Developing music-specific culturally responsive teaching professional development: an autoethnographic action research study

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Article Info

Highlights:
- Autoethnographic action research informed three CRT-focused professional development sessions for music educators.
- Participants increased CRT awareness but struggled to apply strategies beyond repertoire diversification.
- Equity audits and reflective activities enhanced educators' data-driven, culturally responsive practices.
- Time constraints, professional isolation, and presenter misconceptions hindered the effective implementation of CRT.
- Recommendations include real-world modeling, extended collaboration, and ongoing coaching for sustainable CRT.

Abstract

This study employs Autoethnographic Action Research to investigate the design and implementation of professional development sessions on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in music education within the state of Virginia. Previous literary research underscores the pressing need for educational practices that foster equity, understanding, and respect for diverse cultural backgrounds. The professional development sessions were designed to support music educators to move beyond diversifying repertoire to developing a deep understanding of students' cultural backgrounds, engaging in reflective practices, and undergoing transformative learning experiences. Field notes on participant discussions revealed that while participants demonstrated growth in CRT awareness and strategies, challenges such as discomfort with discussions on race, limitations in applying CRT beyond repertoire, and constraints of time and resources persisted. The study identifies significant issues in professional development for music educators, including time constraints, isolation, and a lack of relevant, discipline-specific training. Key findings suggest that effective CRT requires educators to deconstruct existing teaching practices, confront their own biases, and actively seek resources and strategies that align with students' diverse cultural backgrounds. The incorporation of real-life examples, collaborative lesson planning, and reflective activities within professional development sessions emerged as essential for enhancing educators' confidence and competence in CRT.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the importance of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) has been increasingly recognized as essential to fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Initially coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) as *culturally relevant pedagogy*, the concept emphasizes empowering students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by incorporating cultural referents into all aspects of teaching. Geneva Gay (2018) later expanded this work, articulating CRT as an approach that affirms students' cultural identities and adapts instruction to reflect cultural diversity. More recently, Zaretta Hammond (2015) has linked CRT to cognitive development, advocating for strategies that enhance student learning by aligning teaching practices with students' cultural experiences.

In music education, CRT necessitates a comprehensive approach that goes beyond diversifying the repertoire. It involves a deep understanding of students' cultural backgrounds, sustained reflective practice, and transformative professional development experiences that enable educators to critically examine their own assumptions and positionalities. Research indicates that CRT can significantly enhance student engagement, motivation, and academic success (Bradley, 2006; Abril & Gault, 2007). However, music educators often lack discipline-specific professional development opportunities that facilitate the meaningful application of CRT in their classrooms (Koza, 2008; Shaw, 2012). Existing CRT training often targets general education contexts or preservice teachers, providing limited guidance for in-service music educators who must implement culturally responsive practices in highly specialized instructional settings. This study addresses that gap by exploring how music-specific CRT professional development can be designed and implemented to support in-service music educators. It seeks to answer the research question: How can professional development for music educators be designed and implemented to support the effective adoption and practice of culturally responsive teaching, and what challenges and solutions arise from this process? By examining the experiences and reflections of both participating educators and the facilitator, the study identifies effective strategies and common challenges in adopting CRT practices. Through a dual lens of autoethnographic and action research, this paper presents insights into the evolving nature of CRT in music education and offers practical considerations for designing transformative and sustainable professional learning experiences.

Literature

The concept of CRT has evolved over time, with numerous scholars contributing to its definition and application. Gloria Ladson-Billings is widely credited with coining the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" in the mid-1990s. She defined it as a pedagogical approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Her work emphasizes engaging learners whose cultures and lived experiences have traditionally been excluded from mainstream curricula and instructional practices. Geneva Gay further expands this foundation, offering a more detailed articulation of culturally responsive teaching and advocating for its integration across all areas of instruction. Gay (2018) highlights the importance of affirming students' cultural identities while adapting teaching to reflect cultural diversity. Building on these foundational works, Zaretta Hammond (2015) deepens the conversation by connecting CRT with cognitive development, describing culturally responsive instruction as an approach that fosters independent learning by increasing students' brainpower through culturally aligned strategies. In the context of music education, CRT aims to create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment by incorporating students' cultural identities, experiences, and perspectives into the curriculum and teaching practices. Key concepts in CRT include recognizing cultural diversity, understanding the importance of cultural competence among educators, and the need for curriculum and instructional practices that reflect the cultural backgrounds of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By acknowledging and integrating students' cultural identities into the curriculum, educators can create a more relevant and meaningful learning experience for students from diverse backgrounds.

