defined identity during my own school years. The labels students used—"ghetto," "snobby," "hood," "white trash," "rich kid," "poor kid"—were more than just casual descriptors; they carried racial and classed undertones that shaped how we saw each other and ourselves. Friends from lower-income neighborhoods (predominantly Black or white) would talk about their home lives, expressing frustration about absent parents, financial struggles, or limited opportunities. I vividly remember being invited to a sleepover at a friend's house in a nearby neighborhood and sensing my mother's unease about leaving me there. At the time, I didn't understand the hesitation, but I now recognize it as a reflection of racialized and class-based fear—an unspoken belief that certain places, and the people who lived in them, were less safe or less worthy of trust. These moments helped me see how boundaries were drawn and maintained, often quietly, through assumptions tied to whiteness and middle-class norms. These early encounters align with sociological research on how cultural capital and social class shape identity formation in educational settings (Bourdieu, 1984; Yosso, 2005). I wrestled with understanding my place in this dynamic. Coming from a white, middle-class background, I didn't face the same barriers, but I felt a growing sense of guilt when listening to my friends' stories. I could observe inequity from the outside, while for others, it shaped every part of their lives.

That sense of guilt, paired with a deepening awareness of injustice, influenced the

academic and professional decisions I would later make. I never doubted that I would go to college or pursue a career I found meaningful—those possibilities had always been part of my worldview, reinforced by teachers, family members, and the broader culture around me. As I reflected in Chapter 5, even when I first began teaching piano lessons in a lower-income neighborhood, I recognized how easily talent could be misread as disinterest when filtered through assumptions about race and class. By the time I was teaching in majority-Black, under-resourced schools (Chapter 6), I saw those inequities replicated in harsher ways: students who demonstrated musical creativity were often the same ones targeted for discipline or denied access to leadership opportunities. These experiences solidified my commitment to teaching in schools that have been historically marginalized—not as an act of charity, but as a conscious effort to challenge the structures that once made me feel safe while making others feel invisible. My career choices were shaped not only by my love for music, but by an unresolved tension between the opportunities I was given and the exclusion I witnessed others endure.

As I transitioned into teaching, these early observations took on new meaning. Working in underfunded, majority-Black districts, I encountered students who faced the same systemic barriers my peers had described years earlier. Their struggles were not abstract; they were lived realities that shaped every aspect of their education. One particularly devastating moment came when a Black student whom I considered to be "gifted" was forced to drop out of orchestra because their family couldn't afford the instrument rental fee. The look on their face—disappointment mixed with resignation—stayed with me long after that conversation. Looking back now through the lens of

antiracist education and critical theory, I see that my outrage at that moment was rooted not only in empathy but also in the discomfort of recognizing how deeply unequal systems persist.

These moments forced me to confront my own whiteness and middle-class background, and how these informed my understanding of teaching, success, and equity. As I recounted in Chapter 5, my early teaching experiences in a low-SES music studio exposed me to structural barriers that many of my students faced—financial hardship, lack of resources, and the deficit-based assumptions that framed their challenges as personal failings. I initially approached these conditions with a savior mindset, believing it was my role to intervene and "fix" things for my students. But over time, particularly in working with both Black and white students navigating adversity, I began to see that what they needed was not rescuing—they needed teachers and schools willing to dismantle the structures that excluded them. Students who practiced on broken keyboards or traveled hours by bus still showed up. They taught me that resilience is not extraordinary—it is a necessary condition of surviving in a system that withholds opportunity.

Yet exclusion was only part of the problem. I also began to understand that inclusion, when defined on the terms of elite, Eurocentric, classist, or colonialist values, could be equally harmful. In many music programs, students are told they belong only if they conform to narrow standards of excellence rooted in Western classical traditions, academic literacy, and formal training—standards that are deeply racialized and inaccessible to many students. Including students without transforming the culture,

language, or value systems of school music merely reinforces the same hierarchies under a more palatable label. This realization pushed me to shift from a charity mindset to one of critical advocacy, recognizing that the problem was not the students—it was the system and the definitions of success it protects (Bradley, 2006; Hess, 2017; Kallio, 2020; Vaugeois, 2009).

In my classroom, I often encountered resource challenges that reflected broader systemic neglect. Many students did not have access to music stands, rosin, or even functioning instruments. Some practiced at home on electric keyboards or, in some cases, on laminated paper piano diagrams taped to a desk. Families often opted for neon-colored violins from Walmart or Amazon, not because they wanted to, but because traditional rental options were cost-prohibitive. At the time, I saw these conditions as deficits I needed to solve. I made repairs, borrowed equipment, and celebrated each workaround as a success. Over time, however, I began to understand that the issue was not simply that students lacked instruments. The problem was that they were being asked to participate in a system that defined them as lacking the moment they entered it.

This became especially clear in orchestra and traditional piano instruction. These programs, rooted in Eurocentric and middle-class norms, rely on tools, techniques, and forms of literacy that often do not align with my students' musical lives. Students who played by ear or learned songs through online videos were rarely recognized for their musical fluency, while those who struggled with classical notation were labeled as behind. Many of my students entered high school already believing they were not good at music because they had failed earlier classes that required memorizing facts about

Western composers or demonstrating proficiency in staff notation. These assessments were often disconnected from their actual musical skills or interests, yet they shaped students' identities and confidence in lasting ways. I worked hard to include them, but I did not always pause to ask whether the musical forms I was inviting them into reflected their identities or interests.

Still, I want to be transparent about the complexity. I was hired as the orchestra director. I cannot remove the class from the curriculum, nor would doing so address the larger structures that uphold it across the district. Orchestra spans grades 4 through 12 and is supported by longstanding staffing models, scheduling systems, and budgetary priorities. My responsibility is to teach it, so I try to do that in ways that are as inclusive and student-centered as possible. We incorporate electric instruments, play student-selected pieces, and search for repertoire composed by musicians of color. When possible, I adapt the curriculum to reflect the cultural backgrounds and preferences of the students in the room. And, perhaps surprisingly, many students also find joy in performing classical works—music they recognize from movies, television, or commercials. This helps to balance the repertoire and maintain expectations, while also validating their curiosity and sense of accomplishment.

Beyond orchestra, I have seen how student engagement thrives when curriculum structures are more flexible. In my Performing Arts course, students sing, act, choreograph, and direct. They lead scenes, select music that speaks to them, and treat performance as a way to explore and express their identities. In our percussion class, students with no prior experience explore rhythm and ensemble playing in collaborative,

low-pressure environments. These classes don't rely on expensive instruments or years of formal training. They rely on curiosity, joy, and shared ownership. These are not lesser forms of music; in many cases, they are where I witness the most creative and personal growth. These spaces affirm what Yosso (2005) describes as "community cultural wealth"—the assets students already possess, rather than what they are presumed to lack.

Over time, I've come to see that deficit is not a trait, but a construct. My students were never underprepared, they were under-recognized. The issues I once tried to fix were not within the students themselves, but within narrow definitions of what counts as music, who gets to make it, and how that making should look and sound. Even my most sincere efforts—such as removing credit checks for rentals or securing donated violins—still operated under the assumption that orchestra was the gold standard, and everything else was a compromise. That assumption requires interrogation. As Kendi (2019) argues, antiracist work demands more than good intentions. It requires a willingness to critique the very systems we trust, including those embedded in our own curriculum and professional roles.

Orchestra will likely remain part of my teaching load, but it no longer defines my understanding of what matters most in music education. I continue to advocate for students who want to pursue it and celebrate their successes within it. But I now recognize that simply making orchestra more accessible does not resolve the deeper cultural and structural misalignments at its core. Even my best efforts, such as incorporating electric instruments, diverse composers, or flexible repertoire, operate within a system that continues to center Eurocentric values. In that sense, my adaptations

may have offered relief but not transformation.

If I were to imagine a program that truly advantaged students from low SES backgrounds, it would likely look very different. A fully integrated musical theater course, offered during the school day and treated with the same institutional legitimacy as orchestra, might serve as a better foundation. A hip hop or beat-making program rooted in students' cultural identities could offer another meaningful pathway. These ideas are not yet fully realized in my current setting, but they represent the direction I hope to grow toward. What I have built so far reflects sincere effort, but also carries limitations that I continue to confront. This dissertation is not a celebration of solved problems. It is a record of ongoing struggle, a reflection on how my work as a teacher has shifted, and how it still needs to shift in pursuit of something more just, more relevant, and more fully shaped by the students I serve.

Cultural Diversity and the Pedagogical Disconnect

Growing up, I frequently experienced a disconnect between what my music teachers taught and the musical experiences that shaped my everyday life. School curricula prominently featured European classical composers such as Beethoven and Brahms, while the music I loved, including hip-hop, R&B, and musical theater, was notably absent. In sixth grade, when I performed a piano concerto with the school orchestra, I assumed many of my peers also enjoyed classical repertoire. Otherwise, why would they participate? Only later did I begin to question that assumption. Participation in school music programs often has little to do with valuing the repertoire itself. Students may join because their friends are involved, because they enjoy the teacher, or because

they perceive participation, however mistakenly, as a form of social advancement. Looking back, I see how orchestra, like other elite music forms, was framed as a culturally uplifting experience. That framing, though subtle, reflected a broader narrative: that aligning with whiteness, particularly elite and institutionally sanctioned whiteness, was a sign of progress (Bradley, 2006).

Reflecting on this now, as a white, middle-class teacher in predominantly Black schools, I better understand how my early conceptions of music education were shaped by a narrow and stratified view of culture. I once accepted these traditions as neutral, but I now recognize that they are not culturally universal. They are rooted in elite whiteness, a form of cultural capital that privileges specific aesthetic values, behavioral norms, and modes of learning. Yet even within whiteness, there are hierarchies. Terms like "poor white trash" expose the ways that whiteness can be deemed inadequate or transgressive, suggesting that not all white identities carry equal cultural power. If there is an unacceptable form of whiteness, there must also be one that is upheld as the ideal: refined, educated, compliant, and affluent. These were the markers embedded in my own music education and, for a long time, the standards I unknowingly reproduced.

In my early teaching experiences, these same curricular disconnects became glaringly evident. Initially, I selected familiar music—American folk songs, classical compositions, and standard choral literature—assuming these represented the appropriate repertoire for educational settings. When students resisted by groaning, joking, disengaging, or flatly asking, "Why do we have to sing this?", I first interpreted their responses as behavioral problems or disrespect. With time, guided by engagement with

culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), I came to view their reactions not as acts of defiance, but as legitimate critiques of a curriculum disconnected from their lived cultural realities.

One vivid example from middle school highlights this issue. In my seventh-grade general music class, several classmates enthusiastically discussed their favorite hip-hop lyrics from artists like Tupac and Biggie. They deeply appreciated the music's rhythm, storytelling, and emotional resonance, though they might not have articulated it in academic terms. Hip-hop was rarely, if ever, represented in our school curriculum. Enthusiastically, these classmates approached our teacher—a white, older male—and asked why hip-hop was not included in our studies. His visibly appalled dismissal, stating bluntly, "That's not real music; it's not relevant here," instantly silenced the room. His reaction underscored broader systemic issues identified by scholars such as Alim (2009) and Love (2019) in the curricular marginalization of Black cultural expressions. Students internalized the harmful idea that music representing their experiences and cultural identities was inferior and undeserving of academic recognition. This memory profoundly shaped my understanding of the stakes involved in curricular choices, and it echoed again years later when one of my own students asked, "Why are we learning about some dead white guy when we could be making our own music?" That moment confirmed how these exclusionary messages persist, and how curricular decisions continue to signal whose culture matters and whose does not.

As a teacher, I later found myself replicating some of the same exclusionary dynamics I had witnessed as a student, despite my efforts to do better. Early in my career,

I taught a sixth-grade general music class where I asked students to analyze a piece by Mozart, complete with staff notation worksheets and vocabulary quizzes. I believed I was setting high expectations, but many students quickly lost interest, and some openly asked when we would get to study music they actually listened to. At the time, I brushed off their comments, telling myself that exposure to classical music was important and that they would appreciate it eventually. What I failed to see was that my teaching communicated something much deeper—that their own musical knowledge, rooted in community, popular culture, and family traditions, did not belong in the classroom. My approach may have looked rigorous, but it reinforced the same cultural hierarchy I had internalized as a student. Over time, I began to see that this disconnect had more to do with pedagogy and power than with individual effort. I had to unlearn the idea that high standards meant replicating the models I was raised with, and instead start designing learning experiences that honored students' identities, voices, and cultural ways of knowing.

The disconnect with the curriculum quickly became evident through student disengagement. Students mocked the outdated lyrics or found amusement in terms they found childish or culturally distant, such as "gay," "pussycat," or rhythmic syllables like "ti-ti." Their mild amusement quickly evolved into active resistance, classroom disruptions, and my escalating frustration. This dynamic highlighted how the prescribed curriculum failed not only pedagogically but culturally, necessitating a significant reconsideration of my teaching approach. I recall one early attempt where I tried to follow a scripted lesson from the 7th grade general music curriculum, complete with

printed packets and vocabulary drills. The lesson felt lifeless even as I introduced it, and students quickly became restless. Several pushed the packets aside without opening them, others began tapping beats on their desks or creating call-and-response rhythms unrelated to the assigned material. I initially viewed their behavior as defiant, but I later realized they were creating their own musical engagement in response to a curriculum that felt disconnected and dull. Their resistance was not apathy; it was a demand for relevance, authenticity, and participation in a learning space that respected their identities.

Acknowledging this pedagogical gap, I sought strategies to authentically integrate culturally relevant materials without tokenizing or trivializing them. Unknowingly guided by principles subsequently outlined by Paris and Alim (2014), I began to reflect on whether the skills I had prioritized, such as reading standard rhythmic notation, performing fixed rhythmic patterns, and analyzing lyrics through a formal academic lens, truly connected with my students' experiences and ways of knowing. These Eurocentric frameworks, embedded in the required curriculum, often privileged formal training and Western conventions over creativity, improvisation, and cultural relevance. Rather than abandoning the standards, I reimagined how they could be taught. I developed lessons using hip-hop to meet required learning goals in rhythm, form, and analysis, featuring artists whose work offered rich content for critical engagement. This shift immediately transformed classroom dynamics. Previously disengaged students began actively participating, proudly sharing analyses of Kanye West's songs or unpacking metaphors in Snoop Dogg's lyrics. One student who had struggled in traditional music units suddenly became one of the most vocal contributors, drawing connections between the rhyme

schemes in “Jesus Walks” and the rhythmic structures we had studied earlier in the year. Their enthusiasm spilled over into conversations outside of class, and for the first time, they asked if they could stay after school to work on a project. These interactions demonstrated that meeting curricular standards did not require abandoning students’ musical identities. Instead, it required making space for those identities within the learning environment.

Integrating culturally relevant materials also foregrounded systemic challenges within school administration and policy frameworks. In one instance, high school theater students passionately advocated for performing the musical *Avenue Q*, which is known for mature content. Working collaboratively, students and I spent considerable time modifying certain parts of scripts and lyrics to ensure appropriateness for the school environment while retaining the integrity and humor of the original show. Despite our conscientious efforts, administrators, upon learning about the show's content, threatened to shut it down entirely, even suggesting disciplinary action against me. Although ultimately allowed after extensive negotiation, the administration’s initial resistance highlighted the rigidity and biases embedded in the educational system, emphasizing significant institutional barriers educators face in promoting culturally relevant, student-driven curriculum.

