"The Vulnerability in Singing Comes From Trust in the Relationship First:" Perceptions of Human Connection in High School Choral Music Classrooms

by

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Dedication

To my beloved students—who taught me the meaning and importance of human connection.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how human connection (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020) is experienced in the high school choral music classroom. The central research question for this study was: How is human connection experienced in the classrooms of three high school choral music educators?

A multiple case study design (Yin, 2018) was employed to examine human connection at three research sites. Sources of data included: (a) three interviews per teacher participant; (b) two student focus groups per research site; (c) four classroom observations per research site; and (d) the collection of material culture and artifacts at each research site.

Findings centered on the following emergent themes: the importance of care, the importance of trust, supporting vulnerability, sense of belonging, and navigating relational challenges. Participants acknowledged that foundations of care were tied to choral teachers actively knowing and responding to students as people (through daily greetings, 'reading the room,' and interpersonal classroom check-ins) as well as expressions of care (conveyed through specific acts of care and perceptions of the choral teacher as a caring figure akin to a mentor or family member). Interwoven with notions of care in the choral classroom was the importance of trust within teacher-student relationships (cultivated through facets of identity and recognition of the teacher as a trustworthy adult) and student-student relationships (cultivated in relationship-building activities and early classroom experiences with low-risk singing). Threads of care and trust were found to be essential to supporting students' expressed vulnerabilities in the choral

classroom, especially as related to the singing voice (alone and with others), making mistakes, and learning repertoire. Participants also framed the high school choral classroom as a community infused with notions of belonging rooted in perceptions of the high school choir classroom as a safe and validating family; a space based in student agency, leadership, and collaboration; and rooted in legacies linked to shared memories and traditions, civic pride and activism, and perceptions of the choral community as a 'home.' Finally, teacher participants acknowledged that navigating relational challenges—including addressing racial and economic privilege, supporting introverted students, and maintaining rapport with students perceived as not invested in the choral program—were a factor in their efforts to initiate and maintain connections with and among students.

Implications for the profession include a call for increased attention to human connection in preservice choral music teacher education, in-service P-12 choral music classrooms, and within music education policy. Based on findings, the notion of *conscious connection in choral music education* is introduced as a state of curricular, pedagogical, and interpersonal awareness rooted in consciously basing relational and instructional decision-making in human connection.

Chapter I
Introduction

Orientation: Relationships, Community and Belonging in My Practice

One's voice is emblematic of their personhood. A voice is a full-bodied representation of who they are—a physical and emotional blend of self-expression. When communicating to—and with—others, the voice is social, cultural, and relational. Just as one's core identities cannot be separated from who they are as a human, the voice is inseparable from the human it resides within. The act of sharing one's voice within the endeavor of music-making is an intensely vulnerable venture. An involuntary voice crack or note sung incorrectly cannot be blamed on pressing the wrong key on the piano or sliding the bow improperly across a violin string. Rather, vocal missteps, whether in tone, pitch, or expression are instead often attributed to a "human instrument:" an individual with a personhood and a soul. Thus, the act of singing is an amalgamation of physiological risk. This risk is palpable for all individuals who embark on the act of singing. For adolescents, who are already attempting to navigate the twists and turns of their placement in the world, the physiological risks associated with singing may churn at an even heightened level. Imagine, then, a space where adolescents find themselves amidst an adult and collection of peers attempting to maneuver the coalesced psychological, emotional, social, cultural, physical, and musical risk of singing. This markedly complex space is the secondary choral music room.

As a middle and high school choir teacher, I spent nine years attempting to create a learning space where the adolescents in my classroom felt supported in their efforts to

understand and share their voices—whether as singers or humans. Carefully selected vocal warm-up exercises, curated repertoire, and discussions of vocal technique were pillars of that practice. Such pedagogical touchstones are important in any choral classroom and were certainly important in my attempts to provide an informed and meaningful choral music education for my students. That said, meaningful relationships, expressions of care, and the cultivation of community and a sense of belonging were deeply embedded within my approach to vocal and choral music instruction as a middle and high school choral music teacher.

When I reflect upon my years teaching in the middle and high school choir room, memories related to thrilling concert performances, triumphs during a complicated sight-singing example, and exciting tours with students across Europe certainly act as representations of my experiences with students. What remains foremost in my memory, however, are the interpersonal connections that my students and I shared together on the path toward those concerts, sight-singing challenges, and international tours. These connections manifested in communal moments like: the annual Karaoke Night where 100+ students would gather in the choir room to sing through the digital rolodex of their favorite songs, the annual Black and White Ball—a school wide dance organized by our student chorus council and attended yearly by over 400 students, the impromptu pizza party for a class of middle school tenor-basses, the holiday gift exchange in the high school Chamber Ensemble, or the senior slide show presented at the end-of-year choir community banquet. Connections also manifested in moments of one-on-one interpersonal interactions, such as: the individualized hand-shakes/fist-bumps at the door as students entered the classroom every day, the thirty-second conversations beside the piano after class where I learned more about what students were going to do over the weekend, the in-depth emotional discussions about repertoire text on a Thursday morning, the sustained bonds built over seven

years of impromptu conversations in my office before or after school, the emotionally palpable discussion with a student who had just come out as gay, or the resonant group reflection with my predominately Black high school tenor-bass ensemble after the 2016 murder of Philando Castile. Collectively, communal and one-on-one moments of connection like this became the cornerstones of my teaching practice. The relationships between my students and I—and the students with each other—grounded the vocal music experiences we pursued together. These facets were important in their own right: building relationships with students and cultivating community and sense of belonging with/among students was part of the fabric of my human and teacher identity. That said, those curricular components were also ultimately enmeshed within a relational practice rooted in the goal to foster empowering choral music-making experiences.

Due to my own experiences as a singer in middle and high school, I already understood the link between meaningful relationships with a choir teacher and peers with a students' musical experience of the choral classroom. For example, my own moments of internal struggle in seventh grade choir when my choir teacher extended care—or experiences in high school forming a sense of community and belonging with my choral peers—meaningfully informed my vision of what a middle and high school choral environment could, and 'should,' look like. Therefore, when I was a middle and high school choir teacher, I knew that asking my students to proclaim their voices, use their bodies, express their emotions, and pursue shared experiences with those standing next to them on the choral risers required a level of trust and interpersonal understanding. I knew that the intensely vulnerable, emotional, social, cultural, and physical endeavor of singing demanded a foundation of relational connection: connection that was threaded between my students and I—and amongst students themselves. Thus, I deeply felt that it was my duty to conceive and cultivate relationships, community, and belonging in my

classroom. My investment in building bonds with students rested in the belief that, if students felt acknowledged, valued, protected, and empowered, then the musical journeys we took together had the potential to know no bounds.

In my classroom, trust, care, compassion, and community tended to emerge at the intersection of my responses to students' musical and non-musical needs. Points of connection allowed us to build rich musical experiences together that were founded in the mutuality of deep human understanding. As described above, daily handshakes at the door, sharing eye contact and a smile with students during vocal warm-ups, reflecting on current events, or talking about weekend plans, were just as important as—and in direct relation to—our collective capacity to relate emotional lyrics to our unique lived-experiences, find beautiful choral blend, take risks when singing a high note, or sight-sing fearlessly. And, because of the sense of trust, care, compassion, and community we shared, student risk-taking endeavors when singing a high note, attempts to find the perfect choral blend, discussions of repertoire text, and navigations of vulnerability were heightened.

That said, when asked by colleagues *how* I was building relationships and community with my students, I often found myself unable to fully articulate the explicit steps I took. What was the root cause(s) of the unique atmosphere my students and I shared? How did this atmosphere evolve? Why was it important? Thus, the origin of this dissertation stems from my interest in uncovering and exploring how relational practice is enacted within other secondary choral music educators' practice. How are relationships, community, belonging, and care perceived in the choral music classroom? How are they cultivated?

Purpose Statement and Research Question

Jorgensen (2020) provides a starting place: "We may begin at the ground at our feet, seek

to express humanness in our teaching, and open our hearts to the needs, interests, and desires of our students" (p. 281). Music education scholars have increasingly examined how dimensions of relational pedagogy impact music teaching and learning (Edgar, 2017; Hendricks, 2018, 2023; Hendricks et al., 2023a; Jorgensen, 2020; Parker, 2020; Small, 1998; Sweet, 2016, 2019). Specifically, as outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, music education scholars have examined the intersections between music education and topics that include: (a) *belonging* (Ellis et al., 2021; Freer, 2015; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019; Graves, 2019; Jones, 2022; Parker, 2010; Phelan, 2017); (b) *care* (Bailey, 2022; Bauman-Field, 2023; Cho, 2021; Edgar, 2014a; Hendricks, 2023; Hibbard, 2017; Howard, 2022; Lalama, 2016; Parker & Hutton, 2023; Price, 2023b; Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Ryals, 2022; Salvador & Culp; 2022; Silverman, 2023; Steele Royston, 2017; Watts et al., 2020); (c) *community* (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Burnard et al., 2008; Dagaz, 2012; Cohen, 2012; Martin, 2021; Matthews, 2017; McCarthy, 2000; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008); (d) *relationships* (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Ehrlich, 2023; Goodrich, 2023; Hendricks et al., 2023; Kennedy, 2002; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Parker & Powell, 2017; Rawlings & Young, 2021; Robison, 2019; Shaw, 2015; Sweet, 2010); and (e) *vulnerability* (Abril, 2007; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015; Wiggins, 2011). These inquiries have focused on relational factors within *P-12 settings* (Abril, 2013; Edgar, 2014a, 2016; Freer, 2009, 2015; MacGregor, 2023; Parker, 2010, 2016; Rawlings & Young; 2021; Sweet, 2008, 2010, 2015); *collegiate settings* (Abril, 2007; Cho 2021; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Powell & Parker, 2017); and *community settings* (Bartolome, 2013; Cohen, 2012; Hendricks et al., 2023b; Hogle, 2021; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Palkki, 2022), showcasing the presence and importance of relational pedagogy across music education contexts.

While these and other scholars have employed the terms belonging, care, community, vulnerability, and relationships, I posit that each scholar is ultimately attempting to unearth understanding related to the notion of *human connection* as originally defined by Miller and Stiver (1997) and critically interpreted by Jordan (2017b, 2018) and Walker (2004, 2008, 2020). In their early conceptualizations, Miller and Stiver (1997) described connection as "an interaction between two or more people that is mutually empathic and mutually empowering" and cultivated through an "emotional and cognitive (feeling-thinking) movement" between individuals (p. 26-27). Thus, I am interested in understanding the origin(s) and evolution of human connection within the context of high school choral music classrooms. Aspects of belonging, care, community, and relationships are essential in their own right within learning environments, but may be of critical importance when intersecting with adolescent student's approaches to singing and choral music. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how human connection is experienced in the high school choral music classroom. The central research question for this dissertation study was:

> How is human connection experienced in the classrooms of three high school choral music educators?

Within this chapter, I will first provide an initial rationale for the need for connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019) in high school choral music settings. I will then briefly examine the lineage of human connection across the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education. Next, I will delve deeply into the importance of connected teaching in choral music education based on emergent themes from a large-scale review of literature, suggesting that connected teaching requires belonging, care, community, relationships, and the support of vulnerability. I will then introduce Relational Cultural Theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997), discuss the framework's central

tenets, and assert Jordan's (2017b, 2018) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) critical interpretations of Relational Cultural Theory as this study's theoretical framework. I will conclude by describing the overview of this current study.

Rationale: The Importance of Human Connection in Choral Music Education

The central purpose of this study is to understand how human connection is experienced in the high school choral classroom. A review of literature comprised of empirical inquiries from across the field of music education suggests that facets of human connection are meaningful—and important—within music teaching and learning. Emergent themes from that review of literature (described in detail in Chapter 2), specifically point to the importance of belonging, care, community, relationships, and the support of vulnerability in music education environments. Discussed in further detail later in this chapter, the increased examination of these relational themes—and the breadth of empirical and scholarly perspectives specifically devoted to facets of connection in choral music settings—reinforce the importance of human connection and connected teaching in choral music education.

A Lineage of Human Connection

In this section, I will trace dimensions of human connection from across the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education. I will begin by briefly describing the philosophical roots tied to the notion of relationships and human connection. I will then outline how psychological conceptualizations of dimensions of connection, individualization, and separation evolved over the 19th and 20th centuries. I will then illuminate the presence of connection embedded in the seminal perspectives of prominent thought leaders from the field of teaching and learning.

Finally, supported by philosophical, psychological, and educational foundations, I will present the notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019).

Philosophical and Psychological Roots: The Evolution of Connection

Though examining dimensions of connection is a relatively new area of inquiry in the field of music education research and scholarship, considerations of connection have long-informed philosophical and psychological inquiries in the broader fields of education and psychology. This lineage of relational inquiry stems back to classical philosophical roots. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2009) examined the complexity of human relationships in his consideration of the broad notion of friendships. Within this framing, Aristotle employed the term 'friendship' to denote both the contemporary conceptualization (ties between peers), as well as bonds between a parent and child, elder adult and younger person, and authority figure with subordinate. The highest form of such a relationship—what Aristotle defined as "perfect friendship" (p. 145) or "friendship of the good' (p. 146)—was described as grounded in shared virtues, sustained commitment, and love.

Despite Aristotle's emphasis on mutuality in relational bonds, prominent philosophical and psychological voices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries centered competition-based developmental paradigms that emphasized an individual's propensities to survive, thrive, and relate to others (Darwin, 2003; Freud, 1917; Hume, 2003; Spencer, 1884). For example, Darwin (2003) asserted that living organisms held a predisposition toward "competition" and "contests," always vying to "gain the upper hand" in varied ecosystems (p. 94). Spencer (1884) extended Darwin's concept into the human domain, establishing the notion of "survival of the fittest" as a "means of preserving an already-established balance" between humans and the worlds they lived within (p. 445). For Spencer, 'fitness' represented the competitive adherence to an individualistic

and developmental ascent toward a status quo-based “equilibrium” (p. 426). Prominent psychological theorists of the twentieth century similarly focused on the individual’s propensity to develop and survive separately from the relational support systems in their lives (Freud, 1917; Mahler, 1971). Much of Freud’s (1917) work emphasized separation (typically from one’s mother) and the conscious/unconscious psychological boundaries formed as a result. Mahler (1971) and colleagues (Mahler et al., 1985) also focused on this proposed disposition in their development of Separation-Individuation Theory to examine the self-centered evolution of a child’s separation from the symbiotic relationship of a caregiver.

The work of Bowlby (1973, 1979), Ainsworth (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991), and Maslow (1958) reasserted much of Aristotle’s initial considerations, particularly that relationships are a core component of the human experience and that it is indeed human nature to seek to love and be loved, to see and be seen, and to know and be known. Bowlby (1979) veered from Freud’s (1917) and Spencer’s (1884) conceptualization of human development based in individualization and separation. Rather, in his Attachment Theory (1979, 1991), Bowlby posited that children, and indeed all people, are predisposed to—and in need of—human connection with others (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1991; Bretherton, 1985). This premise reflected Maslow’s (1958) Hierarchy of Needs in which he suggested that to fully realize one’s whole self required the fulfilment of certain psychological needs, such as the relational need for love, belongingness, and positive self-esteem (pp. 380-381).

Scholarly Roots: Connection in Teaching and Learning

Thought leaders from across the field of education have produced rich bodies of literature aimed at understanding—and advocating for—relational nuances in teaching and learning contexts (Freire, 2005, 2018, 2021; Greene, 1993; hooks, 1994, 2003; Noddings, 2003, 2013;

Palmer, 1999, 2017). For example, Freire (2021) proclaimed that "…to be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world" (p. 3). The very roots of Freire's (2005, 2018, 2021) critical pedagogy were based in a dialectic approach that called for a heightened sense of mutuality between teacher and learner(s) as they navigated the teaching and learning experience amidst sociocultural contexts. Greene (1993) similarly centered foundations of human connection in her writings on a curriculum for human beings, acknowledging education in the Arts as a nuanced relational learning space where those present can be awakened to "alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, of being other" (p. 214).

hooks (1994, 2003) posited that a democratic and liberatory education rests in a teacher's capacity to create an open-hearted community based in mutuality and teacher-student partnerships. Paramount to hooks' (2003) pedagogy of hope was the belief that "principles of love form the basis of the teacher-pupil interaction" (p. 131). Further imparting the importance of connection in education, hooks (1994) asserted: "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). Echoing hooks (1994, 2003), Noddings (2003) suggested that "human relationships are perhaps the most important single ingredient in happiness" (p. 179). Noddings (2013) grounded the notion of care as the epicenter of education, and suggested that within caring and empathic learning environments, "teaching involves two persons in a special relationship" (p. 195). Applying an increasingly equity-focused lens upon the notion of care, Shalaby (2020) called for a concept of care in teaching and learning that demands the mitigation of power structures amidst efforts to nurture and transform young learners:

> …The idea of care, much like the idea of love, is too often misunderstood as apolitical, our work with children and with each other must be first to establish the relationship

> between care and justice. Care is not about being kind or charitable; rather, care is about being and working in ways that are fair, inclusive, and in solidarity with the most vulnerable. (p. 42)

Palmer (2017) provided perhaps the most thorough and explicit vision for connection in education, suggesting that connection is the impetus for effective teaching and learning. Palmer (2017) posited that master teachers possess a “capacity for connectedness” based in their ability to meaningfully blend and center elements of themselves, their students, and the subjects they teach within their instruction (p. 11). Palmer’s (2017) conceptualization of connection extended far beyond solely academic links between subject, student, and teacher, but rather, deep into the realm of human relational connection:

> As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able, so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require. (p. 11)

Here, Palmer centered teachers’ capacity for an embodied wholeness as foundational to cultivating authentic connection with students. He illustrated the complex nature of the connective fabric necessary to weave dynamic and multi-dimensional learning spaces based in human understanding and community. In this sense, again, connection is not only the final product, but is a critical component in conceiving and initiating relationships from the onset.

Whether conceived through the lens of critical dialogue and listening (Freire, 2005; 2018), efforts to better understand humans and humanity on a deeper level (Greene, 1993), basing teacher-student relationships in love and mutuality (hooks, 1994; 2003), a holistic ethic of care (Noddings, 2003, 2013), justice-based notions of care (Shalaby, 2017, 2020), or a teacher’s capacity for connectedness (Palmer, 2017)—underlying each of these educational philosophies is

the broader notion of human connection (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020). Not only human connection *within* relationships and community in the classroom, but as a *pre-requisite to*—and potential *root of*—relationships and community in the classroom. The notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019) may be a meaningful pedagogical foundation reflective of the pillars outlined by the scholars above.

Foundations of Connected Teaching

Relational teaching practice scholar Harriet Schwartz (2019) framed the notion of *connected teaching* from within the foundations of this study's theoretical framework, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Though discussed at length later in this chapter, RCT theorist, Judith Jordan (2017a) posited that "Relational Cultural Theory is a theory about our basic interconnectedness, about the inevitability of needing one another…we are wired to connect" (p. 231). Based in a critical understanding of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008), Schwartz (2019) suggested that connected teaching is rooted in the belief that teaching is a relational endeavor between teacher and student(s). Schwartz (2019) stated that "…relationship is the fulcrum and spark, the valley and the vista—the essential driver of teaching and learning" (p. 1). Schwartz (2019) contextualized the relational principles woven within contemporary conceptualizations of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008) when conceiving the foundations of connected teaching, suggesting that connected teaching grounds "relationship as a site and source for learning" (p. 18). She posited that connected relationships in the classroom foster (a) relational energy in the form of a social, emotional, or intellectual 'spark;' (b) a deeper sense of mutuality and understanding of those one is in relationship with; (c) an increased sense of worth through heightened feelings of validation, mattering, and purpose; (d) new-found inspiration and motivation often associated with increased feelings of optimism; and (e) a desire for more

connection (p. 18). In advocating for connected teaching in all learning environments, Schwartz proposed that connected teaching is not "simply a strategy" enacted in isolated moments of instruction or interactions with students, but rather is a mindset that informs "the foundation of the entire teaching endeavor…evident in single meaningful interactions and longer term teaching relationships" (p. 15).

In the field of music education, scholars are increasingly considering what connection 'is' and how it intersects with the field of music teaching and learning (Abril & Battiste, 2022; Hendricks & Boyce-Tillman, 2021; Hendricks et al., 2023b; O'Neill, 2017; Parker & Hutton, 2023). O'Neill (2017) suggested that connectedness represents the "capacity to benefit from connections across personal, social, educational, and musical domains" (p. 94). Similarly, Abril and Battiste (2022) suggested that relational connections in music classrooms may be the meeting point where teachers and students gather to deeply understand each other, the music they explore, and the worlds they live within. While Hendricks' and Boyce-Tillman's (2021) description of authentic connection reflects certain facets of human connection as framed by RCT (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2004)—such as trust, empathy, and mutuality—their conceptualization more acutely aligned a sense of connection with spirituality and entrainment. To better frame how dimensions of connection have been explored in past inquiries, in Chapter 2 of this dissertation I will review the breadth of music education scholarship devoted to relational themes emergent in music education research and scholarship, such as belonging, care, community, relationships, and vulnerability.

Based in an understanding of Schwartz's (2019) notion of connected teaching and the connection-based theoretical framework of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020), I posit that concepts emergent in music education research and

scholarship (as outlined above)—such as belonging, care, community, relationships, and vulnerability—intersect in meaningful ways and can be encapsulated within a broader conceptualization of *human connection*. Rather than dichotomizing each of these terms as explicitly separate entities, I acknowledge their unifying threads and propose them as a coalesced foundation for the notion of *connected teaching in choral music*. Therefore, my vision for *choral music education rooted in connected teaching* is a constellation of relational concepts. Throughout this dissertation, I will employ the terms 'connection,' 'connected teaching,' 'human connection,' and 'relational pedagogy/practice' interchangeably, and as informed by—and representative of—the essences of belonging, care, community, relationships, and the support of vulnerability.

Connected Teaching in Choral Music Education

In the previous section, I briefly illuminated the lineage of human connection across the realms of philosophy, psychology, and education. In this section, I will build upon Schwartz's (2019) notion of connected teaching to demonstrate why connected teaching in choral music education is paramount for choral music teaching and learning. First, I will briefly discuss how scholars in the field of music education have explored facets of connection within inquiries examining relational practice in music teaching and learning. Based on emergent themes from that literature base, I will outline the importance connected teaching in choral music settings rooted in the necessity of care, relationships, community and belonging, and the support of vulnerability. I will then provide the rationale for why connected teaching is necessary in high school choral music teaching and learning.

The Presence of Connection in Music Education Scholarship

Scholars have long sought to center the human experience in music learning spaces (Allsup, 2003; Bowman, 2009; Edgar, 2017; Hendricks, 2018; Greene, 1993; Jorgensen, 1995; McCarthy, 2000; Parker, 2020; Sweet, 2016). In outlining their concept of artistic citizenship, Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman (2016) proposed a music education model that positions music teachers as connective curators of human wellbeing, and the entity of music education itself as a possible mitigator of oppressive sociocultural hierarchies. Allsup and Shieh (2012) similarly stated that music education is "something larger than steady beats and eighth-note rhythms," subsequently calling for an ethical, social justice-based practice rooted in the teacher's relational capacity to validate, listen, and respond to diverse cohorts of students (p. 48). Jorgensen (2020) reiterated this "person-centric" aim of music education and proposed that people—and how they come to know themselves, each other, and the worlds they perceive—should be the crux of music teaching and learning (p. 281).

Choral music education—enmeshed within the embodied, emotional, and relational endeavor of group singing and learning—uniquely fosters and requires human connection (Bartolome, 2013; Edgar, 2017; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Freer, 2015; Hogle, 2021; Howard, 2022; Palkki, 2022; Paparo, 2022; Parker, 2016; Parker & Hutton, 2023; Phelan, 2017; Powell, 2017; Sweet, 2016, 2019). As Phelan (2017) contended, in choral music, where "our bodies are the site of our performances, experiences, thoughts, and actions," the presence and need for connection is profound (p. 70). In framing his vision for musicking, Christopher Small (1998) asserted: "How we like to music is who we are" (p. 220). I embrace Small's notion, and, in echoing the scholars above, further emphasize that *who we are is how we music.* The high school choral classroom has the potential to be a dynamic gathering space elevated through relational

connections between multidimensional adolescents and multidimensional teachers—and thus, requires connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019).

The Importance of Connected Teaching in Choral Music Education: Care

In her first chapter establishing the scope of *The Oxford Handbook of Care in Music Education*, Hendricks (2023) framed "care as a catalyst toward connection and empowerment" (p. 14). She emphatically centered a care-based and trust-based pedagogy as foundational for music teaching and learning:

> Care ethics offers a vision for individualized, yet holistic, relational decision-making possibilities wherein music educators can practice presencing with students and meet their needs in ways that matter most to them and to their communities—in music-learning spaces and beyond. (p. 18)

Instead of positioning care outside the realm of a music teacher's practice, here, Hendricks placed care at the center of music education.

Additional scholars have pointed to care as a necessary foundation in the music classroom (Berg, 2023; Dansereau, 2023; Edgar, 2014a, 2016; Ehrlich, 2023; Hibbard, 2017, 2021; Howard, 2022; Lalama, 2016; Lewis, 2023; Parker & Hutton, 2023; Powell & Parker, 2017; Steele Royston, 2017; Vū, 2023; Watts et al., 2020). Furthermore, an increasing number of scholars are exploring the important intersections between care and trauma-informed pedagogy in music education (Bailey, 2022; Hibbard, 2021; Hibbard & Price, 2023; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022; Sauerland, 2021). Scholars have also frequently turned to secondary choral spaces when examining the importance of care in music education (Bartolome, 2013; Bennett, 2021; Cohen, 2012; Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Freer, 2009, 2015; Kennedy, 2002; Parker, 2010; Parker & Hutton, 2023; Sauerland, 2022; Sweet, 2008, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2019), highlighting the unique need for care-based choral learning environments, choral instruction infused with aspects of care, and caring teacher-student and student-student relationships. Considering care in choral settings,

Parker and Hutton (2023) conceptualized their notion of 'singing-caring' as reflective of these varied relational paths, suggesting that "multidimensional, continuous, and reciprocal singing-caring relation cycles occur when singing with others" (p. 270). In alignment with past research, Parker and Hutton asserted the need for singing-caring relationships in choral music teaching and learning settings "based in compassion, or caring-with" students (p. 270). They proposed that such relationships may manifest in one-on-one moments between choral teacher and student, between teacher and the full choral ensemble, amongst student members of a vocal section, or between students across the choral ensemble.