Several theories support the principles of CRT in music education. Transformative learning theory, developed by Mezirow (1991), provides a valuable lens for understanding the profound shifts in perception and practice that culturally responsive teaching often necessitates. According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when individuals encounter a "disorienting dilemma" that challenges their previously held beliefs, prompting critical reflection and a reassessment of assumptions. This reflection can lead to a transformation in worldview and behavior. In the context of CRT professional development for music educators, such dilemmas arise when teachers acknowledge that their repertoire choices, teaching methods, or classroom norms may reflect unconscious cultural biases or exclude the lived experiences of their students. For example, a teacher realizing that a "diverse" piece chosen for performance does not align with students' actual cultural identities

represents a transformative moment—one that initiates deeper inquiry and pedagogical change. By incorporating reflective activities, equity audits, and community engagement, the CRT sessions in this study were intentionally designed to promote the kind of critical reflection Mezirow describes. Teachers participated in cycles of reflection, discussion, and implementation, leading many to reconsider their assumptions and begin shifting their instructional practices in more culturally responsive directions. Villegas and Lucas (2002) provide a complementary perspective by introducing the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy as a dynamic and reflective teaching approach that takes into account students' cultural referents in every aspect of learning. Their model emphasizes six key characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, including sociocultural consciousness, affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, and a commitment to building caring learning communities. Central to their framework is the belief that cultural diversity is not a challenge to be overcome but a rich resource to be leveraged in the teaching and learning process. This perspective highlights the necessity of teacher reflexivity and the ongoing adaptation of pedagogical practices to meet students' cultural and academic needs.

In the context of professional development, Villegas and Lucas's emphasis on teacher identity and critical reflection serves as a foundational guide for helping educators recognize their cultural biases and assumptions. Culturally responsive educators, according to their perspective, actively work to restructure their teaching by drawing on students' cultural strengths to facilitate deeper learning and engagement. This study builds on that foundation by designing PD experiences that invite music educators to explore their sociocultural consciousness through tools like equity audits, data reflection, and collaborative dialogue. Furthermore, Howard (2003) expands on the concept of cultural competence, emphasizing the need for educators to possess a deep understanding and appreciation of their cultural identities and biases as a prerequisite for effectively engaging with students from diverse backgrounds. Howard's work highlights the importance of self-awareness and ongoing personal reflection among educators to foster genuine and meaningful connections with students as a means to improve student performance and provide a more positive classroom climate (Howard 2001). Furthermore, interpretations of Howard's work position professional development efforts as a solution to deficits in cultural competence.

Banks and McGee Banks (2010) contribute to the discourse on culturally responsive teaching by advocating for the integration of multicultural education principles into the curriculum. They argue that a multicultural curriculum, which includes a diverse representation of cultural narratives and perspectives, not only promotes equity and inclusivity but also prepares students for citizenship in a multicultural society. In the context of music education, this involves incorporating music from various cultures and historical contexts into the teaching repertoire, thereby enriching students' musical experiences and understanding. Koza (2008) critiques the Eurocentric bias prevalent in traditional music education curricula and advocates for a more inclusive approach that recognizes and values musical diversity. Koza's analysis calls for a reassessment of the music canon taught in schools, arguing for the inclusion of non-Western music traditions and genres to reflect the global nature of music and to validate the cultural identities of students from diverse backgrounds. Bradley (2006) conducted a study examining the effects of culturally responsive teaching strategies on student engagement and learning in music classrooms. The findings suggest that when educators implement teaching practices that are reflective of and sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of their students, there is a notable increase in student participation, motivation, and academic achievement in music education. Bradley's research underscores the practical benefits of CRT, providing evidence of its positive impact on student outcomes. Research findings in the field of music education support the effectiveness of CRT in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. For example, studies have shown that incorporating culturally relevant music into the curriculum can increase students' interest and motivation in learning (Abril & Gault, 2014). Overall, the literature on culturally responsive teaching in music education highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds in the learning process. By incorporating CRT principles into their teaching practices, music educators can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment that benefits all students, regardless of their cultural background. The readings above heavily influenced the design of the professional development sessions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs Autoethnographic Action Research to explore how professional development (PD) for in-service music educators supports the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT). This dual methodology combines the personal reflection of autoethnography with the iterative cycles of action research, enabling the researchers to refine PD practices while engaging participants in transformative learning experiences.

Hickey and Austin (2007) discuss how "the cyclical nature of action research is echoed in autoethnographic work, whereby the initial provocation to inquiry… is engaged and interrogated so that formative understandings of Self are generated and located back onto the social dynamic as elements of individual Identity formation." By investigating CRT principles through a cultural lens, the study examines both teacher and facilitator growth, capturing the dynamic interplay between individual insights and collective implementation.

