

# “Knowing Their World”: Urban Choral Music Educators’ Knowledge of Context

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## Abstract

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore how successful urban choral educators use contextual knowledge to inform pedagogical practice. With choirs in nine of a large midwestern city’s demographically varied residential neighborhoods, a children’s choir organization provided a research setting that offered a unique view of urban teachers’ contextual knowledge. The study’s ethnically diverse participants taught in multiple classrooms each week, providing opportunities to explore how the same teacher responded to more than one demographic setting. Participants relied upon knowledge of learners, knowledge of context, and personal practical knowledge to successfully navigate the urban environment. Findings were interpreted in light of Geneva Gay’s five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching to illustrate how the teachers enacted contextual knowledge through culturally responsive practice. Implications for music teacher education are discussed based on the findings.

## Keywords

urban, culturally responsive teaching, music teacher education, choral music, teacher knowledge

Poverty, violence, and low academic achievement are often among the first images that come to mind when teachers envision urban education. The public’s assumptions about the “inner city” have been shaped by media portrayals that often sensationalize

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the most negative aspects of urban environments. Further, the assumption that urban students are “at risk” carries connotations of a deficit perspective in which youth are viewed as disadvantaged, neglected, or deviant (Benedict, 2006). Regarding urban teaching with trepidation, teachers might miss opportunities to view educational institutions as capable of catalyzing positive social change.

The practical realities of teaching in urban settings can present a myriad of obstacles that reinforce negative perceptions of urban education. The property tax–based system of public school funding distributes resources unequally between neighborhoods, solidifying existing social boundaries (B. Erickson, 2008). These dynamics can particularly disadvantage urban schools situated in underserved communities where teachers are challenged to provide quality educational experiences but given inadequate resources (Calloway, 2009; Costa-Giomi, 2008). Federal policy emphasizing high-stakes testing has reduced funding and instructional time for arts education in many urban schools (Hazelette, 2006). An extreme emphasis on standardization, in which teachers are required to adhere strictly to prescriptive curricula, reduces teachers’ ability to exercise creativity and deprofessionalizes teaching (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Delpit, 2003). Seasoned veterans as well as novice teachers might experience frustration stemming from these issues.

Considering these complex dynamics, it is not surprising that recruiting and retaining effective teachers for urban settings present a significant challenge (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Ingersoll, 2004). Preservice teachers’ feelings of being unprepared by their teacher education programs for positions in culturally diverse urban environments have been well documented (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Fiese & DeCarbo, 1995; Parker & Hood, 1995). Having limited personal experience in urban contexts, they express discomfort and anxiety at the thought of working in inner-city schools (Kindall-Smith, 2004). There is therefore a demonstrated need for research identifying knowledge and skills that equip music teachers to undertake the distinctive challenges inherent in urban education.

Rather than further documenting the plight of urban music education, research can elucidate factors influencing urban teaching success. Lessons can be learned from arts organizations that, freed from some of the institutional constraints of public schooling, have created successful models that can inform public school teaching. In this collective case study, I examined one such organization, an urban community children’s chorus, and four of its teachers who have achieved success in spite of challenges presented in urban environments.

Urban teaching success may be determined by how teachers navigate the dynamic cultures of their particular classroom environments and the broader communities in which they are situated (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Several models of teacher knowledge recognize the importance of these contextual understandings to effective teaching (Clandinin, 1985, 1989; Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore how successful urban choral music educators use contextual knowledge to inform pedagogical practice. In this study, I adopt Grossman’s (1990) concept of contextual knowledge as encompassing teachers’ knowledge of their specific learners and the educational contexts in which they are situated,

including the school setting, school district environment, and broader community.<sup>1</sup> Three questions guided this research, the first of which was adapted from Fitzpatrick (2008):

1. What contextual knowledge do successful urban choral music teachers hold about their students and about the communities in which they teach?
2. How do urban choral music educators use contextual knowledge to inform their pedagogical practice?
3. What experiences do effective urban choral educators consider to be essential preparation for teaching in an urban environment?

### **Conceptual Framework**

While many urban schools are situated in underserved communities where the majority of pupils are students of color, the majority of teachers are White, female, and middle class (Kindall-Smith, 2006; McKoy, 2009). The majority of these teachers also come from small towns or suburbs where limited experiences with diversity may result in negative attitudes and beliefs about people whose backgrounds differ from their own (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). As a result, cultural incongruities between teachers and students of different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds can present barriers to successful urban teaching (Benedict, 2006; Robinson, 2006).

Cultural incongruity can also exist on an institutional level when students' preferred learning, communication, and performance styles differ from those emphasized in schools (Gay, 2000). For example, Carlow's (2004, 2006) investigation of English language learners' experiences within an American high school choral program revealed "discourse norms" that were culturally incongruent with students' previous musical experiences (Carlow, 2006, p. 63). These included a nearly exclusive focus on Western classical music, an emphasis on music literacy and devaluation of aural learning strategies, hierarchies of auditioned ensembles within performance-oriented programs, and an emphasis on individual achievement over collective effort. Evidence of disjunctures between students' musical experiences inside and outside of the school music domain resurfaces repeatedly in extant literature (Campbell, 2010; Carlow, 2004, 2006; Kelly-McHale, 2011, 2013; Lum, 2007; Lum & Campbell, 2009).

Teachers may attenuate such incompatibilities through culturally responsive teaching (CRT), a pedagogical approach that seeks to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Geneva Gay (2000, 2002) defined CRT as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106) and identified five of its essential components:

1. Developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity;
2. Including ethnic and culturally diverse content in the curriculum;

3. Demonstrating caring and building learning communities;
4. Communicating with ethnically diverse students; and
5. Responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. (Gay, 2002, p. 106)

The descriptor *responsive* implies a student-centered focus that depends upon teachers' knowledge of their individual learners and the contexts in which they are situated. Given the inextricable relationship between CRT and teachers' contextual knowledge, Gay's (2002) five essential elements of CRT served as an important theoretical framework for this research.