The Importance of Connected Teaching in Choral Music Education: Relationships

Small (1998) underscored the essential nature of human connection in musical endeavors: "I believe it to be true of all those activities we call the arts, not just of musicking, that at base they are about human relationships" (p.140). By their nature, choral music learning settings are settings rooted in musicking and intersections of humanity—where intrapersonal, interpersonal, emotional, and social growth are closely intertwined with the exploration, understanding, and sharing of music (Bennett, 2021; Fuelberth & Todd, 2017). It is within these settings, as Elliot (1995) asserted, that music is fully realized as a "shared human endeavor" (p. 42). The 'shared' nature of choral music involves relational connections between teacher and student (Edgar, 2016; Hibbard, 2017) and between students (Kennedy, 2002; Goodrich, 2023; Ramsey, 2016; Sweet, 2010).

Trust may also be a critical component in teacher-student and student-student relationships in the music classroom (Ellis et al., 2021; Goodrich, 2023; Hibbard, 2020; Price, 2023b). Hendricks et al. (2023a) employed the scholarship of Tschannen-Moran (2014) when outlining the process for fostering trust in the music classroom. Tschannen-Moran (2014)

defined relational trust as "one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (pp. 19-20). Hendricks et al. (2023a) proposed that relational (between two individuals) and collective (amongst multiple individuals) trust directly influences students' self-efficacy in music learning as well as their willingness to be vulnerable with regard to musical, social, and emotional risks (p. 5). Thus, trust, as embedded within meaningful teacher-student and student-student relationships, may be an important foundational root of connected teaching in choral music settings (Engelhardt et al., 2022; Hogle, 2021; Palkki, 2022; Phelan, 2017).

The Importance of Connected Teaching in Choral Music Education: Community and Belonging

Closely interwoven with the notion of relationships, music education scholars have also identified the importance of community (Abril, 2013; Bowman, 2009; Jorgensen, 1998; McCarthy, 2000; Parker, 2016) and belonging (Ellis et al., 2021; Graves, 2019; Parker, 2020) in music teaching and learning. When attempting to understand the need for community and belonging in connected choral teaching, it is once again helpful to turn to Small (1998), who distilled the psychological and social facets within a group's musicking efforts: "Those taking part in a musical performance are in effect saying—to themselves, to one another, and to anyone else who may be watching or listening—*This is who we are*" (p. 134). This final component of Small's passage ('*this is who we are'*) is in many ways emblematic of the potential communicative meaning and power of community within connected choral settings. Echoing Small, Parker (2020) contended that "musicking communities become meaningful when adolescents commit to togetherness and experience shared purpose" (p. 147). Gelled through this shared purpose, music communities based in care, trust, and empathy may foster a sense of

belonging in that they not only represent the potential for ensemble members to develop shared meanings of the collective ‘we’ noted by Small—but may be crucial conduits in helping individual students understand themselves (Edgar, 2017; Parker, 2020; Sweet, 2016). Drawing additional threads between the symbiotic nature of community and belonging in music environments, Parker (2020) suggested: “When individuals feel they belong and others accept them, they experience a psychological home where their self-identities become tethered to a particular place” (p. 224).

Notions of community and belonging may be exceptionally meaningful facets of connected teaching in choral music for adolescent singers. Scholars have found that secondary choral classrooms are a special place where adolescent student singers may find community and develop a sense of belonging (Bartolome, 2013; Parker, 2010, 2016; Ramsey, 2016; Sweet, 2008). Further, research and scholarship establishing belonging as a core human need (Baumeister & Leary, 2007; Maslow, 1958; Slee, 2019) reinforces the social, emotional, and psychological benefits of belonging to a meaningful choral high school choral community. Furthermore, when embarking on the vulnerable vocal and musical journeys of the high school choral experience, students may be more willing to take risks if they know they are enveloped by the communal safety net of their choral teacher and peers (Freer, 2009; Hendricks et al., 2023a; Sweet, 2015).

The Importance of Connected Teaching in Choral Music Education: Vulnerability

Vulnerability researcher Brené Brown (2012) contextualized vulnerability as involving “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure,” while also suggesting that a willingness to be vulnerable required a sense of mutuality and trust (p. 34). Brookfield (2017) similarly spoke of the link between trust and vulnerability, positing that “coming to trust another person is the most

fragile of human projects" (p. 95). Adolescents in high school choral music classrooms are navigating this 'project' during a tumultuous developmental corridor of their lives (MacGregor, 2023; O'Neill, 2015; Parker, 2020; Sweet, 2016, 2019). During this time, adolescents' capacity to take risks, embrace agency, and interpersonally connect with others is often linked to issues of trust and concerns regarding how others might perceive them (Abril, 2007; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Robson & Kenny, 2017). Sweet (2019) suggested that "adolescents are heavily influenced by the invisible audience that watches and judges their every mood, every word, and every fashion choice" (p. 14). Many students in secondary choral settings may also presume this 'invisible audience' to be present alongside the 'visible audience' of their choral teacher and peers during their singing endeavors in the high school choir room (Ryan & Andrews, 2009; Sweet, 2015). Student singers may in turn attribute feelings of nerves, fear, uncertainty, and perceived singing efficacy to negative experiences with a choir teacher, criticism from peers, or discomfort with aspects of their singing voice, blend within the ensemble, or reading music (Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Palkki, 2022). Hogle (2021) specifically referred to such moments in choral settings as "wounding experiences," explaining that these experiences are commonly accompanied by feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and shame (p. 182).

The ache associated with these wounding experiences is perhaps uniquely palpable in the secondary choral classroom (Freer, 2015; Maunu, 2019; Ryan & Andrews, 2009). It is within these spaces that adolescents gather together to sing while each individually attempting to mediate their own multifaceted vulnerabilities. Here, the embodied nature of singing is perhaps most heightened—as student bodies become the "primary conduits of experiential knowledge and the medium though which experiences such as inclusion, exclusion, belief, identity, and ideology are negotiated" (Phelan, 2017, p. 8). Building upon Phelan's (2017) acknowledgement

of the relationship between singer, body, and soul, Maunu (2019) asserted:

> We create sounds from inside our bodies. There is something very personal about sharing our voices. Because singers create sound entirely biologically, the sounds we make are closely connected with who we are as human beings. Not only do choral musicians have to build up the courage to make sound with others, but we have to share it with the public. (p. 64)

Other scholars have similarly pointed to the weight of the physiological courage required to traverse the somatic and emotional landscape of adolescent singing and choral music participation (Bowman, 2009; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Paparo, 2016; Sutela et al., 2020). These scholars reaffirm that every time a student in choir is expected to consider a musical, intellectual, or academic point of vocal and/or choral instruction, they must first align every facet of their physiological hardwiring through an internal negotiation of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical factors. Thus, the process of singing is intimate, sometimes unpredictable, and often impacted by other components of students' lives—ranging from what they had for breakfast, a distressing conversation they had at home, or something weighing on their mind (Sweet, 2019). Ultimately, as Sweet (2016) suggested, "if adolescent musicians do not feel positive about themselves and their abilities, then they are less willing to be open to new musical challenges or 'putting themselves out there'" (p. 23).

Finally, scholars acknowledge that not all students know how (or want) to be emotionally or musically vulnerable (Bradley & Hess, 2022; Goodrich, 2023; MacGregor, 2023; Richerme, 2016). Not every student in the high school choral classroom will feel comfortable, or interested in, expressing layers of vulnerability (vocally, physically, verbally, emotionally, musically, etc.) (Culp & Jones, 2020; Orejudo et al., 2017; Price, 2023a, 2023b). Further, as discussed later in this chapter, issues of power, identity, and context may influence how students perceive, approach, and experience vulnerability (Cole, 2016; Hess, 2019b; Hendricks et al., 2023a; Hogle, 2021). Due to embedded relational images (Walker, 2020), students suffering from trauma

(Bailey, 2022; Hibbard, 2021; Hibbard & Price, 2023; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022; Sauerland, 2021), and/or those who identify as part of historically marginalized populations based on racial identities (Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; McKoy & Lind, 2023; Good-Perkins, 2021; Shaw, 2015) and sexual orientation or gender identity (McBride & Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Palkki, 2018; Sauerland, 2022) may (a) be particularly predisposed to feelings of vulnerability and shame in the music classroom (Richerme, 2016; Silveira & Goff, 2016); (b) hold decreased levels of trust in teachers/peers (Hendricks et al., 2023a; McCall, 2017, 2021; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018); and (c) be acutely prone to feelings of distress when placed in vulnerable learning scenarios (Hibbard, 2021; Pendergast et al., 2018; Price, 2023a, 2023b).

Thus, high school choral classrooms function at a vulnerable juncture that is "part hope and fear, part promise and peril" (Bull, 2019, p. 87). This juncture illuminates why an amalgamation of belonging, care, community, and relationships are crucial in a notion of connected choral music teaching and learning. As prominent figures in students' lives throughout adolescence, choral music teachers hold an immense amount of leverage to expand or dismantle student trust and promote or diminish vulnerability (Engelhardt et al., 2022; Hendricks et al., 2023a; Parker & Hutton, 2023; Phelan, 2017; Sweet, 2019).

Summary: The Importance of Connected Teaching in Choral Music Education

Connected teaching in high school choral music settings is of critical importance due to the multidimensional vulnerabilities and interpersonal realities of adolescents in high school choral classrooms (Freer, 2009; Maunu, 2019; Ramsey, 2016; Sweet, 2016, 2019). Thus, reflecting emergent themes from music education research and scholarship, the cultivation of high school choral music spaces rooted in *belonging* (Ellis et al., 2021; Freer, 2015; Parker, 2010); *care* (Hendricks, 2023; Howard, 2022; Maunu, 2019; Parker & Hutton, 2023; Watts et al.,

2020); *community* (Bartolome, 2013; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008); *relationships* (Kennedy, 2002; Ramsey, 2016; Sweet, 2010); and that support *vulnerability* (Abril, 2007; Hogle, 2021; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015; Wiggins, 2011), may be critical in fostering human connection with—and among—secondary choral students in choral music teaching and learning endeavors.

Thus far, I have examined the lineage of human connection across the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education, particularly centering how seminal voices in education scholarship conceived aspects of connection in their work. I then introduced Schwartz's (2019) notion of connected teaching. I then briefly turned to the field of music education to contextualize how scholars have considered aspects of connection in inquiries devoted to relational practice in music teaching and learning. Based on emergent themes from that literature base, I outlined the importance of connected teaching in choral music education rooted in the importance of care, relationships, community and belonging, and the support of vulnerability. I then provided a rationale for why connected teaching is necessary in high school choral music teaching and learning.

Below, I briefly discuss relational frameworks employed in previous studies in the field of music education. I will then introduce Relational Cultural Theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997), asserting Jordan's (2017b, 2018) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) critical conceptualizations of Relational Cultural Theory as the theoretical framework for this study.

Relational Frameworks Previously Employed in Music Education Research

Before delving into the foundations of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020), it is important to first briefly consider other relational frameworks employed by music education scholars within empirical inquiries. At the time of this

study, no scholar in music education has employed Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020) in empirical study. That said, scholars have examined the importance of interpersonal connection in humans' lives through the lens of the specific theoretical frameworks briefly described below. Table 1 (p. 25) displays some of these music education studies and the relational theoretical framework employed within each study.

For example, one relational framework employed in music education empirical study is Turner's (2004) notion of *communitas,* which emphasizes that the notion of community is often representative of an interconnected and shared experience of individuals. Similarly looking at community, Hylton (1981) adapted Gorlow and Schroeder's (1968) religious motivation framework to examine adolescents' views of community and belonging in high school music ensembles, finding that participants often experienced a spiritual dimension and quality within their bonds with others. Derrida (2021) conceived the notion of *hospitality* within the context of providing hospitable treatment of migrants and asylum-seekers in new countries, though the notion has been extended into educational realms as the potential responsiveness of a host (teacher) to guests (students) in a home (classroom). Buber (2012) examined the two-way mutuality within intra/interpersonal relations within his *I-Thou* framework, reminiscent of Hawkins' (1974) earlier conceptualization *I-Thou-It* which included a third dimension to represent the setting, medium, or activity wherein a relationship unfolded. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) developed their concept of *teacher presence* based on the relational frameworks set forth by Buber (2012) and Hawkins (1974), suggesting that presence is an intra/interpersonal awareness—and pedagogical response to—individual and collective needs in the classroom. Scholars in music education have employed some of these theoretical frameworks when examining dimensions of human connection in music teaching and learning (Table 1 on p. 25).

Table 1

Relational Frameworks Employed in Music Education Research

Theoretical Framework	Main Tenets of Framework	Music Education Studies
I-Thou (Buber, 2012)	-There exists a two-way mutuality within intra/interpersonal relations	Burnard et al. (2008); Parker (2016
I-Thou-It (Hawkins, 1974)	-Similar to Buber(2012) -Includes (It) as third dimension	Hibbard (2017)
Motivation For Participating in the Religious Experience (Gorlow and Schroeder, 1968) *Choral Meaning* (Hylton, 1981)	-Gorlow and Schroeder's (1968) original examined the meaning religion had in the lives of adolescents -Hylton (1981) adapted the framework for the *Choral Meaning* survey to examine community and belonging in high school music ensembles	Adderley et al. (2003); Parker (2010)
Communitás (Turner, 2004)	-Community is linked to notions of shared experience, belonging, and relationships	Parker (2016)
Ethic of Care (Noddings, 2013)	-Care is a universal need -The teacher is the 'care-er' -The student is the 'cared-for'	Edgar (2014a), Parker (2016)
Hospitality (Derrida, 2021)	-Initially conceived by Derrida (2021) in relation to hospitable treatment of migrants and asylum-seekers -In teaching, hospitality may be conceived as a responsiveness of a host (teacher) to guests (students) in home (classroom)	Sullivan (2017)
Presence in Teaching (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006)	-Connected awareness—and pedagogical response to—individual and collective needs	Hibbard (2017)
Possible Selves Theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986)	-Identity is fluid and shaped by contexts -In terms of development, the theory focuses on personal discovery, thinking, imagining, reflecting, growing, performing	Freer (2015)
Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020; Zins & Elias, 2006)	-Broadly grounded in the notion that the following principles support development and learning: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness	Edgar (2016, 2014a)
Recognition Theory (Fraser, 1997)	-Confronts social and relational injustice through the mitigation of cultural domination, non-recognition, disrespect	Burnard et al. (2008)

These studies are invaluable within the music education profession's pursuit to understand how facets of relational pedagogy manifest in the music classroom through notions of belonging, care, community, and relationships. Further, these frameworks, combined with the perspectives outlined by prominent educational thought leaders earlier in this chapter, highlight critical foundations from which future relational studies in music education might emerge. Below, I introduce Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020) as the relational framework employed in this dissertation study.

In the sections that follow, I will introduce RCT, provide a general history of the theory, and describe the theory's main pillars. I will then introduce Jordan's (2017b, 2018) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) critical framing of RCT as interpretations that: (a) confront RCT's origins rooted in the perspectives of white, middle class, cisgender and highly-educated theorists; and (b) deepen RCT's reach by centering human connection within implications of power, context, and subsequent intersections with issues that include race, ethnicity, culture, class, tribal affiliation, gender, sex, power, religion, language, and (dis)ability. I will conclude by centering Jordan's (2017b, 2018) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) framings of RCT as the theoretical interpretation employed in this study to examine human connection in three high school choral settings.

History of Relational Cultural Theory

Miller initially constructed the building blocks of RCT in her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976), proposing a conceptualization of women's psychological development that centered the importance of relationships. Miller's initial considerations of RCT coincided with a growing field of feminist scholarship (Belenky et al.,1986; Gilligan, 1977, 1988, 1993). For example, during the time of RCT's early development, Gilligan (1977, 1988)

was presenting work which asserted that individualistic and patriarchal models of human development did not effectively reflect the nuances of women's perceptual understandings. Instead, Gilligan (1993) placed relational factors at the core of women's psychological needs, suggesting that "relationships require connection" to support women's holistic growth (p. xix).

Re-emphasizing and expanding upon Gilligan's premise, Belenky et al. (1986) explored "women's ways of knowing" (p. 64), positing that women's knowledge and meaning-making maintained a complexity not previously investigated (or understood) in many male-dominated psychological forums. In their landmark study, Belenky et al. (1986) found that women's knowing centered the importance of relationships, care, and community. From within the realms of this discourse, RCT was conceived (Miller, 1988).

Miller and Stiver (1997) sought to further examine the unique dimensions of women's psychology by expanding beyond institutionalized cisgender male psychological paradigms (Freud, 1917; Spencer, 1884). As the basis of RCT, Miller and Stiver (1997) proposed that psychological growth emerges as the result of relational interaction *between* individuals:

> In our view, the goal of development is not forming a separated self or finding gratification, but something else altogether—the ability to participate actively in relationships that foster the well-being of everyone involved. Our fundamental notions of who we are, are not informed in the process of separation from others, but within the mutual interplay of relationships with others. In short, the goal is not for the individual to grow out of relationships, but to grow into them. As the relationships grow, so grows the individual. Participating in growth-fostering relationships is both the source and the goal of development. (p. 22)

Distinct from individualist paradigms of the past (Freud, 1917; Spencer, 1884), RCT centers relationships and coming together (instead of separation) on the psychological journey toward interpersonal and intrapersonal development (Jordan, 2010). Additionally, though originally conceived as a feminist framework, scholars—including Miller and Stiver's colleague and RCT theorist Judith Jordan (1992, 2001, 2008, 2010, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2023)—have asserted that

the relational-psychological tenets embedded within RCT in fact apply to *all* humans (Chan et al., 2022; Haskins & Appling, 2017; Jordan, 2017a; Singh et al., 2020), with Jordan (2018) contending: “RCT has increasingly moved toward trying to represent women's (and men's) many voices” (p. 14). Further, RCT has continued to be applied in fields of research and scholarship beyond its counseling and social work origins, including when exploring relational dimensions of education (Bensinger, 2020; Evans, 2002; Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020; Schwartz, 2019; Womack, 2019).

Standing squarely alongside RCT’s *relational* foundations are *cultural* foundations. Within RCT, *culture* is conceived as a complex amalgamation of racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, economic, neurodiverse, physical, social, and political elements that inform multidimensional individuals’ lives (Brown, 2006; Jordan, 2010; Singh & Moss, 2016). Within this study, I will frame notions of culture through this RCT framing as well as Cross et al.’s (1989) conceptualization of culture as encompassing “integrated patterns of human behavior that includes, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group” (p. 3) (A list of definitions relevant to this inquiry is included in Appendix D of this document). Reflecting these understandings of culture, RCT acknowledges that cultural dimensions not only impact human life (Chan et al., 2022; Hammer et al., 2016) but inform the philosophical and psychological theories examining human development (Irvine et al., 2021; Jordan, 2017a). Therefore, within RCT, cultural dimensions are not considered neutral, static, secondary, or obsolete with regard to their impact upon people and their interpersonal interactions. Rather, as Jordan (2017a) asserted, “to place culture alongside connection at the center of the theory is to break a critical silence” (p. 230). That said, while the notion of culture has always been an integral component of RCT, some early—and many subsequent—

interpretations of the theory did not always consider the full depth of structural implications when exploring the influence of culture in relational dynamics. Later in this chapter I will discuss how prominent RCT theorists, including Jordan (2017b, 2018, 2023), Walker (2004, 2008, 2020), and Schwartz (2019) have increasingly examined dimensions of connection through critical conceptualizations that center power, identity, and context within relational dynamics.

Finally, RCT scholars have increasingly emphasized the psychological and neurobiological foundations of connection as an important component of the framework (Brown, 2012, 2021; Jordan, 2010, 2017a; Schwartz, 2019). Again echoing Bowlby 's examination of human attachment, and Maslow's (1958) acknowledgement of psychological relational needs, RCT suggests that individuals "grow through and toward connection" (Jordan, 2010, p. 2). Jordan (2017a) posited that as relational beings, "we are wired to connect" (p. 231). Brown (2012) similarly suggested that humans are "hardwired for connection" (p. 212). She maintained that the need for connection consciously and subconsciously motivates most intrapersonal and interpersonal navigations. A focus on these biological wirings as the psychological pillars of RCT is gaining prominence in research and scholarship exploring the theory (Haskins & Appling, 2017; Jordan, 2017a, 2018; Kress et al., 2016; Lenz, 2016) and are discussed below.

Interpersonal Neurobiological Foundations of Connection

Scholars incorporating RCT into empirical work are turning to the field of neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2012) to better understand how brain activity informs and shapes relational experiences (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2023; Schwartz, 2019). Siegel (2012) defined interpersonal neurobiology as a field that "explores the ways in which relationships and the brain interact to shape our mental lives" (p. A1/42). Siegel affirmed that the brain's neuroplasticity allows it to react to relational signals and

subsequently process them in complex neural, electrical, and chemical ways that inform an individual's perceptions of relationships with others.

Empirical studies have examined this intersection between neurological, biological, and relational experience (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; McCraty et al., 2018; Olff et al., 2013). For example, Eisenberger & Lieberman (2004) found that activity in the brain's dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex processed emotional pain (related to social exclusion, shame, and vulnerability) in the same way as traditional notions of physical pain. McCraty et al. (2018) discovered that a transfer of the human heart's electromagnetic energy occurred when two people touch or are in close proximity. Positive human relationships have also been found to increase levels of the attachment-based hormone oxytocin, while relational exclusion resulted in lower levels of the hormone (Crockford et al., 2014; Müller et al., 2019; Vrticka & Vuilleumier, 2012). Finally, an increasing number of neuroscience researchers have attributed the human display of—and need for—empathy to biological mirror neurons (Decety & Ickes, 2011; Plank et al., 2021; Trieu et al., 2019). Based on this research, scholars have suggested that the responsive nature of mirror neurons allow humans to receive verbal and nonverbal signals from others (tone, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and perceived emotions) in a manner that permits them to physiologically connect (empathize) with others' experience (Banks, 2015; Siegel, 2012).

This brief review of the historical, psychological, and neurobiological domains of human connection is crucial to understanding the main theoretical tenets of RCT. This juncture of mind and meaning establishes the interpersonal physiology that grounds the upcoming overview of the RCT framework.

Relational Cultural Theory: A Conceptual Overview

Thus far, I have provided an initial glimpse into RCT, including the framework's philosophic impetus, historical lineage, and neurobiological foundations. I have introduced RCT as a theoretical framework that centers relationships and cultural implications in the scope of human development. I will now provide a conceptual overview of RCT's central theoretical pillars.

Relational Cultural Theory: Rooted in Connection and Growth-Fostering Relationships

As with any theoretical framework, RCT has a set of philosophical values that guide the theory's scope. The central tenets of RCT are based in the following principles (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997):

1. People grow through and toward connection (relationships).
2. Mutuality—instead of separation and isolation—is essential to interpersonal growth.
3. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are the basis of growth-fostering relationships.
4. The propensity to develop authentic connection in complex and diverse settings heightens relational capacities.
5. Fostering connection in relationships deepens one's social, emotional, and psychological growth.

Connection

The notion of *connection* shapes the RCT framework (Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 1988; Singh & Moss, 2016). Miller and Stiver (1997) described connection as "an interaction between two or more people that is mutually empathic and mutually empowering" and cultivated through an "emotional and cognitive (feeling-thinking) movement" between individuals (p. 26-27). The symbiotic essence of this "feeling-thinking" dynamic is based on shared interpersonal resonance (Comstock et al., 2008; Hammer et al., 2016). Connective relationships therefore create and sustain resonance through mutual commitment, respect, and openness (Chan et al., 2022; Kress et al., 2018). As a result, relational connection is often physiologically fulfilling and

pleasurable (Hartling, 2008; Jordan, 2000)—it ultimately feels good to be synchronously joined with others in meaningful interaction (Buber, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). RCT scholars note that seeking connection with another does not mean diminishing aspects of one's own selfhood for the sake of an interaction (Jordan, 2010; Miller, 1988). Rather, connection calls for each individual to present their full selves within the scope of the relationship in order to create as authentic a connection possible (Duffey & Somody, 2011; Stargell et al., 2020). This vulnerable and liberating authenticity grounds the RCT notion of growth-fostering relationships (Chan et al., 2022; Jordan, 2010).

Growth-Fostering Relationships

Reflective of the connective factors outlined above, Schwartz (2019) suggested that "we are at our best when we have the capacity to engage in and maintain growth-fostering relationships" (p. 13). *Growth-fostering relationships* are a form of interpersonal connection wherein both individuals experience emotional, psychological, and social growth (Bruneau & Reilly, 2021; Haskins & Appling, 2017). The mutuality within growth-fostering relationships requires a "two-way, bi-directional" interpersonal investment (Hartling, 2008, p. 63). Shared participation in the relationship leads to subsequent dimensions of growth based in increased relational satisfaction and desire for more connection (Hammer et al., 2016; Comstock et al., 2008). Ultimately, this growth is formed through the development of *mutual empathy* and *mutual empowerment* (Jordan, 2017a; Purgason et al., 2016). In RCT, *mutual empathy* represents a physiological attunement between individuals (Brown et al., 2002; Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Here, the interactive mirror neuron processes introduced earlier in this paper (Trieu et al., 2019) ignite feelings of empathy as a shared relational bridge linking one's own emotional understanding with that of another (Comstock et al., 2012; Jordan, 2017b).