Despite these external challenges, the benefits of adopting culturally sustaining pedagogy were profound. In many areas of my teaching, especially in Performing Arts and percussion, the classroom evolved into a space of empowerment, creativity, and genuine cultural representation. Students enthusiastically volunteered to lead,

choreograph, remix arrangements, and suggest repertoire that reflected their cultural backgrounds. These musical practices were not gimmicks to enhance superficial engagement; they represented legitimate musical rigor deeply connected to community traditions. In orchestra, however, the path was more complicated. Although I made efforts to incorporate student-selected repertoire, electric instruments, and composers of color, the ensemble's structure remained largely defined by Eurocentric expectations. Participation still required expensive instruments, alignment with Western notation, and performance of music often disconnected from students' lived experiences. These limitations were not easily resolved. They reflected the deeper issue: the pedagogical disconnect was never rooted in students' alleged deficits, but in a system that consistently privileges Eurocentric norms as the default. In this context, culturally sustaining pedagogy became less about adding representation and more about resisting the structural forces that shape what and who music education is designed to serve.

Yet, my journey toward culturally responsive teaching was neither linear nor uncomplicated. One particularly troubling interaction occurred when I suggested to a talented Black student—who had achieved success in local poetry slams—that they present a Shakespeare monologue in the style of "Black poetry." My intention, though rooted in an appreciation for the literary traditions of poets such as Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, was poorly articulated and lacked the clarity and care such a suggestion required. The phrasing came across as reductive and stereotypical, and the student was hurt and confused. The incident resulted in a formal administrative meeting and prompted serious reflection on my part. This experience underscored the critical difference between

intention and impact. It reminded me that cultural sensitivity is not just about content, but about language, positionality, and humility. As a white educator in a predominantly Black school, I needed to become far more attentive to how even well-meaning ideas could reinforce harm when communicated without deep critical thought.

This incident stressed a crucial responsibility in my work: consistently reflecting on how my racial and cultural identity shapes my interactions, curricular decisions, and classroom dynamics. Recognizing the potential for unintended harm required ongoing vigilance and humility. Rather than assuming the role of cultural authority, my practice evolved into a more collaborative and reflexive approach, where students became co-creators and knowledge holders. These culturally responsive shifts took shape most fully in my elementary general music and high school performing arts classes. In these spaces, students were encouraged to improvise, experiment with beat-making, build vocal layers, and create original arrangements. These approaches allowed students to bring their full selves into the classroom, turning music-making into a collective and affirming experience. In orchestra, however, the possibilities remained more constrained. Although I incorporated student-selected repertoire, electric instruments, and composers of color, the ensemble continued to rely on Western notation, formal technique, and instruments that many students did not use outside of school. The work of cultural responsiveness looked different across these settings, but in all of them, I learned to prioritize student voice, cultural awareness, and ongoing critical reflection as central to my role as an educator.

The impact extended beyond my classroom. Parents and guardians frequently expressed appreciation for seeing their children's identities genuinely celebrated. After one musical performance, an audience member offered to call the superintendent to share a glowing review, reinforcing that the work we were doing mattered beyond the stage. In another instance, after a student successfully auditioned for a prestigious summer intensive in New York City, their family and community rallied around them, raising money so they could attend. The student returned with renewed purpose, inspired by both the experience and the support that made it possible. Students often made personal comments after performances, leaving notes on my desk or lingering backstage to say things like, "This is the first time I felt like I could really be myself," or, "I never thought I'd be able to do something like this." These moments signaled a deeper shift—students began speaking more openly about their dreams and sharing reflections that revealed increased confidence and pride. Culturally sustaining practices were not just about classroom engagement; they fundamentally shaped how students saw themselves and what they believed was possible.

Reflecting on these experiences, I now understand that culturally sustaining pedagogy is not merely about diversifying repertoire. It requires shifting institutional norms to meaningfully recognize the musical and cultural identities students bring to the classroom as valid, complex, and worthy of deep engagement. Embracing this philosophy has meant questioning the systems that once affirmed my own educational experiences while marginalizing those of my students. This work remains unfinished. I still grapple with how to navigate the constraints of ensemble traditions like orchestra, where student

agency is often limited by preexisting structures and expectations. I continue to examine how my own cultural values show up in classroom management, assessment practices, and even in the genres I instinctively consider "worth teaching." Through ongoing reflection and adaptation, my teaching aims to center students' voices, affirm their identities, and expand shared understandings of what constitutes meaningful and rigorous music education—not as a fixed destination, but as a continuing process of unlearning and rebuilding. As Paris and Alim (2017) argued, sustaining students' cultural ways of being requires both pedagogical innovation and a sustained challenge to the institutional structures that have historically devalued them.

Safety and Resilience in Music Education

Safety and resilience were recurring themes throughout my educational and musical journey, shaping how I approach my work as an educator. My early experiences attending desegregated schools gave me a firsthand understanding of how school environments can simultaneously offer opportunities and create challenges. Walking through metal detectors every morning was a ritual meant to ensure safety, yet it left me questioning the assumptions behind such measures. I vividly recall thinking, "Why do they think we're a threat? We're just kids coming to school." A friend once muttered, "Feels more like jail than school." These moments stayed with me, influencing my belief that both physical and emotional safety are crucial for learning. Research suggests that security measures, though intended for safety, can also contribute to feelings of criminalization and mistrust, particularly in schools serving low-income students of color (Hirschfield, 2018; Kupchik, 2016).

The physical environment itself sent clear messages about student worth. Aikens and Barbarin (2008) found that deteriorating school conditions, such as dim lighting, broken furniture, and outdated materials, not only impact learning but also influence students' self-perception and motivation. Reflecting on my intermediate school, I recall how neglected spaces seemed to silently communicate what was deemed "good enough" for us. It was difficult not to internalize that neglect as a reflection of low expectations or a lack of care. At the same time, I wondered if students who grew up in lower-income housing were so accustomed to these conditions at home that they didn't even notice anything wrong at school. This unsettling thought reinforced my understanding of how profoundly school environments influence students' confidence, creativity, and sense of possibility.

These early observations planted the seed for my desire to become an educator who would counteract these negative messages and create a space where students felt valued and capable. I didn't just want to teach music—I wanted to build something that made students feel seen and inspired, regardless of what happened outside the classroom. My experiences drove me toward a career aimed at addressing systemic inequities I witnessed growing up. This awareness continues to guide my work as I strive to create an environment where students feel empowered to redefine success on their own terms.

As a teacher, I carried these lessons with me, determined to ensure every student felt valued. Many arrived burdened by challenges such as food insecurity, family instability, and exposure to violence—daily realities that shaped their capacity to engage in school. One middle school student once confided, "I can't keep my eyes open because

I was up all night helping my mom with my baby brother." Their words reminded me of classmates from my own childhood, many of whom assumed adult responsibilities long before their socioeconomically privileged peers. While these early responsibilities were often framed as hardship, they also reflected a kind of maturity, compassion, and familial commitment that schools rarely acknowledged as strengths. I recall an elementary student who wore the same ripped hoodie and stained shirt for two weeks, prompting me to quietly involve the school social worker to help coordinate support. In high school, students regularly shared experiences of violence or neglect at home, leading me to keep a list of emergency contacts and child welfare resources at my desk, ready for immediate use. These encounters emphasized the importance of creating a classroom environment that prioritized safety, stability, and affirmation, not just instruction.

Trauma was an ever-present reality in my students' lives, frequently misinterpreted by educators as defiance or disengagement. Research confirms that students in low socioeconomic communities experience significant trauma stemming from systemic inequities, food insecurity, and exposure to violence, all of which shape their behavior and ability to engage in school (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Herman et al., 2017). Too often, these trauma responses are mistaken for misbehavior, reinforcing punitive disciplinary structures instead of addressing underlying causes. One student who regularly slammed his music book shut and pushed around desks in frustration later revealed he was struggling with recent violence at home: "I just can't think straight and I don't care about this right now," he admitted. Rather than reprimanding him, I gave him space, reassured him that his seat and music would be waiting when he felt ready, and

followed up with a conversation affirming that his feelings were valid. These moments showed me the necessity of replacing punishment with understanding. My goal became to create classrooms where students—many of whom carried the weight of instability, grief, and violence—could begin to trust that school was a space of care, not surveillance. Over time, I saw this approach reduce emotional outbursts and foster deeper engagement, affirming what I had come to believe: music education, approached with trauma-informed care, could provide a vital space for healing and connection.

My teaching practice evolved through consistently navigating harsh realities shaped by intersecting impacts of classism and racism. Students often confided unimaginable pain, revealing struggles with suicide attempts, self-harm, witnessing drive-by shootings, murders, and other profound traumas. The deaths of peers and students reverberated through our classrooms, inflicting collective grief. A particularly devastating event was a shooting at a home football game, starkly illustrating that no place, not even school, was immune to violence. Students from high-violence neighborhoods often exhibited hypervigilance, a heightened stress response hindering their academic focus (Benedict, 2006).

My personal experiences with distress, loss, grief, and fear intertwined deeply with my professional role, shaping my empathetic approach to teaching. Trauma was not only something students brought into the classroom—it became something I lived alongside them. I have lost students to cancer, drugs, street violence, and suicide. I have feared for my own safety during classroom incidents and school events, including a shooting that erupted during a home football game. I have broken up fights, heard

disclosures of abuse, and witnessed how poverty and violence shaped my students' daily lives. Over time, I found myself emotionally exhausted and increasingly desensitized to behaviors like fistfights, profanity, and sexualized comments. These were not isolated events, but manifestations of chronic stress adaptation. Research confirms that educators working in high-trauma environments can experience secondary traumatic stress, a condition that mirrors the emotional effects of trauma exposure even when not directly victimized (Hydon et al., 2015). My experiences affirmed that trauma-informed education must include not only students' well-being, but also the emotional health and sustainability of those who teach them.

There were moments when tragedy hung heavily in classrooms—a student arrested mid-day, another mourning a family member's murder, or coping with classmates' deaths. Maintaining routine amid such trauma was challenging yet expected. These experiences underscored the critical need for compassionate, trauma-informed teaching, especially in communities disproportionately affected by poverty and systemic neglect. Research consistently shows that children living in poverty are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including exposure to violence, chronic stress, and grief, all of which significantly impact their ability to learn and self-regulate (Perfect et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006). One student broke down in tears during a quiet rehearsal, explaining that they had lost a friend and neighbor to gun violence the night before and had not slept. Another student, typically quiet and withdrawn, delivered a powerful monologue during a musical theater rehearsal and later told me, "That's the only time I didn't feel angry all day." These moments revealed the

emotional depth students carried and the power of music as a channel for processing that pain. In response, I sought to transform my classroom into a refuge—a space where students could express both vulnerability and strength. Music education became not just about technical skill development, but about honoring the emotional lives of students, offering rhythm, voice, and movement as tools for healing, connection, and resilience.

Reflecting on these experiences highlighted the necessity of advocacy beyond individual classrooms. When music programs faced cuts, I presented passionate arguments to the school administration, emphasizing music's profound impact on student identity, expression, and well-being. As a department chair, I raised concerns about staffing shortages, inequitable funding, and growing class sizes—systemic issues that threatened the continuity and quality of our offerings. But advocacy, I came to realize, had to extend beyond preservation toward transformation.

For students living in poverty, music education offers more than just artistic exposure; it can foster healing, agency, and community. I recall one orchestra student who, despite rarely speaking in class, shared a cello motif from a popular song that reminded them of their father leaving. Another classmate quietly connected the piece to the loss of their uncle, revealing grief that they had previously kept silent. The rehearsal space that day became a sanctuary of shared emotion and unspoken solidarity. In a different context, a student who struggled academically found new confidence performing their own rhythm-based arrangement in our elementary orchestra class, demonstrating leadership and inspiring their peers to follow along. These moments helped me understand that music could serve as a mirror and a bridge: reflecting students'

lived experiences while connecting them to one another.

Even within the limitations of orchestra, there have been powerful successes. Dennis, an elementary orchestra student who struggled socially and musically, stayed involved in music through high school and now volunteers directing school musicals as a history teacher—his love of music having endured even without a formal career in it. Other students told me they still had their old concert programs, some over 20 years old—evidence that these experiences held lasting meaning. While only one former student became a professional musician, many others discovered a lifelong appreciation for music, gained friendships, or found a creative outlet that allowed them to feel seen.

Still, I have come to question what exactly orchestra offers young people in high-poverty contexts—and what it may inadvertently exclude. The cost of participation, both financially and culturally, often renders the experience inaccessible or irrelevant unless reimagined. I now understand that resilience, while admirable, should not be the price of entry into music education. My students deserve programs built around their strengths and interests, not adaptations of systems never designed with them in mind. That realization led to the addition of classes like Performing Arts and Percussion, where students with no formal training could explore musical creativity freely and collaboratively. These classes thrived, with students taking ownership of repertoire and performance design. Their excitement and sense of belonging revealed what orchestra alone could not always provide.

Ultimately, these realities reinforced my commitment to an education grounded in cultural awareness, trauma-informed care, and systemic equity. My students' ability to

persist in the face of structural barriers has reshaped my educational philosophy. As Paris and Alim (2017) assert, culturally sustaining pedagogy is not simply about inclusion, but about affirming and sustaining students' identities through their education. Music education, when approached with this mindset, becomes not just a place to learn technique, but a space for belonging, resistance, and transformation. It is this vision that now guides my work: not to fit students into traditional music education, but to co-create systems where they already belong.

Advocating for Students

Advocacy in music education takes many forms, each important to preserving and enriching the role of music in schools. Traditionally, advocacy efforts have focused on promoting music's value to the public and securing its continued inclusion in school curricula—a critical and ongoing effort, particularly in under-resourced districts (Koza, 2006; Abril & Gault, 2008). Equally important, however, is advocacy on behalf of students *within* music education. This form of advocacy is not about defending music education uncritically, but about interrogating its structures and reimagining how it can serve students more justly. It involves challenging deficit narratives and systemic barriers while recognizing and amplifying students' strengths, cultural identities, and creative voices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Bradley, 2015).

Growing up and working in environments where music education was consistently positioned as inherently good, I too often assumed its value without critique. But as I have come to see, music education—particularly in its traditional, Eurocentric forms—can exclude, alienate, or reproduce inequity, even when intentions are positive.

The existence of alumni who return to rehearse, perform, and support our current students through initiatives like our school music foundation demonstrates music's potential to build lasting community. These relationships reflect music education at its best: culturally responsive, emotionally supportive, and grounded in care. However, that outcome is not automatic. It requires intentional effort to ensure that music education is not just preserved, but transformed. This dissertation has been, in part, a reflection on that process—how student-centered advocacy must include not only celebration, but critique. Imagining a more equitable vision for music education requires asking not only *how* we advocate, but *what* we are advocating for, and for whom.