### **Culturally Responsive Music Education**

While CRT evolved as part of the multicultural education movement within general education (see Banks, 2004), applying its central premises to music education has only recently attracted researchers' attention. Rohan's (2011) collective case study of culturally diverse high schools from Australia, the United States, and New Zealand offered a multinational perspective on the potential for and challenges of culturally responsive music education. Interviews probing teachers' and students' perceptions of ways in which music education is informed by cultural diversity revealed instances of misalignment between teachers' intentions and students' classroom experiences. Students' responses reflected a view of school music education that privileged Western European paradigms and repertoire despite teachers' claims that they did not espouse such beliefs. Although teachers articulated their commitment to culturally responsive ideals in interviews, students were unable to recognize ways their music programs were culturally responsive, inclusive, or informed.

Abril (2009) documented a teacher's efforts to engage her school's rapidly growing Hispanic<sup>2</sup> population by establishing an extracurricular mariachi program. Subsequently (Abril, 2011), he detailed a second-generation Mexican American student's perceptions of her experiences as a member of the ensemble. The researcher interpreted various tensions encountered by the White, non-Hispanic teacher as she strove to make her instruction more culturally responsive. Together, the studies illustrated how classroom dialogue prompted shifts in the teacher's curricular aims, beliefs, and practices and empowered students toward social action. Abril (2011) concluded that "dialogic spaces for students to engage in meaningful discussions and debates about the music they are studying . . . may offer the greatest opportunities for learning and social transformation" (p. 13).

Gurgel (2013) examined culturally relevant pedagogy in relation to student engagement in a racially diverse seventh-grade choral classroom. The study compared the teacher's and students' perceptions of conditions that supported and constrained student engagement. Students' perceptions of engaging teaching corresponded closely with Ladson-Billings' (1994) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Specifically, the teacher's cultural competence, high expectations for student achievement, and ability

to develop caring relationships were foundational to students' deep engagement in their choral experiences.

Karlsen (2013) problematized the practice of basing instruction upon students' "homeland music," or the music teachers assume corresponds to students' ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds. Through classroom observations and extensive interviews with 30 immigrant students ages 13 to 16, the researcher discovered that this instructional practice fostered connections to students' cultural heritages and served as a resource for identity development. The study illustrated that "one cannot necessarily assume a direct line between any students' national-geographical, ethnic or cultural backgrounds and their musical identities" (Karlsen, 2013, p. 163). Thus, incorporating students' homeland music into school curricula requires considerable musical and cultural sensitivity on the part of the teacher and does not in and of itself constitute culturally responsive practice.

Kelly-McHale's (2011, 2013) research with second-generation immigrant students in an elementary general music classroom illuminated how an absence of cultural responsiveness can widen cultural gulfs between home and school and alienate students from the belief that they are musicians. The teacher she profiled rigidly adhered to a Eurocentric curricular framework featuring a sequence-centered instructional approach. While the teacher successfully achieved her stated goals of developing students' singing proficiency and notational literacy, Kelly-McHale found that these skills did not transfer to students' musical lives outside of the school setting. Further, the students did not consider themselves to be "musicians" despite their participation in a school music program. Kelly-McHale (2011) concluded that the teacher's approach "resulted in an isolated musical experience that did not support the integration of cultural, linguistic, and popular music experiences, and largely ignored issues of cultural responsiveness" (p. 3).

Lehmborg (2008) examined cultural responsiveness as one facet of urban teaching effectiveness. She conducted extensive interviews with six urban elementary general music teachers who had been deemed effective on the basis of supervisor recommendations, expert evaluations of videotaped teaching episodes, and results of a survey designed to assess respondents' cross-cultural adaptability. Emergent themes aligned with Gay's (2002) five elements of CRT, leading Lehmborg to conclude that "culturally responsive teaching is a critical key to the success of this group of interviewees in urban schools" (Lehmborg, 2008, p. 261). However, she also observed that the teachers were unable to detect differences in students' culturally informed learning and communication styles and lacked awareness of cultural bias in instructional materials. Therefore, Lehmborg's study revealed some barriers to CRT even among educators who successfully implemented many of its premises.

Robinson (2006) also used Gay's (2002) framework to analyze the culturally responsive practice of three teachers of White, European heritage. She attributed her participants' effectiveness teaching pupils of color in an urban setting to a student-centered approach through which they responded to cultural and linguistic diversity present in the classroom. The teachers Robinson profiled honored

students' cultural heritage while expanding their horizons, established learning communities within their classrooms, and meaningfully connected students' home and school cultures. The present study builds most directly upon Lehmborg's (2008) and Robinson's (2006) research by applying Gay's (2002) framework within a performance-based setting.

## **Method**

### *Context*

Founded during the civil rights movement, the urban community children's chorus that served as the setting for this study is "a multi-racial, multi-cultural choral music education organization" whose mission is defined by "combining high artistic standards with a social purpose" (choir mission statement). In light of its social justice-oriented mission, the nonprofit organization attempts to remove as many barriers to students' participation as possible. The choir's audition process might be described more appropriately as a placement interview, during which teachers become acquainted with individual singers and recommend an appropriate choir for their current skill level. Teachers could not recall any instance in which they had turned away an interested singer. In an effort to promote socioeconomic diversity within the choir, the organization has developed a sliding scale for tuition based on family income. Additional financial support is available to families who request assistance. The choir is also piloting a bussing service in locations where transportation to rehearsals presents an obstacle to students' participation.

The nonprofit organization serves 3,500 children, ages 8 to 18, through a three-tiered structure that includes a top-level mixed choir, nine after-school choirs meeting at community centers throughout the city, and 60 choirs meeting in the city's public schools. This study focused on the organization's after-school program, which is noteworthy in that after-school choirs rehearse in nine of the city's residential neighborhoods rather than one centralized location. Teachers strive to tailor instruction to the distinctive demographic profiles of each surrounding community, offering an advantageous view of urban teachers' contextual knowledge.