The reciprocal nature of mutual empathy leads to *mutual empowerment* (Edwards & Richards, 2002; West, 2005). In RCT contexts, empowerment is felt as the result of receiving and providing relational support (Haskins & Appling, 2017). Mutual empowerment in growth-fostering relationships is attained through the realization of what Miller (1988) described as the "five good things" (p. 5): (a) *zest* (relational energy and vitality); (b) *clarity* (about oneself, the other, and the relationship); (c) *self-worth* (related to one's relational competencies); (d) *action* (in the form of heightened relational agency and empowerment); and (e) an increased *desire for more connection* (in the specific relationship and in general) (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Schwartz, 2019). Thus, growth-fostering relationships nurture—and are heightened by—mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and the 'five good things' (Cannon et al., 2012; Jordan & Hartling, 2002).

Disconnections and Relational Images

Thus far I have highlighted RCT's framing of human connection as the formation of mutually empathic and empowering interpersonal bonds cultivated through growth-fostering relationships. While relational growth is a central aim proposed by RCT, the theory firmly acknowledges the presence of relational struggles and challenges within relational dynamics. Within RCT, scholars frame the antithesis of connection as disconnection—or relational experiences where facets of mutual empathy, empowerment, and trust are fractured (Haskins & Appling, 2017; Jordan, 2010). In many instances, disconnections are a conscious and/or subconscious relational response to the navigation of connection within the multifaceted impacts of systemic power structures (Hammer el al., 2016; Triplett, 2003; Walker, 2008). I examine these links below.

Disconnection. RCT frames human relationships as composed of both connections and disconnections (Miller, 1988; Walker, 2008). Relational *disconnections* occur when there is a disruption in connection caused by a severance of empathy, empowerment, trust and/or the 'five good things' (Jordan, 2010). Disconnection may leave an individual feeling emotionally (and physically) rejected, detached, or isolated (Cannon et al., 2012; Comstock et al., 2008). Within disconnection, individuals' experience of the 'five good things' (relational zest, clarity, action, self-worth, and the desire for more connection) is reduced. For example, they may experience a loss of energy and sense of worth, as well as an increase in relational confusion or withdrawal from previously meaningful relationships (Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020; Lértora et al., 2021; Purgason et al, 2016). Miller and Stiver (1997) posited that continued disconnections often cause individuals to develop distorted conceptualizations of relationships with others: "These images and meanings limit [individuals'] ability to act within connections, to know their own experience, and to build a sense of worthiness" (p. 83). In RCT, these images are described in terms of being *relational* and *controlling*—and based on intricate relational models formed throughout one's life (Jordan, 2023; Walker, 2020).

Relational Images. *Relational images* are the contextual foundations from which individuals perceive themselves, others, and relationships in general (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 75). Hammer et al. (2016) described relational images as "expectations that individuals have about their roles in relationships based on past relational experiences" (p. 133). Walker (2008) suggested that relational images "function to explain self, other, the purposes and the possibilities for relationship" (p. 139). Relational images are often formed early in life, sustain long-term impact, and can be related to interactions with important life figures such as parents, caregivers, family, friends, and teachers (Bensinger, 2020; Branco, 2022; Brown, 2006; Edwards

et al., 2013; Jordan, 2010). Further, individuals may develop relational mindsets that transfer interpersonal experiences from past relationships upon current relationships (Jordan, 2017b). *Controlling images* tend to be critically-based forms of relational images (Walker, 2008). Controlling images may represent intra/interpersonal relational understandings based in macro-level perceptions of sociocultural factors (Hammer et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2020). Controlling images exist within racial, gendered, cultural, and socioeconomic power structures, developing "when individuals internalize societal expectations and interact with others based on the expectations they have internalized as a result of these images" (Hammer et al., 2016, p. 133). Though discussed at greater length in the section of this chapter about critical interpretations of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2020), the institutionalized and oppressive impacts of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia can maintain a wide-range impact on if/how an individual connects with others (Avent Harris et al., 2021; Hartling, 2008; Ruiz, 2005; Singh & Moss, 2016).

The Central Relational Paradox

Individuals experiencing discrimination and/or trauma based on identities that include race (Storlie et al., 2017. Walker, 2008), culture (Lértora et al, 2021); gender (Canon et al., 2012; Randell et al., 2015), sexual orientation (Russell, 2009; Singh & Moss; 2016), and positioning within familial/social structures (Branco, 2022; Brown et al., 2018) may be more prone to relational disconnections. Often, these disconnections occur as the result of the *central relational paradox* (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The central relational paradox suggests that despite the core human need to connect with others (Bowlby, 1979), an intense fear of rejection, invalidation, and shame can ultimately be so intense that it causes an individual to enact "barriers or strategies of disconnection to protect themselves," (Singh et al., 2020, p. 264). Survival strategies of

disconnection may include avoidance, silence, anger, fear, and anxiety (Chan et al., 2022; Gómez, 2020; Hammer et al., 2016; Purgason et al., 2016; Ruiz, 2005; Russell, 2009). Disconnections at the root of the relational paradox can be the result of one-on-one (with another person/persons) or societal (in which relational and controlling images may come into play) implications (Jordan, 2023; Miller, 1988; Walker, 2020).

While combatting the roots of disconnection is a goal of RCT, scholars also acknowledge the need for contextual nuance in individual cases of disconnection (Dorn-Medeiros et al., 2020; Hammer et al., 2016). Attempting to mitigate disconnection through forced connection is a violation of another's comfort and vulnerability—which is the antithesis of empathic, growth-fostering relationships (Chan et al., 2022; Schwartz, 2019). Therefore, scholars suggest that any inquiry/approach employing RCT must not only examine dimensions of human connection broadly, but also honor the experience of individuals working through disconnections. Here, the importance of *relational resilience*—newfound empowerment, increasingly realized self-worth, and desire for more connection—takes precedence (Jordan, 2023; Hartling, 2008). The concept of relational resilience can perhaps best be explored through the examination of one final dimension of RCT: the notion of 'power over vs. power with.'

Power Over vs. Power With

Embedded within the RCT framework is the notion that the pursuit of human connection is equally the pursuit to reduce separation and isolation, often experienced as a result of oppression-based relational/controlling images and the central relational paradox (Chan et al., 2020; McConnel & Phelan, 2022; Walker, 2008). Thus, RCT has been increasingly employed in empirical inquiries in the field of social work (Branco, 2022; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Kress et al., 2018) and education (Bruneau & Reilly, 2021; Edwards et al., 2013; Rector-Aranda, 2019;

Simola, 2020) to engage the critical intersections of human connection within broader issues of equity and justice.

As noted earlier in this chapter, RCT places culture at the center of connection, acknowledging the ways that racial, gendered, and socioeconomic realities are enmeshed within how humans understand and relate with each other (Lacatena, 2018; Purgason et al., 2016; Stieha, 2010). These implications often emerge in the form of controlling and relational images (Hammer et al., 2016; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2004). RCT suggests that hierarchical, marginalizing, and restrictive relational perceptions are often the result of *power-over relationships* (Jordan, 2017a; Schwartz, 2019). *Power-over* relationships are nonmutual in nature and exist when one person(s) maintains power over another person(s) who holds less power (Hammer et al., 2016; Mereish & Poteat, 2015). Power-over may stem from oppressive sociocultural implications (race, gender, class) as well as subordinate/insubordinate authoritarian structures (parent vs. child, teacher vs. student), resulting in an individual's reduced autonomy, validation, and empowerment (Comstock et al., 2008; Walker, 2008).

In turn, RCT advocates for a resilience-based *power-with* relational model based in mutuality (Chan et al., 2022; Hammer et al., 2016). *Power-with* relationships are cultivated through an equity-focused, mutual energy flow between individuals (Jordan, 2017b; Stargell et al., 2020). Power-with relationships are infused with shared vulnerability, empathy, willingness to learn, and empowerment (Dorn-Medeiros, 2020; Schwartz, 2019). Jordan (2008) proposed that within growth-fostering relationships grounded in a *power-with* mentality, "we transcend separateness, we extend ourselves to others, we find ways to navigate conflict, we see that vulnerability is necessary to grow, and we move toward increasing mutual connection" (p. 231). Jordan (2023) further suggested that resilience emerges from power-with relationships through

the sustained increase of the five good things: relational zest, clarity, self-worth, action, and desire for more connection. Implications of power within relationships are discussed below in the presentation of critically reimagined interpretations of RCT.

In this section, I introduced RCT (Miller & Stiver, 1997) as the theoretical framework for this study and provided an overview of the framework's historical foundations. I provided RCT's definition for 'connection' and presented the framework's central tenets, including growth-fostering relationships, relational images, the central relational paradox, and notions of power in relationships. In the remaining portion of this chapter, I will present Jordan's (2017a, 2018) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) increasingly critical interpretations of RCT, as well as their intersections with Schwartz's (2019) notion of connected teaching. I will conclude by framing these critical interpretations of RCT as the lens employed in this dissertation study.

Employing a Critical Framing of Relational Cultural Theory

When conceiving the foundations for this study, I sought a theoretical framework with the potential to reflect and amplify the importance of human relationships in the secondary choral music classroom. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Miller & Stiver, 1997) emerged as a possible framework to incorporate into this study in that RCT established a foundation from which to consider dimensions of human connection. Though the framework has been primarily employed throughout the fields of counseling (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Kress et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2020; Singh & Moss, 2016; Stargell et al., 2020) and social work (Branco, 2022; Chan et al., 2022; Edwards & Richards, 2002; Lenz et al., 2012), a growing number of scholars are turning to RCT when conducting research in educational contexts (Bensinger, 2020; Bruneau & Reily 2021, Byers et al., 2020; Cholewa et al., 2014; Lértora et al., 2021; Randell et al., 2015; Simola, 2020; Womack, 2019). Given the growing applicability of

RCT in education-based research—paired with the framework's overall conceptualization of human connection—RCT seemed poised to provide a meaningful foundation when examining the vulnerability-laden musical and relational nature of secondary choral classrooms.
That said, the original theoretical foundations (Miller, 1976, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1997) and certain early conceptualizations of RCT do not consistently or explicitly ground dimensions of human connection through a distinct lens of criticality (Edwards & Richards, 2002; Liang et al., 2002; Miller & Richards, 2000; West, 2005). Many of RCT's earliest framings were often largely neutral with regard to how sociopolitical implications such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender diversity, (dis)ability and structures of oppression inform human approaches to, navigation of, and experiences within relationships.

Prolific RCT scholar—and colleague of Miller and Stiver—Judith Jordan (1992, 2000, 2001, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2017b, 2018, 2023) recognized that "early RCT theory was skewed by the fact that the original writers were all white, middle class, and well educated" (Jordan, 2018, p. 13). Jordan (2018) further explained that initial responses to RCT from scholars identifying as members of historically marginalized communities urged RCT's original theorists to acknowledge "how the assumption of universality by the privileged dominant group creeps into even the most conscious attempts to incorporate diversity and appreciate power and equities…committing the very distortions they were protesting" (pp. 13-14). Some of these early critiques (Jenkins, 2000; Ruiz, 2005; Triplett, 2003) catalyzed Jordan and subsequent RCT scholars (Avent Harris et al., 2021; Comstock et al., 2008; Hammer et al., 2016; Patton & Reicherzer, 2010; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2004, 2008) to employ RCT while consciously centering facets of identity and context within the examination of relational interactions, vulnerabilities, and power dynamics. In her work, RCT scholar Maureen Walker (2004, 2008,

2020) critically excavated previous notions of culture in RCT and called for a more direct and nuanced approach to examining how societal structures are enmeshed with the relational and neurological elements of human relationships. Walker (2020) asserted that, as humans in connection with others, “our sense of place and purpose in the world is shaped not only by formative relationships but by the omnipresent cultural messaging that establishes standards of beauty, goodness, worth, values, and reality” (pp. 29-30).

Walker’s (2004, 2008, 2020) and Jordan’s (2017b, 2018, 2023) calls to action have led to the continued evolution of RCT’s theoretical pillars. Thus, in framing an increasingly critical understanding of RCT, Jordan (2018) asserted:

> RCT has increasingly moved toward trying to represent women's (and men's) many voices as they are shaped not only…by sociopolitical, racial, cultural, sexual, and economic contexts. More recently the delineation of the impact of race, class, sexual orientation, and all types of marginalization on individuals and groups of individuals—both men and women—has been at the center of this work. (p. 14)

Seeking to further contextualize the intersections between human relationships and sociocultural/sociopolitical implications, Jordan (2018) contended: “relational development is always completely suffused with social and cultural identities and has been central to the development and practice of RCT” (p. 28). This increased attention to and investment in enmeshing contextual and identity-based implications within the study of human connection has been crucial in the evolution of RCT through a critical lens—and RCT’s incorporation within research and practice. Researchers have turned to RCT when examining the intersections between relationships and issues related to (a) race and ethnicity (Avent Harris et al., 2021; Comstock et al., 2008; Irvine et al; 2021; Purgason et al., 2016; Rector-Aranda, 2019; Ruiz, 2013; Singh et al., 2020; Simola, 2020; Storlie et al., 2017); (b) sexual orientation and gender (Lértora et al., 2021; Patton & Reicherzer, 2010; Russell, 2009; Singh & Moss, 2016); and (c) masculinity (Christensen et al., 2020; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Rice, 2022). Many of these

inquiries have been based on scholars' critical reconsideration of certain relational concepts embedded in RCT, such as relational images, disconnection, and power dynamics. I discuss some of these shifts below.

Critically (Re)Considering Specific Relational Cultural Theory Concepts

Jordan (2018) suggested that "relationships are embedded in culture [and] theory is embedded in culture" (p. 9). Thus, Jordan suggested that acknowledging the situatedness of human connection in a critically reimagined RCT is woven within a scholarly commitment that seeks to "dispel the illusion of the objectivity and neutrality of any theoretical position" (Jordan, 2018, p. 10). Jordan (2017b, 2018, 2023) and Walker (2004, 2008, 2020) have been prolific in their critical conceptualizations of RCT within the fields of counseling, social work, and psychology though additional scholars have increasingly applied a critical lens when discussing how implications of identity and context inform RCT concepts like relational images, disconnection, vulnerability, and power dynamics (Brown, 2021; Byers et al., 2020; Haskins & Appling, 2017; Hartling et al., 2004; Nordell, 2022; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020; Walker & Rosen, 2004). Below, I discuss some of these critically-framed conceptualizations of RCT concepts, including relational images, disconnection, vulnerability, and power.

Relational Images and Disconnection. As described earlier in this chapter, RCT theorists initially posited that relational images are assumptions, expectations, and understandings of relationships based on past relational experiences, while controlling relational images reflect interpersonal internalizations of various sociocultural/political power structures (Jordan, 2000; Miller & Stiver, 1997). While some early conceptualizations of RCT explored the influence of identity and context on relational development (Jordan & Hartling, 2002), many interpretations lacked comprehensive considerations of relational images and were broadly

identity- and context-neutral. Jordan (2018) rejected this neutrality when asserting that relational images are “shaped by societal forces and values” (p. 31). Similarly, Walker (2008) further contextualized relational images, suggesting that “relational images function to explain self, other, the purposes and the possibilities for relationship” (p. 139) and are directly situated within structures of power that impact how individuals perceive relationships in their lives.

Evoking the first edition of Hill-Collins’ (1990, 2022) *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, Walker (2004) suggested that individual and collective development of controlling relational images is often associated with, defined by, and ultimately sustained by dominant societal structures: “These images are then key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated the images disappear” (Walker, in Walker & Miller, 2004, p. 142). Walker further proposed that there is a cyclical nature between these systemic wirings and relational images that intricately inform intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal perceptions of power and marginalization.

In their evolving interpretations of RCT, Jordan (2018, 2023) and Walker (2004, 2008, 2020) further delved into the threads between implications of power, macro-level controlling images, and various forms of interpersonal disconnection. Jordan (2018) called for RCT scholars and researchers to consider how “social and cultural identities are stratified and accorded different amounts of social respect and power” (p. 28) as well as “the ways in which disconnections created by stratified social organization and marginalization contribute to the experience of immobilization and isolation” (p. 9). Walker also confronted this link between societal stratification and relational realities when stating that “growth and connection means recognizing that everybody lives under a culture that prescribes relational violations” (Walker, in

Walker & Miller, 2004, p. 144).

Walker asserted that culture—as a dynamic entity comprising an amalgamation of social, cultural, and political structures—establishes forms of entrenched relational maps upon how groups and individuals perceive their relational competencies, worth, and status in relationships with others. In speaking of culture, Walker suggested:

> …culture itself becomes an agent of disconnection and distortion, proliferating images that undermine mutuality and authenticity. So much of what we deal with are power distortions that interfere with relational development. (Walker, in Walker & Miller, 2004, p. 144)

In later work, Walker (2020) further posited that the influence of dominant societal structures "amplifies socially sanctioned narratives, both inchoate and articulated, that shape how we see ourselves in relationship to others in the world" (p. 30). According to Jordan (2018), these distortions often take the form of "racism, homophobia, class prejudice, and sexism [that] all lead to chronic disconnections that create pain and drain energy in individuals and society" (p. 9). Walker and Miller (2004) contended that these power distortions catalyze disconnection and lack of mutual relational empathy or empowerment in many relational dynamics. Specifically, they suggested that such relational disconnection is directly aligned with relational images that reinforce dichotomies labeling individuals as "dominant" (white, male, Christian, wealthy) and "subordinate" (historically marginalized individuals) (p. 130). Walker (2020) suggested that these dichotomies tend to occur when a dominant group or individual determines "who is included and who is excluded within the boundaries of normal" (p. 35). Speaking to these implications of power in earlier work, Walker (2004) proposed:

> There are inherent power differences in these categories and political inequalities that have an impact on how we are with each other. If we truly believe that we grow in relationship with each other, then this situation of cultural and political inequality will have an impact on human development and human functioning. (Walker, in Walker & Miller, 2004, p. 130)

Walker (2004) also suggested that within systems of inequality, individuals with reduced levels of power often feel at fault for breaks in relational connection, imparting what Jordan (2023) described as a form of “self-blame” (p. 79), even if they are ultimately the individual on the receiving end of an interpersonal violation. This interplay ultimately “affects one’s sense of worth” and elicits “chronic disconnections [that] lead to negative relational images” (Jordan, 2018, p. 31).

As briefly described above, a critical interpretation of RCT (Jordan, 2017b, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) not only explicitly calls attention to the overarching existence of power, identity, and context in the formation of relational images, but posits that those same elements directly inform how humans experience and navigate relationships. This means that macro-level paradigms related to identity, power, and context will influence not only an individual’s interpersonal relational lens, but will impact their experiences of relational connection and disconnection with others.

Vulnerability. In continuing to engage with RCT through a critical lens, scholars (Hartling et al., 2004; Jordan 2023, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) have also recontextualized how perceptions of relational images and disconnection intersect with notions of vulnerability. From an RCT perspective, vulnerability is broadly one’s willingness “to express authentic feelings” based on perceptions of “safety…directly related to how much mutuality exists in a relationship” (Jordan, 2018, p. 9). Hartling et al. (2004) stated that there is an innate vulnerability at “the growing edge” of connection, requiring a semblance of “joining together, hearing each other into voice” that often feels unclear, unsafe, and difficult to trust (p. 127). Closely related to vulnerability is the fear of humiliation and shame, which within relational contexts, can lead individuals to feeling devalued, disempowered, and “unworthy of connection” (Hartling et al.,

2004, p. 106). Both the vulnerability-based fear—and experience of—humiliation or shame can restrict an individual's propensity to mutually engage in relationships with others (Walker, 2020).

Closer critical examinations of RCT posit that the crosshairs between vulnerability, humiliation, and shame intersect with implications of sociopolitical structures (Avent et al., 2021; Hartling et al., 2004; Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020). In this way, vulnerability, humiliation, and shame may emerge within oppressive interpersonal experiences as well as in the shadow of societal waves of racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and classism (Hartling et al., 2004; Walker & Miller, 2004). As Jordan (2018) stated, "the dominant culture distorts images of self, images of others, and images of relational possibilities" in ways that influence one's overall conceptualization of what it means to be vulnerable, perceptions of 'safety' in vulnerable situations, and manifestations of humiliation and/or shame (p. 9). Contemporary RCT scholars maintain that a hesitancy toward vulnerability may be especially palpable for members of historically marginalized communities due to intra- and interpersonal challenges associated with power-laden and oppressive relational images (Avent Harris et al., 2021; Lértora et al., 2021; Purgason et al., 2016; Ruiz, 2013; Singh & Moss, 2016). For example, Walker (2020) contended that "racialized power differentials breed a sense of separateness and wariness" which may in turn lead to the perception that forms of relational disconnection are "the only possibility of relational safety" (p. 42). Specifically, Walker (2004) asserted that in the face of distrust and uncertainty, individuals who identify as part of any historically marginalized community may avoid relational vulnerability by enacting disconnection or self-preservation:

> [Historically marginalized individuals] sometimes get rutted in disconnections because the possibility of connection does bring with it vulnerability—the challenge to let go of the relational images that seem to provide protective function. It is sometimes quite

> difficult to talk about transformation and mutuality on all sides of structured-in inequalities. (Walker, in Walker & Miller, 2004, p. 141)

Here, Walker reiterated that RCT concepts such as mutuality (whether in empathy, empowerment, and trust) are often exceedingly more complex for individuals from historically marginalized communities. Missing from many early iterations of RCT was this distinct consideration of how individuals identifying as Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, neurodiverse, or as persons with disabilities navigated "deep-structured inequality" (Walker, 2020, p. 53) within their experiences of vulnerability in relationships. That said, in their interpretations of RCT, Walker (2004, 2008, 2020) and Jordan (2017b, 2018, 2023) emphasize that considerations of power are crucial when attempting to address issues of vulnerability in connection, especially for individuals within historically marginalized communities.

Implications of Power. As discussed above, closely intertwined with notions of vulnerability are implications of power. Walker (2008) suggested that "a central tenet of RCT is that humans learn and grow through action in relationship by staying present, alive, and connected in the present moment, a place of profound vulnerability" (p. 141). Therefore, relational disconnections—particularly in the face of oppression or marginalization—may instill lifelong feelings of relational vulnerability, particularly for individuals from historically marginalized communities (Hartling et al., 2004; Lértora et al., 2021; Singh & Moss, 2016). These sustained forms of disconnection often reflect the absence of mutuality and inhibit the chance for empathic and empowering relationships (Walker, 2008). Further, these disconnections in relation to dominant societal structures—or what Walker (2020) described as "the presumed normalcy of permanent inequality" may in turn impact how one perceives their place in a given relationship or space (p. 37). That said, even amidst calls for relational resilience (Jordan, 2023), critical implications are to be foregrounded (Jordan, 2018, Walker, 2017, 2008, 2020). By

interpreting human connection in this manner, paths toward mutually empathic, empowering, and vulnerable relationships distinctly involve the acknowledgement of power, identity, and context (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2008). From that premise, Walker (2008) called for the following:

> If the goal of relationship is movement and creativity, then embracing power is a necessary function. To disavow power is not an option. The option is to choose how to relate to and through the power that one has. To disavow power is to disavow relational accountability. (p. 133)

Walker (2008) proposed that scholars and practitioners invested in the principles of RCT might rather consider the dimension of power as the following: "To embrace power from a relational perspective is to enlarge the terms of engagement. Most often, it means creating a new choice out of the dichotomized options" (p. 137). Thus, enlarging the terms of relational engagement—cultivating mutuality through critically-based understandings of empathy, empowerment, vulnerability, interpersonal safety, and trust—may broaden the depths of relational connection. In turn, Jordan (2023) suggested that a critical interpretation of RCT may inform a framing of connection based in notions of: supported vulnerability, mutual empathic involvement in the relationship, relational confidence that one has relationships they can depend on, empowerment through mutual growth, and the simultaneous development of personal and relational awareness (p. 76).

Critical Conceptualizations of RCT in Relationship with Connected Teaching

The evolving critical interpretations of RCT described above (Jordan, 2023, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) reflect the RCT lens employed by an increasing number of scholars when considering dimensions of human connection in educational contexts (Bensinger, 2020; Bruneau & Reily 2021, Byers et al., 2020; Cholewa et al., 2014; Lértora et al., 2021; Randell et al., 2015; Simola, 2020; Womack, 2019). These sample studies, rooted in a critical reimagining

of RCT, offer foundations from which to consider how human connection is experienced in the choral classroom. Further, these foundations align with the voices of leading educational scholars introduced earlier in this chapter who have long centered issues of power, identity, and context within their vision for relational possibilities in the classroom (Freire, 2005, 2018, 2021; Greene, 1993; hooks, 1994, 2004; Noddings, 2003, 2013; Shalaby, 2017, 2020, Small, 1998). Below, I bring the voices of Freire, hooks, Noddings, Shalaby, and Small into conversation with critical interpretations of RCT (Jordan, 2017a, 2018; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) in an effort to further foster the foundation of connected teaching in choral music education.