Throughout my teaching career, I've found that effective advocacy begins with understanding and valuing the cultural and musical assets students already possess. Many arrived in my classes with background knowledge and musical expertise in genres traditionally undervalued in formal music education. For instance, middle school general music curricula centered around classical composers such as Mahler and Berlioz frequently failed to engage students, whereas they became deeply invested when working with music familiar to their cultural backgrounds. Similarly, elementary orchestra students often found method book exercises and songs disconnected from their experiences. Yet when provided melodies from video games, hip-hop, or R&B, they exhibited increased enthusiasm and confidence in their instruments. Many students demonstrated existing expertise in beat-making and music production—skills that involve rhythmic precision, layering, and sophisticated musical form differing from traditional staff notation. Recognizing and affirming these talents as valid forms of musicianship

significantly enhanced their engagement and learning.

In high school choir, traditional choral repertoire often failed to resonate. However, introducing gospel, R&B, and contemporary musical theater dramatically improved student engagement. One previously disengaged student emerged as a vocal leader when performing gospel music, showcasing talents not reflected in standard assessments. These instances emphasized the necessity of integrating culturally relevant music to validate students' musical identities and artistic capabilities. Advocacy became a means of reimagining music education as a space where students felt seen, valued, and empowered. Still, not all areas of music education lent themselves as easily to these shifts.

While traditional orchestra models sometimes seemed exclusionary, I discovered they could effectively engage students by fostering resilience, collaboration, and self-expression (Dyndahl et al., 2014). By incorporating culturally relevant elements such as call-and-response phrasing, improvisation, electric instruments, and groove-based playing, students felt their musical identities were validated within the ensemble. However, persistent systemic inequities in funding and curriculum frequently limited these inclusive practices, reinforcing the need for advocacy efforts to challenge restrictive educational norms and secure essential resources.

Advocacy efforts must extend beyond financial support to include intentional strategies for fostering equity, belonging, and personal growth through music education. Dennis, a white fifth-grade student, lived very modestly—likely in poverty—and struggled with practicing regularly and connecting socially. He was quiet, self-conscious

about a lisp, and often unsure of how to engage with peers. Recognizing both his musical potential and his need for social inclusion, I invited student volunteers to try the viola to help build up that section and create new opportunities for collaboration. This allowed Dennis to contribute uniquely to the ensemble and begin forming meaningful peer relationships. Over the years, I witnessed his transformation: he became more confident, well spoken, and musically accomplished. He volunteered to introduce concert pieces, earned orchestra solos, and landed leading roles in school musicals—public performances that once would have overwhelmed him. Dennis eventually pursued a degree in education and now teaches in the same school he once attended, giving back to the community that raised him and earning professional recognition for his work. His journey illustrates the power of asset-based advocacy in music education—recognizing and nurturing students' potential, even when they face economic hardship and social challenges (Yosso, 2005; Milner, 2010).

Dennis' journey underscores the importance of recognizing and building upon the personal strengths students already bring with them. Though quiet and socially hesitant in his early years, Dennis showed a kind of quiet resolve and independence that set him apart. Perhaps shaped by years of being underestimated or even bullied, he developed an ability to tune out the opinions of others and focus intently on what mattered to him. He didn't seek validation; he simply participated with sincerity and persistence. That quality—his willingness to go for it regardless of what others thought—became one of his greatest strengths. Music education did not create this confidence, but it offered a space where it could flourish. Whether learning the viola, stepping into solo roles, or

speaking in front of peers, Dennis brought authenticity and courage to each new experience. His growth was not the product of music instruction alone, but of a student whose internal drive and character allowed him to make the most of what music education had to offer. His story reminds me that music programs do not transform students on their own; they create opportunities for students like Dennis to bring their full selves into spaces where they can be seen, heard, and valued.

Advocating for students required constant curricular adaptation, involving significant time spent modifying resources and developing culturally relevant, engaging activities. Lessons integrating movement, humor, and student-driven exploration created an environment where students eagerly shared their interests and musical expertise. Research confirms that cultural representation in education significantly increases student motivation and engagement (Glenn, 2021; Hess, 2021). Encouraging students to have autonomy within the class and introduce their favorite songs, dances, or instrumental skills fostered a balanced, student-centered environment—what I termed "organized chaos"—where meaningful engagement and essential skills flourished. Their voices and preferences were recognized and respected.

A significant indicator of student investment was their collective self-regulation of classroom behavior. Disruptions were often handled by peers motivated to preserve our mutual culture of respect and active engagement. Studies confirm that student ownership of learning environments positively influences behavior and social responsibility (Zyngier, 2011). This collaborative culture represented advocacy in action, emphasizing student empowerment, respect, and agency.

Navigating diverse educational contexts further emphasized the necessity for culturally responsive practices. At Thornberry Elementary, historically low engagement highlighted the need for culturally relevant, experiential learning (Lind & McKoy, 2016). I advocated for my students by introducing culturally connected activities like "Pizza, Pizza, Daddy-O," the "Boom Snap Clap" handshake game, and the "Nutcracker Cup Game," I transformed passive instruction into dynamic, invested participation.

Advocacy in music education also involves challenging systemic barriers that limit student participation and belonging. During my collegiate training, I encountered an idealized version of music teaching that often failed to acknowledge the constraints and cultural realities of under-resourced schools. Traditional materials drawn from the Kodály approach—such as rhythm syllables, hand signs, and rhymes like *Naughty Pussycat*, *Queen Caroline*, and *Hot Cross Buns*—were presented as universally developmentally appropriate and pedagogically sound. However, in practice, these songs often failed to resonate with my students. *Naughty Pussycat*, for example, elicited giggles and discomfort from upper elementary students due to its language, particularly the term "pussycat," which held different connotations in their peer culture. *Queen Caroline* introduced a character and setting—British royalty and courtly behavior—that felt completely removed from their lived experience, and whose reverence seemed out of place in classrooms shaped by economic struggle and cultural complexity. Even *Hot Cross Buns*, a staple used to teach melodic contour and introductory keyboard or recorder skills, confused many students unfamiliar with the pastry or the concept of paying "one a penny, two a penny." These songs often prompted laughter, blank stares, or outright

resistance—not because students were disengaged from music, but because they were disengaged from materials that failed to reflect their worlds.

Beyond the lyrics themselves, the Kodály framework's emphasis on tonal solfège, Eurocentric folk material, and structured melodic repetition often clashed with students' musical instincts and lived experiences. Many students entered my classroom already fluent in rhythmically complex, improvisatory traditions such as gospel, hip-hop, or R&B. The curriculum's lack of acknowledgment of these genres not only limited engagement but implicitly framed those musical forms as less valid. These experiences reinforced the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy—one that affirms students' identities, knowledge, and creativity as central to instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Kelly-McHale, 2013). Curricula that rely heavily on unadapted European folk material risk perpetuating cultural hierarchies and exclusion (Bradley, 2012; Koza, 2010). Effective advocacy must include critical reflection on the assumptions embedded in traditional methodologies and a willingness to reimagine foundational approaches in ways that are responsive to the communities we serve.

Reflecting deeply, I recognize advocacy requires systemic critique alongside practical action. Policy change is essential, yet meaningful advocacy also occurs through everyday interactions—by validating student strengths, integrating culturally relevant pedagogy, and fostering trusting, creative environments. Music educators can dismantle barriers and cultivate inclusive spaces, enabling all students to thrive and redefine educational success.

My Journey as a Critical Educator

Reflecting on my journey as an educator, this autoethnography has illuminated my progression from questioning social inequities as a student to intentionally developing practices rooted in critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist teaching. My understanding of these frameworks was shaped not only by professional experiences but also by my personal history. Growing up in a middle-class, white neighborhood while maintaining close friendships with families in low-income white and Black communities allowed me to witness stark disparities in educational access and expectations. These early experiences fueled my commitment to addressing social injustices in music education, even before I possessed the language to articulate my observations.

Long before encountering Regelski's concept of critical praxis, I grappled with questions about fairness, equity, and power dynamics in education. As a student, I noticed how deficit perspectives framed peers from different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds as "less than," and observed how systemic structures marginalized those who did not conform to dominant cultural norms. Talented peers were labeled troublemakers or disregarded simply because they did not fit the expectations of an inequitable educational system. Later, during my university education, I encountered teaching materials and methods that felt disconnected from the diverse classrooms I aspired to serve. Initially, I trusted my training and adhered to the prescribed methods, even when the materials seemed culturally irrelevant. However, classroom experiences quickly demonstrated the limitations of these approaches. Hess (2021) critiqued traditional Western-based music education for alienating students from diverse

backgrounds by prioritizing Eurocentric repertoire and epistemologies, often overlooking students' lived musical experiences. My early teaching years confirmed Hess's observations, as students disengaged when faced with curricula disconnected from their cultural realities. These critical moments compelled deep reflection on how traditional educational approaches inadequately served racially and socioeconomically diverse student populations. I realized that these standardized methods ignored the cultural richness and diversity—valuable assets—that students brought into the classroom.

Over time, my teaching evolved to celebrate the cultural knowledge and lived experiences of my students. An impactful moment occurred during my early years teaching middle school music, when students frequently questioned the relevance of classical composers. Their frustrations mirrored my own seventh-grade experience, when a music teacher dismissed hip-hop as “not real music.” Remembering the pain of that cultural erasure, I committed to incorporating students’ musical realities—such as gospel, jazz, hip-hop, and rhythm-based traditions—into our lessons. These genres did not replace the formal curriculum entirely, but they were thoughtfully included alongside traditional repertoire to reflect a broader range of musical expression. This intentional inclusion helped create a more inclusive and validating classroom environment. The shift also transformed my identity as an educator; I moved from viewing resilience merely as a response to systemic inequities, to recognizing it as a meaningful strength worthy of acknowledgment and celebration. My role evolved from content deliverer to co-creator of relevant and affirming learning experiences, in partnership with my students.

Yosso (2005) emphasized that students bring diverse forms of cultural capital,

including linguistic, familial, and aspirational assets, into the educational space. Rather than focusing on students' deficits, I intentionally centered and amplified their strengths. This asset-based perspective reshaped my classroom dynamics. One student initially struggled with traditional sheet music but excelled through improvisation exercises inspired by hip-hop. Their compelling bassline energized the entire class, shifting the dynamic from passive learning to active co-creation. This change highlighted how students could lead and showcase their expertise, fundamentally altering classroom interactions.

Critical theory provided a necessary lens to understand how music education often perpetuated systemic hierarchies that marginalized students whose cultural expressions differed from dominant norms. Culturally sustaining pedagogy and antiracist teaching practices offered pathways to challenge these hierarchies, centering students' voices and contributions. Before fully grasping critical praxis, I considered my efforts reflective teaching or practical problem-solving with purpose, aligning my practices with values rooted in equity. Bates (2021) warned against merely celebrating student resilience without addressing the systemic barriers necessitating such resilience. Engaging deeply with Bates's scholarship during my doctoral studies, coupled with direct mentorship, significantly shaped my understanding of systemic inequities within music education. This engagement prompted me to redefine success beyond traditional academic benchmarks, prioritizing student agency, creativity, and empowerment instead.

Implementing culturally sustaining principles helped bridge the gap between prescribed curricula and students' lived realities. I began supplementing traditional

repertoire with spirituals, gospel, jazz, and African music, reflecting students' personal and cultural identities. Although I encountered Paris and Alim's (2017) framework years into my teaching, their concept of sustaining cultural identities resonated deeply with my evolving practice. In high school choir, introducing a "cabaret night" allowed students to choose songs personally meaningful to them, drastically improving engagement. One academically struggling student notably gained significant confidence through their performance, later expressing profound appreciation for being authentically seen within the educational environment.

Antiracist pedagogy required continuous reflection on my positionality as a white educator in predominantly Black schools. Bradley (2012) emphasized the importance of explicitly addressing race and power dynamics in music education, cautioning that avoidance reinforces systemic inequities. I critically examined my language, curriculum, and instructional choices, ensuring they affirmed rather than erased student identities. Love (2019) highlighted how well-intentioned educators can inadvertently reinforce biases through assumptions about student identities. This insight resonated powerfully when a student misunderstood my suggestion to present a Shakespeare monologue through her style from poetry slam competitions. My intention was affirming her talent, but she perceived it as prescriptive, highlighting my misunderstanding and prompting deeper introspection regarding communication, trust-building, and positionality.

Through this reflective process, I reconceptualized success in music education beyond technical proficiency or Western classical alignment. Success became about fostering spaces that celebrated students' cultural identities, creativity, and resilience.

Milner (2010) similarly emphasized diverse expressions of learning and creativity as measures of success. An elementary orchestra student previously challenged by traditional notation thrived during a hip-hop-inspired rhythmic activity, demonstrating significant leadership and musical confidence. This experience underscored the necessity of recognizing students' musical strengths rather than imposing singular definitions of achievement.

Ultimately, prioritizing cultural identity, creativity, and connection challenged conventional norms within music education, shifting emphasis from rigid standards to holistic understandings of student success. The analysis highlights the critical need for inclusive spaces empowering all students. Integrating culturally relevant practices significantly enhanced student engagement, revealing the limitations of elite Eurocentric curricula in diverse educational contexts. This exploration highlights the essential role of asset-based educational approaches, affirming students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences as foundational to authentic and meaningful success.

To clearly summarize the findings from this critical analysis, the following table outlines key themes that emerged from this study, illustrating how shifts in pedagogy, curriculum, and advocacy contribute to a more inclusive and equitable music education framework.

Table 1: Findings

Key Finding	Description	Supporting Evidence
Racial and Socioeconomic Inequities Influence Educational Outcomes	Systemic disparities significantly affect students' educational experiences, confidence, and perceptions of opportunity.	Contrasts observed between affluent and lower-income schools' resources and expectations. Examples include metal detectors in low SES schools, deteriorating classrooms, and stigmatized reputations negatively impacting student self-esteem.
Cultural Relevance Enhances Engagement	Integrating students' cultural knowledge and musical traditions significantly increases their engagement and deeper learning.	Engagement soared when lessons included culturally relevant materials such as hip-hop, gospel, and contemporary music. Elementary students showed enthusiasm for pieces like video game themes and pop music; high school students participated actively in "cabaret night," highlighting their cultural backgrounds through music.
Traditional Curricula Create Barriers	Standardized, elite Eurocentric curricula often alienate students from diverse backgrounds, reducing participation and investment.	Student disengagement was common with imposed classical curricula. For example, middle school students rejected Mahler, Berlioz, and inappropriate folk songs lyrics like "Kookaburra," while university experiences revealed disconnect with square dancing and operatic repertoire, indicating misalignment with diverse student backgrounds.
Asset-Based Approaches Empower Students	Prioritizing students' strengths and lived experiences fosters increased confidence, ownership, and meaningful participation in learning.	Asset-based examples include a student excelling through improvisation despite struggling with notation, Dennis overcoming speech anxieties by introducing orchestra concerts, and elementary students embracing leadership roles through rhythm games and culturally relevant music activities like the "Pizza, Pizza, Daddy-O" dance.
Antiracist Pedagogy Requires	Continuous critical reflection on educators' positionalities and biases is essential for	Reflective incidents include a misinterpreted suggestion for a Shakespeare monologue performed by a Black student, highlighting the importance of intentional language.