Unlike teachers who carry out their responsibilities within a single classroom, the study's participants were employed full-time by the organization to teach in 10 to 14 demographically contrasting classrooms each week. The unusual nature of the teachers' schedules provided opportunities to explore how the same teacher responded to more than one urban setting. I sought opportunities to investigate teachers' work with students whose cultural backgrounds were both similar and dissimilar to their own.

The study was approved by the children's choir's administration and the institutional review board of the author's university. The choir's artistic director recommended three current teachers and one former employee who, having successfully taught in varied contexts, could make informative contributions to the study. Through purposeful maximal sampling (Creswell, 1998), I selected a group of participants that included early-, mid-, and late-career teachers who were ethnically and racially

diverse. Participants included teachers who identified as African American, Caucasian, Korean American, and “citizen of the world.”

### *Participants*

In this collective case study (Stake, 1995), I examined four individual teacher cases within an urban community children’s chorus to explore the phenomenon of urban choral teachers’ contextual knowledge. One participant captured the study’s central phenomenon in a nutshell: “I’m working with different schools so I have to, in an instant, change things around. I change my teaching style according to the specific group. I can’t just be the same teacher in every situation.” While participants’ weekly schedules each included 10 to 14 unique classrooms, their after-school rehearsal sites served as home bases where they spent the greatest amount of instructional time. Focusing on these sites presented a logical way to establish the “boundedness” of each case (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Demographic information for each site is presented in Table S1 (available at <http://jrme.sagepub.com/supplemental>).

Lisa Rose, an ethnically proud Korean American, was born and attended public school in the same neighborhood in which she now directs an after-school choir.<sup>3</sup> Her immigrant parents are both musicians and provided a music-filled home environment that influenced her development as a musician and teacher. She grew up in a Korean enclave, surrounded by Korean family and friends, where even her formative musical experiences were with a Korean children’s choir. As a result, Lisa related, “I definitely have a strong identity with the Korean culture even though I was born in America—probably even more so than the average Korean American.” This is the first teaching position that Lisa, a 2nd-year teacher in her late 20s, has held. One of the after-school choirs she conducts is located in an area known for its strong Mexican presence, while the other is based in the ethnically mixed neighborhood in which she was born.

An African American man in his mid-40s, Troy Parris has taught choral and general music for 23 years, 15 of which have been with the children’s chorus. While his mother and grandfather are from Jamaica and Barbados, respectively, Troy was born and attended school in the city in which he now teaches. He fondly recalls hearing his grandfather, a church musician, playing hymn settings on the organ, which he considers a formative musical experience. As both a classical pianist and gospel musician, Troy describes his musical background as encompassing “two worlds.” Troy’s choir is based at a community youth center, where the choir program complements a range of after-school activities and social services offered to youth living in one of the city’s most underserved neighborhoods. There, he enjoys exploring “both worlds” with his students, all of whom are African American.

John Peterson, a Caucasian in his 30s, was inspired by his 6 years of experience with the choir to pursue an advanced degree in education. Having recently left the organization to attend graduate school, he participated in only the interview and material culture phases of the study. One of his significant contributions to the organization was establishing a new after-school choir in a predominantly Mexican



American community. John therefore was recommended as someone who could provide valuable insights into the process of developing contextual knowledge of a community in order to establish a music education program.

An energetic man in his 60s, James Moses is a self-described “citizen of the world.” His Jewish parents left Germany at the start of World War II, settling in South America, where James grew up “as a Moses in Colombia.” While James spoke Spanish at school, he grew up in a home environment that was “very European” and retained many elements of German culture, including the language. He also has resided in Israel, where after spending time on a kibbutz, he pursued a bachelor’s degree from the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem. He then received his master’s in conducting from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, before eventually moving to the city in which he now teaches. James’s cultural identity is shaped by so many influences that he “doesn’t label” himself. A 19-year veteran of the organization, James conducts one after-school choir in an area known as a thriving ethnic enclave for Puerto Rican residents and a second in a neighborhood where over 80 spoken languages reflect the ethnic diversity present in the community.

### *Data Generation and Analysis*

The study was carried out over a period of 15 weeks from February to May of 2012, during which data generation methods included individual semistructured interviews, a focus group interview, ethnographic field notes, autobiographical notes, and collection of material culture. I observed the three current employees teaching in five after-school locations for the routine durations of their rehearsals (120–150 min). I also attended the choirs’ performances, resulting in a total of 22 hr of observation. Hoping to remain as unobtrusive to the children’s learning environment as possible, I adopted Campbell’s (2010) nonparticipant observer role, which she described as a “fly on the wall” perspective (p. 15). I took ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) focused on the teacher’s pedagogical approach as well as features of the educational context in which the instruction occurred. Rehearsal sessions were also audio-recorded, transcribed, and added to the data record for subsequent analysis. Table S2 in the online supplemental material provides a summary of the data generation schedule (<http://jrme.sagepub.com/supplemental>).

Each teacher participated in two individual semistructured interviews (90–120 min each) and a focus group interview including all four participants (120 min), resulting in a total of 14 hr of interviews. All interviews were conducted at a location of participants’ choosing that afforded confidentiality and were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. While predetermined questions guided the discussions, a semistructured approach to interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 1994) afforded flexibility to include questions tailored to the unique context of each after-school choir as well as questions prompted by observations.

The focus group interview offered insight into the ways urban teachers discussed teaching practice among themselves (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) by encouraging “participants to talk to one another; asking questions; exchanging anecdotes; and



commenting on each others' experiences and points of view" (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4). The organization's teachers have developed comfortable rapport, frequently collaborating on projects and exchanging ideas. They each discussed the importance of such collegiality to urban teaching success in individual interviews, so it was hoped that the presence of colleagues would encourage disclosure (Krueger & Casey, 2000) and supply different insights from those offered in individual interviews.