Schools Reflecting Broader Contexts. Critical interpretations of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020) contend that all relational development exists within broader societal systems, meaning that human relationships reflect broader structures of power and oppression. Prominent educational scholars have similarly asserted that sociopolitical systems and structures influence relationships embedded in teaching and learning (Freire, 2005, 2018, 2021; hooks, 1994, 2003; Noddings, 2003, 2013, Shalaby, 2017, 2020; Small, 1998). For example, hooks (1994) identified school as “a political place” reflective of broader sociopolitical contexts that inform how teachers and students perceive—and navigate—the entity of schooling. In her work aligning RCT principles with the notion of connected teaching, Schwartz (2019) echoed hooks when describing schools and classrooms as contextual microcosms that mirror facets of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism (p. 90). Speaking to teacher-student connections, Schwartz posited that “RCT reminds us we cannot understand or authentically navigate relationships without acknowledging the influence of race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity…faced by people as they move through the world” (p. 89). How students and teachers communicate in relationships with each other reflects

implications of identity, positionality, and life experiences (Brookfield, 2017). These interactions are also informed and sustained by relational images based in interpersonal and societal experiences (Walker, 2008). Therefore, the teacher-student relationship requires a commitment on behalf of the teacher to not only develop an understanding of how their personal identities inform their own meaning-making, but how those identities intersect with their teaching—and their students' meaning-making (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). This mirrors many aspects of Freire's (2021) notion of critical consciousness and what Brookfield (2017) similarly described as critically reflective teaching, in which he suggested actively building "into our practice the habit of constantly trying to identify, and check, the assumptions that inform our actions as teachers" (pp. 4-5).

Mutual Dialogue. Walker (2020) defined "dynamic mutuality [as] a relational stance and process that invites engagement by all participants in a relationship," (p. 98), and asserted that "an effective teacher holds dynamic mutuality as an attitudinal stance throughout the relationship with the student" (p. 93). In speaking to this pedagogical responsibility, Freire (2005) believed that as teachers, "our relationship with the learner demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them" (p. 102). Schwartz (2019) similarly believed that developing a deeper understanding of students and their worlds may help teachers relationally "connect with students in their complexity rather than assuming a universal experience or overlooking the nuance of their lives" (p. 93). Embracing such complexity also mirrors Small's (1998) framing of musical encounters, in which the full group of musicians assembled (the "who we are") is also representative of "any number of individual 'who I am's'…[belonging] to a number of social groups simultaneously"

(p. 134). The ‘who we are’ of choral music classrooms are similarly comprised of multidimensional student ‘who I am’s.’

Implications of Power. RCT-based relational intersections between identity and context with power are also foregrounded in examinations of teacher-student relationships (Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020). Power within classrooms often manifests in traditional authoritarian modes of teaching and learning (Freire, 2018; hooks, 2003; Shalaby, 2017, 2020), as well as in how societal structures reinforce power-laden dynamics between teachers and students—and amongst students (Brookfield, 2017; Noddings, 2003; Schwartz, 2019). Authoritative teacher-student relationships, particularly in classrooms—which Noddings (2003) stated sometimes reflects a “totalitarian state” (p. 288)—position the teacher as all-knowing and the student as subordinate, effectively eliminating possibilities for mutual relational empowerment (Freire, 2005). Such teaching models may increasingly restrict the potential for shared empathy and vulnerability (Noddings, 2013; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020). Further, as noted by hooks (2003), whether as a result of authoritative-based learning paradigms or when embedded in teacher-student/student-student relationships, classrooms remain “environments that continue to be shaped by the politics of domination” where students from historically marginalized populations continue to face various forms of interpersonal harm (p. 99). These paradigms of control instill what Shalaby (2020) characterized as “a model of power that punishes people instead of taking care of them” (p. 41). Reflective of how such power differentials may influence relational images, Shalaby suggested that authoritative relational models in learning spaces reinforce the notion that those in positions of authority—whether due to their role as teacher or due to power attributed by sociopolitical structures—often dictate how students approach and navigate relationships in (and outside of) the classroom. The impact of these relational images may then reduce students’ sense

of perceived relational capacities, self-efficacy, levels of vulnerability, and feelings of trust—especially for students who identify as members of historically marginalized communities (Brookfield, 2017; hooks, 2003; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020).

The dimensions of power described above are entrenched in the institution of schooling and within the relationships of the classroom (hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2003). Given the typical manifestation of power in the classroom, the RCT notion of 'power with' vs. 'power-over' can become further complicated. Through the lens of RCT, Schwartz (2019) recognized that "a teacher clearly holds power over students— position power, power inherent in the assessment role, and often power regarding a student's future" (p. 19). Similarly, Walker (2020) acknowledged that to undermine the power differentials in the teacher-student relationships would "interject an unreality that could ultimately undermine the purpose of the relationship" (pp. 92-93). Freire (2005) further asserted that teachers may "confuse a certain use of authority with authoritarianism" (p. 113). Though markedly against notions of authoritative teaching, Freire (2005, 2018) recognized that disregarding all implications of power in the classroom are simultaneously not possible (due to societal structures) and not holistically constructive due to the productivity of learning, asserting that teachers maintain a level of power due to their knowledge of, and experience with, content.

Rather, Freire urged teachers to reconceptualize power in ways that reduced teacher-student hierarchies while expanding the mutuality between teacher and student (and amongst students)—a notion that has further grounded the work of other scholars (Brookfield, 2017; hooks, 1994, 2003; Shalaby, 2017, 2020). Freire's dialogic, listening-based approach to teaching and learning aligns with Schwartz's (2019) vision for aspects of power within connected teaching, in which she expressed believing that teacher and student may "find power in

vulnerability and in listening and responding to the other" (p. 87). She proposed that teachers might conceive their power as the capacity "to increase energy, clarity, mutuality, and connection—with the goal of facilitating meaningful [relational] movement and learning" (p. 85). Similar to Freire's (2005) image of mutually dialectic relationships in the classroom, Schwartz (2019) posited that the RCT notion of power-with students, as opposed to power-over, involves this layered approach:

> Through various expressions of power-with [students], such as measured and confident vulnerability, transparency, appropriate shared decision-making, and committed and ongoing attention to identity (ours and our students') and the larger cultural context, we expand the shared learning space. (p. 98)

Similarly, Walker (2020) affirmed that in shared notions of power between teacher and student, the teacher should not forgo their necessary experience or professional knowledge. Rather, Walker (2020) stated that educators should continue to "grow, stretch, and learn" alongside their students while maintaining a "sensitivity to conflicting social identities and intersectionality" (p. 93). Further, Walker (2020) suggested that in their efforts to develop shared understandings of power, teachers might enact forms of "disruptive empathy" when engaging with students—a specific form of empathy based in an "open-heartedness and open-mindedness" that prompts one to 'disrupt' "narratives about self and other" (p. 66)

Thus, rather than dispel the impacts of power in the relational realities of a classroom, connected teaching actively confronts implications of power in how teachers, students, and content interact (Freire, 2005; Hawkins, 1974; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020). By acknowledging and working through implications of identity, power, and context in the classroom, teachers and students may find increasingly collective paths toward mutual empowerment and care (Shalaby, 2020). Walker (2020) contended that such relational mutuality

may ultimately cultivate a sense of mattering and increasingly equitable conceptualizations of shared power necessary in learning spaces:

> The experience of mattering to another…affirms the students' sense of dignity, purpose, and possibility. The student experiences power as the energy of being present and alive because she is participating in shaping her world. (p. 95)

Critical Conceptualizations of Relational Cultural Theory and Connected Teaching in Choral Music

Context- and identity-based facets such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status are inseparable from any inquiry seeking to better understand how choral music educators foster caring and trust-based relationships with—and among their students (McKoy & Lind, 2023; Sauerland, 2022; Shaw, 2019; Sweet, 2016). In presenting his vision for musicking, Small (1998) charted the intersections between musical pursuits, the individuals involved in the musical pursuits, and facets of context and identity:

> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning, but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world, and even perhaps the supernatural world. (p. 13)

Here, Small affirmed the centrality—and reflexivity—of identity and interpersonal interactions within the intersections of musicking and sociocultural contexts. One might also consider Small's assertion as a way to enliven Hawkins' (1974) I-Thou-It triad within music and music education—with the 'It' representing music journeys students take together while interchanging the 'I' and 'Thou' based on the relational perspective of teacher or student. Small's (1998) discussion of these themes in music settings also mirrors much of what Freire (2005) called for within broader educational contexts—that when engaging with curricular content, the

relationship between teacher and learner should be grounded in an ongoing awareness of the contextual realities that shape students' (and teachers') experiences in the world.

In her discussions of engaged and liberatory pedagogy, hooks (2003) further explored the importance of developing learning environments that reflect—and care for—students: "committed acts of caring let all students know that the purpose of education is not to dominate, or prepare them to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom" (p. 92). High school choral music classrooms may foster connection for all students if rooted in these critically-based notions of care centered by hooks. Similarly, efforts to embed notions of relational trust and care into teaching—like the development of all relationships—will exist amidst the implications of context and identity impacting the perspectives of teachers and students (Freire, 2005; Noddings, 2003; Palmer, 2017). Given these implications, high school choral music teachers might more actively consider the "relationship between care and justice" in their classrooms, further reimagining pedagogical care as "about being and working in ways that are fair, inclusive, and in solidarity with the most vulnerable" (Shalaby, 2020, p. 42).

Shalaby's (2017, 2020) vision for justice-based care frames what might be possible in learning spaces where choral music teachers and their students coalesce in a shared choral community of compassion and understanding. This notion of mutuality in growth-fostering relationships is the basis of RCT (Jordan, 2017, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) and connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019), and further grounds hooks' (2003) conceptualization of the potential relational partnership between teacher and student: "Students want [teachers] to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences" (p. 15). That said, cultivating such knowing requires a love for students that hooks (2003) suggests is a mixture of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust: "between teacher and student love

makes recognition possible; it offers a place where the intersection of academic striving meets the overall striving to be psychologically whole” (p. 136).

The relational intersection between love, care, and the pursuit of educational content outlined by hooks (2003) in many ways reflects the unique learning environment of secondary choral music classrooms (Bartolome, 2013; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Freer, 2015; Maunu, 2019; Parker, 2010, 2016; Phelan, 2017; Ramsey, 2016; Sweet, 2016, 2019). Choral students are deserving of the affirming community outlined by hooks. Thus, choral music teachers who cultivate human connection through the development of dynamic relationships and a sense of belonging may be crucial facilitators of such learning communities. For, as Small (1998) contended, dimensions of human connection are the foundation for the exploration of music and music education:

> Every way we can think of to specify a human being will involve a relationship with others. Our relationships specify us: they change as we change, and we change as they change. Who we are is how we relate. So to affirm and celebrate our relationships through musicking, especially in company with like-feeling people, is to explore and celebrate our sense of who we are, to make us feel more fully ourselves. (p.142)

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how human connection is experienced in the high school choral music classroom. In this chapter, I provided an initial rationale for why human connection and connected teaching is critically important in high school choral music settings. I then briefly examined the lineage of human connection across the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education. I followed this introductory foundation by framing the need for connected teaching in choral music education based on emergent themes from a large-scale review of literature, suggesting that connected teaching requires belonging, care, community, relationships, and the support of vulnerability. I then introduced Relational Cultural Theory

(Miller & Stiver, 1997), discussed the framework's central tenets, and asserted Jordan's (2017b, 2018, 2023) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) critical interpretation of Relational Cultural Theory as this study's theoretical framework. I concluded by framing critical notions of Relational Cultural Theory as a foundation for connected teaching in high school choral music. These critical interpretations of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2017b, 2018, 2023; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) grounded my approach to examining dimensions of human connection in the high school choral classroom. This critical RCT lens centers implications of identity, power, and context—specifically with regard to sociocultural issues that include race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, trauma, and facets of mental health—within the development and experience of relationships in the high school choral music classroom.

In Chapter 2, I will present a review of relevant literature from the field of music education organized by emergent themes reflective of specific relational facets prominent in music education research and scholarship. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methodology and design for this study. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 illustrate a within-case analysis of each of the three research sites and participants. Chapter 7 presents a cross-case analysis that illuminates emergent patterns and nuances across cases. In Chapter 8, I conclude by providing a discussion on emergent themes and implications for the profession of music education.

Chapter II
Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to understand how human connection is experienced in the high school choral music classroom. Scholars in music education have increasingly examined how certain relational facets *embedded within* the notion of human connection as defined by RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2020)—such as belonging, care, community, relationships, and vulnerability—intersect with music teaching and learning. Thus, the purpose of the literature review provided in this chapter is to explore how scholars have empirically examined relational concepts within music teaching and learning contexts. I will begin this chapter by providing an overview of RCT-based literature from the fields of counseling, social work, and education. Next, I will review literature from the field of music education focused on relational elements of music teaching and learning, organized according to the following themes synthesized from the literature base: relationships, community, care, vulnerability, and belonging. I will synthesize themes within each subsection in an effort to propose considerations for the field of music education. In alignment with critical conceptualizations of RCT (Jordan, 2017b, 2018, 2023; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020), throughout this review of literature I will emphasize empirical findings and recommendations that foreground sociocultural implications in teacher-student and student-student relational endeavors and experiences.

RCT-based Counseling, Social Work, and Education Studies

As stated in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, RCT was initially conceived within counseling

contexts to understand the dimensions of relationships in the lives of female-identifying clients (Miller & Stiver, 1997). That said, as scholars have broadened conceptualizations of RCT to affirm the importance of relational development for all humans (Jordan, 2018), an increasing collection of empirical work has extended the theory to inquiries in social work (Duffey et al., 2016; Hartling, 2008; Storlie et al., 2017) and education environments (Bensinger, 2020; Rice, 2022; Womack, 2019). I provide a brief overview of prominent RCT-based counseling, social work, and education studies below.

Studies Examining Relational Cultural Theory in Counseling and Social Work

From its counseling origins, RCT has been employed as a framework in a broad range of counseling and social work scholarship (Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Stargell et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020; Singh & Moss, 2016). Scholars have also used RCT as a lens within empirical studies when examining the relational experiences of clients (Evans, 2002; Hartling, 2008; Liang et al. 2002; Storlie et al., 2017) and when developing specific counseling-based interventions (Duffey et al., 2016; Lenz et al., 2012; Randell et al., 2015). While RCT has been employed in empirical work across the field of counseling and social work, in alignment with this study, the studies presented below were selected for this review as a representation of RCT-based empirical work in social work/counseling education settings examining adolescent relationships and connection.

For example, Duffey et al. (2016) evaluated the impact of an RCT-based social work preparation program, finding that participating social work students had a heightened ability to recognize healthy supervision relationships and maintain clients who reported a higher perception of meaningful connections with the social work students as their supervisor. Lenz et al. (2012) assessed the effectiveness of an RCT-based therapy intervention program for

incarcerated youth at a detention facility. They found that the majority of youth participants reported improvement in their relational health as a result of the intervention program, specifically with regard to increases in relational empowerment and self-esteem. Similarly, Randell et al. (2015) examined how relational-cultural approaches and growth-fostering relationships were implemented in an afterschool gang-prevention program. Randell et al. (2015) found that program involvement impacted participating youth's (a) sense of self-worth; (b) interpersonal impact on others; (c) vitality in other areas of their lives (academically, behaviorally, etc.); (d) increased desire for relationships with family, peers, teachers, and community members, etc.; (e) increased sense of empathy; and (f) increased trust in others.

Beyond intervention-based studies, scholars have also employed RCT to understand clients' relationships. Evans (2002) examined 179 undergraduates' relationships with family members, friends, and significant others, finding that the presence of mutual empathy broadly accounted for an increase in perceived sense of relational empowerment. Hartling (2008) applied an RCT lens when examining the relationships between two adolescent sisters and their newly adoptive parents, finding that relational bonds were strengthened when parent participants interacted with adolescent participants based on a knowledge of the adolescents' internalized controlling images/understandings of child-parent relationships. Using RCT as a foundation, Liang et al. (2002) developed the Relational Health Indices to examine female-identifying student participants' relationships with peers, mentors, and community members, finding that growth-fostering relationships were associated with perceived mutuality, support, belonging, decreased levels of stress, and an overall improvement in participant mental health. Similarly, Storlie et al. (2017) used RCT to examine the perceptions of middle school female-identifying students of color related to social and family influences on their career plans. RCT was found to

be an effective framework through which to assist student participants in processing messages they received from family and social networks, particularly regarding an increased understanding of their relational images, relational disconnections, self-compassion, and capacity to navigate relationships.

Studies Examining Relational Cultural Theory in Education

RCT has also guided a wide scope of research and scholarship in the field of education (Bensinger, 2020; Cholewa et al., 2014; Edwards et al., 2014; Edwards and Richards, 2002; Lértora & Croffie, 2020; Rassiger, 2011; Rector-Aranda, 2019; Rice, 2022; Schumacher, 2012; Thompson, 2018; Womack, 2019). RCT has been used to empirically examine connection between teacher and student—and amongst students (Bensinger, 2020; Rice, 2022; Schumacher, 2012; Womack, 2019). For example, Bensinger (2020) found that seven middle school teachers built relationships with students through (a) one-on-one connections with individual students (such as greetings at the classroom door, in the hallway, by learning student names quickly, and in getting-to-know you activities); (b) extending those moments toward knowing students on a personal level; (c) understanding students within greater sociocultural contexts; (d) remaining attuned to students' emotional needs; and (e) sharing information about their own lives and emotions with students in the classroom. Rice (2022) employed RCT to examine how ten preschool teachers developed relationships with male identifying students who exhibited behavioral challenges. Data conveyed that participants broadly perceived their relationships with students in terms of connection and 'closeness' (involving mutual trust, care, communication, and consistency) or disconnection and 'conflict' (related to teacher patience, unrealistic expectations of students, and power struggles between teacher and students). Also examining teacher's perceptions of student relationships, Womack (2019) found that teachers who taught in

schools with smaller student populations and smaller class sizes displayed higher relational attachment to students than teachers with larger classes or those who taught in schools with a greater overall student population. Schumacher (2012) explored the utility of RCT as the foundation for restorative justice-based work with middle and high school students, finding that relationships formed between teacher-student, and amongst students, in restorative dialogue facilitated student (a) joy through relationship building; (b) safety cultivated through trust and confidentiality; (c) increased vulnerability to express emotion; and (d) the development of empathy.

Scholars have also explored the tenets of RCT in tandem with culturally responsive and culturally sustaining teaching approaches (Bruneau & Reilly, 2021; Rector-Aranda, 2019). Empirical inquiries focused on these intersections have critically examined issues of sociocultural implications, context, and ‘power with’ mentalities in pedagogical work (Cholewa et al., 2014; Lértora & Croffie, 2020; Rassiger, 2011; Thompson, 2018). For example, Cholewa et al. (2014) employed RCT when investigating the impact of one elementary school educator’s culturally responsive and relational teaching practice on the psychological well-being of her African American students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Cholewa et al. found that culturally responsive connection was found to emerge specifically through: (a) affirmation of student life experiences; (b) incorporation of familiar cultural communication styles; (c) validation and response to student feelings; (d) recognition of student achievements; (e) consistency of high expectations; and (f) teacher willingness to share portions of their own life with students. Thompson (2018) also explored the intersection between RCT and culturally responsive teaching in his examination of 20 African American male high school teachers’ perspectives of mentorship of African American male students, finding that the mentor-mentee

relationship (a) relied on interpersonal connections; (b) was most effective when cultural understanding was shared between the mentor and mentee; (c) was most productive amidst a flexible blend of compassion and discipline; and (d) relied on the formation of boundaries to protect the mentors' emotional wellbeing. Similarly, in an examination of the intersection between teacher-student relationships and the academic success of middle school students, Rassiger (2011) found that perceived teacher care was often a predictor of academic success for Black and Latinx students. Lértora and Croffie (2020) found that relationships with professors, university support professionals, and peers helped LGBTQ+ international students transition to life on campus, specifically through the processing of (a) relational apprehension in the form of controlling images; (b) feelings of disconnection related to their LGBTQ+ and/or international student identities; and (c) navigation of perceived power dynamics.

In this section, I provided an overview of RCT-based empirical work in the counseling, social work, and general education fields of scholarship. In the following section, I will review literature related facets of relational pedagogy from within the field of music education.

Relational Studies in Music Education

A growing number of scholars are exploring facets of human connection in their considerations of the relational dimensions in music teaching and learning (Abril & Battiste, 2022; Edgar, 2017; Hendricks, 2018, 2023; Jorgensen, 2020; Parker, 2020; Steele Royston, 2017; Sweet, 2016). Specifically, scholars have conducted studies examining the intersections between music education and: (a) *relationships* (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Kennedy, 2002; Parker & Powell, 2017; Sweet, 2010; Rawlings & Young, 2021); (b) *community* (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Burnard, 2008; Dagaz, 2012; Hendricks et al., 2023b; Matthews, 2017; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008); (c) *care* (Bailey, 2022; Cho, 2021; Edgar,

2014a; Hibbard, 2017; Howard, 2022; Lalama, 2016; Price, 2023b; Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Ryals, 2022); (d) *vulnerability* (Abril, 2007; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015; Wiggins, 2011); and (e) *belonging* (Ellis et al., 2021; Freer, 2015; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019; Graves, 2019; Jones, 2022; Parker, 2010).

As stated in Chapter 1, I suggest that the notions of belonging, care, community, relationships, and the support of vulnerability reflect dimensions of human connection as defined by RCT (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2004, 2020). Furthermore, I suggest that the studies listed above reflect empirical examinations of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019) in music education, and thus, serve as the foundation for the following review of literature. The studies below were identified as relevant to this inquiry if (a) they were directly devoted to a dimension of connection (belonging, care, community, relationships, vulnerability); or (b) if a dimension of connection (belonging, care, community, relationships, vulnerability) emerged in the study's findings.

Relationships

Relationships between teacher and student(s) (Brinkworth et al., 2018; Pianta et al., 2012) and amongst students (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Gowing, 2019) are a foundation of learning environments. Tschannen-Moran (2014) suggested that trust is central to the development of relationships between teachers and students, and forms through benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competency (p. 20). Scholars have asserted that building trusting relationships with students requires consistently conveying care, knowing students as people (specifically facets of students' identities and life experiences), and forming learning spaces that reflect student needs and support vulnerability (Brunzell et al., 2016; Gay, 2018; Van Maele et al., 2014; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). In turn, scholars suggest that students develop trust-

based relationships with teachers and peers when they feel supported, cared for, and seen as their full selves (Bandura, 1997; Casper, 2012; Forsyth et al., 2011; Wentzel, 2012).

Scholars in the field of music education are increasingly exploring the centrality of trusting relationships in music classrooms (Edgar et al., 2023; Cohen et al., 2016; Hendricks, 2018; Hendricks et al., 2023a; Hibbard, 2020; Rawlings & Young, 2021; Steele Royston, 2017). Hendricks et al. (2023a) posited that relational trust in the music classroom is “the confidence a person may have that their exchanges with others in the class, whether musical or otherwise, will be positive and supportive” (p. 2). Further, Hendricks et al. (2023a) suggested that as a result of trusting relationships with teachers and peers, music students “are more likely to be engaged and willing to take risks involved in learning, both academically and socio-emotionally” (p. 2). Music education researchers have also conducted empirical investigations in which they have examined the importance of trust-based relationships between teacher and student (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Powell & Parker, 2017), amongst students (Kennedy, 2002; Rawlings & Young, 2021; Sweet, 2010), and as critical components for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Doyle, 2012; Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Shaw, 2015). I will begin this portion of the literature review by presenting studies examining relationships between teacher and students in the music classroom.

Relationships Between Teacher and Students

In a large-scale study, Powell and Parker (2017) found that interpersonal factors were frequently cited when 134 undergraduate preservice music teachers were asked to describe the qualities of ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ P-12 educators. Data was collected over 4.5 years and comprised of handwritten and typed reflections from consecutive preservice student cohorts enrolled in collegiate instrumental, choral, general music, and freshmen-level introductory music

education courses. Powell and Parker found that preservice teacher participants broadly described 'successful' P-12 music teachers as caring, patient, honest, personable, communicative, and knowledgeable of individual students' lives. 'Unsuccessful' music teachers were largely described by participants as leaving them feeling "unknown" and "uncared" for (p. 32), and further were largely characterized as delivering instruction that was considered to not meet the academic and interpersonal needs of individual students.

Through the lens of social emotional learning (CASEL, 2020; Zins & Elias, 2006), Edgar (2016) conducted a multiple case study in which he examined four high school instrumental music teachers' efforts to build meaningful relationships with their students. Teacher participants were selected based on their reputation for developing caring relationships with students, maintaining a facilitative teaching approach, and having at least ten years of teaching experience. Cases were also purposefully selected in an effort to include participants from rural, suburban, and urban settings. Data was collected through three interviews with each teacher participant, one teacher participant focus group, a student focus group at each research site, a parent interview at each research site, and observations. Findings revealed that social emotional components grounded much of teacher participants' approaches to music teaching and learning. Teacher participants acknowledged the importance of (a) relational bonding through the act of music making; (b) relational continuity between music teachers and students who may have spent multiple years together; (c) devoting instructional time to addressing and supporting students' social emotional needs; (d) noticing and responding to student wellbeing on a daily basis; (e) listening to students when they share important life details or communicate in moments of distress; and (f) teachers' modeling of effective social emotional decision-making and behaviors (Gardner, 2011). Student participants shared that participation in the instrumental

music classroom provided them a place to develop meaningful relationships. Student participants largely identified the relationship with their music teacher as especially meaningful—and in some cases, similar to that of a family member. Based on these findings, Edgar suggested that the high school music classroom has the potential to be a uniquely meaningful space for relationship-building and the development of social emotional capacities, particularly due to the ensemble-nature of instruction and the long-term interpersonal continuity between teacher and student.

Barrett and Bond (2015) also found teacher-student relationships and social emotional growth to be positive 'extra-musical' benefits of participation within secondary and elementary youth music programs located in urban and rural Australian communities. Conducting a multiple case study that included a series of observations and interviews with teacher and student participants, Barrett and Bond found that teacher-student relationships were considered a meaningful element of the youth program for participating teachers and students. Specifically, teachers shared that consciously incorporating expressions of care and affirmations into instruction helped develop positive relationships with students. Teacher participants also noted that students' overall social emotional capacities displayed in teacher-student relationships improved throughout program enrollment. Specifically, Barrett and Bond found that student participants developed meaningful relationships with their teachers during the music program, in turn perceiving their music teachers as interpersonal role models through whom to observe, internalize, and reflect social emotional relational capacities. Barrett and Bond further found that sustained teacher-student relationships throughout the program led to an increase in student musical and social risk-taking, perseverance, leadership, and communication skills.