Active Reflection	equitable teaching practices.	Continuous personal reflection during teaching at Thornberry Elementary, acknowledging the impacts of racial biases and inequities, reinforced the necessity of culturally sensitive interactions.
Safety and Resilience as Core to Educational Spaces	Physical and emotional safety significantly shape student learning and engagement, with resilience reflecting both systemic failures and student strengths.	Examples include personal recollections of metal detectors and school violence, incidents of classroom disruptions and aggressive behaviors at Thornberry, and students' resilience in navigating systemic neglect like inadequate classroom resources and emotional trauma, emphasizing the importance of creating secure, supportive learning environments.
Success Redefined Beyond Technical Mastery	A broader definition of success includes creativity, cultural affirmation, resilience, and student agency alongside technical proficiency.	Success examples range from Liam achieving professional music career to quieter successes like Dennis finding belonging and confidence through music despite academic struggles. High school students demonstrated holistic success through musical theater and choir performances, overcoming barriers related to traditional academic and music assessments.
Music Education as Advocacy for Systemic Change	Music education can be an effective platform for advocating systemic change, empowering students, and dismantling educational barriers.	Advocacy initiatives included securing instrument donations to reduce financial barriers for elementary orchestra participation, pushing against restrictive curricular practices at the middle and high school levels, and actively rebuilding music programs post-COVID to ensure equitable student access and participation in enriching musical experiences.

By fostering a learning environment grounded in culturally sustaining practices and antiracist pedagogy, educators can actively challenge systemic inequities and reflect critically on their own biases, ensuring that teaching remains relevant, responsive, and equitable. The analysis summarized in Table 1 represents a critical analysis of my lived

experience as both a student and educator, offering insight into how traditional definitions of success in music education often fall short—particularly in schools where racism and classism intersect. It underscores the need to move beyond narrow, Eurocentric measures of technical proficiency. Instead, success should encompass creativity, cultural affirmation, resilience, and student agency, integrating a wide range of culturally relevant technical skills, including classical, operatic, hip-hop, musical theater, gospel, improvisation, and other diverse musical forms.

This reconceptualization affirms students' cultural assets and lived experiences as essential components of musical and artistic development. By recognizing multiple forms of musicianship, music education becomes a space for deeper engagement, identity validation, and meaningful inclusion. Furthermore, as the findings demonstrate, music education can serve as a vehicle for systemic advocacy, empowering students to critically engage with and challenge the barriers they encounter within and beyond the classroom.

The key findings outlined in Table 1 directly address the central research questions of this dissertation, which explore how music education can be reimagined as a transformative force for equity, inclusion, and student empowerment. The following chapter will revisit these research questions explicitly, synthesizing insights from this chapter with broader theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. It will also present actionable strategies for reshaping music education practices and policies to more effectively serve, empower, and honor all students.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Discussion

The purpose of this autoethnography was to consider alternatives to traditional and written music education standards for success, such as state or national standards, that have historically stigmatized low SES schools, teachers, and students as deficient. Throughout this dissertation, I have examined how institutional standards—such as state and national music benchmarks—prioritize technical proficiency in Western classical traditions while overlooking the cultural, social, and creative strengths of students in marginalized communities. In this chapter, I advance that inquiry by returning directly to the five research questions that have guided this study, offering an asset-based reconceptualization of success in the context within which I work: a low SES, predominantly Black public school music program.

This chapter builds on the reflective and thematic synthesis developed in Chapter 7, which surfaced the tensions, contradictions, and transformative moments I have experienced across various educational contexts, including my own potential structural, cultural, and personal biases. While Chapter 7 offered a narrative exploration of these moments—highlighting how racism and classism intersect in my music education practice—Chapter 8 shifts to a more analytic orientation. Here, I explicitly address each research question through the lenses of critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and antiracist education. This approach draws from critical reflection on both my lived experiences and the theoretical commitments that have informed my practice, while emphasizing how success might be more equitably defined in ways that honor students' identities, agency, and cultural contexts.

Importantly, in this chapter, I do not claim to offer definitive solutions for the challenges facing music education. Instead, I build from my own teaching experience to question how success is defined, measured, and recognized—particularly in contexts shaped by systemic inequality. While my reflections are necessarily rooted in personal experience, they are meant to shed light on broader structures that often go unquestioned. I do not position myself as a corrective force, but rather as a participant in a much larger effort to rethink how music education might affirm student identities, honor cultural knowledge, and make room for multiple forms of excellence. The purpose here is not to tell others how to teach, but to challenge the assumptions we inherit and to imagine how our field might move closer to equity by reexamining what we call success.

Cultural identity tensions are deeply embedded in my teaching and in the questions I bring to this research. As someone trained in Western classical music traditions, I often find myself conflicted about how to uphold rigorous expectations while also honoring the cultural knowledge my students carry. These tensions are not abstract. They show up in my decisions about repertoire, classroom discourse, and what kinds of musical expression are validated within school walls. I sometimes wonder whether I am challenging dominant norms or simply repackaging them in ways that still prioritize whiteness and middle-class values (Bradley, 2015; Love, 2019). My students experience cultural tensions as well. Many feel that success in school music means leaving behind elements of their home and community identities. Some have told me they worry about being labeled as “acting white” when they excel in settings that center elite, Eurocentric standards (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Others feel discouraged when their cultural

expressions are ignored or treated as extracurricular rather than central to the curriculum. These tensions influence how success is felt, performed, and resisted. Naming them explicitly helps me ask better questions about what music education is really valuing, and how we might make room for more expansive and culturally affirming definitions of excellence (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017).

The following sections are organized around each research question, offering not prescriptive solutions, but critical reflections on how music education might better serve all students by redefining success through an asset-based lens. These responses examine the disconnects between dominant standards and student realities, highlight possible cultural and material strengths present within my school community, and consider how alternative frameworks can reposition music education as a more inclusive and justice-oriented practice that affirms, rather than ignores or erases, the diverse ways students engage with and find meaning through music.

Research Question #1: What are the standards I feel obligated to use to measure success in the low SES, predominantly Black school music program where I currently teach?

This question interrogates the complex relationship between the official standards that govern music education—national, state, and district frameworks—and the alternative standards that have evolved through critical reflection on my teaching practice. It addresses an ongoing tension: I am required to adhere to externally imposed curricular structures while striving to center the cultural realities, artistic strengths, and lived experiences of my students. This analysis outlines the formal expectations I must

navigate and contrasts them with the asset-based, justice-centered measures of success that have emerged through critical, culturally sustaining, and antiracist pedagogical engagement.

Formal Standards and Cultural Misalignment

As a public high school music teacher, I am formally bound to design instruction aligned with both state and national standards, including my state's visual and performing arts standards and the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) developed by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME). These frameworks organize student development across domains of creating, performing, responding, and connecting (NAfME, 2021), with proficiency levels such as novice, intermediate, proficient, accomplished, and advanced.

While designed with the intention of promoting equity, these standards frequently reflect narrow assumptions about what constitutes valuable musical knowledge and achievement. They center formal, Western, and often elitist Eurocentric traditions of music-making, presuming linear pathways of musical development that rarely align with the realities of students from racially and socioeconomically marginalized communities.

In practice, many of my students arrive in high school with discontinuous or inequitable access to prior formal music instruction. Some have never read the staff notation around which national and state standards are centered, nor have they been introduced to other formal conventions such as Western music theory terminology or structured ensemble rehearsal etiquette. Others demonstrate remarkable musical skill developed through informal contexts such as church choirs, community ensembles, or

independent production. Many are fluent in aural learning traditions, able to harmonize by ear, improvise, or layer vocal lines without written scores. Some students arrive with beat-making and audio editing skills using digital platforms, while others bring embodied rhythmic knowledge through step, dance, or cultural call-and-response. Their knowledge is rich, dynamic, and contextually grounded, but it does not always align with the predetermined categories outlined in official standards.

The NCAS proficiency levels presume consistent access to formal instruction, often including private lessons, sequential coursework, and ensemble experiences. These resources are not equitably available across schools and communities. As a result, the standards overlook the many alternative pathways through which students develop musical expertise, including church choirs, family traditions, beat-making, and other informal or community-based practices. For example, a student who can harmonize by ear in four parts—a skill honed through years of gospel singing—would be classified as a "novice" because they cannot sight-read Western notation. Another student who produces sophisticated trap beats on GarageBand, manipulating rhythm and texture with expert precision, would similarly be marginalized under standards that privilege written documentation and Western theory over aural creativity and production. These examples illustrate the "cultural incongruence" Paris and Alim (2017) identified—the systemic failure to recognize diverse cultural knowledge as valid educational achievement.

Consequences and Pedagogical Dissonance

The consequences of this misalignment are not merely technical; they are ideological. Scholars have argued that music education standards rooted in elite

Eurocentric norms reinforce structures of whiteness, positioning assimilation to dominant cultural forms as the gateway to legitimacy (Bradley, 2012; Hess, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019). Musicianship becomes defined by adherence to decontextualized, formalized tasks—tasks from which many historically marginalized students have been excluded, yet are nonetheless assessed by. Robinson (2020) wrote that these frameworks not only marginalize non-Western musical forms, but also participate in ongoing settler colonial logics that erase Indigenous knowledge systems and musical sovereignty. Ladson-Billings (2006) and Leonardo (2009) similarly argued that whiteness operates not just as a demographic category, but as a pervasive institutional force that shapes norms, values, and expectations across educational systems. Within music education, this force manifests in adjudication rubrics, standard repertoire lists, and assessment criteria that fail to recognize the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and musical fluency students bring from gospel, hip-hop, Latin, and other diasporic traditions.

Early in my teaching career, I attempted to meet these standards earnestly, meticulously designing lessons aligned with state indicators. I include this moment to show that I began my career by earnestly working within the system, trusting that alignment with formal standards would lead to meaningful learning. Yet, I quickly realized the disconnect between the official language of mastery and the lived experiences of my students. After a lesson targeting a “responding” standard on form and function, a student candidly remarked, “I don’t care about the sections. I just know this song gets me through some tough stuff.” Their statement revealed an emotional, cultural, and survival-based understanding of music—one that the standards framework had no

mechanism to recognize or validate.

Performance adjudications further highlighted these tensions. Public performances, festivals, and competitions functioned as the primary spaces where student success was externally judged. However, these assessments often emphasized elite Eurocentric aesthetic norms—tone quality, posture, facial expression, repertoire choices—through an unspoken but powerful cultural lens (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). At a regional adjudication, for instance, my choir performed a gospel arrangement that students had prepared with extraordinary passion and musical skill. Despite a strong performance, the adjudicator critiqued our tone and suggested a pivot toward "more traditional literature." In that moment, the profound cultural work my students had accomplished was rendered invisible by an evaluative framework unwilling to recognize it.

Reframing Success through Asset-Based Practice

Such experiences forced me to confront the ways my own training in classical piano and predominantly white institutions had conditioned me to equate excellence with Eurocentric benchmarks. This process was not easy. My musical identity, like that of many music educators, was shaped through formal training that presented classical traditions, particularly those rooted in Western Europe, as the standard for rigor, expressiveness, and legitimacy. It took years of teaching in a low SES, majority-Black public school before I began to fully grasp how those standards, which I had once seen as neutral or universal, were deeply situated in classed, racialized, and institutional histories.

Yet, institutional realities persist. I remain obligated to align lesson plans and

curricular documentation with state and national standards. I continue to prepare students for adjudicated performances because they offer critical visibility for the program and can serve as meaningful milestones for some students, particularly those seeking post-secondary opportunities in music. However, my orientation toward these standards has shifted. I now view them as partial tools to be engaged critically rather than as comprehensive measures of success. This ongoing reassessment has led me to question the very structure of my program, particularly the orchestra component, which remains tethered to Eurocentric values and performance traditions.

Through critical reflection and the influence of critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist scholarship, I have begun adopting alternative standards for measuring success. These standards are rooted in student agency, cultural validation, and ethical responsiveness. Rather than positioning traditional standards as the ultimate goal, I now treat them as one consideration among many within a broader, praxis-based approach (Regelski, 2020). This approach is grounded in what students already do musically and what they are likely to continue doing beyond school. Practices such as popular music, church music, and musical theater are not peripheral to their development. They are central, authentic, and self-sustaining.

For example, when I structured a unit around musical storytelling, students were invited to reinterpret existing songs or compose originals reflecting their lived experiences. This unit took place in a high school performing arts course, where students had the flexibility and support to explore personal storytelling through a range of musical forms. One student rewrote the lyrics to an R&B ballad to narrate their struggles with

mental health—an act of profound musical and personal agency. Their arrangement, harmonies, choreography, and spoken word performance demonstrated technical artistry and emotional insight, despite not fitting neatly into standard benchmarks. In this reimagined framework, success was measured by authenticity, cultural resonance, emotional expression, and collaborative artistry—not merely technical execution.

These experiences have reinforced that for students in low-SES, racially diverse schools, musical success must not be predicated on conformity to dominant norms but on the affirmation of their humanity, creativity, and resilience (Love, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Thus, while I remain accountable to formal standards, I hold myself more deeply accountable to a moral and pedagogical imperative: to recognize, nurture, and celebrate the brilliance my students already embody. Success is no longer defined by how closely students can approximate elite Eurocentric ideals, but by how fully they are empowered to express who they are and envision what they can become within a musical space that sees them, hears them, and values them.

Moral Obligations

In contrast to externally imposed standards, the definitions of success I felt morally obligated to uphold were grounded in ethical responsibility, pedagogical justice, and an intentional commitment to honoring the cultural wealth my students brought into the classroom. These internal standards, shaped by critical theory (Regelski, 2020), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), and antiracist education (Love, 2019; Bradley, 2012), did not reject technical rigor, but reframed it within a more inclusive and student-centered vision of excellence. They demanded a fundamental shift

in not only how I taught, but also why I taught, for whom, and toward what end. At the same time, I recognize that these evolving values have not yet been fully reflected in the structure of the music program itself. While some culturally responsive practices have been embedded within individual courses, the overall curricular design—including what is offered during the school day versus after school, and which ensembles receive the most institutional recognition—still bears traces of traditional, elite Eurocentric hierarchies. This disconnect remains an area of active reflection and potential transformation.

Success, viewed through these frameworks, was no longer defined by students' ability to approximate an external, elite Eurocentric ideal. Instead, success was measured by whether students were affirmed in their cultural identities, empowered in their creative agency, and provided opportunities to define their own goals and aspirations in music learning. Paris (2021) emphasized that sustaining students' cultural identities was not simply a matter of inclusion, but a matter of educational justice. Within this framework, I came to understand that teaching students to read notation or perform on pitch—skills often treated as neutral indicators of musicianship—was insufficient if they occurred in a space that failed to affirm students' humanity, creativity, and lived experiences. For example, reading notation and performing on pitch are culturally relative practices, shaped by particular musical traditions and institutional expectations. Recognizing this challenged me to reframe technical instruction not as the center of music education, but as one possible pathway among many, depending on students' needs, strengths, and cultural contexts.

