

Research Report

Bryan E. Nichols, editor

Culturally Responsive, Relevant, and Sustaining Pedagogies: An Introduction to Seminal Contributions and Selected Empirical Studies in Choral Singing

by Julia T. Shaw

While choral singing in American schools has historically been based on Eurocentric paradigms, teacher-conductors are increasingly seeking pedagogical approaches that prioritize and meaningfully build upon culturally diverse learners' ways of knowing about and engaging with music. Chief among these are culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies—approaches to teaching that developed in the broader realm of general education that hold transformative possibilities for choral education. As the choral profession works to incorporate these pedagogical approaches, it is essential to understand the premises underlying them, distinctions between them, and ways that they complement and build upon one another. In this column, I provide definitions for each and summarize some of their central tenets, drawing on contributions from scholars who originated these terms and approaches. I then highlight examples of research studies that explore these topics within choral music settings.

The term *culture* “encompasses worldview, thought patterns, epistemological stances, ethics, and ways of being along with the tangible and readily identifiable components of human groups.”¹ Culture is fluid and dynamic, and while individuals are shaped by culture, they also hold agency in shaping culture.² Several terms have been used to refer to approaches to teaching that

are intended to be responsive to or informed by individuals' cultural backgrounds and identities, including those that are the focus of this column.³ The scholars who coined these terms have used them in nuanced ways to refer to precise concepts, and they are not directly synonymous or interchangeable. One commonality that culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogy share is that they are asset-based approaches to pedagogy. This means that the knowledge, experiences, languages, literacies, and ways of being that Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Asian students bring to their education are honored, respected, and treated as valuable bases for learning.

These pedagogical approaches are not intended to serve as a recipe or a prescription for practice. They offer broad principles that can guide teachers' efforts to tailor their approach for specific individuals situated within particular school, community, and broader cultural contexts. Accordingly, culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogy will not be approached identically within each choral classroom, but instead will be designed specifically for particular learners. Considering the vital role of singing within many of the world's cultures, and the potential for singing to serve as a means of cultural expression, choral ensembles offer ideal contexts in which to pursue these approaches to teaching.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Including the descriptor *responsive* within the term *culturally responsive pedagogy* connotes a pedagogical and ethical response to particular learners' knowledge, strengths, prior experiences, culturally based assets, and learning needs. This term therefore implies a learner-centered approach as well as a "dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture."⁴ Geneva Gay defined culturally responsive teaching as using "the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" and identified five of its essential components:

Developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction.⁵

Scholars have continued to develop the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy,⁶ and illustrate its application in varying choral contexts.⁷

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Gloria Ladson-Billings developed the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy,⁸ which grew from her seminal research with educators who were recognized for their teaching success with African American learners.⁹ She defined culturally relevant pedagogy as that which "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right."¹⁰ Her theoretical framework encompasses six components, three of which describe outcomes of culturally relevant pedagogy: promoting high levels of academic success and student learning, developing students' cultural competence, and promoting their sociopolitical consciousness. The remaining three components describe commonalities in these teachers' conceptions of themselves and others, their approaches to

developing social relationships, and their conceptions of knowledge.¹¹

According to Ladson-Billings, "the goal of cultural competence is to ensure that students remain firmly grounded in their culture of origin (and learn it well) while acquiring knowledge and skill in at least one additional culture."¹² For students who have been marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, class, and ethnicity, the additional culture will typically be the dominant culture emphasized in schools. Students are then equipped to navigate societal power structures as they currently exist, but not by denying or sacrificing connections to their own culture(s) of origin or reference. Ladson-Billings further emphasized that all students, including those who are White and middle class, benefit from developing multicultural and/or multilingual competence.

Ladson-Billings defined *sociopolitical consciousness* as "the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems."¹³ Culturally relevant teachers work with students to pose questions about how schools and society operate, to identify social issues that hold importance to them, and to take action toward solving these issues. This does not mean that teachers impose partisan politics or their own political views upon students. Rather, as students identify issues that impact their lives, teachers can help them develop ways to research these issues, communicate their positions through writing or presenting, or collaborate with individuals who hold power to bring about change (e.g., school officials, school boards, or representatives of community agencies). Through processes such as these, students hone their critical capacities and develop skills to be active participants in democracy.