Relationships Amongst Students

In addition to relationships between teacher and student, past research in music education has found that meaningful relationships between musical peers positively impacts student pursuits in the music classroom, as well as their overall social, emotional, and psychological growth (Kennedy, 2002; Rawlings & Young, 2021; Sweet, 2010). Hendricks et al. (2023a) framed relational trust between multiple individuals as "collective trust" or the "willingness to be vulnerable to the group, positive expectations of other members' contributions, and group member interdependence" (p. 3). Reflecting Hendricks et al.'s (2023a) characterization of collective trust, Kennedy (2002) found that eleven junior high school male-identifying choristers identified relational connection with peers in the choral ensemble as one of the most meaningful motivators to join and remain in school choral music. Student participants noted peer mentoring in vocal sections, multi-grade interpersonal connections, and the development of a team-based sense of unity within the ensemble as some of the most common reasons for continued choral enrollment. Similarly, Sweet's (2010) case study explored five eighth grade male-identifying singers' perceptions of the school choral experience. Sweet found that student participants identified the care of peers and a sense of shared teamwork (rooted in peer relational encouragement, trust, support, and understanding) as the leading factors impacting their enjoyment and perceptions of success in the choral ensemble. Rawlings and Young (2021) found that participation in school marching band programs may increase student perceptions of peer connectedness and reduce student experiences of bullying. In their quantitative study, Rawlings and Young surveyed high school band students' ($N = 131$) perceptions of the correlation between peer support/care in marching band and perceptions of relational empowerment or victimizing behavior. Rawlings and Young found that student participants broadly identified the marching

band as a setting wherein they had strong relationships with peers, and subsequently, perceived increased feelings of empowerment and a reduction in self-reported relational victimization.

The Importance of Relationships for Students Navigating Impacts of Marginalization

Relationships have also been found to be of critical importance for students from historically marginalized populations and as central components of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and culturally responsive (Gay, 2018) pedagogies in the music classroom (Doyle, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2012; McKoy & Lind, 2023; Salvador & Culp, 2022). Scholars have specifically examined how issues related to race and ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic identities (Doyle, 2012; Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; Shaw, 2015), as well as identities associated with membership in the LGBTQ+ community (Gould, 2012; McBride, 2016; Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2020) impact relationships in music classrooms.

In her multiple case study examining the tenets of culturally responsive choral music practice, Shaw (2015) highlighted four choir teachers' commitment to "knowing their students' worlds" within the context of community youth choirs in a large urban area of the United States (p. 218). In the study, teacher participants' identities in relation to their students' identities varied—one teacher participant identified as Korean American and taught predominately Latinx students; another identified as African American and taught predominately Black students; and two participants identified as white and taught predominately Latinx students. Data sources for the study included two semi-structured interviews per participant, one focus group interview with all teacher participants, observations, and material culture. Though facets of culturally responsive pedagogy were the focus of Shaw's inquiry, the importance of interpersonal and relational factors emerged in her findings. For example, Shaw asserted that teacher-student relationships were enhanced by teachers' knowledge of students' lives, experiential contexts, and

broader community (racial/ethnic identities, housing, socioeconomic status). Further, Shaw found that teacher participants who shared facets of identity with their students extended those elements of shared experiences into efforts to forge increasingly meaningful and supportive student relationships. Conversely, Shaw also noted that differences between teacher and student identities sometimes resulted in interpersonal incongruencies that impacted teacher-student relationships and/or instruction. Shaw suggested that her teacher participants' commitment to bridging their knowledge of student cultural background into the learning space positively influenced the development of meaningful relationships in the classroom. Based on her overall findings, Shaw asserted that music educators seeking to enact culturally responsive relationships in the classroom might convey care to—and gain trust from—students by knowing and responding to student identities and life experiences.

Also examining the influence of identity and context in teacher-student relationships, Horne (2007) explored how relational components impacted the enrollment of African American students in high school choral ensembles. Horne's mixed-methods study surveyed a large pool of high school student participants ($N = 445$) from four schools in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area of Minnesota in the United States. Data included classroom observations and interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators. Horne found that the cultivation of impactful interpersonal relationships (whether teacher-student or student-student) were the single most important factor influencing African American student participants' enrollment and retention in high school choral music classes. Based on these findings, Horne suggested that an effective choral teacher approach toward working with African American students might be based in building relationships, creating a family-like rapport in class, developing cultural competencies, validating students as individuals, and fostering personal connections with student families.

Looking at issues of race and socioeconomic class, Gurgel (2013) also discovered relational implications when investigating the source(s) of instructional engagement for socioeconomically and racially diverse students in one middle school choir room. Gurgel found the teacher-student relationship to be the singular most consistent factor impacting student engagement in this specific choral classroom. Student reflections suggested that most perceptions of learning/instruction (understanding of content, daily participation, musical growth, perceived support) were linked to the teacher-student relationship, specifically with regard to student perceptions of care and trust. Relatedly, the teacher participant's reflections suggested that their capacity for forms of racial and cultural humility, acknowledgement of students' lived experiences, and intentionality when initiating bonds were critical components to forming relationships with students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a quantitative study, Doyle (2012) examined the perceptions of elementary music teachers ($N = 71$) in Title 1 schools within urban districts in the Southeastern United States. Doyle found that participants felt more prepared to teach musically diverse repertoire (such as jazz and other popular music genres) than approach meaningful relationships with students whose racial, ethnic, and/or socioeconomic identities differed from their own. Conversely, Doyle found that teachers who did share aspects of identity with their students (racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic) displayed higher positive attitudes toward relationship-building and teaching in urban settings.

In addition to inquiries exploring how facets of race and ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status impact teacher-student and student-student relationships, scholars have also examined relationships in music classrooms related to the identities of students in the LGBTQ+ community (Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). For example, Palkki (2020) examined how three high school students who identified as transgender navigated high school

choral programs and whether they felt supported by their choral teachers and peers. Palkki found that student participants developed a closer sense of trust and appreciation of their choir teachers when teachers acknowledged and supported their identities as transgender individuals. This sense of validation was especially salient when teachers (a) used students' preferred name and pronouns; (b) modified choral instructional practice—such as voice part placement—based on the students' expressed needs; and (c) honored student participant perspectives when modifying program 'policies'—such as related to gendered ensembles and uniforms reflecting the gender binary (gowns and tuxedos). Based on these findings, Palkki emphasized the importance of choral music educators using students' preferred names and pronouns, dismantling assumptions associated with voice and gender identity in choral settings, and modifying program polices to support the comfort of transgender students.

In a different study, Palkki and Caldwell (2018) asked LGBTQ+ college students (*N*=1,123) to describe their experiences in middle and high school choral music programs. Results from survey responses indicated that only 21% of respondents felt that they had a middle school choral music teacher who openly acknowledged support for LGBTQ+ students; while only 52% of respondents associated such support with a high school choral music teacher. Palkki and Caldwell suggested that student participants' open-ended responses broadly acknowledged the importance of (a) words of support (either in acknowledgement or silence); (b) 'out' students and teachers; (c) acknowledging LGBTQ+ implications when discussing repertoire text/lyrics; (d) efforts to reduce heteronormative paradigms in repertoire selection, rehearsal language, and uniforms; and (e) intervening in instances of the bullying of LGBTQ+ students. Further, Palkki and Caldwell asserted that findings reinforce the notion that secondary choral music settings are often considered havens for adolescents identifying within the LGBTQ+ community and that

middle and high school choir directors are often critical figures of support in the lives and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students.

Discussion: Relationships

Researchers featured in this section found that relationships in the music classroom were an important foundation to music learning spaces (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Doyle, 2012; Edgar, 2016; Kennedy, 2002; Powell & Parker, 2017; Rawlings and Young, 2021; Sweet, 2010). Relationships were not found to be an addendum to music teaching and learning, but rather a central component in music teacher pedagogy (Edgar, 2016; Gurgel, 2013). Further, student participants across reviewed studies identified relationships as a dynamic component impacting their perception of their music teacher (Gurgel, 2013; Powell & Parker, 2017), decisions to enroll and remain in music programs (Horne, 2007; Kennedy, 2002; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Sweet, 2010), and daily approach to music-making (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016).

Data presented in these studies also pointed to the unique role that many music teachers play in students' lives, particularly due to potential longevity of the relationship (Edgar, 2016; Horne, 2007; Powell & Parker, 2017). Findings framed music teachers as relational role models who, in expression of their own social emotional capacities, aided in guiding adolescent students through evolving relational understandings (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Horne, 2007). Data presented in these studies also reaffirmed calls to center knowledge of students and their life experiences within culturally responsive (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Lind & McKoy, 2016) and sustaining (Good-Perkins, 2021) relational practices. Consistent, care-based, and trust-based teacher-student relationships were found to be meaningful points of connection for P-12 students marginalized due to their race and ethnicity (Doyle, 2012; Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; Shaw, 2015) or gender identity or sexual orientation (Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018).

Community

Intersecting with the importance of teacher-student and student-student relationships, scholars suggest that the cultivation of community in learning spaces is crucial for adolescent learners (Berry, 2019; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Nicholas, 1997). Researchers have found that teachers are often the facilitators of community in their classrooms, charged with sparking "feelings of connectedness, cohesion, spirit, trust, and interdependence" amongst their students (Rovai, 2002, p. 201). Scholars have found that the classroom communities teachers build are especially important for adolescents who are developing newfound relational capacities with others and navigating social, emotional, and physical changes (Capone et al., 2018; Reio et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2019).

Scholars in the field of music education have long considered how aspects of community shape realms of music teaching and learning (Bowman, 2009; Elliott & Silverman, 2014; Higgins, 2007; Jorgensen, 1995; McCarthy, 2000). Conceptualizing community in music education, Bowman (2009) framed notions of community as a social and psychological 'experience' shared by those gathered together in music-making. Jorgensen (1995) suggested that the notion of 'community as place' is enmeshed with notions of "rootedness, interconnectedness, boundedness, feelingfulness, and empowerment" associated with a specific setting or context (p. 80). In the section that follows, I present findings from empirical inquiries in the field of music education that examine elements of community in music teaching and learning settings. I organize this section based on findings that reflect (a) student perspectives of community; and (b) teacher perspectives of community.

Student Perspectives of Community

Though sometimes challenging to examine empirically, scholars in the field of music

education have sought to explore the importance of community in music environments (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Dagaz, 2012; Matthews, 2017). In an ethnographic study, Bartolome (2013) explored the perceived values and benefits of participation in an all-female-identifying community choir. Participants included 42 adolescent singers, 14 parents, and 9 educators/staff members. Data included semi-structured interviews with each participant (adolescent ensemble members, parents, and educator/staff), observations, and material culture. Bartolome found that personal benefits (increased self-confidence, empowerment, emotional expression) and social benefits (relationship-building, contribution to a shared vision, acceptance within a group) emerged as prominent themes when examining the adolescent singer participants' perceived value of choir membership. Adolescent participants articulated that the choral ensemble represented a weekly "safe haven" (p. 406) wherein they "fit in" (p. 408) amongst trusted peers and teachers.

A similar inquiry by Adderley et al. (2003) displayed that group social experiences within secondary music ensembles fostered dimensions of community for high school music students. Individual interviews with 60 student participants (20 students in band, choral, and orchestral ensembles, respectively) revealed that participants perceived the community of their music ensemble as "a home away from home, a club, a family or something unlike anything else they experienced at…school" (p. 203). Students expressed valuing the social connections made in their respective ensembles and the chance to be a part of a meaningful gathering of peers. Physical identifiers—instrument cases and clothing, such as marching band jackets—were also described as representative of participant pride in school music community membership. Students further identified music ensemble subcommunities (instrument and vocal sections) as tight-knit peer groups whose support extended into students' lives outside of the music

classroom.

The importance of peer support also emerged in a series of inquiries examining community in school band environments (Abril, 2013; Dagaz, 2012; Matthews, 2017). Harkening to Morrison's (2001) framing of school music ensembles as multidimensional "cultures" (p. 28), Abril (2013) found the high school band to be an important subculture within the greater high school ecosystem. Abril interviewed three high school students who identified as "hardcore band members" in an effort to better understand how they perceived their roles within—and the value of—their high school band community (p. 438). Synthesized findings conveyed that participants (a) strongly associated their individual identities with the high school band community; (b) developed core interpersonal relational skills with like-minded peers in their instrument sections; and (c) increased leadership qualities as a result of band community membership.

In his ethnographic study, Dagaz (2012) found that the high school band was perceived as a family unit that fostered trust, confidence, identity development, commitment to a group, and heightened social acceptance (Dagaz, 2012). Interviews with student participants revealed that experiencing deep interpersonal connection within the marching band lead to viewing the ensemble as a family, developing an increased commitment to the group, and fostering greater feelings of social acceptance. Matthews (2017) similarly found that marching band students at the college-level described membership in band as akin to that of a family. Participants shared that the essence of the familial school band community was based in a strong sense of belonging, affirmation of sociocultural identities, and feelings of pride cultivated through group rehearsals, performances, traditions, and visibility within the school and local community.

Teacher Perspectives of Community

The literature above focused on student experiences of community (Abril 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Dagaz, 2012; Matthews, 2017). It is necessary to also examine how music educators perceive their role when cultivating community in the music classroom (Burnard et al., 2008; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008). In an ethnographic case study, Sweet (2008) examined one middle school choir teacher's efforts to create meaningful community within her middle school program. Through a series of observations and interviews, Sweet found that her participant believed that middle school choral music teachers hold a crucial position when forming meaningful experiences of community for their students. Sweet found that her teacher participant nurtured community through (a) cultivating a classroom 'safe space' (where students knew they were supported as their authentic selves); (b) functioning as a receptive interpersonal guide (assisting students through psychological development, emotions, and emerging worldviews); (c) instilling humor; and (d) sharing personal stories as part of sustained efforts to form relational understanding.

Burnard et al. (2008) found that the cultivation of community was an important component within educators' efforts to develop inclusive music teaching practices. Burnard et al. employed a phenomenological multiple case study approach that included semi-structured, in-depth interviews, open-structured recall interviews, and observation. Three participants were purposefully selected based on criteria that included previous success and commitment to inclusive teaching, as well as their employment in an under-resourced school at the time of the study. Participants shared that creating culturally responsive music learning communities required collectively addressing students' emotional regulation, facilitating meaningful social interactions, and listening (and responding) to student perspectives. Burnard et al. further posited

that students who perceived themselves as marginalized might find renewed sense of self, purpose, and empowerment within inclusive music classrooms communities based in meaningful relationships.

Finally, Parker (2016)'s inquiry examined four high school choral music teachers' perceptions of creating community in their school choral programs. Parker employed an intrinsic case study design, incorporating interviews, observations, and artifacts. Data analysis revealed that participant perspectives broadly fell into four themes: (a) teacher participants viewed themselves as sources of support for their students (formed through relationships in class, at after school rehearsals, and in the hallway or cafeteria); (b) the fostering of acceptance and belonging was critical for the classroom community to thrive (catalyzed by building student self-esteem, instilling a welcoming tone, and facilitating relationships amongst students); (c) musical experiences were found to both create (through maintaining high musical/behavioral expectations supported with care and affirmation) and inhibit (through competition and comparison) community; and (d) notions of legacy and tradition were crucial to building community (displaying signs with class slogans, choir apparel, weekly/annual social events) (p. 228). Based on these findings, Parker recommended that secondary choral music educators increase the foundations of community in their classrooms by actively facilitating interpersonal connections between students (in vocal sections, the ensemble, and program at large), encouraging opportunities for student leadership, involving students in decision-making, and ensuring that all individual students feel a part of the broader ensemble community.

Discussion: Community

The literature described in this section examined community in music education environments (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Matthews, 2017; Parker,

2016; Sweet, 2008). Findings from across reviewed studies suggested that participants conceived the music ‘community’ simultaneously as a *place* (Jorgensen, 1995) and as an *experience* (Bowman, 2009). For example, the interconnected nature of the community choir (Bartolome, 2013), the high school orchestra (Adderley et al., 2003), and the collegiate band classroom (Matthews, 2017) represented examples of important communal *places* (locations, settings*)*. The physiological *meaning-making experience* of community emerged through feelings of acceptance in the ‘safe space’ of the school choir room (Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008), in support received from peers in the clarinet section (Abril, 2013; Dagaz, 2012), and within shared pride amongst a group of peers with shared values and memories (Matthews, 2017; Parker, 2016).

In these studies, community as a place and as an experience required the shared effort of teachers (Burnard, 2008; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008) *and* their students (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Dagaz, 2012; Matthews, 2017). From teacher participant perspectives, community materialized through carefully planned initiatives (Parker, 2016), thoughtful interpersonal and culturally responsive approaches (Burnard, 2008), and in sustained approaches to supportive group interactions (Sweet, 2008). From student participant perspectives, a sense of community manifested in perceptions of the school music ensemble as a family (Adderley et al., 2003; Dagaz, 2012; Matthews, 2017), the cultivation of traditions (Matthews, 2017; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008), through increased bonding (in music sections, throughout the ensemble, and across the program) (Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Parker, 2016), and in increased opportunities for student leadership, collaboration, and agency (Abril, 2013; Dagaz, 2012; Parker, 2016). These findings suggest that community is not an entity which simply manifests in music classrooms due to a group of individuals being gathered together, but rather emerges through deliberate—and sustained—cultivation of community nurtured at the juncture between

trust, collaboration, support, and care.

Care

This section explores literature related to the broader notion of care in education spaces (Gilligan, 1994; Larrabee, 2016; Noddings, 2013). Noddings (2013) affirmed that the human need for care is illuminated in learning settings. She suggested that a caring relationship is "a connection or encounter between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for" (Noddings, 2013, p. 15). The classroom—where the teacher typically functions as 'carer' and student(s) as 'cared-for'—is a setting where the need for care may be most profound (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Yu et al., 2018). Music education scholars have begun to increasingly explore the essential dimensions of care in music teaching and learning as well (Edgar, 2014a; Hibbard, 2017; Howard, 2022; Steele Royston, 2017; Watts et al., 2020), including, at the time of this study, within *The Oxford Handbook of Care in Music Education* (Hendricks, 2023). In centering care at the core of relational practice, Hendricks (2023) encourages teachers to "practice presencing with students and meet their needs in ways that matter most to them and to their communities—in music-learning spaces and beyond" (p. 18).

In this section of the literature review, in addition to examining empirical literature devoted explicitly to concepts of care (Edgar, 2014a; Howard, 2022), I gather relevant literature on two concepts that I posit are embedded within notions of care: empathy (Cho, 2012; Lalama, 2016; Rabinowitch et al., 2012) and presence (Hibbard, 2017). Though these concepts could be treated as separate entities, I suggest that the nature of each lead toward meaningful coalescence within broader understandings of care as part of my conceptualization of human connection (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020). Further, in this section I include three recent studies that examine the intersection between care and trauma-informed practice in music education (Bailey, 2022;

Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022). I review these studies related to care, trauma-informed teaching, empathy, and presence below.

Rooted in Noddings' (2013) ethic of care, Edgar (2014a) examined four high school instrumental music teacher's approaches to care in the music classroom. Data for this study was collected through three interviews with each participant, one focus group interview with all participants, one student focus group per research site, parent interviews at each research site, and observations. Edgar found that: (a) mutual care was an essential component in the teacher-student relationship (and perceived by students in moments when their teachers showed an interest in them); (b) actively teaching students to care was important in the music classroom (this included modeling care, expressing curiosity about students' lives, and providing students with opportunities to express care toward others); (c) conveying care in the classroom often involved thoughtful modifications to instructional approaches (such as the reduction of authoritative teaching practices, maintaining an evenly-tempered learning environment), and outwardly conveying care (through verbal praise and affirmations); (d) caring for the community also required caring for the individual (valuing all students and their contributions while maintaining awareness of individual student needs); and (e) caring required continuity (sustaining care-based practices throughout all facets of interpersonal interactions and instruction).

Howard (2022) examined how dimensions of care guided twelve choral directors' navigation of the intersections between Whiteness, repertoire selection, and student experience. Howard conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants who were choral music educators in secondary or collegiate settings. Howard examined her findings through the combined lenses of ethical caring, dysconscious racism, and critical consciousness. Howard

found that participants ascribed notions of care in their own teaching practice in relation to their efforts to (a) critically consider how implications of Whiteness impacted their choral music instruction; (b) consciously embrace diverse racial perspectives when selecting repertoire; and (c) listen and respond to students' perspectives in moments of perceived marginalization, tokenism, or misrepresentation in the classroom setting.

Notions of care are also increasingly grounding examinations of trauma-informed music pedagogy (Bauman-Field, 2023; Bradley & Hess, 2022; Glaza, 2021; Hibbard, 2022; Hibbard & Price, 2023; McEvoy & Salvador, 2020; Price, 2023a; Salvador & Culp, 2022), though only a small number of empirical inquiries currently directly address aspects of care-based trauma-informed music pedagogy (Bailey, 2022; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022). In a recent empirical study, Price (2023b) examined how an elementary general music teacher identified and responded to trauma sequelae in her students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Price was particularly interested in better understanding the teacher participant's perceptions regarding their own ability to identify student trauma and trauma triggers, respond to students' trauma reactions, and navigate barriers related to enacting trauma-informed practice in the elementary music classroom. Data suggested that the teacher participant felt more effectively prepared to identify students' external or physical responses to trauma than internal responses, and sometimes struggled to attribute challenging student behavior to trauma. Price also found that the teacher participant most effectively initiated a care-based response to students when enacting the process of "attunement" during instruction, in which she "allowed her internal state to resonate" with her students (p. 239). Price noted that her teacher participant expressed feeling unequipped by her preservice teacher training to effectively identify and support the needs of students navigating the impacts of trauma. Based on these findings, Price recommended that preservice music

education programs increase attention to trauma-informed music practice throughout the degree trajectory, specifically through an increased focus on trauma-informed practice in course materials, class discussions, fieldwork experiences, and student teaching.

In another recent study examining the intersections between care, relational practice, and trauma-informed practice in music education (Bailey, 2022), P-12 teacher participants described their trauma-informed teaching approaches as being explicitly rooted in care. Broadly, the fifteen participants cited their efforts to support their students' trauma-related needs as involving the development of music learning environments where students (a) felt comfortable to be themselves, (b) make mistakes, (c) ask for support, and (d) were encouraged to be resilient. Ryals (2022) similarly found that one middle school general music teacher's trauma-informed approach to relational and instructional decision-making was based in an extensive knowledge of student's homelives, acute attention to students' emotional states, and the inclusion of individualized attention and learning experiences. Ryals also suggested that students immersed within the specific trauma-informed music classroom examined in her study reported increased levels of perceived happiness, support, and self-pride.

Empathy

Related to care, an increasing amount of empirical study is suggesting that participation in school music classes may also increase student perceptions and expressions of empathy (Cho, 2021; Lalama, 2016; Rabinowitch et al., 2012). For example, Cho (2021) examined the relationship between undergraduate music students' involvement in music ensembles and their empathic capacities, finding that regular involvement in small group music experiences increased participants' dispositional empathy. Cho found that participants' navigation of the interpersonal domains present in group rehearsals and performances was linked to higher emotional

attunement and empathic responses to peers. Cho also found that participants who began music study early in life displayed higher levels of overall empathy than their peers who began music study later in life.

Affirming this specific element of Cho's (2021) findings, Rabinowitch et al. (2012) examined the link between long-term group musical interaction and the development of empathy in primary school students. Empathy index measures consisted of a variety of musical games that examined students' (N = 23) emotional and empathic responses to each other and teachers. Musical games were designed to encourage empathic responses in group musical interaction, such as resonance, entrainment, imitation, flexibility, and shared intentionality. Rabinowitch et al. (2012) found that students who participated in these group music activities for at least one hour weekly exhibited higher levels of emotional empathy at the end of one year of instruction than students enrolled in a theatre arts class (with no similar activities) or no arts class at all.

Ensemble size was also found to impact perceptions of empathy in high school band students (Lalama, 2016). Data was analyzed from student responses across nine high schools (N = 203) to the Band Climate Questionnaire (which measured variables of cognitive and affective empathy, caring climate, and social behaviors). Lalama found that: (a) students in Title I schools tended to report higher perceptions of caring climates in their band program when compared to students in non-Title I schools; (b) students in smaller ensembles perceived higher levels of empathy than peers in larger ensembles; (c) students who displayed cognitive empathy expressed working more effectively with peers in their ensemble; and (d) students enrolled in music programs where their teacher had taught at the school for more than five years reported higher perceptions of empathy development and care than students whose teachers held less than five years of experience at their school.

Presence

Finally, the notion of presence in teaching (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), though not currently prominent in music education scholarship, synthesizes relational components outlined throughout this review. Presence in teaching is rooted in (a) teacher self-knowledge, knowledge of students, trust, relationships, and compassion; and (b) subsequently basing instructional and interpersonal decision-making on that knowledge (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). A small group of music education scholars have explored the presence in teaching framework (Church, 2022; Hibbard, 2017, 2020; Pellegrino, 2011). Of those scholars, only Hibbard (2017, 2020) has explicitly incorporated the theory into empirical study. In her narrative case study, Hibbard (2017) examined three music educators known for exhibiting positive relationships with students. Hibbard found that participants (a) considered presence central to building trust, creating supportive classrooms, and developing an overall awareness of individual student needs; (b) perceived presence as crucial to building meaningful social and emotional links to musical content; and (c) conceived presence as embedded throughout their holistic understanding of teaching practice.