Credibility of the data and interpretations was enhanced by prolonged engagement in the field (see Table S2, <http://jrme.sagepub.com/supplemental>), triangulation of data (Glesne, 2006), "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), and member checking (Creswell, 1998). Triangulation was accomplished through the use of multiple data sources, including individual and focus group interviews, observations, field notes, and autobiographical notes. Artifacts supplied by participants rounded out the data set, including the choir's mission statement, teacher biographies, lesson plans, musical scores, and concert programs. The resulting diversity of sources and synthesis of observational data with the participants' perspectives contributed to thick description (Geertz, 1973). To facilitate member checking, participants were offered the opportunity to review raw interview transcripts and request changes to the data record. No such requests were made. Additionally, in postobservation interviews, I discussed my analysis with participants, inviting them to comment on the significance of emergent themes and to propose others that I may have overlooked. These conversations served to confirm the themes and did not raise additional analytical issues. Because our discussions did not result in substantive changes to the finalized report, the participants and I considered additional member checks to be unnecessary. Through these "participant check-ins" (Creswell, 1998), the teachers assisted in co-constructing the meaning of the study.

Data analysis unfolded in two phases. Throughout fieldwork, I used the constant comparative method of analysis while simultaneously continuing to generate data (Glaser, 1965). This inductive process informed subsequent interview questions and observational foci (Creswell, 1998), resulting in cycles of observation, interview, and interpretation. When data generation was complete, I recursively analyzed the data set using Creswell's (1998) data analysis spiral, which features an "analytic circle rather than a fixed linear approach" (p. 142). Several broad themes emerged from this process that corresponded closely to Gay's (2002) five essential elements of CRT. While these elements were not used as a priori categories, their correspondence with the findings led me to interpret my data in light of Gay's framework, making every effort to remain open to new or surprising information.

Prior to undertaking this research, I was employed as a children's choir conductor for an urban nonprofit organization, an experience through which I developed insider knowledge that was invaluable to my research process. As a White, middle-class researcher, my previous experiences teaching in a culturally diverse urban setting fueled my interest in ways that culturally responsive practice could be sought and attained. As a result of our shared professional backgrounds, the participants and I spoke the same language (Fontana & Frey, 1994) and developed rapport that encouraged disclosure (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2002).

While my insider perspective presented several advantages, I acknowledge that my previous experiences may have influenced my analysis and interpretations, and I made every effort to minimize this possibility. I documented my reactions to interviews and observations in autobiographical notes to clarify potential personal biases and develop trustworthiness (Glesne, 2006). Aware of a need to interrogate my analysis, I engaged in a peer debriefing process (Spall, 1998) in which a reviewer audited my analytical process and served as a “devil’s advocate” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, the 2-year period in which I left teaching to pursue graduate study afforded the distance necessary to “make the familiar strange” (Spiro, 1990).

## Data and Interpretations

### *Urban Choral Teachers’ Contextual Knowledge Base*

*Knowledge of Learners and Context.* Through observation of and dialogue with the participating teachers, a view of urban teachers’ contextual knowledge base emerged that aligned with three existing models of teacher knowledge. The teachers relied upon “knowledge of learners and their characteristics” (Shulman, 1987, p. 8), knowledge of context (Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1987), and “personal practical knowledge” (Clandinin, 1989, p. 121) to successfully navigate the urban context, paralleling Fitzpatrick’s (2008) findings with urban instrumental teachers. Teachers’ knowledge of learners included awareness of students’ racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic status, immigrant status, family situation, housing, and parents’ orientation toward education. Their knowledge of the communities in which they taught included understandings about the local economy, employment, housing, population stability or transience, crime, social services, and community organizations.

*Personal Practical Knowledge (PPK).* Conversations with participants further uncovered teachers’ “personal practical knowledge,” a type of knowledge that is “practical, experiential, and shaped by a teacher’s purposes and values” (Clandinin, 1989, p. 122). PPK is “imbued with all the experiences that make up a person’s being,” including their experiences within varied communities of race, class, and ethnicity (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362). In this study, teachers who shared cultural characteristics with their students were able to draw upon PPK to understand their students’ needs and approach instruction accordingly. For instance, Troy’s common cultural background with his students, all of whom were African American, enabled him to anticipate how students might expect to relate to adult authority figures.

I think that the common background tends to be that if you’re respectful to them and you really innately care about them, they will let you in their circle of family. Sometimes they see me as an uncle . . . definitely as more of a nurturer. When I grew up, it was not unnatural to walk around a neighborhood, and everyone would say hi to you, feed you, and chastise you if you did anything wrong. So the kids who are African American always have this assumption that you’re going to check them parentally if you need to. With kids in the inner city, it’s always that sense of village.

However, he noted that his students' expectations for interacting with teachers varied according to context: "If I'm dealing with Caucasian or even Hispanic students, they expect you to be the teacher, the maestro and just do your job." Troy's understanding of his African American students' relational patterns (e.g., "village concept") and interactions with adults (e.g., viewing teachers as familial figures rather than as "the maestro") is based upon his lived experiences growing up in African American communities and exemplifies PPK.

Teachers need not share racial or ethnic backgrounds with their students in order for their PPK to be relevant (Kennedy White, 2007). While Lisa did not share her racial and ethnic background with the majority of her students, she shared an important commonality with many of them: the experience of being raised by immigrant parents.

I grew up with my mom being afraid to speak to teachers, so she was never really involved. She knows how to speak English and she's good at it, but it scares her to death. I don't know why. So I can connect with their [students'] parents in that way.

Beyond the barriers that language can present to parent-teacher communication, research has suggested that Latino immigrant parents may maintain distance from teachers as a sign of professional respect, considering it presumptuous to impose expectations upon teachers (Lopez, 2001). Teachers expecting parental involvement in their children's education might misinterpret this distance as a lack of caring, dynamics of which Lisa was keenly aware.

Consequently, she drew upon her understanding of parents' interactional style to develop a system of parent liaisons to facilitate improved communication: "We have a lot of parent liaisons, because they work well with other parents. They trust parents' word of mouth more than staff or conductors." Liaisons talk with parents of students considering joining the choir, communicate details about upcoming concerts, and facilitate general communication among choir families.