Autoethnography offers a lens through which to reflect on Author 1's personal experiences as a professional development facilitator, capturing the intersection of identity, pedagogy, and cultural responsiveness. Anteliz, Mulligan, and Danaher (2022) write:

> Autoethnography opens windows into the aspirations, assumptions and outcomes of individuals and groups involved in learning, teaching, leading educational sites and systems, framing curricula, assessing learning and teaching, and evaluating the impacts of educational programs and courses… Autoethnography also yields greater awareness of the fundamental relationship between 'self' and 'other/s,' including how that relationship is constructed and mediated in the context of formal, non-formal and informal learning…

The reflection of assumptions and increased awareness that autoethnography supports aligns closely with the goals of culturally responsive education. This was particularly significant given Author 1's role as a white educator facilitating discussions on CRT, which required critical self-reflection on bias, privilege, and positionality. Action research complemented this by emphasizing a continuous cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—allowing for the refinement of both the PD sessions and the facilitation methods. Together, these approaches highlight the evolving nature of CRT and underscore the necessity of both personal and collaborative growth.

Participants

The participants in this study were in-service music educators teaching in public schools throughout Virginia. While several educators attended at least one professional development session, three participants attended all three sessions and are the primary focus of this study's analysis. These three individuals brought a diverse range of experiences, teaching contexts, and identities to the professional development space, enriching the collaborative learning process.

The first participant was a white female teacher with 34 years of experience teaching high school chorus. As a veteran educator, she offered historical insight and a long-term perspective on shifts in student engagement and school culture. The second participant was a white male teacher in his 9th year of teaching, specializing in high school audio production. His insights often reflected a practical, tech-integrated approach to music education, particularly in engaging students through popular music and digital media. The third participant was a Latina female teacher in her 3rd year of teaching elementary general music. As a newer teacher, she frequently brought questions rooted in her early-career challenges and opportunities, especially concerning inclusive classroom management and community-building with younger students.

All participants voluntarily chose to engage in the professional development sessions to deepen their understanding of culturally responsive teaching. They represented a diverse cross-section of music education roles—choral, production-based, and elementary general music—and provided valuable insights into how CRT principles may be applied across different music teaching environments.

Data Collection

Data collection included several autoethnographic and qualitative tools. Field notes captured the researchers' observations, experiences, and adjustments during each session. Participants completed pre- and post-surveys to assess changes in confidence and perceptions of CRT, and follow-up interviews were conducted with a subset of participants. Each session also included collaborative dialogue, in which participants shared their experiences and ideas, contributing additional contextual insight. Because some participants expressed discomfort being recorded, especially when discussing topics related to race, only written notes were collected. This decision aligned with the ethical commitment to creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights across multiple sources. Themes emerged around participants' struggles with implementing CRT, their evolving perceptions of student engagement, and the influence of relationships on classroom practices. Reflexivity was central to the process, as the researchers continually examined their own assumptions and biases. By integrating participant data with autoethnographic reflections, the analysis provided a holistic understanding of CRT's impact on educators and their professional development experiences.

The action research process unfolded in four iterative cycles: I) Planning – Designing sessions based on CRT frameworks and tools such as vignettes, equity audits, and discussion prompts. II) Acting – Facilitating the sessions and guiding collaborative activities focused on culturally responsive instruction. III) Observing – Capturing insights through field notes, session artifacts, and participant interactions. IV) Reflecting – Synthesizing findings to inform future sessions and enhance the professional development framework. Each session built upon insights from the previous one, creating a feedback loop that supported continuous improvement.

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent and were fully aware of the study's goals and their role in the process. To maintain anonymity, identifying details were removed from quotes, and no video or audio recordings were taken. Ethical decision-making was informed by ongoing reflexivity, especially considering Author 1's dual role as both facilitator and researcher. Feedback from participants was used to inform both facilitation style and session design, helping to mitigate power dynamics and support trust-building throughout the process.

Limitations

As with all autoethnographic research, researcher subjectivity is an inherent limitation. The perspectives and interpretations presented may be shaped by the researcher's own experience and positionality. However, the use of reflexive practice, participant validation, and multiple data sources helped balance this subjectivity. The participant sample, although rich in narrative detail, may not accurately represent the broader population of music educators, particularly those from other geographic regions or school types. Additionally, the dual role of Author 1 as facilitator and observer may have influenced participant openness. Future studies could expand on these findings by engaging a larger and more diverse participant group and by investigating the long-term effects of CRT-focused professional development.

