Student Interest, Engagement, and Behavior: Investigations of Teacher Perspectives and Practices

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how culturally responsive teaching (CRT) professional development influences music educators' perceptions and practices related to student engagement. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with three K–12 music educators in Virginia who participated in a three-month CRT-focused professional development program, the research explores changes in how teachers define, assess, and respond to student interest, engagement, and behavior. Findings revealed three central themes: a broadened understanding of engagement that includes culturally situated and non-traditional forms of participation; increased student interest and motivation when instruction reflected students' cultural identities and musical preferences; and a reduction in behavioral challenges through the use of inclusive, student-centered strategies. These outcomes align with existing literature on CRT, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and student engagement theories, including the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), Gay (2010), and Paris and Alim (2017). The study underscores the importance of ongoing, reflective, and discipline-specific CRT professional development that empowers educators to create inclusive music classrooms where all students feel seen, heard, and valued. While limited by sample size and geographic context, the findings offer important implications for future research, teacher training, and curriculum design in culturally responsive music education.

Keywords: *Culturally Responsive Teaching, Music Education, Student Engagement, Professional Development*

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Introduction

Consider a music classroom where pedagogy not only acknowledges but intentionally centers students' cultural identities, fostering deeper connections that elevate student engagement and facilitate the development of authentic artistic expression. In recent years, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) gained attention as an essential pedagogical approach for fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. Rooted in the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and Geneva Gay (2000, 2010), CRT emphasizes the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities into the learning process to enhance academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. While much of the existing research focuses on the theoretical foundations and broad applications of CRT, fewer studies examined its direct impact on student engagement in music education, a field where cultural identity and artistic expression are deeply intertwined.

Student engagement is a crucial factor in academic success, and scholars have identified multiple dimensions of engagement, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement theories, such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and Hammond's (2015) research on CRT and the brain, suggest that when students feel autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning environments, their investment in academic activities increases. However, traditional models of engagement often fail to account for the sociocultural factors that shape student participation, leading to disparities in engagement levels among students from diverse backgrounds (Paris & Alim, 2017). This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how CRT influences music educators' perceptions of student engagement and their instructional strategies in response to CRT-informed professional development.

This research examines the experiences of three music educators who participated in a three-month CRT-focused professional development (PD) program and implemented culturally responsive strategies in their classrooms. By analyzing qualitative interview data, this study investigates how educators define and assess engagement, how student interest aligns with culturally relevant instruction, and how CRT strategies impact student behavior and participation. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on CRT by providing insights into how culturally responsive practices shape student engagement in music education, offering implications for teacher training, curriculum development, and classroom management.

Literature Review

Overview of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is an educational framework that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives in the teaching and learning process. CRT is designed to promote academic success, foster cultural competence, and develop students' critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000). By acknowledging and valuing students' cultural identities, CRT aims to create inclusive and equitable learning environments that empower diverse learners. Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasizes three key principles: (a) academic success for all students, (b) cultural competence that enables students to appreciate and navigate multiple cultural

perspectives, and (c) the development of critical consciousness to challenge social inequities. Her work highlighted the ways effective educators affirm students' cultural identities while equipping them with the skills to succeed in mainstream educational settings.

Building on this foundation, Gay (2000, 2010) further developed culturally responsive teaching, providing a more structured pedagogical approach. She defined CRT as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Gay emphasized the importance of curricular representation, instructional strategies tailored to diverse learning styles, and culturally responsive classroom environments that validate students' backgrounds. Banks (1993, 2010) contributed significantly to the discourse on multicultural education, which aligns with CRT by advocating for curriculum reform, inclusive teaching practices, and systemic changes in educational policies. His five dimensions of multicultural education, including content integration, equity pedagogy, and knowledge construction, emphasized the necessity of embedding diverse perspectives within educational systems. Delpit (1988, 2006) introduced the idea of the "culture of power," which critiques how dominant cultural norms in schools marginalize students from underrepresented backgrounds. She argued that while CRT encourages the validation of students' cultural experiences, educators must also explicitly teach students the dominant codes of power to help them navigate institutional structures while maintaining their cultural identities.

Paris (2012) extended CRT through the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which moves beyond responsiveness to actively sustaining and revitalizing students' linguistic and cultural practices. Paris and Alim (2017) argued that educators must foster cultural and linguistic pluralism rather than simply helping students assimilate into dominant educational norms. Nieto (1999, 2010) contributed a critical perspective on equity and social justice in CRT, advocating for teachers to not only incorporate cultural perspectives but also serve as agents of change in dismantling structural barriers in education. Similarly, Monroe (2005, 2016) explored CRT in the context of student behavior and discipline, highlighting the racial disparities in school discipline policies and advocating for culturally responsive approaches to classroom management.