John grew up in a rural community where encounters with racial and ethnic diversity were rare. He credits his parents, both of whom were educators, with teaching him to value diversity: "They raised us to believe that everyone's a human being, everyone should be treated equal, and that there are great aspects to all people, all races, all religions, all socioeconomic backgrounds." Yet when John, a Caucasian, began teaching in several predominantly African American communities, conversations with students prompted him to reconsider notions of racial equality with which he had grown up:

Being a White Caucasian, it's easy for me to say, "Oh, we're all equal, we're all treated equally." Even though that's the way I feel, it's not the way that the kids see it. They see me as someone who has a lot of the luxuries that come along with being a White Caucasian. I learned really quickly that I needed to understand my own heritage and accept it.

In contrast to the other participants, whose PPK allowed them to build upon commonalities with students, John's PPK crucially relied upon cultural self-awareness, which allowed him to acknowledge cultural difference. This finding carries significance in light of literature suggesting that Caucasian teachers may lack understanding of their own culture and fail to recognize ways in which they filter assumptions through the expectations of a Western philosophy toward education (Benedict, 2006; Mazzei, 2004). As these examples demonstrate, teachers' PPK enabled deeper understanding of the particular urban settings in which they taught, forming an integral component of their contextual knowledge bases.

### *CRT: Contextual Knowledge Enacted in Practice*

While teachers' contextual knowledge could be tacit or explicit, it manifested most observably in pedagogical practice as they were attending to potential cultural incompatibilities in their classrooms. Accordingly, these findings are presented in light of Gay's (2002) essential elements of CRT. The following discussion references research on characteristics of ethnic communication and learning styles that is based on group trends and does not imply that all members of any cultural group share the same traits or styles (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). While some scholars are reluctant to deal with cultural descriptors out of fear of stereotyping, "expressive variability of cultural characteristics among ethnic group members does not nullify their existence" (Gay, 2002, p. 111). Therefore, these understandings constitute an important component of teacher knowledge.

*Developing a Knowledge Base About Cultural Diversity.* Developing a knowledge base about ethnically diverse groups' cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns is foundational to CRT (Gay, 2000, 2002). All four participants relied upon cultural insiders, including community members, colleagues, students' families, and the students themselves, in order to build their knowledge base of the values, traditions, and contributions of the specific ethnic groups with whom they worked. James regularly consulted with students' families to learn music that held special significance in the community.

I inquire about whether there are musicians in the family. I love involving parents in concerts. That creates a commitment toward the choir and a strong connection with the kids. One father told me he plays the guitar. I said, "Bring the guitar in." He sang one song that was really beautiful, so I arranged it for the kids. They sang it, and they love it.

James's example is one of many instances in which participants engaged community members as "culture bearers" (Campbell, 2004) who provided song material, assisted in the teaching process, and performed alongside students.

When John established a new choir in a Mexican American community, he relied upon students' families to develop advantageous contextual knowledge. He noted, "In terms of the trust between parents and how close the family is in that culture, we

realized that it was crucial that they were involved in this.” He solicited parents’ advice about how to encourage students to join the program. One of their key recommendations was that choir parents, rather than the teacher, should follow auditions with personal phone calls to interested families. John noted,

The parent won’t give the same [musical] feedback, but they will bring in their knowledge and experience of having their child in that choir and what it means for that child, as well as their family. That basically would go a lot farther in terms of recruiting students. So we started [having parents make the calls], and saw a big influx of students.

Lisa and Troy sought knowledge of students’ musical interests, referencing pop culture to form connections between students’ musical experiences inside and outside of choir. Troy explained,

When they’re warming up and doing their stretching, I may play something on the piano like Tupac or something. It’s very subtle, and they’ll say, “How’d you know that song?” I don’t have to announce that I’m doing it. All I have to play is a lick of a hip-hop song, and they’ll say, “Oh, he knows my world.” You do that, and you gain a lot of respect because they say, “Wow, they’re really in tune to what I’m doing.” And they’ll love you for it.

By consulting with students, their families, and community members, participants developed knowledge of students’ “worlds” that was foundational to their effectiveness in the classroom.

*Including Ethnic and Culturally Diverse Content in the Curriculum.* All four teachers emphasized the importance of including linguistically, stylistically, and culturally diverse repertoire in the curriculum. Their processes for selecting repertoire for their specific learners and programming concerts tailored to their particular communities were especially informed by contextual knowledge. A concert titled *Canto Latino*, on which Lisa and James were collaborating at the time of this study, was particularly illustrative. *Canto Latino* is especially intended to engage the city’s Hispanic communities. James’s choir has a strong Puerto Rican presence, while Lisa’s is composed mostly of Mexican American students. However, as James described, the teachers included music from a variety of national traditions:

We did Puerto Rico which was “La Trulla,” and we did certainly stuff from Colombia. We did Venezuela and Argentina, and we had a fun song from Chile. I am trying to find music from different countries which have slightly different flavors and that the children can appreciate the change in the style of all these countries.

This strategy revealed the teachers’ attention to honoring specific musical traditions of individual countries. They did not essentialize culture by assuming that all people belonging to a social category were culturally similar (see F. Erickson, 2005), nor did they assume any single musical tradition was representative of or relevant to all people

of a given cultural background. They further cautioned that teachers cannot assume that Hispanic students will receive a piece as culturally relevant simply because it is sung in Spanish, an issue raised in related literature (Kelly-McHale, 2011).

When selecting arrangements for his choir to sing, James sought renditions that were “very genuine, very traditional, and reflect the way people would sing” in the culture of origin. This reflects a concern for what Abril (2006) coined “cultural validity,” which he defined as the degree to which a piece is typical and characteristic of the represented culture. To locate culturally valid selections, James sought advice from cultural insiders, including a Puerto Rican teacher at a school in the community for which he was seeking pieces. She suggested “Mi Viejo San Juan,” telling him, “This is a song that will bring tears to every eye in the audience.” James summarized the song’s significance as “a song of longing of Puerto Ricans for their country. It’s a very romantic song, but it’s a song not of love for people but love to Puerto Rico.”