RESULTS

Professional Development Design & Implementation

When developing the three professional development sessions, the researchers employed a method of continuous learning through activities that focused on the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching. The professional development sessions were structured using literature from the above literature section but primarily drew from the book "Culturally Responsive Teaching in Music Education; From Understanding to Application" by McKoy and Lind (2022) to guide the sessions and spark discussion. The sessions heavily utilized discussion and reflection techniques with prompts such as quotes, posters, and other resources. The first session uses vignettes from the Lind and McKoy book to illustrate examples of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom, followed by small group and large group discussions. Through these discussions and narratives, the topic of culture and whose culture is prioritized in the classroom emerges, offering teachers an opportunity to reflect on how their curriculum, instruction, and classroom activities might benefit certain populations over others. This is achieved by discussing the repertoire performed or selected in class and how students may have opportunities to share their own music. Three culturally responsive teaching characteristics are emphasized to structure the sessions: cultural lens, relationships, and data. The first characteristic of culturally responsive teaching provides a framework for reflection time. Gay (2018) states that culturally responsive educators must recognize "that people view the world and life through different lenses." This characteristic encourages teachers to reflect on their own culture and cultural lens. The second characteristic is also explored, focusing on relationships or partnerships with students, families, and the surrounding community. Both Gay (2018) and Hammond (2015) discuss caring and partnership with students as critical to being a successful culturally responsive educator.

The second session focuses on providing teachers with resources and examples of how to apply culturally responsive teaching in their music classrooms and capture student growth through data. Teachers have the opportunity to discuss how these methods could benefit their classrooms and explore available resources. This session shifts the conversation from repertoire to other aspects of classroom instruction that can be culturally responsive. Teachers bring in class data to conduct an equity audit, identifying students who may be struggling more than their peers and looking for any present trends. The third characteristic of culturally responsive teaching is explained, emphasizing the development of a curriculum that is both rigorous and relevant to the students in the classroom. According to Gay (2018), "effective teaching and learning for diverse students are contingent upon the thorough disaggregation of achievement data by student demographics and types of academic skill." Teachers select a few resources or culturally responsive techniques they plan to implement.

The third session serves as a workshop, utilizing data gathered by attending teachers. In small groups, teachers examine the data they collected, beginning to analyze it while searching for patterns and trends both before and after applying culturally responsive techniques. Educators have the opportunity to share their experiences with resources or techniques and discuss their impact on their classrooms (Bauer, 2007; Conway, 2007). This session concludes with the entire group reconvening to share insights, challenges, successes, and aspirations for the future before parting ways. The breakdown of these sessions is illustrated in Figure 7, along with activities that align with the culturally responsive characteristics from the methodology. Personal impacting factors were often considered naturally through discussion during each session.

Figure 1. Breakdown of Sessions

	Session I	Session II	Session III
Culturally Responsive Characteristic	Reflection on cultural lens & relationships in/with the community	Equity Audit: Review of data from the classroom	Synthesis based on data
Learning Process Step	Pre-Assessment	Research & Implementation	Post-Assessment
Activities/Tools Utilized	Vignettes from Lind & McKoy Discussion Prompt: "What is it like to play (via mp3 or live performance) music that you identify with/like for others; friends, peers, colleagues, family, etc?" Personal Lens Worksheet Small group discussion on "otherness."	Living Document of Resources Presentation of examples in the music classroom Review of Equity Audits Discussion on what we could utilize now for our classrooms.	Workshop ideas in small groups Analyze data from equity audit Small group and large group discussions on the journey and what has been discovered.

Several tools were used intentionally throughout the professional development to guide teacher reflection and foster culturally responsive implementation. One key tool introduced in the first session was the Personal Lens Worksheet, designed to help educators reflect on how their cultural upbringing influences their perceptions of school, music, and student behavior. Questions included: "Review primary messages from your upbringing: "What did your parents, neighbors, and other authority figures tell you respect looked like? Disrespect?" and "What got you shunned or shamed in your family?" These questions prompted deep reflection on the unspoken norms teachers carry into the classroom and encouraged them to consider how those norms might differ from their students' lived experiences.

In the second session, teachers engaged in an Equity Audit, adapted from more general equity tools to better suit music educators. This audit guided participants to assess classroom participation data, ensemble placement, solo opportunities, and repertoire choices. These audits led teachers to discover more trends in the classroom and teaching. For example, discovering that most of the repertoire chosen by the teacher were from white composers or that the leadership positions in the class were occupied by mostly male students.