These moral obligations emerged gradually, often catalyzed by moments when I confronted the limitations of my own assumptions. Early in my career, I believed I was providing opportunity by exposing students to classical repertoire, formal concert etiquette, and theoretical language drawn from Western harmonic traditions. I saw these offerings as pathways to access—mirroring the experiences that shaped my own musical education and sense of legitimacy. In retrospect, I recognize that this approach reflected more about my background than my students' realities, and in many cases, it functioned less as a bridge and more as a filter. These early choices often reinforced a hierarchy that positioned students' musical traditions—gospel, hip-hop, trap, R&B—as less legitimate, less sophisticated, and less academically valuable. As Hess (2015, 2017, 2018) and other scholars (Bradley, 2006; Koza, 2008) have argued, the continued centering of Western art music—even in reformed or diversified settings—often reinforces whiteness as the normative musical framework and sustains hierarchies that marginalize students whose cultural practices diverge from these traditions. Even now, despite my efforts to center culturally sustaining practices, I acknowledge that aspects of my current programming may still contribute to these inequities. This is a critical aspect of autoethnographic work: recognizing that my practice remains a work in progress, shaped by evolving understanding, institutional constraints, and my own positional vantage point. I offer these reflections not as a declaration of having found the solution, but as an ongoing examination of how success in music education can be reimagined—imperfectly, reflexively, and always in dialogue with the communities I serve.

One student, a gifted vocalist, once asked why our program could not perform

songs she listened to at home—songs that made her feel powerful and understood. In that moment, I redirected her toward the predetermined concert repertoire, citing the need to meet district expectations. Only later did I recognize that I had used institutional language to justify exclusion. I failed to see that true rigor would have included honoring her musical knowledge and centering her cultural experiences. The moral obligation, I now understood, was not to offer access to dominant culture, but to dismantle the structures that privileged it as the only legitimate pathway. Yet, dismantling requires more than curricular changes. It calls for questioning participation in adjudicated festivals with required repertoire lists, reevaluating whose musical achievements are made visible, and restructuring performance opportunities to center students' identities rather than institutional validation. While I have taken steps—such as expanding performance formats, offering culturally relevant classes, and foregrounding student choice in repertoire selection—I acknowledge that elements of the traditional structure remain. I continue to wrestle with what it would mean to fully transform the program, or to replace ensemble models like orchestra with frameworks that reflect students' lived musical practices. These questions remain active, and my work is ongoing.

Students consistently demonstrated success through skills and forms of knowledge that traditional standards failed to recognize. When students reworked melodies with gospel harmonies or freestyled during music theory lessons to make sense of content, they exhibited advanced musical thinking, adaptability, and cultural fluency. These acts reflected what Hess (2015), Bradley (2012), and Emdin (2016) have described as forms of culturally rooted expression that challenge dominant paradigms rooted in

whiteness and Western classical tradition. While Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth helped me begin to recognize the value in these practices, it was through the lens of music and education scholars that I came to understand these musical responses as rigorous, expressive, and intellectually sophisticated. These skills that my students demonstrated were not peripheral; they were central manifestations of musical excellence that conventional assessments failed to acknowledge or reward.

This reorientation reshaped how I planned, assessed, and reflected. No longer focused solely on covering a prescribed body of repertoire, I prioritized asking different questions: What kinds of learning mattered to students? Where did they want to grow? How could their existing musical knowledge be honored, expanded, and celebrated within the classroom? Leading warmups, remixing melodies, building beats on digital platforms, and sparking discussions about musical meaning all became recognized and valued forms of success. Authenticity, relevance, and cultural grounding, rather than adherence to static content, began to guide pedagogical decision-making.

However, I recognize that these changes were not consistent across all courses or learning experiences. While culturally sustaining pedagogy informed many of my instructional choices, particularly in high school performing arts and general music classes, its presence was more limited in traditional ensemble settings like orchestra, where institutional expectations, performance norms, and assessment structures constrained the extent of innovation. At times, my efforts resembled what music education scholars have critiqued as "add and stir" approaches to diversity—superficial insertions of culturally diverse content that leave dominant curricular frameworks intact

(Bradley, 2006; DeLorenzo, 2016; Hess, 2015). This inconsistency reflects both the structural barriers within music education and the evolving nature of my own understanding. I continue to grapple with what it would mean to embed culturally sustaining practices not just within units or projects, but within the foundations of the program itself.

Antiracist pedagogy further challenged me to critically examine whether my instruction affirmed students' identities and equipped them to recognize and interrogate systemic inequities. Love (2019) emphasized that antiracism required action, not simply intent. This approach demanded that music classrooms become spaces where students could question why certain musical traditions were privileged, critique the racialized structures of curriculum design, and situate their artistry within broader struggles for equity and justice. While these conversations often emerged informally—during casual reflections or hallway discussions—they became powerful indicators of deeper engagement with both music and the world it reflected.

This shift in moral orientation also expanded my understanding of rigor. True rigor, I came to believe, encompassed not only technical proficiency but also creative risk-taking, collaborative leadership, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. Rigor was evident when students negotiated complex harmonies collaboratively, when they produced beats in makeshift home studios, or when they turned personal hardship into original musical expression. It surfaced when students requested to study artists whose stories mirrored their own, bridging musical learning with identity formation and critical consciousness. These acts of artistry were not deviations from the curriculum—they were

the curriculum.

At the same time, this broader conception of rigor exists in tension with the demands of traditional adjudicated festivals. Preparing students for these performances still requires focused rehearsal, alignment with stylistic norms, and prioritization of specific technical skills tied to formal rubrics. Investing time in songwriting, remixing, and culturally grounded explorations often means spending less time drilling excerpts that will earn a higher festival score. I have not always navigated this balance seamlessly. At times, I have privileged one at the expense of the other, depending on the goals of a given class or the needs of particular students. In ensemble settings like orchestra, I continue to wrestle with how to prepare students for formal evaluation while also making space for culturally sustaining forms of musicianship. This ongoing negotiation reflects both the limits of current educational structures and the possibility of transformation within them. Rather than choosing between institutional demands and student-centered values, I am working to reimagine how both might coexist—even if imperfectly—in service of more inclusive and meaningful definitions of success.

A striking example of the disconnect between institutional expectations and moral obligations appeared within the "Connecting" strand of the National Core Arts Standards. Although this strand ostensibly calls for students to relate music to personal and cultural experiences, it is frequently treated as secondary in both policy implementation and classroom practice. Curriculum pacing guides, evaluation rubrics, and adjudicated performance expectations often prioritize performance and theory benchmarks, leaving "Connecting" goals to be addressed only if time allows. In this way, administrators,

policymakers, and even well-meaning educators may unintentionally relegate students' cultural knowledge to an optional add-on rather than an essential component of musical development. Hain (2020) critiqued how such compartmentalization reinforces deficit-based views of non-dominant cultural expressions, positioning them as supplemental "enrichment" rather than central to rigorous instruction. This structural marginalization communicates to students that their lived experiences and musical worlds are peripheral to what counts as legitimate learning in music education.

Earlier in my teaching, I had replicated this hierarchy, offering student-selected music projects only after "core" repertoire had been completed. It was only through sustained reflection that I recognized how such practices marginalized students' voices and reified the very systems of exclusion I sought to dismantle.

This realization became visceral during moments when students requested to perform music outside my own technical expertise. When a student asked to perform Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" and sought help with vocal runs I could not model, or when another wanted to sing "Defying Gravity" requiring advanced belting techniques beyond my comfort zone, I faced a choice: redirect students toward familiar material, or embrace collaboration and risk. Choosing collaboration, I facilitated learning through peer feedback, audio references, and experimentation—positioning myself not as the sole authority but as a co-learner and supporter. Regelski (2017) described this relational approach through the lens of *phronesis*—practical wisdom rooted in ethical, situated judgment. These moments reaffirmed that culturally sustaining teaching demanded humility, flexibility, and relational trust.

Ultimately, the moral standards I adopted demanded greater rigor, not less. They required responsiveness to student voice, transparency about my own limitations, and a willingness to co-create educational spaces rooted in authenticity, belonging, and mutual accountability. These standards challenged me to center the cultural and artistic wealth students brought into the classroom, rather than treating it as ancillary to "real" learning. However, I acknowledge that this moral orientation did not restructure my entire program. While many of these values shaped how I approached general music and performing arts classes, other areas—such as orchestra or participation in solo and ensemble festivals—remained more closely aligned with traditional expectations. Students in those settings did not often perform Broadway solos, Whitney Houston-type singles, or other culturally relevant repertoire at adjudicated events, not because such music lacked value, but because the structure of those systems constrained our choices. This contradiction continues to push me to reflect on how much of my practice is shaped by student needs versus institutional demands. Though I have not yet resolved these tensions, naming them is part of my ongoing effort to transform music education from within.

Success, through this lens, was no longer about assimilation to dominant norms or achievement of static benchmarks. It was about creating educational spaces where students could thrive authentically, where their artistry was recognized as rigorous, and where their full humanity was reflected in every aspect of musical learning. It was about redefining excellence as collective empowerment rather than individual conformity, affirming that education for justice requires not only new pedagogies, but also a

fundamental reimagining of whose knowledge counts—and why.

This shift has prompted gradual changes in the structure of my program. I currently teach a combination of traditional ensembles, including chamber choir and orchestra, alongside courses such as performing arts, music technology, and percussion, which center student-led creativity and cultural relevance. These newer offerings emerged in direct response to the disconnect I observed between students' lived experiences and the musical expectations embedded in conventional music education. After-school programming now includes musical theater and student-directed performance projects, which provide additional opportunities for identity expression, collaboration, and joy. While these additions represent progress, I also recognize that my continued preparation of students for university music programs introduces another layer of complexity. University entrance requirements—focused on Western notation, repertoire, and audition-based assessments—often reflect the same narrow standards I have critiqued. I continue to wrestle with how to support students pursuing these pathways without reinforcing the idea that success lies in mastering a single, dominant tradition. This tension remains unresolved, but it has prompted me to begin questioning not just K–12 music structures, but also the assumptions embedded in postsecondary music education itself.

Research Question #2: In my experiences as a music educator, how has the dominant culture with its focus on academic achievement required, recommended, and/or implied the centrality of standard measures for success?

Dominant cultural expectations surrounding academic achievement have consistently imposed and reinforced narrow definitions of success within both general and music education. Grounded in critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and antiracist education, my analysis in this section seeks to illuminate how these dominant frameworks have shaped, constrained, and ultimately distorted the ways in which success has been defined for students in the low-SES, racially diverse school context in which I teach.

In the broader educational system, standardized testing, GPA, and rigid curricular benchmarks have functioned as primary measures of achievement, often emphasizing quantifiable outcomes over holistic development. These systems, though presented as neutral, reflect deeply racialized and classed assumptions about intelligence, ability, and worth (Regelski, 2020; Schmidt, 2017). Even within the inherently interpretive domain of music education, dominant norms have privileged elite Eurocentric traditions and codified a limited set of technical skills as the central indicators of musical success.

State and national standards, including those endorsed by NAfME and local visual and performing arts frameworks, positioned musicianship within narrow domains of creating, performing, responding, and connecting—domains that were scaffolded in practice around formal instruction, traditional notation, and Western classical repertoire. While these standards were intended to promote equity in theory, in practice they often

ignored the varied, culturally rich musical experiences that many of my students brought into the classroom. Students whose musical fluency emerged through church choirs, oral traditions, beat-making, or improvisational practices were positioned as "behind" or "deficient" according to benchmarks that privileged linear, formalized skill acquisition. Hain (2020) critiqued how such compartmentalization reinforced deficit-based views of non-dominant cultural expressions, treating them as "enrichment" rather than as central to musical learning. Similarly, Hess (2015, 2018) argued that standards-based frameworks frequently re-centered whiteness by embedding Western classical norms within seemingly neutral categories. Lamb (2010) also challenged the National Standards directly, stating that they privileged a narrow conception of music education rooted in Eurocentric and technocratic values, ultimately excluding more relational, communal, or culturally diverse practices. These critiques revealed how standards—though presented as universally applicable—often reinforced existing hierarchies of power and legitimacy within music education.

During my early teaching career, district administrators, department chairs, curriculum supervisors, and veteran colleagues explicitly framed adherence to state and national music education standards as a professional obligation and a central measure of teacher competency. Across multiple schools and years, I was directed to align my instruction with pacing guides that prioritized Western classical repertoire, music theory terminology, and formal notation. I was told to program composers like Mahler and Berlioz regardless of how disconnected those works were from my students' lives. When I suggested incorporating genres such as gospel, R&B, hip-hop, or musical theater—

genres that resonated deeply with my students—I encountered resistance framed by language about "academic rigor," "real music," and "high standards." This rhetoric echoed what Ladson-Billings (1995) described as the racialized nature of educational expectations, where Black cultural forms are often excluded from definitions of excellence. Love (2019) further argued that dominant schooling practices uphold a narrow and whitewashed view of learning, rendering culturally sustaining approaches suspect or supplemental. Emdin (2016) critiqued how schools strip away the cultural practices that make students feel most connected and powerful, particularly when those practices involve Black expressive traditions. These early experiences made it clear that dominant conceptions of musical legitimacy were deeply racialized and systematically reinforced within the profession.

My early musical successes were scaffolded by unacknowledged privilege. Growing up, I had access to private piano lessons, familial support, and what was considered high-quality music instruction—realities shaped by race and class that translated to advantages within the dominant Eurocentric music education paradigm. These structural supports were rendered invisible, allowing success to be misinterpreted as natural talent or individual perseverance. In contrast, many peers from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, equally talented, faced barriers that limited their opportunities for musical achievement. This dissonance illuminated how educational success was less a product of inherent ability and more a reflection of cultural alignment with dominant norms.

Tom Regelski (2016) critiqued how music educators often accept traditional

methods and standards without question, treating them as inherently valid due to their longevity. He argued that such "taken-for-granted" practices are perpetuated through teacher preparation programs and institutional cultures, leading educators to teach as they were taught, without critically examining the exclusivity of those practices. Ladson-Billings (2006) similarly described how educational inequities are not simply gaps in achievement but reflections of a broader "education debt" that accumulates from generations of systemic neglect, racism, and economic disenfranchisement. Together, these critiques helped me recognize that my own musical pathway, which once seemed neutral or earned, was shaped by advantages I had not seen—and that many of my students had been denied.

My early piano students, despite tremendous musical aptitude, were "disadvantaged" by a lack of access to instruments, private lessons, and formal resources. Liv, a student who used a phone app to teach herself melodies, embodied adaptability, creativity, and deep musical engagement—forms of excellence that were invisible within dominant standards. These examples did not simply highlight a failure of the system to recognize authentic musical literacies—they exposed how the system was structured to reward those who already had access and to marginalize those who did not. Agger (2013) argued that social systems, including education, maintain power not only through rules and hierarchies but through taken-for-granted cultural assumptions that define what counts as legitimate knowledge or success. Ladson-Billings (2006) similarly framed educational inequality not as a short-term gap in achievement, but as the result of a persistent educational debt tied to historical and systemic injustice.