James’s decision to program “Mi Viejo San Juan” was informed by PPK he had developed through his own experience of immigration. When asked what he might understand about immigrant families’ experiences that a teacher who had not immigrated might not, he responded,

The feeling of cultural shock. The frustration is immense. They probably see the benefits of being here, but they miss their culture. I think there are many, many immigrant families that if you asked them, “Are you happy?” [Shakes head] They’re not. Can they really feel like being at home? That’s where the song “Mi Viejo San Juan” comes from.

On the evening of the performance, “Mi Viejo San Juan” generated an emotional response from the audience unlike that of any other piece on the program. Attendees sang along with tears in their eyes and applauded thunderously. James’ contextual knowledge concerning the salience of the immigrant experience to this community enabled him to create a meaningful experience for the audience.

*Cultural Congruity in Classroom Instruction.* A primary way that teachers used contextual knowledge was to anticipate and ameliorate cultural incongruities in the classroom. Gay (2000) noted that these “discontinuities can interfere with students’ academic achievement, in part because how students are accustomed to engaging in intellectual processing, self presentation, and task performance is different from the processes used in school” (p. 12). As one example, participants discussed how the European vocal timbre associated with Western classical music could initially be alienating to students accustomed to traditions emphasizing more extensive use of chest voice or a varied palate of vocal timbres, a phenomenon documented by several researchers (Armetta, 1994; Bradley, 2006; Chinn, 1997; Joyce, 2003). Troy elaborated,

We don’t use head singing in gospel music; it’s just nonexistent. If you walk into a room with sixth, seventh, and eighth graders and have them singing high Cs and D-flats in their head tone, they’re going to rebel because they think, “This music is so foreign to me.” We don’t sing everything, [in head voice] “up here” and “Panis Angelicus.” We sing [sings

Kirk Franklin's "I Smile" in chest voice] "today's a new day." Chest singing actually brings out more expression and emotion. It evokes more from the heart. So, when they sing here [in chest voice], they feel that there [gestures to heart]. [Sings in head voice] This is stuffy. It's classical.

For students who have sung almost exclusively in chest voice, the sensation of singing in head voice can initially feel uncomfortable. Acknowledging this, Troy provided culturally relevant models. In class, he imitated a character from a well-known children's television program who speaks exclusively in head voice. He then revealed to students that the actor who portrays the character "is actually an African American who's probably 50 years old and he's a millionaire and he's dark and he looks something like me." In this way, Troy was able to "get past that whole mystique of singing head tone."

Participants also were aware that the individualist orientations of many choral classrooms, which foster competition for solos and promotion to advanced-level choirs, can be a disenfranchising factor for students from more collectivist cultures of reference (Carlow, 2004). To reduce this possibility, James built community among his diverse learners by engaging them as peer mentors. The rehearsals of his two choirs overlapped by half an hour to facilitate interaction between singers with different levels of experience. More experienced members mentored younger students, assisting them with everything from rehearsal etiquette to reading music. The resulting environment was compatible with the orientations of many students of color who "grow up in cultural environments where the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual and where individuals are taught to pool their resources to solve problems" (Gay, 2002, p. 110).

Troy used his understanding of his students' preferred learning styles to facilitate "cultural scaffolding," a process of "using students' own cultures and experiences to expand their intellectual horizons and academic achievement" (Gay, 2002, p. 109).

Even if I'm doing an African song, which can be a stretch because of the language, but if it's like a beat, [taps on desk] and I'm rocking back and forth, they feel that. I'll go [sings] "Ise Oluwa." I have them sing it. Then I say, "This means the creator's work cannot be destroyed, and who's the creation?" [Students:] "I am." [Troy:] "Well, you are wonderful. You know that you cannot be destroyed, your dreams. How does that feel? Do you look sad, or should you smile?" So, they're smiling and I catch them that way because they feel the groove, the African beat. Even though the language may be foreign to them, they feel this; they get to move. As opposed to maybe starting with "Panis Angelicus" or [sings] "Hallelujah," a Handel piece. I may get to that, but I may not start with that. I try to find something that moves them here [gestures to heart].

This example demonstrates several ways that Troy's knowledge of students' learning styles enabled him culturally to scaffold learning a piece in a culturally unfamiliar language and style. First, he used a strongly percussive rhythm, to which students related from familiar musical experiences, as a pedagogical bridge. Second, he had them move, capitalizing on the fact that many African American students prefer



kinesthetic learning styles (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Allen & Butler, 1996; Irvine, 2001). Third, he taught the song holistically, promoting cognitive, physical, and emotional learning in synergy with one another. The benefits of holistic teaching strategies for African, Asian, Latino, and Native American students have been well documented (Escalanté & Dirmann, 1990; Irvine, 2001; Krater, Zeni, & Cason, 1994).

*Cross-Cultural Communications.* Another important form of contextual knowledge concerns students' preferred communication styles. Many schools emphasize a passive-receptive style of communication in which students are expected to listen quietly and speak only when given permission by the teacher. In contrast, many groups of color communicate in ways that are more active and participatory, with listeners expected to engage with the speaker as they speak (Gay, 2002). For music educators, an interesting parallel exists in the expectations we hold for audience etiquette. A striking example of this occurred during one of Troy's performances.

Troy considered the students' spring performance of Handel's "Art Thou Troubled" to be a significant teaching victory. Many of his students had extensive experience singing gospel at church, where music was taught aurally and sung using chest voice exclusively. Therefore, performing a Western classical piece taught from notation and requiring western European vocal timbre was an experience that stretched students musically and culturally. Troy described how relating the text to the students' personal experiences was crucial to helping them understand and appreciate the piece:

I felt like the text was going to bring them in. [Quoting the text]: "Art thou troubled? Music will calm thee." So I simply said, "How have you been troubled? How have you dealt with trouble?" Most of them said, "I listen to music when something's driving me nuts." I said, "This is the same song. Just place yourself in a different time period. Remember, you can't use your own African rhythms because this was in Europe. It has to be how Handel would interpret it." Once they understood the importance of music changing lives, I felt like they could relate to it. If I hadn't had that conversation, there was no way I could pull that off.