Additionally, a Presentation of Examples in the Music Classroom tool was used to showcase how culturally responsive strategies can be implemented across various music education contexts. Teachers were encouraged to share examples from their own practice and were introduced to curated resources supporting inclusive, equity-centered teaching. Teachers also shared and explored a range of classroom tools and websites that support culturally responsive teaching. These included: I) Blurring the Binary: A site dedicated to helping music educators use affirming language and practices to support transgender and nonbinary students. II) "You Might Be Left With Silence When You're Done": A NAfME article on identifying and removing racist works from music libraries while replacing them with inclusive repertoire. III) Smithsonian Folkways Lesson Plans: A free library of global music traditions with lesson plans tied to historical, cultural, and musical context. IV) Decolonizing the Music Room: A platform offering tools for critical self-reflection and resources for dismantling Eurocentrism in music education. V) Music by Black Composers: A directory and collection of living composers of African descent, with repertoire appropriate for various levels and ensemble types. VI) Jodie Blackshaw's Female Band Composers List: A searchable list highlighting underrepresented women composers in the wind band field.

These resources, along with peer examples and facilitator guidance, helped participants envision practical, content-specific ways to make CRT a living, breathing part of their instruction. The inclusion of diverse musical genres, composer identities, and cultural practices ensured that each teacher, regardless of grade level or ensemble type, could find meaningful, relevant strategies aligned with their teaching context.

The sessions spanned three months to allow teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching techniques and continuously improve their approach while observing the effects on their students. Data for further research was also collected with the aim of future publications. Before participating in the sessions, teachers took a survey measuring their confidence in applying culturally responsive teaching techniques and their perceptions of student engagement in their classrooms. After the third session, teachers who attended all three sessions were given the same survey to assess their confidence in applying the techniques and their perceptions of student engagement. They were also allowed to participate in a follow-up interview about their views on student engagement, aimed at determining whether culturally responsive pedagogy had shifted teachers' perceptions of classroom engagement.

While the original sessions were planned to be in-person, they were subsequently moved to an online platform via Zoom to increase accessibility. The final session was also conducted one-on-one for some teachers due to scheduling conflicts. The researchers took field notes during the sessions since many participants felt uncomfortable being recorded due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Challenges in CRT Implementation: Discussion within the PD

During the professional development sessions, the researchers' field notes indicated that most educators focused heavily on the repertoire in their classrooms to build cultural responsiveness but struggled to apply the pedagogy to other aspects of their teaching. Often, the repertoire chosen for, with, or by students was viewed as sufficient for being culturally responsive. However, while the repertoire may have been diverse in sound or origin, it may not have accurately reflected the actual culture of the students in the room or even made assumptions about student culture based on race or appearance. For example, in a choral classroom, a piece sung in Spanish might be selected simply because there are Spanish-speaking students present, but if the song originates from Argentina and the students are from El Salvador, the song doesn't necessarily represent their cultures, and the Spanish pronunciation may differ from their own dialect. Some educators grappled with their perceptions of their capability to teach certain skills or repertoire due to their lack of knowledge or experience. For instance, some teachers found it challenging to cover repertoire related to African American spirituals because they did not identify as African American and felt discomfort over their own knowledge or fear of cultural appropriation. Other instructional aspects were discussed but were not always seen as culturally responsive by participants, such as providing additional uniform options for LGBTQ+ students or employing resources for sight-impaired students during sight reading. Instead, participants often concentrated on being culturally responsive based on factors like race and religion. Youth and popular culture also emerged as a controversial factor in the classroom, as teachers provided opportunities for their students to share the music they enjoy. Teachers faced challenges in screening music for inappropriate language in time for class, screening songs in languages other than English, feeling unsure or reluctant to address swearing in mainstream music with students, and a hesitance to perform popular music, as some educators regard it as less valuable for developing music literacy and performance skills. While many teachers struggled with incorporating popular music in their classrooms, others found small ways to integrate it through activities or projects, with very few making popular music the foundation of their curriculum.

Many perceptions of culturally responsive teaching emerged in the discussion, ranging from a necessary practice to the belief that the pedagogy is "just good teaching." Educators examined their views on what constitutes "just good teaching" versus what they deemed specifically culturally responsive, mentioning strategies like partnering with families, fostering a warm and welcoming environment, and making efforts to try new approaches to enhance student learning, which they did not see as inherently culturally responsive. A few educators grappled with the notion that some of their typical practices might stem from their own cultural biases, such as favoring certain genres of music over others or prioritizing musical literacy and performance over the creation and improvisation of music.

Religion was also brought up as a potential "trigger" or source of discomfort when performing sacred music in a choral context. Some teachers discovered that songs they assumed were widely recognized, like "I Saw Three Ships," a Christmas carol, were not as well known among students now compared to previous years. Upon reflection, they acknowledged that having a more culturally diverse class significantly influenced what was considered common knowledge among students. Some teachers shared their personal challenges in finding a variety of music from different religions and had avoided sacred music as a consequence. Others have opted to refrain from labeling concerts as "Christmas" or "Holiday" concerts and instead have settled on seasonal titles like "Spring" or "Winter" concerts.