Discussion: Care

Care—embedded with layers of empathy and presence—has been found to be a central dimension of connection in the music classroom (Bailey, 2022; Edgar, 2014a; Hibbard, 2017; Howard, 2022; Lalama, 2016; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022). Research suggests that teachers and students in music education settings perceive care as a crucial component in teacher-student relationships (Bailey, 2022; Edgar, 2014a; Hibbard, 2017; Ryals, 2022). Within teacher-student relationships, care was found to often be conveyed/experienced through an understanding of individual students' identities, experiences, and needs (Edgar, 2014a; Hibbard, 2017; Ryals,

2022). Findings from the reviewed studies also point to the importance of developing caring and empathic learning environments early in a student's educational trajectory, as well as actively addressing concepts like care, empathy, and presence with students in lower, as well as in, upper grades (Cho, 2021; Price, 2023; Rabinowitch et al., 2012). Finally, research and scholarship suggest a critical intersection between care-based pedagogy (Hendricks, 2023) and trauma-informed music teaching and learning approaches designed to acknowledge and respond to students' varied needs in the music classroom (Bailey, 2022; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022).

Vulnerability

Scholars suggest that aspects of care, presence, and empathy are often linked to the cultivation of vulnerability in the music classroom (MacGregor, 2022, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Phelan, 2017; Richerme, 2016; Sweet, 2019). Brown (2012) framed vulnerability as an amalgamation of feelings related to exposure, risk, and uncertainty (p. 34). MacGregor (2023) defined musical vulnerability as an "individual's inherent and situation openness to being affected by the semantic and somatic properties of music-making" (p. 3). In the music classroom, MacGregor (2023) found that "encounters with musical vulnerability were intimately connected with interpersonal relationships" (p. 14), suggesting that an individual's willingness to take musical risks in a music-learning space may be wrapped within identity-based psychological, social, and emotional factors. This complex manifestation of social and musical vulnerabilities buried within the seams of music teaching and learning has prompted a growing number of music education scholars to examine vulnerability through philosophical (Hess, 2019; MacGregor, 2022; Richerme, 2016), empirical (Abril, 2007; MacGregor, 2023; Hogle, 2021; Huovinen, 2021; Kreutz and Brünger, 2012; Orejudo et al., 2017; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015; Wiggins, 2011), and practitioner lenses (Maunu, 2019; Sweet, 2019).

Intersections Between Music Performance Anxiety and Vulnerability in the Music Classroom

Before examining the relatively small collection of empirical studies in music education *directly* associated with vulnerability, it is important to first draw important intersections with the robust collection of scholarship devoted to examining psychological, emotional, and social factors often *associated* with vulnerability in music teaching, learning, and performance settings. To date, in music education research and scholarship, the consideration of these interrelated factors have been broadly gathered under the term 'music performance anxiety' (Clarke et al., 2020; Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; Kenny, 2005, 2011; MacAfee & Comeau, 2020; Papageorgi, 2022; Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Ryan & Andrews, 2009). While neither this review of literature or dissertation study are based in the consideration of music performance anxiety directly, a brief look into literature related to anxiety in music settings is important to (a) understand how scholars in the field of music have defined and contextualized music performance anxiety in music settings; (b) how factors related to music performance anxiety—such as fear, nervousness, self-consciousness, shame, and humiliation—are related to the musical and interpersonal vulnerabilities experienced in music settings; and (c) why caring and trust-based relationships between teacher and student—and amongst students—are crucial components toward reducing student music performance anxiety and supporting vulnerability in the music classroom.

The prevalence of music performance anxiety in music learning (Boucher & Ryan, 2011; Braden et al., 2015; Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Thomas and Nettelbeck, 2014; Ryan & Andrews, 2009) and performance/rehearsal spaces (Dobos et al., 2018; LeBlanc, 2021; LeBlanc et al., 1997; Kenny & Ackerman, 2015; Paliaukiene et al., 2019; Zakaria et al., 2013), is an increasingly examined area of inquiry in music education research and scholarship

(Kenny, 2005; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Patston, 2014; Salmon, 1992). Scholars have broadly sought to better understand how an individual's self-efficacy (Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; MacAfee & Comeau, 2020; Stoeber and Eismann, 2007), identities and environment (Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu, 2018; Papageorgi, 2022; Patston, 2014; Thomas and Nettelbeck, 2014; Ryan, 2004), and past/current music learning and/or performance experiences (Braden et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2005; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Osório et al., 2017; Ranelli et al., 2015; Ryan, 2004; Sârbescu & Dorgo, 2014) impact potential anxiety related to one's approach to—and experience of—musical experiences. Scholars have also noted an increased link between dimensions of perfectionism and music performance anxiety, especially amongst young musicians (Diaz, 2018; Dobos et al., 2018; Kenny et al., 2004; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Stoeber, J., & Eismann, 2007).

Broadly, these inquiries suggest that the physiological experience of music performance anxiety in music and music education settings often manifests in forms of psychological or emotional distress and panic (Boucher and Ryan, 2011; Juncos et al., 2017; Papageorgi et al., 2007; Ryan, 2004), physical reactions to fear such as sweating, shaking, stiffening, and difficulty breathing (Braden et al., 2015; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Patston, 2014; Robertson & Eisensmith, 2010), and feelings of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation (Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu, 2018; Stoeber and Eismann, 2007; Thomas & Nettelbeck, 2014). That said, findings from many of the inquiries above suggest that music educators and instructors can proactively help mitigate aspects of music performance anxiety in their learning environments by (a) establishing clear and achievable goals with their students (Papageorgi et al., 2007; Patston, 2014; Patston & Osborne; 2016); (b) planning repertoire, assessments, and performance experiences that align with student ability (Boucher & Ryan, 2011; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Papageorgi, 2022; Robertson &

Eisensmith, 2010); (c) creating classroom environments where student (and teacher) mistakes and risk-taking are supported and treated with care (Braden et al., 2015; Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu, 2018; Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; Dobos et al., 2018; MacAfee & Comeau, 2020; Osborne & Kenny, 2008; Papageorgi, 2017; Ryan, 2004); and (d) instilling mindfulness practices like meditation, relaxation exercises, or low-stakes performance simulations to aid students' wellbeing of mind and body before, during, and after performances (Diaz, 2018; Juncos et al., 2017; Spahn et al., 2016).

The music performance anxiety-based factors presented in this subsection closely reflect the unique forms of psychological, emotional, social, musical, and physical vulnerabilities experienced by adolescents in choral music settings as outlined in past research and scholarship (Engelhardt et al., 2022; Freer, 2009, 2015; Paparo, 2016; Ramsey, 2016; Sweet, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2019). Enmeshing the realities of music performance anxiety within a conceptualization of vulnerability in the music classroom may be critical when conceiving how choral music educators might extend relational foundations into their practice.

Studies Examining Vulnerability in Music Teaching and Learning

Above, I briefly turned to music education research and scholarship examining music performance anxiety in music settings in an effort to ground a broader conceptualization of vulnerability in music teaching and learning. Now, I will present a collection of studies that directly examine the notion of vulnerability in music learning spaces (Abril, 2007; Hendricks et al., 2023b; Hogle, 2021; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015; Wiggins, 2011). As displayed below, at the time of this study, most studies in music education explicitly examining vulnerability in music environments involved adult participants.

Vulnerability emerged in the findings of an intrinsic case study in which Hendricks et al. (2023b) examined how a folk musician, songwriter, activist, and conflict facilitator forged connections with others through music. Though reflective of certain dimensions of human connection as established by RCT (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2004, 2020)—such as empathy, trust, and community—Hendricks et al.'s (2023b) conceptualization of 'authentic connection' employed in this study more prominently aligned with notions of spirituality and entrainment (Hendricks & Boyce-Tillman, 2021). Specifically, the framework for authentic connection employed in Hendricks et al.'s (2023b) study was based on work by Hendricks and Boyce-Tillman (2021) who defined connection as "genuine, honest, spiritual/emotional bonding through music" (p. 218). In this study, data consisted of two semi-structured interviews and researcher notes. Hendricks et al.'s (2023b) findings reflected the importance of (a) trust in social interactions; (b) trust in the process of music-making; (c) presence; (d) vulnerability; (e) choice; and (f) self-awareness. Though based in a community music education context, Hendricks et al. (2023b) recommended that music educators in all contexts, including P-12 classrooms, might refer to these findings as part of a more intentional effort to foster trust and vulnerability in music teaching and learning settings.

Bridging the intersections between music performance anxiety and vulnerability in the music classroom, Abril (2007) conducted a narrative inquiry to examine the singing-related anxieties of three preservice elementary education majors enrolled in a university elementary music methods course. From three structured interviews, participant journals, and field texts, Abril found that participants' singing-related anxieties were often connected to negative experiences in school music. Further, Abril found that his preservice teacher participants' singing-related anxiety only manifested in the presence of others when participants feared

criticism, evaluation, or judgment. Findings suggested that participants perceived singing success as an “inborn trait” and tied to “innate characteristics” or “something possessed from within’ (p. 13). Based on these findings, Abril recommended that to help support preservice music students through their anxiety, instructors might attempt to (a) recognize signs of student anxiety; (b) consciously guide students though aspects of vocal technique related to use of their singing voices before class assessments; (c) provide students with multiple chances to sing/perform assessments; (d) allow students to perform with others during assessments; and (e) offer students the opportunity to partake in individual assessments. Noticing similar themes when examining 14 middle and high school female-identifying choral students, Sweet (2015) found that student participants acknowledged social, emotional, and psychological vulnerabilities as a key barrier during the voice change process. In Sweet’s study, students shared that “risk assessment” and “fear of embarrassment” impacted how they sang around peers in the ensemble (p. 84).

In a study examining adult participants, Wiggins (2011) suggested that vulnerability in music settings required “…baring one’s musicianship, one’s musical understanding, one’s whole musical identity to others, often in the context of seeking validation” (p. 358). Wiggins found that vulnerability was both essential (in developing the courage necessary to take risks) and detrimental (related to the onset of crippling fear of failure) to being and becoming a musician. Wiggins’ (2011) findings reflect findings from a large-scale study conducted by Kreutz & Brünger (2012) who examined adult community choir members’ (n = 753) negative experiences associated with singing. Kreutz and Brünger found that over a fourth of their participants acknowledged a negative experience associated with choral singing at some point in their lives. Participants specifically identified negative experiences related to criticism from a past choral conductor, performance-related pressure from a conductor or fellow ensemble member, and a

negative self-concept of their individual singing voice based on preconceived notions of what a 'good' and 'bad' singing voice should sound like.

Two studies also examining vulnerability in adult community choirs both elicited findings that specifically highlighted the psychological and emotional struggles related to vulnerability in choral music settings (Hogle, 2021; Palkki, 2022). For example, Hogle (2021) examined how aspects of vulnerability impacted 15 adult participants' comfort level when singing with others. Hogle found that many participants recalled specific (or multiple) "wounding experiences" (p. 182) during past singing endeavors, often associated with feelings of humiliation, shame, embarrassment, or deficit. Participants shared that these incidents were often tied to criticism from a music teacher or peers and generally related to the use of their singing voice. All participants put forth "protective strategies" (p. 183) after these wounding incidents that included attempts to increase anonymity in the choral ensemble, efforts to look for a different and more supportive singing environment, or deciding to leave choral music all together. Based on these findings, Hogle recommended that choral directors (a) combat vocal vulnerabilities by actively talking about and dismantling shame and perfectionism in vocal/choral music; (b) share their own experiences with choral/vocal vulnerabilities with their singers; (c) embed opportunities for informal and joyful musical experiences into rehearsal periods; (d) deepen their awareness of specific singers' emotional and psychological approaches to singing; and (e) instill increased levels of patience, care, and compassion into instruction. Finally, Hogle also asserted that students' varied social, cultural, neurological and physical experiences will impact their emotional and psychological approaches—and ultimately their vulnerabilities—in choral music experiences.

Reflecting the emotional and psychological pain of the “wounding experiences” emphasized in Hogle’s (2021) study, Palkki (2022) similarly found that adult community choir members carried vulnerability associated with negative past experiences in vocal/choral music environments into adult community choir settings. Palkki found that many participants recalled past experiences where they had been characterized as ‘non-musical’ or ‘non-singers,’ were told they could not match pitch, and/or were asked to not sing (or to sing at lower volume levels). In an effort to mitigate similarly painful moments of shame and humiliation as expressed by his participants, Palkki recommended that choral music educators at all levels (P-12, collegiate, and community) attempt to create music learning environments where the process of the musical experience outweighs the importance of the performance, the reinforcement of deficit perspectives upon certain types of singers is avoided, and learning environments that support joy, improvisation, experimentation, as well as collaboration replace the authoritative disciplinary structures typically associated with traditional choral paradigms.

MacGregor (2023) examined dimensions of vulnerability in music education settings in her phenomenological study investigating how 12 music teachers in the United Kingdom perceived their students to be positively or negatively affected by music instruction. MacGregor found that teacher participants conceptualized vulnerabilities in music instruction as a combination of interpersonal (relational and social-identity based) and personal (aligned with personality, emotional, neurological) factors (p. 8). Findings also suggested that teacher participants often associated a reduction of student vulnerability in the aftermath of interpersonal conflict with their teacher or peers, in the wake of mistakes or embarrassment, or in general moments of uncertainty. Further, MacGregor found that many teacher participants perceived an increase in vulnerability when they (a) reflected students’ social identities and life experiences

within classroom music-making; (b) enmeshed music-making with class conversations about "weighty social issues" pertinent in students' lives (p. 13); (c) provided students with leadership roles or opportunities to express individual musicianship/agency in the music-making process; and (d) acknowledged and praised student risk-taking in the music learning space.

Discussion: Vulnerability

Scholars suggest that the relational intersection between care, trust, and vulnerability is complex, particularly in teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships (Brown, 2012; Brookfield, 2017; Daloz, 2012; Schwartz, 2019). In music classrooms, scholars frame the mutual interplay between elements of caring relationships, trust, and vulnerability (interpersonal and musical) as especially prominent (Hess, 2019b; MacGregor, 2022; Maunu, 2019; Palkki, 2022; Richerme, 2016; Sweet, 2016). Findings from studies in music education examining facets of music performance anxiety reflect how aspects of anxiety (including self-consciousness, fear, nervousness, humiliation, and shame) are closely intertwined with the presence of vulnerability in the music classroom (Boucher & Ryan, 2011; Braden et al., 2015; Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Papageorgi, 2022; Patston & Osborne, 2016; Thomas and Nettelbeck, 2014; Ryan & Andrews, 2009). In music settings, vulnerabilities were found to converge at the intersections of musical, psychological, physical, and social factors (Dobos et al., 2018; LeBlanc, 2021; LeBlanc et al.,1997; MacAfee & Comeau, 2020) and impact students' and adults' approaches to risk-taking in the music learning environment (Abril, 2007; MacGregor, 2023; Sweet, 2015; Wiggins, 2011). Fear of vulnerability was also found to be associated with: painful 'wounding' memories connected with past music learning experiences (Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Hogle, 2021; Palkki, 2022), conceptualizations of shame, humiliation and embarrassment related to making mistakes in music learning settings (Abril, 2007; Hogle, 2021; Sweet, 2015), and the establishment of self-

deficit perspectives based on damaging feedback from an instructor or peer (Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022). Based on these findings, researchers examining vulnerability in music teaching and learning affirmed the importance of (a) eliminating instructional practices and language that evoke student shame and embarrassment (Hogle, 2021; Palkki, 2002); (b) increasing opportunities to provide student praise (MacGregor, 2023; Sweet, 2015; (c) modeling vulnerability for students (Hogle, 2021; Wiggins, 2011); (d) combatting deficit-forms of learning and authoritative teaching paradigms (Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022); and (d) considering how student identities and life experiences impact student vulnerabilities in the music classroom (MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015).

Belonging

Caring and empathic relationships may lead to the development of a sense of community that is critical when cultivating belonging in the learning space (Abril & Battiste, 2022; Hendricks et al., 2018, Parker, 2020). Belonging—or belongingness—is a fundamental psychological need (Maslow, 1958) and requires interpersonal bonds that are rooted in stability, care, and marked by consistency and longevity (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). Belonging has become increasingly part of the lexicon of education scholarship (Hartman et al., 2020; Slee, 2019) and is gaining prominence in music education discourse as well. For example, Parker (2020) suggested that belonging fostered through musical engagement includes three components: (a) experiencing relational bonding and attachment to individuals who support one's musicking efforts; (b) feeling responsible to others for one's role(s) in shared musicking; and (c) participating in musicking in ways that elevate a shared experience with others (p. 108). Researchers in the field of music education have conducted empirical inquiries examining belonging in band (Graves, 2019), choral (Ellis et al., 2021; Johnson, 2016; Powell, 2017),

strings (Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019; Rzonsa, 2016), and general music (Jones, 2022; Willow-Peterson, 2016) settings.

Graves (2019) defined belonging in music education settings as a student's "sense of acceptance, value, inclusion, and encouragement felt when supported by teachers and peers" (pp. 4-5). In his quantitative study, Graves surveyed a sample of high school participants ($N = 749$) regarding their perceptions of belonging in the band classroom. He found that students who felt they belonged to the band community tended to display greater motivation for endorsing and following ensemble values, instruction-based collaboration with peers, and sustaining personal relationships with peers. Graves also found that students who perceived relational support from their band teacher (i.e. the teacher showing interest in the student's life, conveying care and acceptance) expressed high levels of belonging and relational satisfaction in their band ensemble.

Parker (2010) similarly posited that music teachers are central figures in the cultivation of classroom belonging. Parker conducted an action research study in which she facilitated small group interviews (of three to four participants) with 26 total participants. Participants described experiencing belonging in (a) the shared experience of singing (particularly through the embodied and text-based nature of vocal practice); (b) small group voice-part sections (fostering accountability, intergrade relationships, and overall social growth); (c) the establishment of the choral 'safe space' (general acceptance, supportive environment); and (d) the uncompetitive nature of the particular choral setting examined in Parker's study. Stemming from these findings, Parker suggested that belonging in the choral ensemble depended on a caring teacher, trust in peers, the creation of classroom spaces that centered student agency/voice, and opportunities for peer mentorship. In a different inquiry, Jones (2022) conducted a case study to observe how one elementary general music teacher cultivated a sense of belonging amongst her students in the

height of the COVID-19 pandemic and hybrid learning. Jones (2022) found that her teacher participant fostered belonging (virtually and in person) by incorporating social-emotional questions of the day for her students via Zoom, engaging in non-music related conversations when students were in need, and attempting to relationally connect with all students during each class period.

Employing Baumeister and Leary's Belongingness Theory (2017), Ellis et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between African American male-identifying students' sense of belongingness in a high school choral music program and their overall identity and greater success within the wider school community. The study's research team collected data through two individual interviews with each of the 12 student participants, each of whom were enrolled in a choral program at one high school. Student participants shared that (a) community-building with peers in choir; (b) support and safety felt within the school choral community; and (c) identification as part of the school choral community within the wider school ecosystem, contributed to their overall sense of belonging at school. Further, participants expressed that belonging to the choral community enhanced their relationships with choir peers and teachers, increased their self-esteem, enhanced aspects of their academic efforts, and impacted their overall behavior.

Gamboa-Kroesen (2019) similarly examined the intersections between a sense of belonging in a school music ensemble and the greater school environment. Her mixed-methods study included the analysis of 190 student surveys and writing exercises, five teacher interviews, and a series of field observations. Gamboa-Kroesen found that students reported high levels of schoolwide belonging due to the sense of belonging they felt in their middle school orchestra. Students also reported that a sense of belongingness often led to improvements in their overall

mental health, emotional understanding, musical self-efficacy, and awareness of mutuality within the ensemble. In a different study, Freer (2015) found that male-identifying high school choristers described (a) community-building with peers in choir; (b) support and safety felt within that choir community; and (c) identification as part of the choir community within the wider school landscape, as central factors contributing to their overall sense of belonging.

Discussion: Belonging

The studies reviewed in this section conveyed that a sense of belonging in music learning environments often represented the complex psychological, physiological, emotional, and social understanding of 'being a part of something' (Ellis et al., 2021; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019; Parker, 2010). The 'sense' of belonging described by participants in these studies acutely contextualize psychological (Hargreaves & North, 1999) and neurobiological (Camlin, 2019; Freer & Evans, 2018) foundations of connection related to self-worth (Welch & Ockelford, 2016), feelings of loneliness (Rinta et al., 2011), and resilience (Cliff et al., 2017). Though student participants in the reviewed studies were found to cultivate belonging with (and for) each other (Freer, 2015; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019), music teachers themselves were identified as key facilitators of belonging in music spaces (Graves, 2019; Jones, 2022; Parker, 2010). This finding reflects realizations in previous sections of this chapter suggesting that music educators are most responsible for initiating relationships and community in their classrooms (Powell & Parker, 2017; Sweet, 2008). Further, data analysis in multiple studies in this section revealed that a sense of belonging cultivated in a school music class/ensemble positively impacted students' perceptions of identity and belonging in the wider school community (Ellis et al., 2021; Freer, 2015; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019).

Summary: Review of Literature

The purpose of this chapter was to explore how scholars have empirically studied various dimensions of human connection in music teaching and learning. I began by reframing RCT as the theoretical framework for this study and presented a brief summary of RCT-based studies in the field of social work, counseling, and education scholarship. I then provided a review of music education studies wherein dimensions of connection as defined by RCT—such as relationships, community, care, vulnerability, and belonging—were explicitly examined or emerged in the studies' findings. This overview of relational literature in teaching and learning affirms that concepts such as belonging, care, community, relationships, and vulnerability—may be collectively encapsulated within the notion of connection and are crucial components in music education research, scholarship, and teaching practice. Further, reflective of critical conceptualizations of RCT (Jordan, 2017b, 2018, 2023; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020), certain studies reviewed in this chapter included findings that centered the enmeshed presence of race, ethnicity, and culture (Doyle, 2012; Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; Shaw, 2015), gender and sexual orientation (Gould, 2012; Howard, 2022; McBride, 2016; Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2020), implications of trauma (Bailey, 2022; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022), and intersections between power and vulnerability (Hibbard, 2017; Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022) within the experience of relational dynamics in music teaching and learning.

In Chapter 3, I will describe the research methodology and design for this dissertation study. I will discuss this study's research settings, participants, data collection, as well as analysis and interpretation procedures.

Chapter III
Research Methodology and Design

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology and design for this study in which I examine perceptions of human connection in choral music teaching and learning. I will begin this chapter by restating the purpose statement and research question of this current study in addition to describing the mini-study foundational to this current inquiry. I will then introduce and describe this study's methodological design, establish my research positionality, and assert Jordan's (2018) and Walker's (2004, 2020) critical conceptualization of Relational Cultural Theory as this study's theoretical lens. Next, I will discuss my selection of research settings and participants; data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures; and triangulation procedures. I will conclude this chapter by presenting limitations and summarizing methodological components of the study.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand how human connection is experienced in the high school choral music classroom. In this study, I frame human connection as an interaction between two or more individuals that requires—and cultivates—growth-fostering relationships rooted in care, trust, empathy, and belonging. The central research question guiding this study was:

> How is human connection experienced in the classrooms of three high school choral music educators?

Description of Foundational Mini-Study

A course-related mini-study was foundational to the development of this dissertation study. The foundational mini-study was completed as part of a doctoral-level qualitative research methods course in the Department of Music Education at the University of Michigan in the Winter 2022 semester. The study evolved out of my sustained interest in the intersections between relationships, community, and choral music education, along with an increasing engagement with relational-based education and music education scholarship. During the process of the mini-study, I developed research questions, an interview protocol, and data collection and analysis procedures that emphasized facets of relational connection in secondary choral music settings. Further, it was during the evolution of this mini-study that I first considered the term 'connection,' after coming across the term in works by Palmer (2017), Abril and Battiste (2022), and Brown (2021).

Participants and Findings of Mini-Study

I identified participants for the mini-study through criterion sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), selecting three choral music educators with reputations for their successful commitments to fostering dimensions of human connection in their secondary choral programs. Due to the constraints of a one-semester course and health-related mobility issues, through convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I relied on participants who I personally knew cultivated connection in their programs and would be willing to participate in a Zoom interview. After University of Michigan IRB approval, data was collected through one semi-structured interview with each participant via Zoom and an open-ended written questionnaire (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial data analysis for the study involved: review of interview recordings, review of interview transcripts, and coding—both open and axial (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Preliminary analysis across the three teacher participants suggested emerging themes related to human connection that included the importance of (a) understanding one's relational role as teacher; (b) developing strategies for connection; and (c) fostering human connection in choral/vocal music. Within Theme 1—understanding one's relational role as teacher—participants shared that they often thought about how they perceived and enacted their role as a teacher-mentor when attempting to cultivate connection with and among students. Within the Theme 2—developing strategies for connection—participants described the importance of developing trust, knowing individual students' backgrounds, building community throughout the ensemble, fostering in-the-moment and long-term connections, and navigating interpersonal challenges as they arise. Finally, related to Theme 3—fostering human connection in choral/vocal music—participants spoke of the critical importance of (a) fostering human connection in choral/vocal music by supporting students through the embodied nature of singing (individually and with others); (b) fostering learning spaces that nurture students through emotional, physical, social, musical and additional vulnerabilities in order to enhance their singing and choral music experience; (c) addressing the psychosocial elements often embedded in choral music and group singing (gendered, racial, embodied, etc.); and (d) exploring emotional and sociocultural implications of repertoire/lyrics.