Selected Studies Exploring Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogies in Choral Settings

Ruth Gurgel's research illuminated the phenomenon of culturally relevant pedagogy within a racially diverse seventh grade choral classroom, foregrounding the perspectives of one choral teacher and eight adolescent singers.¹⁴ One key finding was that students' experiences of deep engagement often occurred as the teacher

was approaching aims of culturally relevant pedagogy, or when beliefs underlying her pedagogical actions cohered with those identified in Ladson-Billings's framework. Gurgel's scholarship broke new ground in choral research by exploring intersections of culturally relevant pedagogy and engagement theory to promote nuanced understandings of choral singers' experiences. Her findings challenge deficit-based notions of "classroom management," instead highlighting possibilities for building relationships within classroom communities¹⁵ and fostering singers' genuine engagement through culturally relevant pedagogy.¹⁶

In a series of studies, I have explored how choral teachers exemplify characteristics of culturally responsive and relevant teachers¹⁷ as well as adolescent singers' perspectives on their teachers' efforts to enact these pedagogical approaches.¹⁸ One study detailed how instruction that was intended to be culturally responsive unfolded in three choirs situated in an urban center in the midwestern United States: one that served a sizeable im/migrant Hispanic and Latino¹⁹ population, one that had an African American classroom majority, and one comprised of students who identified with eighteen distinct ethnicities. The students offered a range of cultural perspectives, self-identifying as African American, Guatemalan, Honduran, Korean American, and Puer Rican, as well as biracial and multiethnic.

Students perceived their instruction to be culturally responsive when given opportunities to deepen their understanding of their own culture(s) and to broaden their horizons by learning about additional cultures, outcomes that correspond with Ladson-Billings's concept of cultural competence. They valued when teachers invested effort to develop knowledge of the culture(s) with which their students identified, and when they took steps to enhance the cultural validity²⁰ of learning experiences based on those cultures. Singers also identified barriers to culturally responsive and relevant choral teaching: teachers' lack of knowledge, preparation, or confidence to facilitate experiences based on culture(s) with which they were less familiar; "one-off" experiences with repertoire that did not go far enough toward cultural responsiveness; and teaching processes that focused on musical elements while neglecting to address important social, cultural, historical, and political context surrounding the music being studied. Acknowledg-

ing these potential barriers is not to suggest that they are insurmountable, but rather that teachers can learn from students' perspectives and adjust practice accordingly.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In one recent line of scholarship, Django Paris and H. Samy Alim have critiqued, refined, and extended previous asset-based pedagogies,²¹ particularly building upon Ladson-Billings's conception of culturally relevant pedagogy.²² Ladson-Billings herself has contributed toward these efforts,²³ explaining that "culturally sustaining pedagogy uses culturally relevant pedagogy as the place where the beat drops."²⁴ Paris and Alim posited that the "culture of power" in schools is evolving as society becomes increasingly multilingual and multiethnic:

For too long we have taught our youth (and our teachers) that... White middle-class normed practices and ways of being alone are the key to power, while denying the languages and other cultural practices that students of color bring to the classroom. Ironically, this outdated philosophy will not grant our young people access to power; rather, it may increasingly deny them that access.²⁵

They observed that educators have "responded" to elements of student culture only in service to the goal of adopting the White middle-class dominant cultural norms that schools position as "legitimate." Too often, this process requires students to sacrifice connections to their own cultural heritage or identity. Therefore, they argue that terms such as "culturally relevant" and "culturally responsive" do not go far enough toward reflecting the ultimate aims of these pedagogical approaches:

[T]he term "relevant" does not do enough to explicitly support the goals of maintenance and social critique. It is quite possible to be relevant to something without ensuring its continuing and critical presence in students' repertoires of practice...and its presence in our classrooms and communities.²⁶

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Accordingly, they coined the term “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (CSP) to describe teaching that “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation.”²⁷

Paris and Alim observed that asset-based pedagogies fall short when they rely on fixed, static, stereotypical, or essentialist views of culture. They caution educators not to assume neat correspondences between facets of students’ complex cultural identities and curricular content. They further warn against focusing CSP on historical, longstanding, or “heritage” elements of students’ cultures (implying fixed, static notions of culture) without also engaging with the ways in which individuals contemporarily enact their cultural identities. They also encourage educators to recognize and sustain youth culture as an important culture in its own right.