On the evening of the concert, Troy knew that the piece might stretch his audience in the same way it had challenged his students. He related, "I wasn't sure how it was going to go. I was a little nervous. Then it dawned on me: Present it to the parents like the kids."

With an energetic presence, Troy took the microphone and asked the audience, "How many of you have been too worried about your problems lately?" Several attendees answered "Mmm-hmm," and "yes," raising their hands. He continued, "Maybe you have too many bills to pay or the landlord is on your back. Maybe you've lost your job. Maybe someone has broken into your house." As he engaged the audience, attendees actively shouted responses. Troy went on to explain the meaning of the Handel piece just as he had with his students. They rewarded the students' performance with enthusiastic applause. (Field notes, April 24, 2012)

When I later asked Troy about his way of engaging with the audience, he explained,

I felt it was part of my responsibility to say what the song meant because otherwise, there would have been no connection to it. I knew as an African, that call-and-response is very important in our community. It doesn't matter what style or genre, you have to talk to them. You have to say, "Listen, how many of you all have been dealing with this?" It was more effective than just saying this is a piece by Handel from the Baroque period.

This episode reveals how Troy capitalized upon his understanding of the active, participatory communication style favored within the community. Instead of expecting the audience to remain quiet and passively receive his comments, he engaged attendees in "call-and-response," building upon his understanding of salient issues in the community, including crime, unemployment, and poverty. He drew upon contextual knowledge to make his students' performance more connected.

*Demonstrating Caring.* Teacher caring has been a salient theme in studies of urban teaching effectiveness (Lehmberg, 2008; Robinson, 2006). It seems obvious that effective teachers would demonstrate caring toward their students, but Gay (2002) draws an important distinction between "gentle nurturing and benevolent concern" and "culturally responsive caring," which "places teachers in an ethical, emotional, and academic partnership with ethnically diverse students, a partnership that is anchored in respect, honor, integrity, resource sharing, and a deep belief in the possibility of transcendence" (p. 52). John described situations in which he was challenged to build trust with students in underserved communities who knew that he would return to a comfortable, White, middle-class existence at the end of the day. As one dimension of teacher caring, John felt it important to acknowledge White privilege.

I learned that I need to accept my own cultural heritage and say, "These are the facts: Yes, I'm going to go home to my middle-class neighborhood." Then I had to say, "How do I function as a teacher knowing that the students are seeing that?" So that really opened me up as a teacher, to realize I need to open up this dialogue. I understand that I do have these luxuries that they don't and why is that? I was more aware of that, so the way I set up my teaching environment was more aligned for that from the very beginning. Even though I function as "I care for you," I think the way I set it up had more sincerity in it.

When asked how, specifically, John creates a safe classroom environment in which to open dialogue, he discussed the importance of asking thoughtful, sincere questions: "Give them not a textbook question, but a true, sincere question or series of questions. 'What do you think? I want to really know about you. I, the teacher, want you to teach me.'"

One of the most powerful teaching interactions to occur during the study featured the kind of thoughtful, sincere questions John described. The following exchange occurred in Troy's classroom as he taught his African American students the Korean folksong "Arirang":

The final line of the translation (“The one who abandoned me here will not walk even ten miles before his or her feet hurt”) prompted Troy to ask: “How many of you have had to move from one place to another?” Nearly all of the students raised their hands. “So let’s say for whatever reason, you moved, but then you came back. How would that make you feel?” One girl responded, “I’d be happy that I was in the new place, but at the same time, I would miss the old place because it would mean that a certain time in my life was over.” A boy added, “I would feel very emotional. You would remember a lot of memories that you had there, and some of them might not be where you are now.”

Troy posed a different question: “How many of you have had parents in your house and one of them left?” He joined three quarters of his class who raised their hands, saying: “I’m raising my hand.” Then, he asked, “What is abandonment? Is it different from leaving and then coming back?” The students were silent. “Okay, so I’ll ask this question, and if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. How many of you had a parent at home and one morning they were there, and then the next morning they never came back?” There was a long pause during which the students didn’t make eye contact with Troy or with one another. Slowly, one by one, five hands went up. Troy concluded “Alright, that’s abandonment. This song has all of those kinds of emotions.” There was a long pause as this sank in before Troy invited students to sing the song again. (Field notes, April 6, 2012)

Troy’s contextual knowledge included an understanding that many of his students had unstable family situations in which they frequently transitioned between living with various family members and foster families. Recognizing that many of his students had experienced a parent’s abrupt departure, resulting in feelings of abandonment, Troy acknowledged that he had personally shared that experience. In an act of teacher caring, he engaged in personal disclosure that was genuine, empathetic, and humanizing. His willingness to engage students in conversation about their personal lives, and to make himself vulnerable by revealing an aspect of his own, exemplified teacher caring and resulted in potent learning for his students.

### *Music Teacher Education for Urban Contexts*

Participants’ perceptions regarding preservice preparation for urban teaching revolved around three themes: field experiences, preparation for cultural diversity, and university ensemble experiences. All four related that their knowledge of the urban setting developed through experience rather than formal education, a finding that is consistent with previous research on urban teaching effectiveness (Lehmborg, 2008). Participants suggested that field experiences in urban settings were among the best opportunities for preservice teachers to deepen their personal understanding of the urban context, an assertion that has been made in related literature (Emmanuel, 2002, 2005). Teacher educators should provide ample opportunity for critical reflection on these opportunities to counteract the possibility that field experiences may reinforce, rather than challenge, students’ stereotyped perceptions of urban teaching (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Participants considered working with culturally diverse student populations to be a defining feature of their urban teaching experience. Accordingly, they asserted that

teacher education programs should include preparation for cultural diversity, a concept that has been treated extensively by other scholars (see Hollins & Guzman, 2005, for a review). Familiar with the theory of CRT, they emphasized that this should be a curricular thread woven throughout course offerings. As society becomes increasingly diverse, this curricular focus would serve preservice teachers well, regardless of whether they ultimately teach in an urban setting.