Other experiences I chronicled further emphasized how dominant definitions of success marginalized students in formal music classrooms. After being mandated to implement a standardized, Eurocentric curriculum for middle school general music, I witnessed a sharp decline in student engagement. The repertoire—outdated folk songs and European compositions—failed to connect with students' realities, leading not to isolated misbehavior but to profound disengagement born of cultural alienation. Freire (2000) described cultural alienation as a consequence of oppressive educational systems that disconnect students from their own identities, histories, and expressive power. In this context, students' critiques—such as “Why are we singing about Australian birds when we could be writing our own songs?”—revealed a desire for learning that honored their lived experiences. Rather than a lack of interest in music, these reactions pointed to a misalignment between curricular design and students’ need for meaningful, self-expressive learning.

Adjudicated performances made these disparities especially visible. In music festivals and competitions, students were judged not only on musical quality but on performance practices rooted in white, middle-class aesthetics such as posture, attire, diction, and decorum. I watched as my students poured their hears into expressive performances, only to receive lukewarm feedback that ignored their musical insight and instead criticized them for deviating from normative technique. One of my gospel singers delivered an emotionally powerful solo but was dismissed for “poor breath support,” a comment that failed to recognize the cultural context and vocal tradition informing her artistry. These experiences reflected what Elpus and Abril (2011) described: that festival

scores often reward proximity to dominant norms rather than acknowledging the depth and complexity of student musicianship. Although I continue to bring my students to these events, I now do so with caution and transparency. I prepare them for the biases they may face and frame success in terms that go beyond any adjudicator's rubric.

By contrast, my students thrive in musical theater adjudications. These spaces consistently recognize their excellence and affirm the work they do. These accolades are not just professional highlights for me as their teacher. They are among the few sources of public praise my school receives, and they matter deeply to my community. They validate the joy, discipline, and brilliance my students bring to their work. Musical theater has become a space where they are seen and celebrated, where their cultural strengths and creative voices are not only included but valued as central to our program.

These experiences pushed me to interrogate not just the formal standards themselves, but the deeper cultural assumptions behind them. My students' musical excellence rarely conforms to static benchmarks. It emerges through community-driven creativity, resilience, and collaborative artistry. In musical theater productions, I have seen students who struggle academically emerge as confident leaders. They commit themselves to performance and teamwork with a level of focus and maturity that traditional assessments overlook. One student, who had difficulty engaging in core classes, found his voice both musically and personally when he stepped into the role of Seaweed in *Hairspray*. That moment captured a kind of learning, transformation, and affirmation that no test score could reflect. These performances are not side projects or enrichment activities. They are essential spaces of belonging and musical success for my

students.

Through performances of student-written songs addressing housing insecurity, hip-hop codes woven into theory lessons, and gospel harmonies layered into orchestra rehearsals, my students continually demonstrated that musical excellence was not confined to formal notation or traditional repertoire. These creative acts reflected what Emdin (2016) termed reality pedagogy, learning grounded in students' cultural codes, and resonated with Love's (2019) emphasis on teaching that challenges racial injustice by honoring students' lived experiences and modes of expression. Songwriting in particular offered students a platform to process personal challenges, engage in social critique, and connect their identities to their musical work (Abril, 2016; MacGregor, 2022). Their success demanded recognition on their own terms, not as exceptions to a dominant model, but as evidence that the model itself was incomplete and unjust.

Importantly, my shifting understanding of success was not merely about diversifying content. As Hamilton (2021), Kendi (2019), Love (2019), and Paris and Alim (2017) all have argued, reimagining education requires interrogating the systems of power that privilege some ways of knowing while marginalizing others. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, antiracist education, and the framework of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) provided critical tools for recognizing that students' resistance, improvisation, and critical questioning were not deficits—they were profound expressions of musical and social intelligence.

How I conceptualize success, then, has become more relational and contextual. It has come to include the student who wrote a verse about police violence, the choir that

rallied around a peer to teach harmonies learned outside of school, and the student who risked singing a solo for the first time. It manifested in the student who found school bearable because of music, the student who taught peers new beats after class, and the student who advocated for including Black composers in the concert program. That advocacy was meaningful and necessary, but it also unfolded within the constraints of concert repertoire rooted in elite European aesthetics—where inclusion often meant adding composers of color into preexisting traditions rather than transforming the framework itself. These forms of growth, leadership, and artistry resisted dominant models of assessment, yet they exemplified the very capacities—creativity, agency, empathy—that I believe true education should cultivate.

Redefining success, then, requires more than changing assessment tools or incorporating diverse content. It demands a deeper transformation of the cultural values and assumptions that underpin music education itself. True success must be measured not by conformity to dominant norms but by the empowerment, agency, and flourishing of students as cultural and creative beings.

I recognize that this work is unfinished. My own teaching continues to reflect compromises and contradictions shaped by institutional constraints, personal biases, and the limits of my training. While I have taken steps to center student voice, shift power, and challenge exclusionary norms, I remain aware that culturally sustaining pedagogy is not a fixed destination but an evolving practice. It is a commitment to reflection, resistance, and revision, an ongoing struggle to create musical spaces where all students are seen, heard, and valued.

Research Question #3: From my emic vantage point relative to the context of this district, school, and state, what groups appear to be advantaged and/or disadvantaged by generally-accepted state and national music standards?

Analyzing this question through the frameworks of critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), and antiracist education reveals that state and national music standards, while intended to establish uniformity and equity, in practice reinforce systemic inequities within music education. These standards often privilege white, middle- and upper-class students who have access to resources aligned with Western classical traditions, while disadvantaging students from low-income and racially diverse backgrounds whose musical experiences and expertise fall outside dominant educational norms (Bates, 2021; Love, 2019; McCoy & Lind, 2009).

The National Core Arts Standards (NAfME, 2014) and similar state frameworks emphasize domains such as creating, performing, responding, and connecting, yet their application remains deeply shaped by elite Eurocentric assumptions about what constitutes valuable musical knowledge. Terms such as "works," "theoretical structures," and "formal analysis" carry implicit biases that elevate Western classical traditions while marginalizing gospel, hip-hop, R&B, and other culturally embedded forms of music-making. Regelski (2009) argued that such terminology reflects a taken-for-granted ideology rooted in institutionalized music practices, prioritizing aesthetic formalism over community-based or socially grounded forms of music. Scholars such as Emdin (2016), Love (2019), and Hess (2015) have further critiqued how music education often excludes the lived musical realities of students of color, reinforcing a hierarchy of value that

privileges whiteness in both content and pedagogy.

Even when standards gesture toward cultural diversity—such as the requirement to "analyze expressive qualities of a varied repertoire"—they often position non-Western and popular genres as supplemental rather than central, reflecting what Bradley (2006) and Gustafson (2019) describe as "add and stir" multiculturalism: a superficial inclusion that leaves dominant curricular structures intact. In contrast, culturally sustaining pedagogy calls for a deeper transformation—one that affirms students' cultural identities, disrupts hegemonic norms, and repositions musical knowledge as contextually situated and community defined.

From my emic perspective as an educator working in a low-SES, majority-Black school district, these structural inequities are not abstract—they manifest daily in the experiences of my students. Students whose musical expertise emerged through church choirs, freestyle rap, or digital production were consistently evaluated against technical benchmarks that privileged skills they had never been given equitable access to develop. Formal notation, classical diction, and compositional analysis, rather than improvisation, rhythmic complexity, or lyrical storytelling, became the primary measures of success.

I vividly recall a middle school student asking during a unit on Beethoven, "Why are we learning about some dead white guy when we could be making our own music?" Their critique illuminated a broader dissonance between mandated curricula and students' lived musical realities. Similarly, when a student questioned why hip-hop was excluded from discussions about musical storytelling, my department chair's dismissal—"They get enough of that at home"—underscored how whiteness functioned as an unspoken norm

within music education. Scholars have long critiqued this dynamic. Bradley (2007) and Hess (2015) described how white, Eurocentric content remains central to music education, while culturally rooted practices such as hip-hop are marginalized or framed as peripheral. Emdin (2016) and Love (2019) emphasized that such exclusions are not incidental but structural—reflecting systemic patterns that devalue the cultural knowledge of students from historically marginalized communities and reinforce dominant norms in curriculum and pedagogy.

Students from low-income backgrounds face compounding disadvantages under these standards. Without reliable access to instruments, private instruction, or extracurricular ensembles, they are systematically disadvantaged in meeting technical benchmarks (see Regelski, 2005; Bates, 2025). One student memorized melodies using a phone app due to the lack of a piano at home. Others crafted intricate harmonies learned by ear from church performances or YouTube tutorials. Yet their musicianship, while profound, remained unrecognized by systems that equated proficiency with elite Western classical literacies.

Instrumental adjudications and festivals further reinforced these inequities. Students were evaluated not only on select musical qualities but also on attire, posture, and decorum—criteria steeped in white, middle-class expectations. When a student's gospel performance brought teachers to tears but earned only criticism on a festival rubric for "tone quality," it became painfully clear that excellence was being measured against an exclusionary template. As Elpus and Abril (2011) argued, these structures often conflate access to privileged cultural practices with musical merit.

Race and class intersected in complex ways within these systems. Black students faced both material inequities and racialized marginalization, often feeling tokenized rather than genuinely included when invited into elite musical spaces. One Black student confided that participation in a state choir felt performative rather than affirming, noting discomfort when asked to perform African and gospel pieces for predominantly white audiences. Meanwhile, low-income white students, though less likely to experience racial exclusion, similarly struggled to connect with curricula framed around middle- and upper-class norms. As Hamilton (2021), Sullivan (2021), Good-Perkins and Hendricks (2023), and Bates (2019) have argued, dominant music education frameworks often ignore or devalue the musical knowledge and lived experiences of students from marginalized racial and economic backgrounds.

Thus, the advantaged within traditional music standards are those students whose cultural, economic, and educational capital already aligns with dominant frameworks—students with access to private lessons, high-quality instruments, formal training, and a repertoire embedded in Eurocentric traditions. Disadvantaged are those whose strengths lie in oral traditions, improvisation, community-based musical learning, and genres systematically undervalued by existing standards.

Antiracist and culturally sustaining pedagogies demand that inequities in music education be named and addressed. Simply "adding" diverse genres into an otherwise unchanged curriculum is insufficient. Paris and Alim (2017) argued that culturally sustaining pedagogy requires centering students' cultural practices as legitimate forms of knowledge—not merely acknowledging them as occasional supplements to dominant

frameworks. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2006) and Inoue (2015) emphasized that assessment practices must be reimagined to avoid reinforcing racial and cultural hierarchies.

I often find myself caught between what I feel expected to do—uphold the classical tradition—and what I know many of my students connect with more deeply. I include gospel, R&B, and hip-hop when I can. I allow students to select pieces or remix existing ones. But even as I do this, I sometimes worry that these inclusions are still positioned as "extras"—as fun, accessible additions, rather than serious and rigorous music-making. That leaves me questioning whether I'm unintentionally reinforcing the very hierarchies I aim to challenge. Am I saying that their musical cultures only belong in the "light" part of the concert? That the "real" music is still Western and classical?

Complicating this even more is the feeling that my work may be viewed as "less than" by other educators or adjudicators. I sometimes wonder if people think I'm not doing my job correctly—if I'm not teaching the "hard" music, the "correct" music. Even though I see extraordinary musical growth in my students, I know that the broader field still often equates rigor with Western notation, classical repertoire, and adherence to tradition. This tension continues to shape and unsettle my practice, but I see that discomfort as necessary. It forces me to ask: who decides what counts as legitimate music education, and who gets to belong?

These insights reshaped how I conceptualized success. I began to assess students not only through traditional measures, but through their ability to collaborate, improvise, create, and express their lived experiences through music. A student who could build

intricate beats on GarageBand demonstrated theoretical knowledge just as valid as the ability to identify harmonic cadences. Students who wrote original verses to address social issues were exercising critical thinking and musical storytelling at the highest levels. These were not deficits to correct—they were assets to sustain and celebrate.

At the same time, I recognized the danger of romanticizing resilience without addressing structural barriers. The creativity students developed in the absence of formal resources was powerful—but it should not be necessary for students to thrive despite systemic neglect. Addressing inequity requires both affirming students' existing strengths and dismantling the conditions that marginalize them in the first place.

State and national music standards must be revised to explicitly incorporate culturally sustaining and antiracist principles, moving beyond tokenistic references to diversity and toward structural transformation. Hamilton (2021) argued that dismantling anti-Black racism in music education requires moving beyond inclusion toward curricular redesign that centers Black musical traditions and epistemologies. In music education more broadly, Hess (2015) and Bradley (2012) have contended that true equity cannot be achieved without confronting the elite Eurocentric values that continue to define legitimacy, rigor, and assessment. Technical skill development should be broadened to include oral traditions, improvisation, community-based music-making, and beat production—practices that reflect students' lived musical identities and challenge dominant hierarchies (Emdin, 2016). Likewise, assessment must be reimagined to validate multiple musical literacies rather than evaluating all students against a singular, white, middle-class aesthetic framework (Inoue, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In my

own practice, this has meant gradually moving away from rigid, notation-centered assessments and toward more flexible demonstrations of musical learning, including collaborative performance, student-designed arrangements, peer teaching, and reflective conversations that honor multiple forms of expertise.

Ultimately, addressing the question of which groups are advantaged and disadvantaged by generally accepted state and national music standards reveals a clear pattern: students whose cultural, economic, and educational experiences align with elite Eurocentric frameworks—typically white, middle- and upper-class students—are systematically advantaged. In contrast, students from low-income backgrounds and racially marginalized communities are consistently disadvantaged, their musical knowledge and cultural expressions overlooked or devalued by dominant metrics of success. From my emic vantage point as a teacher within a low-SES, majority-Black district, it has become evident that traditional standards, while purporting to offer equal opportunity, in fact reproduce educational hierarchies and exclusion.

True equity in music education requires a radical redefinition of success—one that centers students' cultural identities, validates diverse forms of musicianship, and dismantles the systemic structures that limit recognition of their creative potential. Without this shift, the very standards intended to promote excellence will continue to serve only a narrow subset of students, leaving many others unseen, unheard, and underserved. While I have begun the work of interrogating and adapting my own practice, I also recognize that my efforts remain incomplete. I continue to rely on elements of the traditional model, and at times struggle to reconcile institutional

expectations with what I know is culturally affirming for my students. A full transformation will require ongoing reflection, greater collaboration with students and families, and a willingness to let go of some long-held assumptions about what "counts" in music education. This remains a critical area of growth in my journey toward a more just and responsive teaching practice.

Research Question #4: How have I conceptualized, throughout my life, the evolving social, cultural, and material assets in this low SES school district and community?

I have had the privilege of growing up, residing, and teaching in a complex, resilient, and culturally rich community that I proudly call home. Over the course of my life, my understanding of this community—and of its evolving social, cultural, and material assets—has shifted dramatically. In my early years, shaped by dominant deficit narratives, I often interpreted poverty primarily through visible hardships: homelessness, substandard housing, under-resourced schools, and unsafe neighborhoods. These surface-level indicators made it difficult for me to recognize the deeper sources of strength within the community.

Although I was never explicitly taught to harbor racial or class-based biases, this autoethnography has illuminated how societal narratives subtly shaped my early assumptions. Growing up, I absorbed unspoken messages that linked poverty with failure and implicitly racialized those associations. I now understand that those perceptions were not reflections of reality, but manifestations of systemic inequity. As I matured—both personally and professionally—and engaged more deeply with critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist education, my lens began to shift. I started to see not

just barriers, but also brilliance: the networks of support, creative expression, adaptive problem-solving, and rich cultural traditions that thrive in the face of structural challenges.