An Exemplar Study Exploring Culturally Sustaining Music Pedagogy

Emily Good-Perkins used culturally sustaining pedagogy as a framework for exploring students’ experiences in two music classrooms in which teachers took markedly different approaches to facilitating singing experiences. One disquieting finding was that when a Eurocentric musical epistemology was upheld as the single “appropriate” way to sing, students reported experiences of being “inhibited” and “silenced.” This silencing included not only a reluctance to sing, but a deeper experience of exclusion as students recognized that their culturally informed ways of knowing, being, and engaging with music were not valued within this classroom. Such a “silencing” of student culture in order to prioritize a single, dominant cultural perspective (in this case, a Eurocentric approach to music education and singing) is precisely what culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to counter.



Choral Offerings Include:

- Solo Stage Time for All (competitive or non-competitive)
- Recorded Observations from Faculty
- Festival Plaque
- Ensemble Clinics and Massed Chorus Participation Available



Competition (optional):

- Gold, Silver, & Bronze Trophies Awarded at Closing Ceremony
- Commendation Certificates Awarded

March 6

Grace Cathedral
San Francisco

ADJUDICATORS

Elena Sharkova
Cantabile Youth Singers

Dr. Jeffrey Benson
San Jose State University

Dr. Felicia Barber
Westfield State University

March 13

Symphony Space
New York City

ADJUDICATORS

Dr. Heather Buchanan
Montclair State University

Jeffrey Cobb
Northwestern Michigan College

Lynne Rothrock
Luther College

March 19

Ferguson Hall, Straz Center
Tampa

ADJUDICATORS

Dr. Julie Yu
Kansas State University

Dr. Anthony Trecek-King
University of Hartford

Dr. Jefferson Johnson
University of Kentucky

April 1

Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center
Chicago

ADJUDICATORS

Dr. Joshua Oppenheim
Kansas State University

Dr. Jason Paulk
Eastern New Mexico University

Dr. Lee Nelson
Wartburg College

web www.codaconcerts.com

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phone 212-239-1238

Good-Perkins also presented a detailed portrait of one teacher's practice that affords a view of what culturally sustaining vocal pedagogy could look like in practice: an approach that actively promotes sustenance of the knowledge, literacies, competencies, and modes of expression that learners bring to the classroom. Rather than positioning the tone and technique associated with Western classical music as the only "appropriate" way to sing, this teacher welcomed children's diverse ways of expressing themselves vocally. One element of this teacher's culturally sustaining practice involved exploring a varied palate of vocal timbres and styles appropriate to the genres being studied. Another key finding was the importance of respecting and building upon the way that physical movement was integral to some students' culturally informed approaches to singing rather than demanding that they sing with still bodies. In response to this teacher, who honored the diversity of musical epistemologies that children brought to the classroom, students were eager participants in singing and embraced identities as singers.

This column has introduced central premises of culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies drawn from seminal literature and has highlighted examples of studies that explored how these have been approached in choral contexts. Interested readers are encouraged to read the cited literature in full, to consult reviews of additional related literature,²⁸ and to explore pieces offering practical recommendations for how culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies can be pursued.²⁹ Given that there is no recipe or prescription that can guarantee culturally responsive, relevant, or sustaining pedagogy; and considering the complexity inherent in the multifaceted and evolving identities of each learner; adopting these approaches requires ongoing effort. While these asset-based pedagogies can be challenging to practice, they are also deeply rewarding as they present opportunities for teachers to learn from and alongside their students. For educators who are willing to invest the ongoing effort to practice culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies well, the potential benefits to students are profound.