Noting a strong emphasis on the Western classical canon and associated pedagogical practices in many teacher education programs, participants suggested that experiences with genres such as popular music, world music, and gospel were essential preparation for choral teaching in urban schools. Citing the formative nature of undergraduates' performing experiences and the influence of conductors as professional role models, they asserted that music education majors' ensemble requirements should include experiences with these genres. John suggested that if undergraduates' ensemble conductors modeled practices such as consulting with culture bearers to learn diverse repertoire, graduates might be more likely to explore these possibilities upon entering the profession. The International Vocal Ensemble at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music offers one example of an ensemble fulfilling this purpose (Goetze, 2000).

While I sought teachers' perspectives on essential preparation for urban teaching, an unexpected outcome was that participants expressed their needs for professional development (PD) specifically addressing urban contexts. Unlike PD offered through professional organizations, which was perceived to be geared toward "elite, suburban choirs," the organization's biweekly teacher meetings served as powerful PD that met the teachers' context-specific needs as adult learners working in urban environments. Providing a space for colleagues to discuss diversity- and equity-related issues and to grapple with teaching dilemmas, the meetings functioned as a social justice-oriented community of practice. This finding supported other authors' assertions that collaborative conversations can serve as effective PD for both music and urban educators (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Gruenhagen, 2008; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003; Stanley, 2009, 2011).

## **Discussion**

This study's findings collectively exemplify how urban choral educators used knowledge of learners (Shulman, 1987), knowledge of context (Grossman, 1990), and PPK (Clandinin, 1985, 1989) to navigate the urban context successfully. Clandinin's (1985) conceptualization of PPK offers "a person-centered language and perspective for accounting for school practices" (p. 361). Appropriately, the teachers enacted this knowledge through CRT, a child-centered approach that places students' strengths and needs, rather than musical products and processes, at the center of the curriculum. This study's participants serve as role models to the profession, exemplifying how responsibilities, such as selecting repertoire, programming concerts, designing instruction, engaging the audience during performances, and recruiting and retaining students, can be driven by knowledge of one's particular learners, community, and educational

context. Such a student-centered orientation serves not only urban teachers but all teachers well. As Fitzpatrick (2012) observed, “although we often discuss issues of culturally relevant pedagogy when discussing urban schools . . . all students are better served by teaching that takes into account who they are and what they have experienced” (p. 56).

Rather than attempting to prepare preservice teachers for every conceivable context in which they ultimately might become employed, teacher education programs might strive to equip candidates with skills and dispositions necessary to cultivate their own contextual knowledge. Related research suggests possibilities for how this might be approached. For example, Soto, Lum, and Campbell (2009) described a university-community collaboration in which preservice teachers developed music education experiences for a Mexican American migrant community and a Native American community, an experience that “reinforced the importance of connecting to the community in all school music positions in which they eventually may work” (p. 349). Preservice teachers participating in the Musical Heritage Project of Teachers College Columbia University engaged public school students’ families in special music projects, an experience for which they received field experience credit toward certification (Allsup, Barnett, & Katz, 2006). Quartz and colleagues (2003) required student teachers to create an “asset map of education-related resources” in the urban communities in which they taught, an assignment that shifted students’ thinking from a deficit-based to an asset-based view of urban communities (p. 15). Music teacher educators could draw further inspiration from Moll and González’s (2004) work in which teams of researchers and teachers conduct ethnographic research in students’ homes to discover families’ specialized knowledge, then design instruction based upon these “funds of knowledge” (p. 700).

The responsibility for fostering urban educators’ professional growth cannot fall entirely to preservice teacher education, which must be broad and comprehensive enough to prepare candidates for a variety of teaching situations. As participants indicated, PD specifically tailored to urban educators’ needs is necessary to deepen teachers’ knowledge of the particular contexts in which they teach and fuel their continued growth. Participants’ perceptions that PD offered through professional organizations is intended for “elite, suburban” programs should be of concern, suggesting a need for expanded PD offerings that simultaneously address urban music teachers’ content- and context-specific needs. Research on the potential for various PD formats to address urban music educators’ distinctive needs appropriately would be a welcome addition to the literature.

CRT is underresearched in music education, suggesting many possibilities for future research. While this study focused on teachers’ perspectives on CRT, additional studies on students’ perceptions of their teachers’ attempts to teach in a culturally responsive manner would allow for a more multifaceted understanding of this complex phenomenon. Considering that previous studies of CRT have revealed areas of misalignment between teachers’ intentions and students’ experiences, studies that juxtapose teachers’ and students’ perspectives (such as Abril, 2009, 2011; Gurgel, 2013; Kelly-McHale 2011, 2013; and Rohan, 2011) offer intriguing models for future

research. Additionally, two emerging lines of research on how CRT affects student engagement (Gurgel, 2013) and identity (Karlsen, 2013; Kelly-McHale, 2011, 2013; Lum, 2007; Tuncer, 2008) hold particular potential for yielding valuable implications for practice. As students' voices are underrepresented in the music education literature, additional studies illuminating student perspectives would be valuable contributions to the field.

This research provided an in-depth account of how four successful urban choral teachers enacted contextual knowledge through CRT within one particular research setting. As the study is limited to the perspectives of these four teachers, the findings cannot be simply extended to teachers serving similar demographics. This is appropriate considering that CRT is not a prescriptive method but develops in response to particular contexts and learners. There is no recipe for CRT, and transplanting the techniques described here to other teaching situations cannot guarantee responsive practice. Rather, each teacher must mindfully enter into the work of "knowing their students' worlds" and designing instruction that responds to their strengths, interests, and needs.

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### Notes

1. While Grossman (1990) refers to this domain in teacher knowledge as "knowledge of context," I use the terms *contextual knowledge* and *knowledge of context* interchangeably.
2. The U.S. Census Bureau indicates that the term Hispanic can be used interchangeably with the term Latino and can be used to refer to people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. See Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010" (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2011), <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2011).
3. All personal names used in this study are pseudonyms.

### Supplemental Material

The online tables are available at <http://jrme.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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