Through this critical self-examination, I have developed a conscious and ongoing commitment to rejecting deficit thinking and centering asset-based frameworks in both my teaching and advocacy. Where I once saw a lot of deficiency, I now more often see resilience, ingenuity, and vibrant cultural capital. Yet I also recognize that this process is incomplete. I am still learning to recognize, understand, and meaningfully engage with the full scope of assets within the community I serve—assets that have always been present, even when I did not yet have the tools or frameworks to see them clearly. The following sections explore the evolving ways I have come to conceptualize the social, cultural, and material assets that shape this community.

Social Assets

Throughout my life in this community, I have come to recognize the extraordinary social assets that students develop through shared experience, perseverance, and collective care. Despite systemic barriers, students in my district consistently demonstrated resilience, empathy, and mutual support—qualities that traditional educational frameworks, often centered on competition and individualism, fail to recognize or value (Flint & Jaggers, 2021). These collaborative dynamics reflect what Templeton (2011) identified as compassion, tenacity, and creativity arising in response to poverty—not in spite of it.

These social assets were especially evident in how students supported one another academically and emotionally. In the elementary setting, students like Dennis—who initially struggled with social connection and self-confidence—grew into leadership roles within the orchestra. His transformation was not solely the result of teacher intervention; peers actively encouraged him, included him in group practices, and celebrated his milestones. While students from relatively more stable households sometimes initiated these moments of inclusion, it was often those with similar lived experiences—who had themselves faced isolation or hardship—who led with empathy. Zhu (2020) emphasized the importance of seeing such relational care not as exceptional, but as integral to students' cultural and educational contexts.

In the high school setting, these social strengths became even more pronounced. Students like Jayna, Carmen, and others in the musical theater program demonstrated that success often emerged from mutual investment and peer-led mentorship. During our production of *Hairspray*, students coached one another on choreography, harmonies, and character development. Jayna, who excelled as both a vocalist and dancer, mentored younger cast members informally—offering support not for recognition or reward, but because she believed deeply in shared success. These interactions reflect what Silverman et al. (2023) described as "difference-as-strength," a pedagogical stance in which collective support and cultural responsiveness are affirmed as educational assets rather than ancillary traits.

These peer-to-peer support systems served not only as emotional buffers but also as implicit critiques of the meritocratic, individualistic model embedded in many school

structures. Rather than competing for scarce recognition, my students practiced a kind of interdependence that prioritized community over individual achievement. As Fitzpatrick-Harnish (2015) argued, effective music educators working in economically and culturally diverse contexts often succeed by centering students' existing strengths and validating the communal knowledge they bring to musical spaces. My students' resilience, then, was not simply personal—it was communal, built and sustained through relationships grounded in trust, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Cultural Assets

The cultural assets of this district were equally powerful, revealing themselves most vividly through students' musical instincts, creative practices, and artistic innovations. Many students entered the music classroom already deeply engaged with musical traditions that, while often marginalized in formal education, were rich in complexity, expression, and social meaning. Yosso (2005) described such cultural engagement as part of "community cultural wealth," challenging dominant deficit perspectives by highlighting the artistic, linguistic, and familial knowledge embedded within marginalized communities.

Students brought with them an intuitive understanding of genres such as gospel, hip-hop, R&B, and musical theater. Jayna, for example, excelled not only because of her vocal technique but because of the stylistic authenticity she brought to gospel and musical theater performances. Her interpretive skills reflected a deeply situated musical knowledge that exceeded formal technique, embodying what Templeton (2011) identified as a creative strength cultivated through the lived experiences of poverty.

Similarly, Levi's cultural fluency was evident in the rhythmic, physical storytelling he brought to musical theater—highlighting the value of embodied expression that is often dismissed in Eurocentric paradigms focused solely on technical precision (Bradley, 2012). Levi's instinctive performance drew on traditions of communal celebration and improvisation—traditions that, as Lind and McKoy (2016) argued, must be embraced as legitimate pedagogical foundations in music education.

Students' requests to adapt pop melodies for violin or cello—like Dennis's excitement to play a pop hook on viola—demonstrated musical agency rooted in their cultural environments. These were not distractions from "real" music education but compelling evidence of what Paris and Alim (2017) called sustaining cultural identities through student-centered practices. Lind and McKoy (2016) similarly stressed the value of honoring students' musical preferences as a gateway to deeper artistic engagement and cultural affirmation.

Improvisation emerged as one of the most consistent cultural assets across grade levels. From spontaneous harmonies and body percussion to beat-making and lyric writing, students demonstrated what Yosso (2005) called navigational capital—the ability to adapt and create across contexts despite systemic constraints. Such improvisational fluency also aligned with Milner's (2010) call for recognizing diverse pathways to excellence in learning spaces.

Yet these assets remained largely invisible within the frameworks of state and national standards, which rarely account for communal knowledge systems, oral traditions, or non-notated musical forms. As Regelski (2017) argued, the dominant

curricular emphasis on formal, abstract analysis perpetuates a narrow definition of musicianship, failing to reflect the lived realities and strengths of many students.

By embracing these cultural assets more fully in my teaching, I began to shift my understanding of musical success. Excellence was no longer defined by compliance with Western classical benchmarks, but by artistic expression, cultural authenticity, and relational engagement. While I have not fully dismantled the traditional structures that shape much of my program, I now see my role as one of continuous critical engagement—centering students' identities and voices as core to music education rather than as occasional supplements.

Material Assets

Material conditions in this low-SES district posed undeniable challenges, but they also cultivated forms of resourcefulness and ingenuity that became personal, social, and material assets in their own right. Students and families leveraged limited resources with remarkable creativity, ensuring that access to musical growth remained possible despite systemic neglect. These adaptations reflect what Yosso (2005) describes as *community cultural wealth*—a framework for understanding how marginalized communities develop valuable skills and knowledge that are often overlooked by dominant narratives of success.

Students often worked with broken or low-quality instruments. Many elementary orchestra students used Walmart or Amazon instruments that would have been deemed substandard in wealthier districts. Yet students adapted by taping bridges, adjusting tuning pegs manually, and compensating for missing strings. They normalized these

improvisations and focused on making music rather than perfecting their tools. These material adaptations align with what Templeton (2011) identifies as forms of creativity and resilience cultivated through lived experience in poverty—traits that traditional standards often fail to recognize or reward.

The prevailing assumption that "real" music education requires expensive, high-end equipment deserves interrogation. There are many musical traditions where modesty in material conditions is not a deficit but a defining aesthetic. Gospel, folk, hip-hop, punk, and country music have long embraced tools that are accessible and affordable. In these genres, the artistry lies not in the polish of equipment but in the expressiveness and message of the performance. As Rose (1994) observed, hip-hop artists historically relied on repurposed or low-cost equipment to produce music of extraordinary cultural and technical complexity. Bates (2021) similarly emphasized that poverty can foster creative conditions that are misunderstood as obstacles but are, in fact, generative contexts for innovation.

Several piano students practiced without instruments at home, using apps on borrowed phones or tapping rhythms on kitchen tables. These adaptations built skills in listening, memory, and improvisation. While I initially celebrated these examples as signs of perseverance, I now see that my emphasis on piano and orchestra—two traditions requiring costly personal equipment—may have unintentionally marginalized students whose musical excellence could thrive in genres requiring fewer individual resources. As Fitzpatrick-Harnish (2015) argues, music educators must design learning environments that reflect and build upon the lived strengths of their students, especially in low-income

contexts.

Students' resourcefulness extended beyond instruments. During performing arts class productions, costumes were often pieced together from thrift stores or borrowed from family closets. Students took on roles in stagecraft, costuming, and design through collective problem-solving rather than formal training. These examples of institutional collaboration reflect the importance of community-based arts models where creativity emerges from relationships and shared purpose, not personal wealth. Silverman et al. (2023) describe this model as "difference-as-strength," highlighting how culturally grounded practices offer rich alternatives to dominant educational frameworks.

Material scarcity also shaped the character of performance itself. Cabaret night, for example, was built on student voice and self-expression, not institutional prestige. Without elaborate staging or expensive sound systems, students created performances that resonated deeply with their peers and families. Their investment came from personal identity, emotional authenticity, and solidarity. This reflects a broader cultural truth—many of the world's most influential music traditions, from gospel to reggae, emerged from conditions of scarcity and collective struggle (Rose, 1994; Bates, 2021). In these contexts, modesty is not a limitation but an aesthetic value and political stance.

Communal practices like musical theater and class-wide percussion projects further illustrate how music education does not need to rely on individual access to private instruments. Instead, shared resources, ensemble collaboration, and institutional support can offer accessible, high-quality experiences that affirm student identity and artistry.

These experiences have challenged and reshaped how I think about what it means to be fully resourced in music education. While quality equipment can enhance opportunities, it is not the only—or even the most important—factor in student success. More critical are the artistic practices that emerge from constraint, the mutual investment students show in one another, and the flexibility they bring to learning. In this context, success is not defined by expensive instruments or adherence to elite norms, but by what students create and share through their ingenuity, cultural knowledge, and collective strength. This recognition continues to guide my evolving understanding of pedagogy and reminds me that affirming student excellence sometimes requires rethinking what excellence looks like in the first place.

Research Question #5: What alternative, asset-based standards could be considered in my efforts to conceptualize, define, and foster success in this low SES school music program?

In conceptualizing, defining, and fostering success within a low-SES school music program, alternative, asset-based standards must center the holistic development of students as artists, culture-bearers, and community members. Rather than reinforcing rigid technical expectations rooted in Western classical traditions, these standards should emphasize cultural relevance, personal growth, creative expression, and community connection. Drawing from critical theory (Regelski, 2021), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), and antiracist education (Love, 2019), success must be reimagined not as assimilation to dominant norms, but as the flourishing of students' existing talents, cultural wealth, and lived realities.

As I reflected on this necessary redefinition, I asked myself: If I were an adjudicator seeking to empower students historically excluded by traditional music standards, what would my criteria prioritize? What strengths, too often overlooked, would take center stage? Rather than emphasizing sight-reading, harmonic analysis, or fidelity to a narrow canon, these alternative standards would validate students' ability to connect with audiences, compose original works, lead peer collaboration, innovate across genres, and infuse performance with emotional and cultural meaning. In short, they would recognize and honor the full range of musicianship that exists beyond Eurocentric frameworks.

But the questions must extend further: If I were to design a music program that reflected the strengths, interests, and cultural practices of my students and community, what would it include? Musical theater, without question, would be central to the school day. Performing arts and popular music ensembles would have equal or greater weight than traditional orchestra. It may be possible to reframe the orchestral model into a more culturally responsive ensemble—one that preserves string instruments but adopts the flexible, student-driven structure of a modern band class. A songwriting course could invite students to explore their own narratives and musical identities, while a production and mixing class might equip them with tools for music-making in real-world contexts. Perhaps new performance opportunities would need to be created to replace adjudications that privilege formalized aesthetics, with community-centered showcases that reward innovation, collaboration, and personal expression. These possibilities require imagining not just how success is measured, but what—and whom—our programs are built to serve.

Justice in music education demands not only expanding access to existing benchmarks but fundamentally interrogating their legitimacy. Asset-based standards reposition success away from technical compliance and toward dynamic expressions of identity, artistry, and collective resilience. They allow students' brilliance to be seen, not through a lens of deficit, but through cultural affirmation, creativity, and critical engagement with the world.

In response to the limitations of traditional music education models—and in alignment with the evolving needs and strengths of my students—I have begun restructuring the program itself. New course offerings such as Performing Arts, a Percussion Lab for beginners, and a Music Technology class were developed to provide more accessible, culturally relevant pathways into music-making. These classes prioritize student voice, creative risk-taking, and collaborative expression over rigid technical conformity. While orchestra remains a required part of the curriculum, my teaching now extends beyond classical frameworks to embrace broader definitions of success. These curricular shifts represent an intentional move away from Eurocentric norms and toward a more inclusive, justice-oriented approach. The alternative standards outlined below offer a framework for conceptualizing, defining, and fostering success in a way that aligns with the values, strengths, and aspirations of students in historically marginalized communities.

Alternative, Asset-Based Standards for Student Success in Music Education

1. **Musical Expression and Engagement**

   Success is reflected in students' ability to create, interpret, and engage with music

in ways that resonate with their lived experiences. Whether through freestyle rap, gospel harmonization, beat production, or improvisation, students demonstrate artistic achievement by expressing themselves authentically and meaningfully through music (Paris & Alim, 2017).

2. **Creative Independence and Cultural Ownership**

   Students perform, adapt, and reinterpret music rooted in their own communities, honoring traditions and knowledge systems often marginalized by formal adjudication frameworks. Artistic ownership is demonstrated through remixing, innovation, and cultural pride (Bradley, 2006; Hess, 2007).

3. **Challenging Systemic Barriers**

   Success includes students' ability to navigate inequities such as lack of private instruction, limited transportation, or underfunded programs. Resilience, advocacy, and adaptation are viewed as powerful indicators of achievement in oppressive systems (Love, 2019; Stovall, 2013).

4. **Culturally Sustaining Musicianship**

   Students sustain, celebrate, and adapt their musical traditions through oral learning, improvisation, and collaboration, reinforcing the validity and rigor of non-notated practices (Paris & Alim, 2017; Stovall, 2013).

5. **Music for Social Justice and Racial Equity**

   Students engage with the sociopolitical dimensions of music, using artistic expression to critique injustice, affirm identity, and support collective healing (Love, 2019; Stovall, 2013).

6. **Collaborative Growth and Accountability**

   Students build knowledge collectively through peer critique, shared decision-making, and ensemble cohesion. Success reflects process-oriented growth and ethical engagement, rather than individual technical mastery (Paris & Alim, 2017; Emdin, 2016).

7. **Repertoire Relevance and Cultural Affirmation**

   Students co-select music that reflects cultural identities and community values, rejecting rigid repertoire lists in favor of meaningful, student-informed choices (Bradley, 2006; Regelski, 2009).

8. **Multiple Ways of Knowing and Valuing**

   Evaluations of musical work incorporate emotional, communal, and symbolic significance, not just structural or theoretical analysis, grounding assessment in diverse epistemologies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Regelski, 2009).

9. **Authentic Presence and Student Voice**

   Leadership, self-expression, and presence are assessed through gesture, verbal cueing, movement, and cultural markers of agency. Success honors students' full participation in embodied, culturally grounded ways (Love, 2019; Emdin, 2016).

10. **Lifelong Musicking and Personal Empowerment**

    Success is redefined as students' sustained engagement with music as a lifelong practice of expression, healing, and cultural participation. Whether performing professionally, composing personally, or leading community ensembles, students leave music education with the confidence and skills to make music part of their

identities beyond school (Green, 2014).

In answering Research Question 5, this repositioning of standards fundamentally recasts success through an asset-based lens, affirming the social, cultural, and creative capital that students bring into musical spaces. By adopting standards that center community, cultural sustainability, innovation, and social consciousness, music education can move beyond deficit frameworks and toward a future where all students—particularly those historically marginalized—are empowered to define and achieve success on their own terms.