DISCUSSION

The Issues Faced

While creating the professional development program, researchers encountered several issues affecting music educators' professional growth. The first issue involved time. Many teachers struggle to find time after work, but music teachers especially have to contend with after-school events and rehearsals, often juggling other musical events or jobs that take up a significant portion of their time outside of school hours. The second issue pertained to distance. Most music educators in the area are the sole music teacher in their school or one of two or three teachers. This can be quite isolating for educators. Combined with the time issue, teachers may find it difficult to travel to meet with other music educators in their county. The substantial differences in music programs across schools also mean that many educators may seek more specifically focused professional development in areas such as music genre or instrument. "Professional development preferences may be related to the specific teaching responsibilities and the area of music in which one teaches, with appropriate, directed professional development experiences needed." (Bauer 2007) Because there are so few music educators per school, individual schools or educators may not perceive a need for professional development focused on their discipline, potentially providing fewer opportunities than other disciplines for gathering. This can lead to the third issue of a lack of understanding from professional development presenters.

Music education can be regarded as a niche topic, and most professional development presenters brought in by schools seldom have teaching experience in music, as the sessions are intended for all educators. Music educators frequently receive professional development on teaching techniques that may not align with their classroom needs or are expected to "figure out" how to adapt a technique for music education. While music educators do their best to apply these techniques with the presenters' guidance, the actual application may not reflect the teaching theory itself due to a presenter's lack of understanding of the music education field and the music educator's basic understanding of the teaching technique or theory. For example, when presenting on how to become a more culturally responsive educator, presenters may use music to connect with students but could struggle to provide examples of how to apply techniques specifically within the music classroom, beyond using music from a student's culture. A music educator might observe that they are utilizing a diverse range of repertoire in their classroom and believe they are being culturally responsive without delving deeper into the actual instruction and application of that repertoire alongside their classroom activities. "The cultural responsiveness of even the most responsible repertoire choices can be undermined by rehearsal practices that are not congruent with the orientations of ethnically diverse students." (Shaw, 2012)

All of these issues surrounding professional development for music educators highlight the importance of sessions specifically designed for them and the challenges in implementing such sessions. While developing professional development opportunities for music educators in Virginia, the researchers identified ways to address these issues. To accommodate time and distance constraints for music educators, the professional development was adapted to be accessible online. An asynchronous version was also considered; however, the reflective nature of the topic and the need for connection among music educators complicated the ability to facilitate sessions that encourage reflection and meaningful discussions in culturally responsive pedagogy without including a synchronous element.

Considerations

Recognizing the intersectionality of teacher identity and its impact on discussions and insights regarding culturally responsive teaching is crucial. The cultural lens that each participant brings to the session is unique, as is the cultural lens of the facilitator. While all perspectives and lenses are shaped by our diverse lives and the communities to which we belong, it is important to consider viewpoints that may not be present or expressed aloud in the room. As a white educator, Author 1, the facilitator, understood that a significant part of this work revolves around the biases many white educators hold about students of color, and the sessions often highlighted cultural lenses related to race. With all but one of the session participants identifying as white and being led by a white educator, discussions surrounding race could feel uncomfortable, with many participants feeling unqualified to engage in conversations about race, embarrassed by their previous biases, and experiencing 'white guilt' (Leonardo 2016). It is essential to consider the need to address race while engaging in the work of culturally responsive teaching and how facilitators from different racial backgrounds may offer important perspectives and experiences that white facilitators might struggle with, depending on their personal journeys in culturally responsive teaching (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

On the other hand, some may argue that white participants found it easier to discuss race when they were surrounded by other white educators and had a white facilitator. As a community insider, Author 1 had the unique experience of inviting colleagues who usually would not participate in this kind of professional development, working with participants who were her teachers or mentors in music as she was growing up. Author 1, the facilitator, was able to use her connection to the community and her white privilege to guide participants through the uncomfortable process of becoming more culturally responsive, sharing personal stories of recognizing her own bias to foster discussion. These sessions underscored the importance of acknowledging how teacher identity—including race, gender, and community ties—influences professional growth (McIntosh 1988). Embracing intersectionality can deepen educators' understanding of diverse student experiences and enhance their ability to create inclusive learning environments. While all the participants in the professional development are engaged in an ongoing learning process, ideally, the facilitator is also continuing to progress through that journey. When participating in professional development as educators in groups of two or more, it's essential to recognize that the relationships between participants and the facilitator can significantly impact the learning process.