Initial implications from this mini-study included: dimensions of connection are important in the secondary choral teacher participants' classrooms, connection is complex and contextual, connection may be particularly nuanced in choral/vocal settings, and connection is worthy of continued investment in music education research and scholarship. In addition to eliciting the findings above, the mini-study also functioned as an opportunity for me to conceptualize the feasibility of examining connection within choral music education settings in

future qualitative research. Thus, the mini-study informed my decision to examine human connection at a deeper level within this dissertation study, particularly by expanding the scope of my data collection and research design through the incorporation of student focus groups, research site observations, and additional teacher participant interviews.

Design of Current Study

A qualitative research design was selected for this current study in order to gain deep insight into teacher and student participants' experiences. Whereas quantitative designs measure and analyze the causal relationships between variables, qualitative designs focus on understanding process and meaning-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed…how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 15). Patton (2015) stated that qualitative inquiry generates knowledge through "illuminating meaning" and "capturing stories to understand people's perspectives and experiences" (p. 12). In likening the qualitative researcher to a bricoleur, or quilt maker, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described the potential for qualitative research—and the researcher—when conveying meaning:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. This means that qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

The image of the bricoleur, gathering various forms of data in order to illuminate the meaning of individuals enmeshed within a phenomenon, grounds my approach to this qualitative study.

Employing a qualitative approach to collect data through interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents (Patton, 2015) allowed me to better understand high school choral teachers' and their students' experiences of human connection in the high school choral setting.

Case Study

In this dissertation I employed Yin's (2018) multiple-case study design to examine how human connection was experienced in three high school choral music settings. Yin (2018) stated that the core feature of case study research is "to understand 'the case'—what it is, how it works, and how it interacts with its real-world contextual environment" (p. xxiii), further asserting that case studies provide researchers paths toward "in-depth descriptions" of the 'how' and 'why' of specific "social phenomenon" (p. 4). Research scholars have emphasized use of the case study when pursuing in-depth examinations of a specific entity or when comparing multiple entities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005). Stake (2005) stated that a central pillar of the case study is the establishment of a bounded system to contextualize the data examined when pursuing a specific phenomenon, issue, or theme (p. 459). Creswell & Poth (2018) framed the notion of boundedness as "defined or described within certain parameters" (p. 97), or, as Patton (2015) suggested, the "necessity of placing a boundary around some phenomenon of interest" (p. 259). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further emphasized this notion when they suggested that a bounded system reflects what is ultimately studied—the setting, the individual, the phenomenon—encapsulated by a boundedness denoting the entities as a case.

Barrett (2014) affirmed the "utility" of case study research when examining dimensions of music teaching and learning. Barrett (2014) emphasized the malleable nature of the case study

as effective when describing and analyzing some of the more complex research questions in music education:

> Aspects of the lived experience of music teaching and learning are often too nuanced, contextualized, and interdependent to be reduced to discrete variables. The dynamic intersections of subject matter, learners, teacher, and educational milieu are vital to our professional understanding; case study reports can aptly convey the multifaceted ecologies of life in music classrooms. (p. 114)

Like Barrett, other scholars across the field of music education have increasingly turned to case study research to untangle important questions examining how multidimensional human beings embark upon music teaching and learning processes (e.g., Berglin, 2018; Edgar, 2012; Forrester, 2015; Kelly-McHale, 2011; Mullen, 2020; Palkki, 2016; Salvador, 2011; J. Shaw, 2014; R. Shaw, 2015; VanDeusen, 2017).

Multiple Case Study

Within this study, I was interested in understanding the phenomenon of human connection with regard to more than one participant or case. This led me to select a multiple case study design (Yin, 2018). Stake (2005) affirmed that in multiple case studies, "a number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition" and that "understanding them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (p. 445). Employing a multiple-case study approach allows the researcher to examine patterns and differences across individual cases and may further strengthen the validity of the broader study: "The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 40). In describing his multiple-case study approach, employed in this study, Yin (2018) stated:

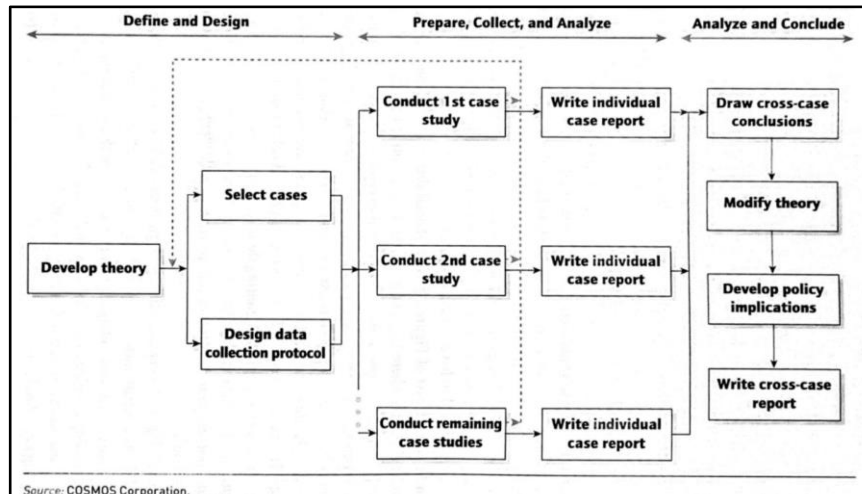
> Each individual case becomes the subject of a whole case study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the findings and conclusions for the study; each case study's

> conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by the other individual case studies. Both the individual case studies and the multiple-case results can and should be the focus of a summary report. (p. 57)

A visual representation of Yin's (2018) multiple-case study procedure is displayed in Figure 1 below. Using Yin's (2018) multiple-case study design required me to actively examine the nuances of each individual case of this study while comparing common and divergent themes across cases (Yin, 2018). Specifically, this design allowed me to consider, reflect upon, and understand the complexities of participants' experiences with connection within three high school choral research sites. In this multiple case study, the social phenomenon being examined is human connection and individual cases are bound by the experiences of the three teacher participants and their students within their specific high school choral music classroom.

Figure 1

Procedure for Multiple-Case Study Design (Yin, 2018)



Researcher Lens and Positionality

Qualitative researchers bring their own meaning-making and perceptions to every facet of the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). How researchers acknowledge and engage with the impact of perceptual elements upon research is broadly

defined as reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Patton (2015) posited that reflexivity is "a way of emphasizing the importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one's perspective" (p. 70). He affirmed that reflexivity occurs when mindfully applying an understanding of perspective (a) not only upon one's duties as researcher; but also in relation to (b) one's participants; (c) those who may read a study; and (d) the "reflexive screens" (race, culture, gender, class, context, etc.) that impact researcher, participant, readers, and meaning at large (Patton, 2015, p. 72). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that researchers "position themselves" within a study in order to convey to the reader facets of their background and experience and how that background and experience influences their interpretations of the study (p. 44).

Scholars are increasingly referring to this notion as 'positionality,' with Misawa (2010) positing that one's positionality is informed by their membership in socially constructed demographics embedded in societal systems. Duarte (2017) suggested that positionality is rooted in degrees of privilege related to race, ethnicity, class, gender, (dis)ability, language, tribal affiliation, religion, neurodiversity, and language, further asserting that positionality refers to how differences in position to, and interconnectedness with, power structures shape identities and access in society. In their work examining white researcher positionality in indigenous spaces, Bennett et al. (2022) called for music education scholars to more actively center facets of positionality in their research as part of broader attempts toward decolonizing—and decentering whiteness in—music education research.

Thus, within the context of this study, it is important to first acknowledge my positionality as a white, gay, English-speaking, cisgender male from a Eurocentric and upper-middle class background. These elements are inseparable from how I identify as a person, and

thus are inseparable from my identity as a teacher, scholar, and researcher. These identities position and inform the lens through which I developed and conducted all facets of this study. These identities impacted how I (a) developed interview and focus group protocols; (b) conducted observations; (c) analyzed and interpreted data; (d) interacted with teacher participants; and (e) interacted with student participants. Furthermore, as enmeshed within sociopolitical implications of power and context, my identities and positionality—in relation to the identities and positionalities of teacher and student participants—likely influenced participant interactions with me, as well as their reflections on human connection in this study. Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge my experience as a middle and high school choral music director who was passionately committed to fostering dimensions of connection in the secondary choral classroom. That experience, and undoubtedly my own relational connections with past students, informed my work throughout this study.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is "the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of [a] study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85). In case study research, Yin (2018) affirmed that the use of theory is instructive when designing a study and deciding how to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Theoretical frameworks may also be conceived as the perceptual "lenses" through which the researcher explores and focuses their phenomena (Anfara & Mertz, 2015, p. 16). Thus, a theoretical framework not only contextualizes the central 'problem' of a study but informs subsequent endeavors of the research project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As stated in Chapter 1, Jordan's (2018) and Walker's (2004, 2020) critical conceptualizations of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) served as the theoretical framework for this study. RCT grounded the conceptual underpinnings of this study and served as a general canvas from which I conceived my central

research question, teacher and student interview protocols, and observation procedures. While the tenets of Jordan's (2018) and Walker's (2004, 2020) framing of RCT broadly impacted my intellectual approach to data analysis—and served as a lens for discussion and implications presented in the final chapter of this dissertation—RCT was not directly employed as part of my formal coding scheme.

Participants and Research Setting

Participant Sampling

Patton (2015) asserted that "information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 53). In order to best understand the nature of human connection in secondary choral music settings, I used purposeful sampling to select my three teacher participants and research sites (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used criterion sampling to intentionally identify participants with a professional reputation for and/or a displayed commitment to fostering connection with and among their students in the high school choral classroom. Participants were identified as having a reputation for and/or displaying a commitment to fostering connection through a mixture of recommendations from university faculty, presence at state music education conferences, and presence in the greater community. Criterion sampling requires the researcher to develop a series of criteria that reflect the central questions of the study and guide the selection of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, criteria for participant selection included the following:

- Choral music educator at the high school level
- 3 or more years of teaching experience
- Professional reputation for and/or a displayed commitment to fostering connection with students in their high school choral classes/program

- Varied gender identity across cases
- Varied racial/ethnic identity across cases
- Varied teaching context(s) across cases

Rationale for Participant Selection

An important component of qualitative research is selecting specific cases from which the researcher and their audience may deepen knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Stake, 2005). Establishing certain criteria for participant selection, particularly within a multiple-case study design, often requires the knowledge that participants in the sample already exhibit components of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Thus, for this study, it was important to select teacher participants with professional reputations for and/or a displayed commitment to fostering connected teaching in their secondary choral classrooms (Abril & Battiste, 2022; Schwartz, 2019). The criterion of having three or more years of teaching experience was established in order to engage with participants who had experience developing connection in the classroom. I decided to conduct this study at the high school level due to (a) the potential of exploring a longer relational span between teacher and students; (b) the possibility that high school students might have an expanded chronology of relational experiences to draw upon with their choral music teachers; and (c) the probability that students participants' age might lead to an increased level of comfort when reflecting upon, and talking about, facets of human connection in the classroom. Finally, efforts to select teacher participants of varied gender, race, and teaching context across cases reflected an effort to ensure that diverse experiences and understandings of connection were represented in the study (Coppola & Taylor, 2022; Elliott et al., 2016; McCall, 2015; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). That said, given the small scope of this study, the span of teacher identity, student identities, and teaching contexts represented is limited and only

reflective of the three individual cases examined in this study. Teacher participants for this study were: Helen Curtis (choral music teacher at Woodland Falls High School), Bryan Dempsey (choral music teacher at Grove Lake High School), and Stephanie Johnson (choral music teacher at Meadow River High School). A general overview of teacher participants' is provided in Table 2 below, including teacher participants' self-identified race, self-identified gender, total years teaching at the time of this study, and years at the school examined in this study. Pseudonyms were used for teacher and student participants, as well as each research site, to protect participant, school, and community anonymity.

Table 2

Teacher Participant Information

Name	Self-Identified Race	Self-Identified Gender	Total Years Teaching	School	Years at Current School
Helen Curtis	African American	Female	36	Woodland Falls High School	6
Bryan Dempsey	White	Male	4	Grove Lake High School	3
Stephanie Johnson	Caucasian	Female	25	Meadow River High School	10

Research Settings

The research settings for each case included each participant's school and the Zoom platform. Teacher Participants' classrooms served as the site for all observations and for two of Helen Curtis' interviews. Helen Curtis' final interview was conducted via Zoom. Expanded demographic details about each research setting are included in Table 3 (p. 111).

Table 3

Research Site Demographics

School Name	School Classification	Students Eligible for Free/ Reduced Lunch	Student Population	City/Community Population	City/ Community Median Household Income
Grove Lake High School (GLHS) *Bryan Dempsey*	Rural-Fringe	34%	83% White 7% Hispanic/Latinx 3% Black or African American 3% Asian 3% Two or More Races 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native	89% White 6% Hispanic/Latinx 2% Two or More Races 1% Black or African American 1% Asian 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native	$93, 406
Meadow River High School (MRHS) *Stephanie Johnson*	Suburban	18%	74% White 17% Black or African 3% Hispanic/Latinx 2.6% Two or More Races 2.1% Asian 0.07% American Indian/Alaskan Native *Note:* MRHS serves the community of Maplebrook as well as two surrounding communities	86% White 5.6% Two or More Races 3.9%-Hispanic/ Latinx 3.2% Black or African American 1.2% Asian 0.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native	$96, 993
Woodland Falls High School (WFHS) *Helen Curtis*	Large Suburban Title I	77%	57% Black or African American 18% Hispanic/Latinx 15% White 8% Two or More Races 0.9 % Asian 0.2 % American Indian/Alaskan Native	61.9 % White 25.5 % Black or African American 7.2 % Two or More Races 6.0 % Hispanic/ Latinx 4.5 % Asian 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander 0.2 % American Indian/Alaskan Native	$40,256

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (School classification; students eligible for free/reduced lunch; student population)

Source: United States Census Bureau (City/community population; City/community median household income)

Gaining Access

The University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study in March, 2023. Upon approval from the IRB, I began contacting individual teacher participants to gain their informed consent to participate in the study (Yin, 2018). Once receiving teacher participants' informed consent, teacher participants were asked to gain approval for themselves and their students to participate in the study from school and/or district administration. Upon school and district approval, I then provided each teacher participant with parent/guardian consent forms to give to students interested in participating in the student focus group.

Data Collection

In the section below, I outline the process for collecting data for this study. I specifically describe my approach to teacher participant interviews, student participant focus groups, research site observations, and the collection of material culture and artifacts.

Teacher Participant Interviews

Within a case study, data collection may include interviews, observations, artifacts, and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participant interview is often the central source through which researchers seek to understand perceptual experience and meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). In qualitative research, interviews are a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee wherein the interviewer "asks about, and listens to, what people themselves tell about their lived world" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. xvii). The interview protocol, specifically, reflects the researcher's line of inquiry (Yin, 2018, p. 99). To extend my line of inquiry, I chose to use a modified version of Seidman's (2019) three-stage interview model as my interview protocol. Seidman posited that

this phenomenological interview model is effective when examining participants' meaning-making within the context of their worlds.

Teacher participant interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and approximately 75-minutes in length (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participant interviews were completed over a two-month period in the Spring of 2023. Three individual interviews were conducted with each teacher participant, equaling a total of twelve teacher participant interviews. Teacher participant interviews were scheduled in alignment with teacher participant preference. All three interviews with Bryan were conducted and recorded via Zoom during his second hour planning period. All three interviews with Stephanie were conducted and recorded via Zoom in the evening after her school day had completed. Two interviews with Helen were conducted in person at Woodland Falls High School during her first hour planning period and recorded using an iPad recording app. Helen's third and final interview was conducted and recorded via Zoom. All interviews for all participants were transcribed by the online transcription service, Rev, for purposes of data analysis. A routine gap of at least one week in between each teacher participant's interviews was observed, providing me and the participants ample time to reflect on the preceding interview (Seidman, 2019). Before each interview, I began with an overview of the study as well as reminders that each interview was being recorded and that participants could stop the interview/recording at any time (Seidman, 2019).

Within Seidman's (2019) three-stage interview model, interviews are generally structured to encompass: (a) a first interview conceptualized as a 'focused life history' discussion designed to contextualize a participant's experience with the topic being examined; (b) a second interview in which participants are asked to discuss their current experiences related to the topic being examined; and (c) a third interview in which participants are asked to reflect on the broader

meaning of their experiences in relation to the topics being examined. When developing the interview protocol for this study, I modified Seidman's (2019) three-stage interview model in the following ways: Though not exclusively devoted to participants' life history in regards to connection, the first teacher participant interview provided teacher participants an opportunity to (a) share a general background on their journey to becoming a teacher; (b) describe their overall conceptualization of connection in their choral classroom; and (c) when/why/how dimensions of connection became important in their choral music practice. In the second interview, teacher participants were asked to (a) describe specific details regarding what aspects of vulnerability they felt impacted students' musical/social engagement in their classrooms; (b) whether there were certain types of choral repertoire that fostered dimensions of connection in their choral classroom; and (c) whether there were certain types of performances, activities, or experiences that fostered dimensions of connection in their choral classroom. In the third interview, teacher participants were asked to again reflect on broad implications of their relational practice, specifically (a) whether/how their relational approach had changed over time; (b) whether/how their relationships with students were informed/impacted by facets of identity (including race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, neurodiversity, aspects of trauma); (c) whether/how they navigated any challenges when attempting to form relationships with students; and (d) whether/how they hoped to change or modify their approach to connection or relational practice within the choral music classroom in the future. For each teacher participant, questions for Interview Two and Interview Three were informed by data gained in the preceding interview. The teacher participant interview protocol for this study is included in Appendix A.

Focus Groups

Discussing the focus group as a method of data collection in qualitative research, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that “a focus group is an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic” (p. 114). Focus group interviews typically include five to eight participants and are structured through an open-ended interview (Patton, 2015). Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested that focus groups not only provide the opportunity to hear perspectives of multiple students per research site, but may be more comfortable than individual interviews for some middle and high school students. Krueger and Casey (2009) posited that student focus groups should create a “permissive, nonthreatening environment” that “encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus” (p. 4). Further, Patton (2015) recognized that in focus groups, “participants get to hear each other’s responses and make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (p. 475). Both Krueger and Casey’s (2009) notion of a non-threatening environment and Patton’s (2015) acknowledgement of the potential to listen and respond to others highlight why the focus group was an appropriate data source in this study for gathering student perspectives.

I specifically chose to include student focus groups in this study in order to center the crucial perspectives of students within the experience of connection at each research site, particularly with regard to teacher-student and student-student connection. I conducted two 60-minute student focus groups at each research site (though only one student focus group at Woodland Falls High School due to Helen’s disciplinary leave of absence—discussed below). I ensured a routine gap of at least one week in between the first and second focus group at each research site, providing me and the student participants time to reflect on the preceding focus

group (Seidman, 2019). The student focus group protocol for this study is included in Appendix B.

The Grove Lake High School student focus group was comprised of ten students, the Meadow River High School student focus group was comprised of nine students, and the Woodland Falls High School student focus group was comprised of nine students. The Grove Lake High School and Meadow River High School student focus groups were comprised of student volunteers who returned their parent/guardian consent forms. At Grove Lake High School and Meadow River High School, the student focus groups took place during the class period immediately following the students' choral music class that I observed for this study (students were granted permission by school administration to miss another class). The Grove Lake High School student focus groups were held in the school choir room. The Meadow River High School student focus groups were held in a school common space. At Woodland Falls High School, Helen conveyed that her students would not be permitted to miss an academic class in order to participate in a student focus group, nor would they be able to attend a student focus group before or after school due to transportation issues. As such, the Woodland Falls High School student focus group was comprised of students in Helen's fourth period choir class and held in the school choir room during their regularly scheduled choral class period. Due to Helen's disciplinary leave of absence, only one student focus group was completed at Woodland Falls High School. Student focus groups at all three research sites broadly reflected the gender and racial/ethnic identities of the choral programs at each research site as displayed in Table 3 (p. 111), though all student focus group participants at Woodland Falls High School were African American, Black, Indigenous, or Hispanic/Latinx students.

Observations

Observations are considered to be a common form of evidence in case study research due to the capacity to observe the case within its real-world context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2018) indicated that direct observations allow the researcher to "assess the occurrence of certain types of behaviors during certain periods of time in the field" (pp. 121-122). For this study, I conducted four observations at both Grove Lake High School and Meadow River High School, and three observations at Woodland Falls High School due to Helen's disciplinary leave of absence. At Grove Lake High School, I observed one mixed-grade, SATB ensemble during a 60-minute class period. At Meadow River High School, I observed two choral ensembles (one mixed-grade, SATB ensemble and one mixed-grade, Treble ensemble), each which met for 55 minutes. At Woodland Falls High School, I observed the morning 'Advisory Period' and the fourth period, mixed-grade, SATB ensemble, which met for 90 minutes.

During visits to each research site, I sat in an unobtrusive location in the classroom, typically in the back corner of the school's choral risers so that I was viewing instruction from behind student participants as they faced their teacher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In alignment with Yin's (2018) procedure for observations, my fieldnotes were typed while instruction was in process in an effort to document pertinent details of instruction as well as teacher-student and student-student interactions. Field notes were detailed, descriptive, and concrete (Patton, 2015, p. 388), and reflected visual, verbal, formal and nonformal interactions, as well as acknowledgement of my own researcher reflexivity. I audio recorded each observation using my personal iPad so that I could review the recording at a later date and make any necessary updates to my fieldnotes. Observational evidence gathered during these field experiences provided

insightful data that meaningfully complimented participant teacher participant interviews, student participant focus groups, and potentially added “new dimensions for understanding” to the case (Yin, 2018, p. 122). The observation fieldnotes template used in this study is included in Appendix C.

Material Culture and Artifacts

Finally, various forms of material culture, documents, and artifacts are often considered to be relevant sources of data when conducting case study research. Yin (2018) asserted that “the most important use of documentation is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 115). Yin further emphasized that, when analyzing documents, the researcher should keenly seek to understand why the document was created, what purpose it holds, and for whom. Documents could include emails, letters, announcements, news articles, and administrative documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Though material culture and artifacts were not a large source of data within this study, specific examples collected and analyzed in relation to interview, focus group, and observational data included: (a) teacher participant email correspondence in which dimensions of connection were addressed; (b) concert programs reflecting dimensions of connection in repertoire; (c) videos of past student performances; (d) course assignments; and (e) pictures taken at each research site documenting the visual and physical nature of the choir classrooms at each research site. Relevant material culture and artifacts are discussed in within-case findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Factors Impacting Data Collection at Woodland Falls High School

It is important to note factors that impacted data collection at Woodland Falls High School. Toward the end of data collection at Woodland Falls High School (WFHS), teacher

participant Helen Curtis was placed on disciplinary leave by her school district (I provide more details on this scenario in Chapter 6). At the time that Helen was notified of her disciplinary leave, I had completed two of three interviews with Helen, three of four observations at WFHS, and one of two WFHS student focus groups. Though my first two interviews with Helen were held in her WFHS classroom on her planning period, the third and final interview was completed via Zoom after Helen was placed on disciplinary leave. Due to Helen's disciplinary leave of absence, I was not able to complete the final observation or the second student focus group at WFHS.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis is the process of developing meaning and understanding from data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). Yin (2018) stated that "case study research requires an inquiring mind during data collection, not just before or after the activity" (p. 83). As a part of my data analysis approach in this study, individual units of data and emerging patterns were analyzed critically to account for contextual factors. Stake (2005) provided a rationale for this approach:

> Qualitative researchers have strong expectations that the reality perceived by people inside and outside the case will be social, cultural, situational, and contextual—and they want the interactivity of functions and contexts as well described as possible. (p. 452)

My procedures for within- and cross-case analysis were based on these scholarly foundations and are described below.

Multiple Case Study Analysis

In discussing the multiple case study, Stake (2005) stated that several cases may be examined in order to investigate a phenomenon because "…it is believed that understanding

them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (p. 446). Within a multiple case study, Stake (2005) suggested that researchers "seek out both what is common and what is particular about the case" (p. 447). Yin (2018) suggested that researchers take a case-based approach to multiple-case study analysis, which he contended requires first identifying within-case patterns of each individual case before comparing to cross-case patterns or emergent themes. Framing how researchers might approach this type of analysis, Yin (2018) suggested that "the initial within-case queries could have involved analyzing 'how' and 'why' each individual person engaged in the chosen strategy, and the subsequent cross-case comparisons would be checked further for literal and theoretical replications" (p. 197).

Within-Case Analysis

In the section below, I outline my procedure for within-case analysis. I will describe my process for initial interview transcription as well as Phase 1 and Phase 2 of analysis, which involved my coding scheme.

Coding. The process of coding aids qualitative researchers in identifying within-case patterns and synthesizing cross-case patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Coding provides a system through which to identify and organize points of data (in interviews, fieldnotes, and documents) for the purpose of analysis and written reports (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, analysis adhered to Yin's (2018) model for multiple case study design (Figure 1, p. 105) beginning with analysis of each individual case before conducting a cross-case analysis. Before beginning the coding process, the data from interviews, focus groups, and observations (field notes) were transcribed using the Rev transcription service and collated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After transcription, I first reviewed the recording of each interview. I

then reviewed the recordings while following along with Rev transcripts. In my role as researcher, I reviewed each transcript for clarity and removed words and phrases that included ‘ah,’ ‘so,’ ‘um,’ and ‘OK,’ unless they were integral to participant responses.