Overview of Student Engagement Theories

Several student engagement theories align with CRT, offering frameworks for understanding how cultural responsiveness impacts motivation, participation, and learning outcomes. Fredricks et al. (2004) defined engagement through three key dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement, which involves participation in academic and social activities, is supported by CRT through inclusive environments that make students feel valued and encourage their active involvement (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2015). Emotional engagement refers to students' sense of belonging and emotional investment in learning, which CRT fosters by affirming students' cultural identities and strengthening student-teacher relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When students feel that their backgrounds and perspectives are recognized in the classroom, they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation and sustained interest in learning. Cognitive engagement, the deepest level of involvement, involves students' commitment to complex thinking, problem-solving, and critical analysis. Research suggests that when teachers integrate culturally relevant materials and instructional approaches, students engage more deeply in learning and demonstrate greater intellectual curiosity and persistence (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Together, these dimensions highlight how CRT serves as a powerful framework for fostering holistic student engagement.

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) posited that student engagement is driven by three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) supports autonomy by allowing students to incorporate their cultural perspectives and lived experiences into their learning, fostering a sense of ownership and agency in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Competence is strengthened when instruction is relevant to students' cultural backgrounds and learning styles, making academic content more accessible and meaningful (Nieto, 2010; Hammond, 2015). Additionally, relatedness is enhanced through CRT's emphasis on building culturally affirming relationships between students and teachers, ensuring that students feel seen, valued, and connected within the learning environment (Gay, 2000; Delpit, 2006). By addressing these psychological needs, CRT aligns with SDT's framework, promoting deeper and more sustained student engagement.

Finn (1989) emphasized that student engagement was a critical factor in preventing dropout, particularly among marginalized groups. He argued that students must develop a strong sense of identification with their school, feeling a sense of belonging and value in their educational experiences, to maintain engagement. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) supports this by ensuring that curricula, pedagogical strategies, and school climates affirm students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, making learning more relevant and meaningful (Banks, 2010). Additionally, CRT promotes active participation by validating diverse ways of knowing and learning, which can help students see themselves as integral members of the school community (Monroe, 2005). By fostering inclusive and culturally affirming environments, CRT aligns with Finn's framework, helping to sustain engagement and reduce dropout rates among historically underserved students. Hammond (2015) integrated CRT with neuroscientific perspectives on engagement, arguing that students engage in learning when they feel psychologically safe, experience cognitive challenges in a supportive environment, and receive culturally affirming instruction. She suggested that CRT enhances neural pathways for learning, making it essential for fostering deep student engagement.

CRT and Student Engagement

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and student engagement theories are closely interconnected, as CRT seeks to create learning environments that foster engagement by affirming students' cultural identities, experiences, and ways of knowing. Scholars argue that traditional engagement models often overlook the sociocultural contexts of students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). By integrating CRT with engagement theories, educators can develop instructional approaches that support meaningful participation, motivation, and investment in learning. Gay (2000) noted:

> Expectations and skills are not taught as separate entities but are woven together into an integrated whole that permeates all curriculum content and the entire modus operandi of the classroom. Students are held accountable for each other's learning as well as their own. They are expected to internalize the value that learning is a communal, reciprocal, interdependent affair and manifest it habitually in their expressive behaviors. (p. 30)

Similarly, Villegas and Lucas (2002) posited:

> If teaching involves assisting students to build bridges between their preexisting knowledge and experiences and the new material they are expected to learn, then teachers must know not only the subject matter they teach but also their students. To engage students in the construction of knowledge, teachers need to know about students' experiences outside school. For example, teachers who are knowledgeable about their students' family lives are better prepared to understand the children's in-school behavior and to incorporate into classroom activities the "funds of knowledge" those families possess (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997). Similarly, teachers who know about their students' hobbies and favorite activities as well as what they excel at outside school can systematically tie the children's interests, concerns, and strengths into their teaching, thereby enhancing their motivation to learn (Ladson-Billings, 1994). (p. 26)

Howard (2003) noted:

> Culturally relevant pedagogy is based on the inclusion of cultural referents that students bring from home. Teachers must be careful to not allow racial classifications of students to be used as rigid and reductive cultural characteristics. A critical reflection process enables teachers to recognize the vast array of differences that can exist within groups. Thus, not all African American students work well in groups, not all Latino students are second language learners, and all Asian American students are not high achievers. Teachers must avoid creating stereotypical profiles of students that may only do more harm than good. While there may be central tendencies shown within groups, teachers should develop individual profiles of students based on students' own thoughts and behaviors. (p.201)

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how professional development (PD) in culturally responsive teaching (CRT) influences music educators' perceptions of student engagement in the classroom. The research was guided by a constructivist paradigm, which valued participants' lived experiences and subjective understandings of engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through qualitative inquiry, the study aimed to explore how teachers described, interpreted, and assessed changes in student engagement after implementing CRT strategies. Participants were three K–12 music educators from public schools in Virginia who voluntarily participated in a three-month CRT-focused professional development program. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who (a) completed all three PD sessions, (b) implemented CRT strategies in their classrooms, and (c) consented to participate in post-PD interviews (Patton, 2015). The participants represented diverse teaching contexts (elementary, middle, and high school) and brought varied levels of teaching experience.

The study participants were selected based on their active involvement in three CRT-focused PD sessions, which aimed to enhance their understanding of CRT principles and strategies. The sessions were structured around foundational content, its application to pedagogy, and collaboration and reflection. Session 1 focused on foundational theories (Ladson-Billings, 1995;

Gay, 2000) and the rationale for culturally responsive practices in music classrooms (McKoy & Lind, 2022). In Session 2, teachers discussed practical instructional approaches, curriculum adaptation, and student-centered music pedagogy. Sample lesson plans, videos, and peer feedback were used to support practice-based learning. In Session 3, teachers shared classroom experiences, reflected on challenges and successes, and engaged in collaborative discussions on student engagement and the impact of CRT on behavior and participation.

Sessions incorporated readings, classroom planning, peer discussion, and guided reflection, aligned with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984) and experiential learning models (Kolb, 1984). Throughout the PD, participants engaged in discussions about their experiences implementing CRT, shared challenges, and explored student responses to CRT-based instructional changes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted within a month following the final PD session. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were conducted via Zoom. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focused on perceived changes in student engagement after implementing CRT strategies, definitions and indicators of engagement in music classrooms, specific pedagogical shifts, and observed student responses, challenges, tensions, and breakthroughs in implementing CRT. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality. All interviews were analyzed thematically. Themes were identified based on repeated patterns in participants' descriptions of student engagement, interest, and behavioral shifts in response to CRT-informed teaching practices.

Results

The qualitative interview data reveal that culturally responsive teaching (CRT) professional development significantly influenced how teachers perceive and assess student engagement. The findings are organized into three main themes: (a) Changes in Teacher Perceptions of Engagement, (b) Student Interest and Cultural Connections, and (c) CRT's Impact on Classroom Behavior and Participation. In addition to these thematic findings, the final section, Challenging Norms: Engagement, Equity, and Belonging, offers a broader interpretation of the implications raised by the data.

Changes in Teacher Perceptions of Engagement

One of the most significant effects of the CRT professional development was a shift in how teachers conceptualized and evaluated student engagement. Before the training, engagement was often defined through traditional behavioral indicators, such as students raising their hands, singing on cue, or physically participating in class activities. This perspective aligns with what Fredricks et al. (2004) describe as surface-level behavioral engagement, which, although visible, may not fully capture students' internal learning processes or cultural expressions. Following the PD, participants reported a broader, more inclusive view of engagement that accounted for subtle and culturally situated modes of participation, such as quiet observation, deep reflection, and independent creative work. These forms, which were initially misread as signs of disinterest or disengagement, were reinterpreted as meaningful evidence of student investment and learning. Participant 2 said:

> I would say I gauge it the same way as before, but applying CRT has changed the way I interpret involvement. The quiet kid who absorbs everything before producing something, the perfectionist who keeps revising, or the lyricist who writes a full album before showing anyone—I now see those as valid forms of engagement. Before, I might have overlooked them.

This shift aligned with Hammond's (2015) assertion that CRT reframes student behavior by integrating cultural knowledge into assessment practices, challenging teachers to recognize and affirm diverse ways of demonstrating learning. Similarly, Gay (2010) emphasized that culturally responsive pedagogy requires a recalibration of teacher expectations, particularly in terms of communication, collaboration, and participation norms that may vary across different cultural groups. Teachers' reflections suggested an evolving sense of empathy and awareness, essential components of culturally responsive instruction, where engagement is understood not as a one-size-fits-all metric, but as culturally mediated and individually expressed. This reconceptualization of engagement allowed educators to better attune to the needs of students who might not thrive under traditional participation standards.