Tensions

Administering professional development in one's home district introduces complex interpersonal and professional dynamics that can influence the overall experience and outcomes of the sessions. Author 1, serving as both a facilitator and a community member where the PD was implemented, faced unique tensions stemming from her dual identity. These tensions were further amplified by the familiarity and shared history among participants, many of whom were colleagues, former teachers, or community peers. This situation created an environment of heightened self-awareness and cautious dialogue, shaping both the process and the participants' responses.

One prominent factor was the interconnectedness of participants. Since all attendees were from the same school district and geographic area and had pre-existing relationships, there was an evident hesitancy in openly expressing thoughts or challenging dominant perspectives. For instance, Participant 3, a senior educator regarded by many as a matriarch within the local teaching community, openly shared her reservations toward CRT. Her history of resistance to CRT concepts created a ripple effect, as other participants became cautious about being perceived as either opposing or endorsing her views too strongly. This dynamic underscores the significant impact that power hierarchies and established social roles can have on professional learning environments (Hammond, 2015; Leonardo, 2016).

For Author 1, these dynamics added another layer of complexity. As an insider within the community, she was keenly aware of the potential for her statements or facilitation style to be scrutinized, misinterpreted, or remembered beyond the PD sessions. This heightened awareness often resulted in moments of self-censorship or a careful balance between fostering transformative discussions and maintaining collegial relationships. Such experiences reflect the broader challenges of navigating insider-outsider dynamics in educational research and practice, particularly when addressing topics that require critical reflection on cultural and social biases (Gay, 2018; Howard, 2003). Research suggests that such tensions are not uncommon in professional development contexts, particularly when facilitators share significant cultural, social, or professional ties with the participants (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010; Cranton, 2016).

After Application: Proposed Changes

After the implementation of professional development, several changes are suggested for future iterations of the sessions. First and foremost, it is essential to recognize that, while culturally responsive teaching is *effective* teaching, it is not synonymous with *good* teaching. As Gay (2018) states, "Individuals who subscribe to this belief fail to realize that their standards of 'goodness' in teaching and learning are culturally determined and are not the same for all ethnic groups." A teacher may excel in their practice according to mainstream standards but may not necessarily be culturally responsive. CRT requires educators to actively learn about their students' cultures, understand how these cultures influence learning, and seek out resources, activities, and lessons that affirm and reflect students' lived experiences.

This process requires educators to deconstruct their existing knowledge and assumptions before building toward a more culturally responsive approach. This deconstruction often presents a disorienting dilemma, a term coined by Mezirow (1991) to describe experiences that challenge an individual's deeply held beliefs and provoke critical reflection. In this study, such dilemmas arose when participants realized that their repertoire choices or classroom norms, though seemingly inclusive, may have unintentionally marginalized certain students. Culturally

responsive PD, then, must go beyond technical skill-building to support this transformative process, which involves emotional vulnerability, self-awareness, and sustained dialogue.

Recent CRT research affirms the findings of this study. For instance, Samuels (2018) found that in-service teachers often begin their CRT journey by diversifying materials but eventually move toward deeper reflection and practice—a trajectory mirrored by participants in this study. Similarly, Taylor and Sobel (2011) emphasize the importance of transitioning from cultural celebration to critical consciousness, a shift that occurred for many teachers as they reevaluated how their own identities and practices impacted student engagement.

This transformation is especially meaningful in music education. Scholars like Bradley (2006) and Shaw (2012) emphasize that music teachers must reflect not only on what is taught but also on how and why, as these decisions are embedded with cultural values. The teachers in this study expressed similar tensions, particularly when addressing repertoire from unfamiliar cultures or genres such as African American spirituals or contemporary popular music. Their hesitation highlights what Paris and Alim (2017) describe as the complexity of culturally sustaining pedagogy, where educators must not only incorporate students' cultures but also support their ongoing evolution and expression. Therefore, one proposed addition to future sessions is the use of the Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC) as both a pre- and post-assessment tool. This would provide educators with a clearer understanding of their own cultural perspectives and enable them to track any shifts that occur as they engage in the work. Pairing this with continued opportunities for discussion and coaching after the final session could support deeper growth.

Another suggested improvement is the incorporation of real-life classroom examples and modeling of strategies in action. While teachers were introduced to many resources during the sessions, few had the chance to see how those resources were used in live or recorded settings. Embedding video demonstrations, collaborative planning opportunities, and time to create lesson materials during the sessions would likely enhance teachers' confidence and fidelity of implementation. While group dialogue proved powerful in helping participants process their learning, some teachers expressed uncertainty or faced time constraints that prevented them from immediately applying the ideas. By allocating time for collaborative lesson design, educators could leave with tangible, actionable tools grounded in both reflection and practicality.