As the traditional NAfME standards prioritize Western classical traditions, technical proficiency, and performance-based assessment, they often marginalize students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. In response, a reimagined framework for music education must center on students' lived experiences, cultural identities, and personal growth. The table below presents a direct comparison between dominant music education standards presented in traditional metrics from NAfME (National Core Arts Standards, 2014) and a state association audition form (PMEA, 2016) and the proposed asset-based standards that more equitably define success in a low-SES, predominantly Black school music program.

Table 2: Comparison of Dominant Music Education Standards and Asset-Based Standards

Dominant Music Education Standards	Proposed Asset-Based Standards
Creating: Compose and improvise musical ideas that reflect characteristics of music studied in rehearsal (MU:Cr1.1.E.IIIa)	**Musical Expression and Engagement:** Students create and interpret music rooted in their lived experiences, such as freestyle, making beats, or other improvisational music-making, affirming cultural identity and shared realities (Paris & Alim 2017).
Performing: Demonstrate technical accuracy and expressive qualities in performance (MU:Pr6.1.E.IIIa); PMEA: "Facility, flexibility, precision."	**Creative Independence and Cultural Ownership:** Students perform, adapt, and innovate music from their own communities, honoring traditions and knowledge often devalued in elite, Eurocentric adjudication (Bradley, 2006; Hess 2017).
Responding: Explain interpretations of musical intent citing treatment of elements, context, and structure (MU:Re8.1.E.IIIa)	**Challenging Systemic Barriers:** Students are recognized for interpreting music in ways that reflect their positionality and resilience, including navigating cultural dissonance in school spaces and using music as a form of resistance and healing (Love, 2019; Stovall, 2013).
Connecting: Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and varied contexts, disciplines, and daily life (MU:Cn10.0.H.IIIa & MU:Cn11.0.T.IIIa)	**Culturally Sustaining Musicianship:** Students connect music to their families, histories, and community traditions through storytelling, collaboration, and peer learning, preserving culture while simultaneously fostering innovation (Paris & Alim, 2017; Stovall; 2013).
Standardized Technical Proficiency: Emphasis on tone, intonation, accuracy, and adherence to traditional notation and stylistic conventions (PMEA Adjudication Forms)	**Music for Social Justice and Racial Equity:** Musical growth includes students' use of music to affirm identity, critique injustice, and engage in personal and community healing, rather than measuring only technical achievement (Love, 2019; Stovall, 2013).

Rehearse, Evaluate, Refine: Evaluate and refine performances using teacher and peer feedback (MU:Pr5.3.E.IIIa)	**Collaborative Growth and Accountability:** Students co-construct musical understanding through peer feedback and collective reflection, valuing process, growth, and relational learning over perfection (Paris & Alim, 2017; Emdin, 2016).
Selecting Repertoire: Choose music based on technical difficulty, form, and performance context (MU:Pr4.1.E.IIIa); PMEA: "Choice of Repertoire"	**Repertoire Relevance and Cultural Affirmation:** Music is selected collaboratively with students to reflect community identities, affirm local traditions, and ensure cultural responsiveness (Bradley, 2006; Regelski, 2009)
Evaluate: Justify evaluations of performances using formal criteria (MU:Re9.1.E.IIIa)	**Multiple Ways of Knowing and Valuing:** Students assess music through culturally grounded values such as emotional impact, innovation, and community meaning, not just structure and theory (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Regelski, 2009)
Other Factors (PMEA): Conduct, Confidence, Appearance, Response to Conductor (evaluated but not scored)	**Authentic Presence and Student Voice:** Student agency, leadership, and presence, through movement, gesture, verbal cues, and cultural expression, are honored as meaningful indicators of musical engagement (Love, 2019; Emdin, 2016).
Relationships to Music: Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music, the arts, disciplines, and daily life (MU:Cn11.0.T.IIIa)	**Lifelong Musicking and Personal Empowerment:** The goal of music education extends beyond schooling to lifelong engagement, supporting personal well-being, identity development, and communal artistry across diverse musical and cultural landscapes (Green, 2014).

Conclusion

Conceptualizing success in a school music program where racism and classism intersect requires a fundamental rethinking of the values. Educators must reconsider whose interests are prioritized, and how achievement is defined and measured. Traditional models rooted in Western classical traditions have long centered whiteness, affluence, and technical mastery, reinforcing systems that reward privilege while

marginalizing students whose cultural knowledge and lived experiences fall outside those narrow parameters.

Guided by critical theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and antiracist education, this dissertation challenges dominant paradigms by offering alternative, asset-based standards grounded in student identity, resilience, creativity, and cultural relevance. In this reframed model, success is not determined by adjudication scores or adherence to Eurocentric performance practices. Instead, it is measured by students' ability to use music as a tool for personal expression, cultural affirmation, community connection, and social transformation.

Reflecting on my experience as a white, middle-class educator in a predominantly Black, low-income school community, I have seen how deeply institutionalized racism and classism shape expectations, resources, and outcomes. Yet within these systemic constraints, students consistently redefine success on their own terms. Students who teach themselves harmonies by ear during lunch, choreograph original movements for performances, explain the cultural significance of a gospel lyric to their peers, or support one another through music in times of hardship—all without access to private instruction or formal theory classes—demonstrate mastery that transcends traditional rubrics. Their artistry, creativity, cultural pride, and mutual care represent a kind of success that is often invisible to conventional assessments but central to the purpose of education.

As I described in earlier sections, I have struggled at times to name or fully understand the weight of my own racial and socioeconomic privilege within this context. My intentions have not always aligned with outcomes. I have made missteps, centering

my own values or approaches over the lived experiences of students. But through reflection, student feedback, and sustained engagement with critical scholarship, I have begun to revise my pedagogy and redefine success in more culturally affirming, student-centered terms.

The goal is not simply to expand existing models of music education but to fundamentally reimagine whose knowledge is honored, whose artistry is recognized, and whose definitions of excellence are centered. Western classical music may still have a place, but it must no longer occupy a singular position of prestige. It must be decentered and positioned as one valuable tradition among many, rather than the universal benchmark of success. Moving forward, music educators must continue asking: Who defines success? Whose voices shape the curriculum? Whose cultures are sustained, and whose are silenced?

This work remains ongoing. I continue to question, revise, and rebuild my own practices. While this dissertation offers one pathway forward, it is not the only one. It is a contribution to a larger, collective journey toward more equitable, culturally sustaining, and justice-oriented music education. I invite fellow educators, scholars, and community members to engage in this reimagining—not as a fixed destination, but as an evolving process of learning, unlearning, and co-creating spaces where all students can thrive. Only by re-centering student assets and redefining success can music education begin to reflect the communities it serves and fully support all students in cultivating lifelong, empowering relationships with music.

APPENDIX

Figure 1

Before the Merger: 1979

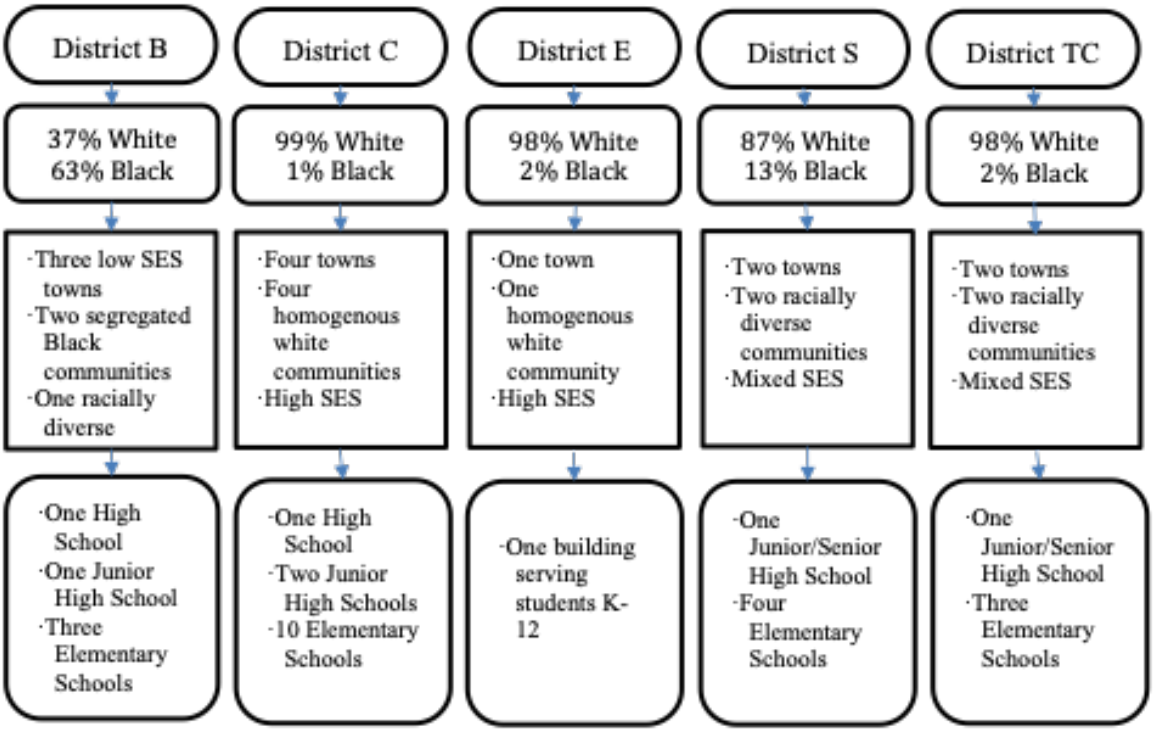
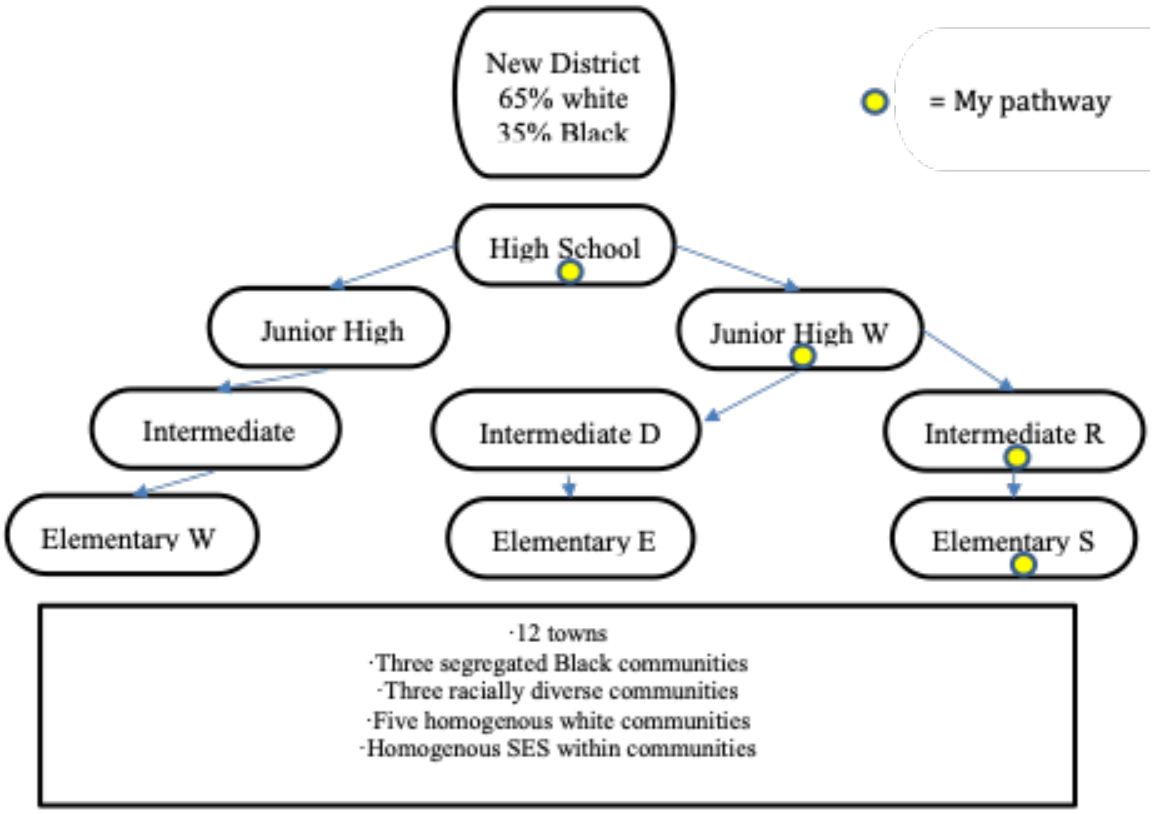


Figure 2

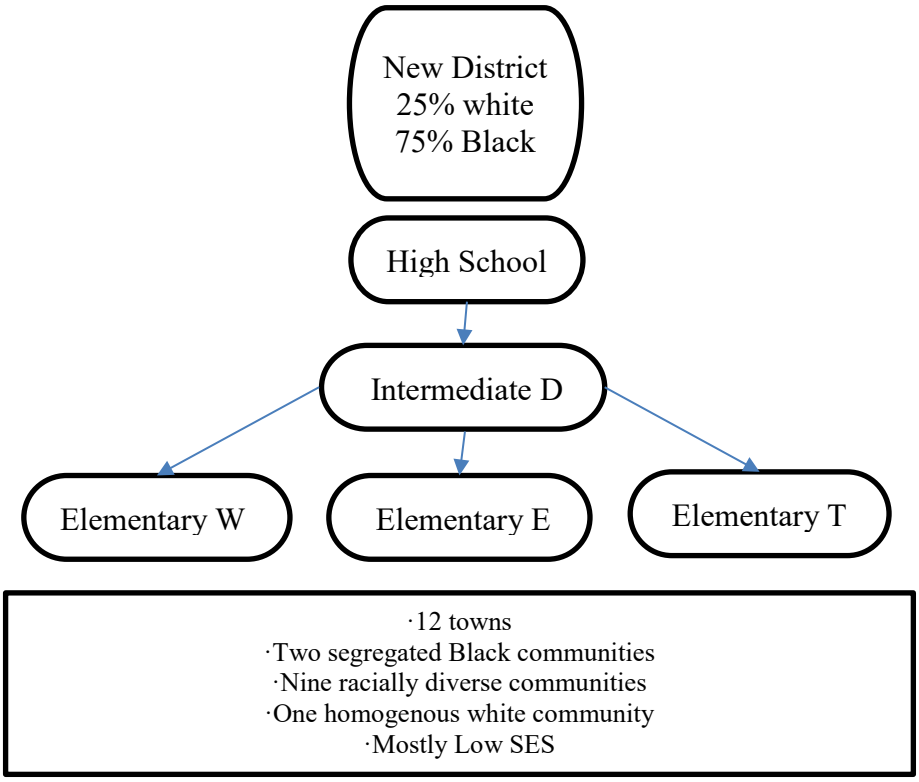
After the Merger: 1985–1998



Note. All schools are racially and economically diverse due to the merger which forced transportation options across the newly formed district.

Figure 3

After the Merger: 2024



Note. All schools are mixed race and mixed SES within communities. Enrollment has drastically decreased based on this configuration.

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