Student Interest and Cultural Connections

Another key theme that emerged was the noticeable increase in student interest and investment when instruction was rooted in culturally relevant content and responsive pedagogy. Teachers consistently observed that when students saw their cultures, identities, or musical preferences reflected in the curriculum, their excitement and motivation to engage significantly increased. Participant 1 noted:

> I used to try to do a Beethoven or Bach unit with my elementary kids, but it never held their attention. Since implementing CRT, I've shifted to a student-directed approach. Now, I introduce classical music in a way that connects to their interests instead of making it the focus.

These findings strongly support Paris and Alim's (2017) concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which advocates not only for cultural inclusion but also for the preservation and growth of students' cultural practices within the classroom. When students bring in music from home, share songs with cultural significance, or see their identities affirmed, engagement is no longer external. It becomes intrinsic and personally meaningful. Participant 2 posited, "A big sign of engagement for me is when students bring in music to share. If they're excited to show me songs that relate to what we're doing in class, I know I've caught their interest."

This aligns with Paris and Alim's (2017) concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which advocates for integrating students' cultural and musical identities into instruction. The shift in practice also supports findings from Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014), who emphasized the role of student autonomy and cultural validation in fostering deeper engagement. Teachers also noted that peer influence played a role in cultural exploration. Students became engaged when exposed to new genres or musical traditions shared by classmates. Teachers also highlighted the role of peer-driven cultural exploration, where students introduced each other to new genres, artists, or styles. This organically fostered a sense of curiosity and mutual respect, reinforcing the social dimension

of learning in culturally responsive classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Participant 2 noted:

> Every year, I see a few students who start disengaged but then 'click' with a genre they hadn't known before. This usually comes from their peers, not me. Creating a space where students can share different types of music has been key.

This theme suggests that when students are positioned as cultural contributors rather than passive recipients, they demonstrate heightened engagement and ownership of their learning process. Teachers' willingness to decenter Eurocentric curriculum norms in favor of co-constructed learning experiences directly contributed to this outcome.

CRT's Impact on Classroom Behavior and Participation

Perhaps most compelling was the impact of CRT-informed instruction on student behavior and classroom participation. All three participants described noticeable declines in disruptive behaviors and increases in self-regulation after incorporating student-centered and culturally relevant content into their lessons. Participant 1 reflected:

> My first year, I tried to force classical music units, and the behavior was awful—students were bored and acting out. Now, since making it more student-driven, I see fewer outbursts. The little kids are less wiggly, and the older kids stay focused.

This echoed Monroe's (2005, 2016) research on the relationship between CRT and discipline, which posited that many behavioral issues stem from students' disengagement and alienation in culturally unresponsive environments. When teachers validate students' identities and learning preferences, they reduce the "discipline gap" and create classrooms where students feel seen, respected, and motivated. Engagement strategies, such as movement breaks, peer collaboration, and allowing students to create their own learning spaces (e.g., the student who arranged "squishy pillows" to act as the teacher), empowered students to participate in ways that honored their individual needs. Participant 1 said:

> I have one first grader who really struggled with focus. But when I let him set up his own 'class' of squishy pillows and sit in front of them like a teacher, he became engaged. Sometimes small shifts like this, honoring how kids feel comfortable engaging, make a huge difference.

These findings reinforced Gay's (2010) view of CRT as a multidimensional and empowering practice, one that addresses curriculum, instruction, student-teacher relationships, and classroom management holistically. Rather than managing behavior through control, teachers who adopted CRT strategies fostered a classroom culture of mutual respect, autonomy, and care. Additionally, the use of non-traditional assessments, such as observing student energy during "Just Dance" activities or engagement in peer-led discussions, demonstrated a shift toward formative, culturally responsive measures of participation. This flexibility is essential in supporting neurodiverse learners and those who may struggle with traditional discipline structures (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Participant 1 noted: "If I lose their attention, I'll call a five-minute dance break or

do a Just Dance activity. Sometimes kids aren't disengaged—they just need a reset." This aligned with Gay's (2010) emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy as being "multidimensional and empowering." By shifting away from rigid, Eurocentric behavioral norms, teachers found that engagement increased and behavioral issues decreased.