Ultimately, this study's findings reinforce the idea that culturally responsive teaching is an ongoing, iterative journey. As Hammond (2015) and Lind and McKoy (2022) suggest, sustainable CRT practices must be built through intentional reflection, meaningful professional relationships, and the application of theory to discipline-specific contexts. By continuing to refine professional development to meet these needs through the addition of tools, expanded collaboration time, and the integration of current research, music educators can become more confident and competent in addressing the cultural and musical needs of all their students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in music education through professional development highlights the challenges of integrating culturally responsive practices in music classrooms. Through Autoethnographic Action Research, the research explored the dynamic interplay between personal reflection, collaborative learning, and pedagogical practice. The findings reveal that CRT requires more than diversifying repertoire; it involves deep self-reflection, understanding students' cultural contexts, and rethinking traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Through three carefully designed PD sessions, participants engaged with CRT principles, examined their own cultural lenses, and explored strategies for building meaningful relationships and leveraging data to create inclusive classrooms. Despite their dedication, many educators faced challenges, including discomfort with discussions on race and privilege, difficulty applying CRT beyond repertoire selection, and the constraints of time and resources. These challenges reflect the broader complexities of integrating CRT into educational practice and underscore the need for continued support, dialogue, and resource sharing.

The study also illuminated tensions related to identity and positionality, particularly in the role of the facilitator as both an insider in the community and a guide in navigating sensitive topics. These findings suggest that effective CRT-focused professional development must be iterative, reflexive, and content-specific, offering participants a safe space to grapple with discomfort while encouraging actionable steps toward cultural responsiveness. The recommendations for future professional development programs emphasize the importance of continued support for music educators in their pursuit of culturally responsive teaching practices. Additionally, the insights gained from the challenges and after-application reflections suggest areas for improvement. These include incorporating real-world examples of CRT application, dedicating more time for collaborative lesson planning, and providing tools to help educators navigate disorienting dilemmas. Additionally, further exploration is needed to assess the long-term impact of CRT-focused PD on teaching practices and student outcomes.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the notion that culturally responsive teaching is a journey rather than a destination—one that requires ongoing commitment, critical self-reflection, and a willingness to adapt. By creating transformative professional development experiences, educators can build classrooms where all students feel valued, understood, and empowered to succeed. The hope is that this work will inspire continued innovation in CRT-focused PD and contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive music education practices.

The work outlined in this piece serves as a call to action for educators, administrators, and policy-makers to prioritize culturally responsive pedagogy in professional development programs. As the field of music education continues to evolve, the implementation of culturally responsive teaching will undoubtedly play a critical role in shaping the future of music education. By embracing the principles of CRT, educators can ensure that all students, regardless of their cultural background, are provided with meaningful, relevant, and empowering musical experiences that celebrate diversity and create a lifelong appreciation for music. Finally, by continuing to develop strong professional development practices for teachers, we can ensure that we are consistently developing and disseminating current, relevant, and impactful information on the most ethical teaching practices.

Author Biographies
Elizabeth M. Weikle is an educator, choral director, and advocate for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) who has significantly contributed to music education and community engagement. She currently serves as Choral Director at Monticello High School in Virginia, where she leads a vibrant choral program and mentors young musicians in performance and leadership. In addition, she is the Arts & Letters Pathway Director, coordinates the Peer Tutoring Program, and supports equity as a Homebound Instructor. Her passion for educational equity and student-centered learning drives her work, including her leadership in CRT-focused professional development. A recipient of the 2023–2024 Golden Apple Award, Weikle is recognized for her excellence in teaching, innovative practices, and commitment to inclusive instruction. She has presented at national conferences such as AERA and NAfME and delivered workshops on CRT and arts integration. Weikle holds a Master of Arts in Music and Music Education from Teachers College, Columbia University (2024) and a Bachelor of Music Education from James Madison University (2018). In Fall 2025, she will begin her PhD in Music Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her work aims to bridge research and practice, advocating for inclusive, responsive, and impactful music education for all learners.

Dr. Drew X Coles is an accomplished educator, researcher, and leader in the field of music education, with a distinguished record of scholarship, teaching, and service. He currently serves as a faculty member in the Music & Music Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he directs the Hybrid Master of Arts Degree Program. Dr. Coles has previously held various leadership positions, including Executive Director of the Crane Institute for Music Business. As a scholar, Dr. Coles has published extensively in leading journals in the areas of music education, arts entrepreneurship education, and teaching philosophy including Music Educators Journal, College Music Symposium, Journal of Educational Thought, School Music News, the American Journal of Arts Management, the Journal of Music, Technology & Education, and the Journal of Arts Entrepreneurship Education. His research explores collaborative pedagogy, music technology, culturally responsive teaching, and the psychology of performance, with ongoing IRB-approved studies in these areas.

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