CJ

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NOTES

- ¹ Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, "The (R)Evolution Will Not Be Standardized: Teacher Education, Hip Hop Pedagogy, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0," in *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, ed. Django Paris and H. Samy Alim (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 143.
- ² Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017); Frederick Erickson, "Culture in Society and in Educational Practices," in *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, ed. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 31–60.
- ³ For discussions of the evolution in these terms, see Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93–97; Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (1995): 465–491.
- ⁴ Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," 467.
- ⁵ Geneva Gay, "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching," *Journal of Teacher Education* 53, no. 2 (2002): 106.
- ⁶ Another seminal contribution is Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas, "Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers: Rethinking the Curriculum," *Journal of Teacher Education* 53, no. 1 (2002): 20–32.
- ⁷ Examples of recent contributions include Evelyn Kwanza, "Exploring Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in a Selected Choral Music Setting: A Naturalistic Inquiry" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2021); Roger Neil Williams, "Investigating Culturally Responsive Teaching in the

- Jamaican Secondary Music Classroom: A Multiple Case Study” (DMA diss., Boston University, 2022); Lawrence Robinson, “The Impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on the Continued Participation of African American Male Chorus Students in a High School Chorus Classroom” (EdD diss., Georgia State University, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.57709/22727697>.
- ⁸ Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy”; Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, “But That’s Just Good Teaching!: The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *Theory Into Practice* 34, no. 3 (1995): 159–165.
- ⁹ Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, *The Dream-Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹¹ Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.”
- ¹² Ladson-Billings, “The (R)Evolution Will Not Be Standardized,” 144.
- ¹³ Gloria J. Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 75.
- ¹⁴ Ruth E. Gurgel, “Levels of Engagement in a Racially Diverse 7th Grade Choir Class: Perceptions of ‘Feeling It’ and ‘Blanked Out’” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2013); Ruth E. Gurgel, *Taught by the Students: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Deep Engagement in Music Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
- ¹⁵ Ruth E. Gurgel, “Building Strong Teacher-Student Relationships in Pluralistic Music Classrooms,” *Music Educators Journal* 101, no. 4 (2015): 77–84.
- ¹⁶ Gurgel, *Taught by the Students*.
- ¹⁷ Julia T. Shaw, “‘Knowing Their World’: Urban Choral Music Educators’ Knowledge of Context,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 63, no. 2 (2015): 198–223; Julia T. Shaw, “Pedagogical Context Knowledge: Revelations from a Week in the Life of Itinerant Urban Music Educators,” *Music Education Research* 20, no. 2 (2018): 184–200.
- ¹⁸ Julia T. Shaw, “‘The Music I Was Meant to Sing’: Adolescent Choral Students’ Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 63, no. 2 (2016): 198–223; Julia T. Shaw, *Culturally Responsive Choral Music Education: What Teachers Can Learn from Nine Students’ Experiences in Three Choirs* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Julia T. Shaw, “‘The Music I Was Meant to Sing’: Adolescent Choral Students’ Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2014).
- ¹⁹ Following the recommendation of the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), I use *Hispanic or Latino* to refer broadly to people “of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture of origin regardless of race.” When referring to specific participants’ cultural identities, I use individuals’ self-identifying language (e.g., Latina, Latine, Latinx). See U.S. Census Bureau, “About the Hispanic population and its origin,” last modified April 15, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/hispanic-origin/about.html>.
- ²⁰ See Carlos R. Abril, “Music That Represents Culture: Selecting Music with Integrity,” *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 1 (2006): 38–45.
- ²¹ Paris and Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies*; Paris, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice”; Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, “What Are We Seeking to Sustain through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 85–100.
- ²² Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.”
- ²³ Ladson-Billings, “The (R)Evolution Will Not Be Standardized.”
- ²⁴ Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0,” 76.
- ²⁵ Paris and Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies*, 6.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ²⁸ Vanessa L. Bond, “Culturally Responsive Education in Music Education: A Literature Review,” *Contributions to Music Education* 42 (2017): 153–180; Catherine Bennett, “Teaching Culturally Diverse Choral Music with Intention and Care: A Review of Literature,” *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 40, no. 3 (2022): 60–70.
- ²⁹ Vanessa L. Bond, “Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Choral Classroom,” *Choral Journal* 55, no. 2 (2014): 8–15; Julia T. Shaw, “The Skin That We Sing: Culturally Responsive Choral Music Education,” *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 4 (2012): 75–81; Vicki R. Lind and Constance L. McKoy, *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Music Education: From Understanding to Application* (New York: Routledge, 2016).