Challenging Norms: Engagement, Equity, and Belonging

These findings raise important questions about how engagement is assessed and valued in music education. Traditional assessment practices often privilege extroverted, verbal, or performance-based behaviors that align with dominant (often white, middle-class) cultural norms (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010). Students from collectivist cultures, for example, may prioritize group harmony over individual expression, or may demonstrate learning through careful observation before outward participation (Hammond, 2015). By expanding their definitions of engagement, participants in this study began to dismantle deficit-based interpretations of student behavior and instead adopted a more asset-based, culturally responsive lens, one that views students' varied ways of knowing and participating as strengths rather than shortcomings.

The shift in behavior and participation described by participants also signals a deeper cultural shift toward classrooms that center equity and belonging. When students saw their identities reflected in the curriculum and were given agency in their learning, they not only engaged more fully but also demonstrated greater emotional investment and self-regulation. This echoes the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Paris and Alim (2017), who argued that culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies serve not only academic goals, but also broader goals of justice and affirmation. For music education, which has historically marginalized certain genres, voices, and traditions, this shift is particularly impactful. It opens the door for more inclusive definitions of musical excellence, participation, and leadership.

However, shifting norms in music education does not come without challenges. Teachers must confront deeply rooted assumptions about what constitutes rigor, talent, and engagement. Assumptions are often shaped by Eurocentric values and standardized expectations. Even well-intentioned educators may struggle with discomfort, resistance from colleagues, or systemic constraints such as rigid curriculum guidelines and performance assessment rubrics that prioritize traditional Western canon and modes of instruction (Bradley, 2007). The participants in this study were already invested in equity-focused teaching; yet they still described moments of uncertainty, a fear of "getting it wrong," and a need to unlearn prior models of success. This underscores the need for professional development that extends beyond surface-level awareness and supports sustained, critical reflection, as well as culturally responsive pedagogical experimentation (Kress et al., 2002).

The implications for practice are both urgent and expansive. Schools and districts must provide structures that support teachers in challenging existing norms, including time for collaborative reflection, access to diverse curricular resources, and mentorship opportunities that center culturally responsive practice. Administrators and policy makers must also recognize the role that school culture and leadership play in either reinforcing or dismantling deficit-based engagement models. Ultimately, redefining engagement in culturally responsive ways means moving from compliance to connection, from performance to participation, and from individualism to

community. Music educators who embrace this shift are not just diversifying content; they are reimagining the very purpose and potential of music education as a space for belonging, affirmation, and transformation.

Discussion

This study reinforced the growing body of scholarship that positions culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as a powerful framework for enhancing student engagement, particularly within music education. Through qualitative interviews with three music educators, findings revealed that CRT-informed professional development contributed to a more expansive understanding of engagement, increased student interest through culturally relevant instruction, and improved classroom behavior and participation. Teachers began to recognize and validate diverse expressions of learning, moving beyond traditional behavioral metrics to include quieter, reflective, and culturally grounded forms of participation. These findings echoed the work of Gay (2010) and Hammond (2015), who advocate for culturally affirming environments that foster authentic engagement.

The study also highlighted how student-centered, culturally relevant instruction can enhance intrinsic motivation and strengthen student-teacher relationships. When students' musical identities and lived experiences were reflected in the curriculum, they demonstrated increased ownership, curiosity, and collaboration, outcomes that align with Paris and Alim's (2017) framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Importantly, CRT not only deepened students' connections to learning but also contributed to more inclusive classroom dynamics, where students felt seen, respected, and empowered. These findings underscore the social-emotional dimensions of engagement and the role of CRT in promoting equity and belonging within music classrooms.

In light of these insights, there is a clear need for ongoing, reflective, and discipline-specific professional development that equips educators with both the theoretical grounding and practical tools to implement CRT. Effective PD should incorporate peer collaboration, reflective journaling, lesson design, and opportunities to integrate student feedback. Strategies that not only support teachers' pedagogical growth but also center student voice in instructional decision-making (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010). Future research should examine the long-term impact of CRT implementation on both student and teacher outcomes, incorporate diverse educational settings, and engage student perspectives, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how culturally responsive practices function in music education.

As with all qualitative research, this study is shaped by its context and scope. The small sample size of three music educators, all located in Virginia and voluntarily participating in CRT-focused professional development, limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, as the data relied on teacher self-reporting, there may be elements of bias or selective recall. Future studies would benefit from triangulating data sources, such as classroom observations, student interviews, or mixed-methods approaches, to provide a fuller picture of CRT's impact on engagement. Nevertheless, this study offers valuable insights into how CRT-informed professional

development can reshape teachers' perceptions and practices and affirms the transformative potential of culturally responsive teaching in music classrooms.

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