In an effort to best understand participants’ meaning-making and understanding, I chose to immerse myself fully in their world and the world of each research site for the duration of within-case analysis. Thus, I completed all phases of each within-case analysis before approaching subsequent cases. I began Phase 1 of within-case analysis for each research site by reviewing all interview and focus group transcripts, observation recordings, and field notes. The second component of Phase 1 involved coding using a multi-stage framework (Yin, 2018). Coding during Phase 1 involved open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used the MAXQDA software program to digitally insert initial open codes into the margins of the transcripts for teacher participant interviews 1, 2, and 3. Each teacher participant was assigned between 48 (Helen), 51 (Stephanie), and 60 (Bryan) open codes, respectively. These initial open codes ranged from terms that included ‘teacher support,’ ‘affirmations,’ ‘knowing/seeing/responding,’ ‘trust,’ ‘care,’ ‘connection to surrounding city/community,’ ‘activities,’ ‘traditions,’ ‘singing voice,’ ‘music reading,’ ‘racial identity,’ and ‘gender identity.’ The five most prominent initial open codes from teacher participant interviews in each within-case analysis included: (a) knowing/seeing/responding, racial/cultural understanding, trust, connection to surrounding city/community, and building up/empowering (Helen); (b) vulnerability, knowing/seeing/responding, critical reflection, one-on-one interactions, and trust (Stephanie); and (c) knowing/seeing/responding, empowerment, community, safety, and repertoire (Bryan). The codes mentioned above represent *initial* open codes assigned during Phase 1 of analysis. As

described below, these initial open codes were subsequently merged into broader code categories in Phase 2 of within-case analysis.

Phase 2 of within-case analysis for each research site involved a second review of teacher participant interview transcripts as well as axial coding. Axial coding for this study involved grouping each of the initial open codes (some of which are listed above) into broader categories. For example, initial open codes like ‘teacher support,’ ‘affirmations,’ and ‘knowing/seeing/responding’ were grouped into the larger category of ‘relationships,’ while initial open codes like ‘activities’ and ‘traditions’ were grouped in the larger category of ‘community.’

Phases 1 and 2 of analysis of teacher participant data was mirrored when analyzing student focus group data for each research site. Again using the MAXQDA software program, I digitally inserted initial open codes into the margins of student focus group transcripts. Initial open codes emergent in Phase 1 of analysis of student focus groups included initial open codes such as ‘fear,’ ‘making mistakes,’ ‘self-consciousness/insecurity,’ ‘multi-year relationships,’ ‘validation/affirmation,’ ‘care,’ ‘peer support,’ ‘singing voice,’ and ‘ensemble singing.’ The five most prominent initial open codes from student focus groups in each within-case analysis included: (a) care, support, teacher/student arrangements, trust, making mistakes (WFHS/Helen); (b) making mistakes, ensemble singing, multi-year relationships, community, validation/affirmation (MRHS/Stephanie); and (c) support, making mistakes, self-consciousness/insecurity, care, validation/affirmation (GLHS/Bryan). As in Phase 1 of analysis for teacher participant interviews, the codes mentioned above represent *initial* open codes assigned during Phase 1 of analysis for student focus groups. These initial open codes were merged into broader code categories in Phase 2 of within-case analysis.

During Phase 2 of analysis of student focus group data, initial open codes like 'validation/affirmation,' 'trust,' and 'care,' were grouped into the larger category of 'relationships;' initial codes like 'fear,' 'making mistakes,' and 'self-consciousness/insecurity' were grouped into the larger category 'vulnerability;' and initial codes like 'singing voice,' and 'ensemble singing' were grouped into the larger category of 'music.'

I then used these final emergent themes from teacher participant data and student focus group data to develop a within-case chapter for each research site. Each within-case chapter begins with a vignette to bring the reader into each teacher participant's story and teaching setting. I then provide an initial description of each case before providing a rich, thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of each teacher and student participants' experiences of human connection in the high school choral music classroom at each research site. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016) rich, thick description is a "strategy to enable transferability" that refers to the description of a study's participants and research settings, including a "detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents" (p. 257). These within-case descriptions and exploration of themes are provided in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this dissertation.

Cross-Case Analysis

After completing the within-case analysis for each research site, I followed Yin's (2018) procedure for conducting a cross-case analysis: "Only after drawing some tentative conclusion about these within-case patterns would the analysis proceed to examine whether there appeared to be replicative (literal or theoretical) relationships across the case studies" (p. 196). Thus, Phase 3 of analysis for this study involved the synthesis of cross-case themes. During Phase 3, newly conceived conceptual categories were formed to reflect and house the within-case axial

codes developed in Phase 2. Thus, each within-case axial code—and its subcodes—were sorted and merged into newly conceived broader categories, allowing for examination of cross-case patterns. Categories developed in Phase 3 were: The Importance of Care, The Importance of Trust, Support of Vulnerability, Sense of Belonging, and Navigating Relational Challenges. From these five categories, I was most effectively able to conduct the cross-case analysis. These five themes became the foundations from which I developed a rich, thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the data across the three cases, particularly regarding points of commonality and nuance between participants and research sites.

Verification and Trustworthiness

Below, I outline my approach to data verification and trustworthiness. I provide detail outlining my approach to ensuring validity and credibility through triangulation, member checking, and continued researcher reflexivity.

Triangulation

In an effort to increase the internal validity and credibility of this research, I triangulated multiple forms of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Patton (2015) stated that triangulation of data sources "means comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means from interviews, observations, and documents" (p. 662). According to Yin (2018), "any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information, following a similar convergence" (p. 128). Furthermore, Yin (2018) suggested that that the six sources of data useful in multiple case study research are documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts (p. 114). In this study, data sources included: (a) three interviews per teacher

participant/research site (nine interviews total); (b) two student focus group interviews per research site (five focus groups total due to only one focus group at WFHS); (c) four observations per research site (eleven observations total due to only three observations at WFHS); and (d) the collection of material culture and artifacts (dependent on research site). These data sources are presented in Figure 2 (p. 126) as a modified conceptualization of Yin's (2018) triangulation model for case study research. In analyzing these multiple sources of data, within-case and cross-case findings were "supported by more than a single source of evidence" and "provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon" (Yin, 2018, p. 128). This approach further reflected suggestions by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), who asserted that the use of multiple forms of empirical evidence "adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry" (p. 5).

Member Checking

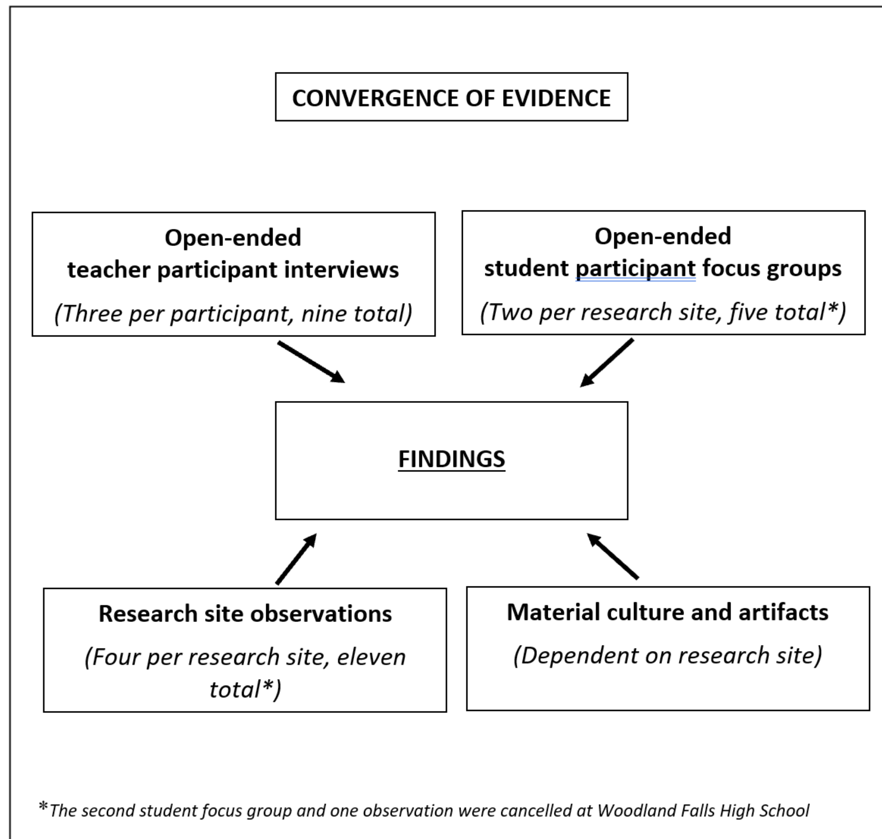
Member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were used as a part of this study to ensure that participant meaning-making was conveyed and presented correctly in the study's findings. Member checking "involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Before conducting any portion of data analysis, I sent full copies of all three interview transcripts to each teacher participant (Patton, 2015). Teacher participants were given three weeks to provide any feedback, request changes, or offer modifications. No teacher participant provided feedback, changes, or modifications.

Reflexivity and Assumptions

As the bricoleur throughout this research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), my commitment to sustained reflexivity was paramount. Similar to factors discussed in this

Figure 2

Modified Conceptualization of Yin's (2018) Triangulation Model



chapter's section outlining my researcher lens and positionality, remaining reflexive during this study required sustained deep introspection and self-awareness (Patton, 2015). Throughout the study—and particularly during data collection and analysis—I engaged in the process of critical reflexivity (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) stated that critical reflexivity in qualitative research requires "the researcher to be acutely aware of, and interact with, the social locations that shape perceptions of the world, the self, and all elements of the study" (p. 99). As I listened/re-listened to each interview, and read/re-read each associated transcript, I contemplated the following questions—which Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017)

suggest serve as crucial points through which to analyze data reflexively and acknowledge researcher positionality (p. 103):

1. What am I hearing (emphasis on 'I')?
2. What am I not hearing?
3. What am I listening to and what am I interpreting?
4. What am seeing?
5. What am I not seeing?
6. How am I interpreting what I see [hear]?
7. What would this look [sound] like to another person?

Thus, given Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017)'s points outlined above, my commitment to critical reflexivity throughout this research process was enmeshed with aspects of my researcher lens and positionality outlined earlier in this chapter. Specifically, reflexivity involved centering how my positionality as a white, gay, cisgender male, from an upper-middle class background—and as an individual with past experience fostering human connection in secondary choral spaces—influenced my approach to the data collection and analysis procedures outlined above.

Limitations of the Study

Generalizability

In this multiple case study, I examined three cases involving three teacher participants and their students. Thus, the findings presented in this study reflect the perspectives of the participants (teacher and student), choral programs, and contexts embedded in the study itself. Though certain findings may offer possible considerations for future music education research or practice, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other music educators or teaching

contexts. However, emergent themes may hold a certain degree of transferability for music educators seeking to enhance facets of their relational pedagogy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the research methodology and design for this multiple case study wherein I examine how human connection is experienced in the classrooms of three high school choral music educators. At the onset of this chapter, I reframed Jordan's (2018) and Walker's (2004, 2020) conceptualization of Relational Cultural Theory as the study's theoretical lens and established my research positionality. I then described the study's multiple case study design; the selection of the research settings and participants; data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures; approach to triangulation; and limitations of the study. In the remaining chapters, I will present within-case findings, cross-case analysis, and discuss emergent themes, implications, and conclusions.

Chapter IV
Participant Introduction and Within-Case Themes:
Bryan Dempsey—Grove Lake High School

Entering the World of the Grove Lake High School Choral Program

My drive to Grove Lake High School (GLHS) involves a maze of freeways that eventually narrow into two-lane roads, taking me through densely wooded areas, farmland, and multiple inland lakes, each with homes gracing their banks. The rural landscape and spread-out homes give way to a strip of local businesses and eventually the entrance to GLHS itself. From my car in the parking lot out in front of the school, I can see that students are being dropped off in the school's front drive by cars, while busses cluster in an increasingly long line. At first, I wonder if students are not permitted to enter the building before a certain time of day. However, once I get out of my car and begin to approach the front entrance of the school building, I notice that students are being admitted to the front entrance one by one. They are each removing their backpack and placing it on a table before walking through full-sized metal detectors, retrieving their now surveilled backpacks on the other side. Almost immediately I piece together that GLHS borders a school district which, just over a year prior to my visit, had experienced a deadly shooting at the high school in which multiple students were killed. This was a somber realization, and not an element I had known or considered when selecting GLHS as a research site, nor Bryan Dempsey as a participant.

Bryan Dempsey meets me at the front door of GLHS. He mentions to the school security team that I was there to visit his classroom. Bryan is all smiles and dressed in a collared shirt,

tie, sweater, and dress pants. He exudes a calm, friendly energy. We talk for a bit about the morning commute as he guides me into the front office to check in. We then exit through a set of double doors across from the main office and down a long, windowless hallway. At the end of this hallway is the door to Bryan's choir room. The GLHS choir room, like the hallway, is windowless and covered with off-white cinderblock walls. The room has immensely tall ceilings and three levels of riser-seating formed in a half hexagonal shape facing a grand piano. The piano is centered on the floor and faces the risers, which I later found out was positioned as such so that Bryan could sit at the piano and look directly at his students.

As Bryan guides me to the top riser in the back of the room to set-up my observation area, I notice a collection of worn-in couches and easy chairs nestled along the wall. When I inquire about the furniture, Bryan explains that he inherited the pieces from his predecessor but decided to keep them since—as I would soon observe—they function as a social gathering space for students as they arrive in the room before the start of class. From my spot next to one of the seemingly Victorian-era burgundy loveseats, I can view the classroom from what the students must see during instruction. I first notice a Wall of Memes comprised of printed pictures with Bryan's face and short phrases, many of which seem to be related to choral music instruction. I also spot a small, LGBTQ+ Pride poster above the piano. I connect that this poster compliments the rainbow sticker affixed to Bryan's teacher name badge.

Once I am settled in my chair, a few students start to enter the room. Bryan turns to greet each student by first name, adding a cheerful "Good morning!" As a few of these early students make their way to the couches in the back of the room, Bryan moves into the hallway to greet the remainder of his students (a daily occurrence, I later find out). Though out of view, I can hear Bryan saying hello to each student by name, and in some instances, having a short conversation

with them. These exchanges seem to broadly involve Bryan asking students how they are feeling on this specific morning, how they feel about their performance on a test they mentioned the week before, or how their weekend was. Students are entering the choir room with a palpable and boisterous energy—seeming particularly energetic for 7:15am. More students maneuver their way up the risers toward the cushioned seating area, while others pull chairs together on the risers to form small conversation circles of three to four students each. This energy continues for a few minutes until the school bell rings and Bryan re-emerges from the hallway and bounds toward the piano. He pauses, turns, smiles, scans the room with concerted eye-contact, and provides a jolly "Hello!" Many students holler a 'Hello' back while making their way from the seating area toward what appears to be their assigned seats, though some students remain where they are throughout the vocal warm-up (Bryan later tells me that he allows students to stand where they want for warm-ups and then asks them to move to their vocal section when it is time to rehearse repertoire).

Bryan starts class with a few details about the students' trip to State Choral Festival the next day. After completing his announcements, he begins a physical warm-up comprised mostly of stretches. He reminds students that they can stretch as much or as little as they feel comfortable. Once the stretching is complete, Bryan announces "Turn to the person next to you and tell them something you like about them." Much cheerful giggling and chatter erupts from the students as they turn to greet and compliment one each other. "Now, turn to the other person next to you and say, 'Hey, I'm glad you're here.'"Again, students engage in bouncy conversation, and I notice that certain students who I perceived as perhaps initially inward or detached are now smiling and conversing with peers. After the compliments and giggles subside, Bryan again takes a pause, smiles at the students, and takes a seat at the piano. From here, the

vocal warm-up begins.

School and Community Background

Grove Lake High School (GLHS) is located in the village of Grove Lake at the northern tip of a populous county in the midwestern region of the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Grove Lake has a population of approximately 17,467 people, 89% of which are classified as white, 6% Hispanic/Latinx, 2% two or more races, 1% Black or African American, and 1% Asian. In Grove Lake, the median household income is $93,406 and 31.9% of residents 25 or older hold a Bachelor's degree or higher (NCES). GLHS is classified as a rural-fringe school with approximately 34% of the student body eligible for free or reduced lunch. Approximately 83% of the GLHS student body is classified as white, 7% is classified as Hispanic/Latinx, 3% Black, 3% Asian, 3% Two or More Races, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native (NCES). My first participant, Bryan Dempsey, was the choir teacher at GLHS.

Who is Bryan Dempsey?

At the time of this study, Bryan Dempsey was in his fourth year of teaching. Bryan self-identified as a white male. Bryan grew up in the Midwest and attended a private, Lutheran-affiliated university located outside a major midwestern city. Despite growing up in a family of teachers (both parents and his sister), Bryan initially decided to study engineering in college. However, about halfway through his sophomore year, Bryan began to grapple with growing internal doubts about a career in engineering. A revelatory conversation with some of his engineering peers—in which they pointed out that his main source of happiness seemed to stem from the slew of extracurricular music groups he was involved in—was the formal nudge

prompting him to officially switch his degree to music and music education. From there, meaningful experiences with choral mentors at the collegiate level, a particularly transformative student teaching experience, and a continued interest in fostering classroom vocal music spaces for the changing male singing voice, all solidified Bryan's commitment to become a music educator. At the time of data collection for this study, Bryan was in his third year teaching at GLHS. Before GLHS, Bryan taught elementary general music for one year in another district. In addition to teaching choral music at GLHS, Bryan also taught choral music and theater classes at Grove Lake Middle School. For my observations, I observed Bryan teach the only choral ensemble at GLHS—a mixed-grade, SATB ensemble. The GLHS student focus group included students from this ensemble.

Beginning at GLHS

Bryan began his relational journey with students at GLHS during an unprecedented time in the world community: he began teaching at GLHS in the Fall of 2020, when schools, teachers, and students were still deeply entrenched in navigating the evolving realities of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond challenges that any new teacher might experience when starting a new position, Bryan described circumstances surrounding his start at GLHS as particularly complicated:

> The first year was a wild mix of 'I don't want to get sick' and 'I'm in a classroom where people are graded on their general ability to breathe at me.' And students were feeling the same thing, in addition to feeling socially isolated because of COVID and everything. So, the first year, in all honesty, did not go super well. But then by the end of the year it started to relax a little bit. The weather got nicer and we were able to go outside and sing a little bit without our masks. We saw each other's faces and heard each other more without a cloth muffling ourselves. That felt better. (Interview 3)

Bryan went on to describe that, due to GLHS's large-scale response to COVID-19 (adjusted schedules, varied restrictions, and overall hesitancies), each of his first three years at the school

seemed like his first year of teaching all over again. That said, he felt that his third year (at the time of this study) was the first time that his teaching life finally felt somewhat “regular” (Interview 3).

In addition to challenges brought on by starting a new job amidst a global pandemic, Bryan recognized that he also faced struggles when beginning at GLHS because he stepped into the position in the wake of the previous, beloved choir director. Bryan’s discussions regarding the difficulties he experienced forming relationships with students in the wake of a well-liked teacher are included in the Navigating Relational Challenges section of this chapter.

Developing a Relational Practice

Early in our first interview, I asked Bryan to describe his approach to building relationships with his GLHS students. After an initial pause, he responded: “I guess the reason it came to be important to me as a teacher was because it's important to me as a person” (Interview 1). “There's already so many negative voices in our life—and I tell the students this—I refuse to be another one,” he continued. “I will never tell [them] that [they] sounded bad. I will tell [them] that [they] could improve, that maybe today just wasn't our best day” (Interview 1). Bryan said that his own experiences in secondary and collegiate choral settings directly informed his efforts to provide a supportive choral community for his students at GLHS:

> [Choir] is important to me and it's something that helped me out of a lot of my own dark places…so it’s important to make sure that everyone [in the classroom] feels seen and feels comfortable. I, personally, don't want to feel like an outsider. So, why would I let that happen in my classroom when I'm the one that's in charge? (Interview 1)

Bryan’s memories of choir as an empowering and meaningful conduit in his own life—and his general value of relationships in his own life—grounded his relational approach to choral music teaching and learning at GLHS.

Presentation of Within-Case Findings:

Bryan Dempsey—Grove Lake High School

In the sections that follow, I present within-case findings bound by the experiences of Bryan Dempsey and his students within the high school choral music classroom at Grove Lake High School (GLHS). Within-case findings were synthesized from data collected during this study, including (a) three 75-minute, semi-structured interviews with Bryan; (b) two 60-minute student focus groups with 10 of Bryan's students in the GLHS choral program (the same group of students participated in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2); (c) field notes from four 60-minute observations at GLHS; and (d) various forms of material culture and artifacts. Findings are organized based on themes emergent from within-case analysis: (a) a supportive home: community and belonging in the GLHS choir family; (b) the importance of relationships in the GLHS choir home; (c) community and relationships: foundations to music-making at GLHS; and (d) navigating relational challenges. Excerpts from Bryan's interview transcripts, student participant reflections from focus groups, and observation fieldnotes are included as data. A within-case summary is provided at the end of the chapter.

A Supportive Home: Community and Belonging in the GLHS Choir Family

Cultivating a sense of community and belonging amongst students in the GLHS choir was a central component to Bryan Dempsey's relational practice. While Bryan sought to cultivate a collective sense of community in the GLHS choir, he also described his efforts to ensure that the GLHS community was a place that supported the varied needs of his individual students:

> It [the classroom community] will mean different things...For some students it's 'Do I feel comfortable standing as a part of this group and singing as quietly as I can?' For some people, that's a win. For others, it's 'Do I feel like I'm making friendships in here?'

> It's not just friends that I came into the class with, but it’s my Alto section people who I can have a side conversation with in between pieces. And, for others, it's ‘Is this my safe space? Is this my reprieve from the rest of school?’ (Interview 1)

Echoing much of what Bryan articulated in the passage above, when asked during a focus group to share the first word that came to their mind when thinking about the GLHS choir program, Bryan’s students shared a variety of answers. Though varied, student answers reflected a common thread: “family,” “comfortable,” “safe space,” and “different than anywhere else in school” (Student Focus Group 1).

In this section, I outline how facets of community were experienced by Bryan and his students at GLHS. Based on Bryan’s and his students’ reflections throughout our interviews, core subthemes within the broader theme of community included: (a) starting strong and maintaining momentum: community-building; (b) fostering community through repertoire; (c) relying on community in the aftermath of a nearby school shooting; and (d) sustaining a commitment to community throughout all aspects of instruction.

Starting Strong and Maintaining Momentum: Community-Building

For Bryan, cultivating a sense of community in the high school choral classroom begins on the first day of the school year. He shared that getting students to feel comfortable with themselves and each other was an immediate priority at the beginning of each school year, one he often explored via icebreaker activities, lighthearted games, and opportunities to learn everyone’s name (one of his preferred name games, he shared, involved having students introduce themselves and share their favorite ice cream). Bryan explained that these relationship-building activities tended to dominate the first days of instruction each Fall. He felt that such activities were essential when developing interpersonal bonds between students, especially with peers who were a part of their vocal sections (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) where they spend

much of their time during choir:

> In my mind…you have this group [the vocal section] that you need to know so that you can match your voices, and also know so that it's not awkward if you're sitting next to someone you haven't talked to all year. That gets back to the silly name games we play at the beginning of the year. We're all individuals. We all have a name. It's very important to know that. Instead of like, 'Hey you, can you sing a little softer, so you're not blowing my eardrum out?' At least there's at least always a name attached to that request [he chuckles]. (Interview 3)

In addition to formal getting-to-know-you exercises, Bryan stated that the beginning of the school year is a particularly important time to provide students in the ensemble with informal opportunities to talk with each other. During the first GLHS student focus group, one of Bryan's students identified relationship-building activities at the beginning of the school year as a central foundation to heightened social bonds between students as the year progresses: "There's a sense of camaraderie between us, and I think a lot of that is just because we have moments towards the beginning of the year…where we would just talk" (Student Focus Group 1). Hearing this, a Senior student in the focus group immediately echoed in agreement:

> I feel like at the very beginning of every single school year he [Bryan] makes it very clear that this class isn't supposed to be the type of classroom where you just come in, sing, learn something, and go away. It's very much just a place for us to come and be friends with each other. And I think because of that, it just feels very different from other school environments. (Student Focus Group 1)

Bryan indicated that his intentionality regarding developing relationships between students extended beyond just the first weeks of the school year. He shared that he tries to open as many opportunities as possible through which to empower students to initiate new connections with each other. For example, Bryan explained that during instructional moments that require students to find a partner or gather in a circle, he will encourage students to pair off with/stand next to someone they may not have a prior rapport with:

> I try to help them make those connections…I always tell them, 'You're not allowed to stand next to someone who sings your part, and you're not allowed to stand next to

> someone you hung out with over the weekend. Then…you're with someone new…and you hear their voice, they hear yours, and you know more about the individual voices that are contributing to the overall sound that we have. (Interview 1)

Similar to this facilitation of student-student connections, I observed other examples of Bryan directly and indirectly encouraging socialization amongst students. For example, as presented in this chapter's vignette, during one of my observations, just prior to the vocal warm-up I watched as Bryan empowered his students to turn to a peer and "Say something nice about your neighbor." While this warm-up activity may be an example of Bryan directly imploring his students to connect with a peer, the deeper meaning behind the couch corner in the back of the room represented a more indirect invitation for students to bond. When describing his goal for the couch corner, Bryan said the following:

> I try and leave that [the couch corner] as their space…It's kind of like the watering hole, if you will. Students come in the morning and, it's, 'Oh, if I want a comfy chair, I'll go sit by this person who might not be my closest friend, but they are someone I can at least have a connection or a conversation with because we have shared interests—we're both in choir. (Interview 1)

In addition to these two examples, Bryan also shared that as the school year progresses, his students tend to feel increased levels of comfort in their relationships with each other. When I asked him to consider the possible causes for this increase in students' relational comfort, Bryan attributed his continued commitment to relationship-building activities. He shared that after initial getting-to-know-you activities at the beginning of the year, relationship-building tended to manifest in examples such as the allocation of 10 minutes of instructional time every Monday for students to share something about their weekend with the class, or encouraging the Baritone section to come up with a specific piece of positive feedback for the Soprano section during a rehearsal, or inviting students to facilitate social activities with members of their vocal section and the full ensemble. After sharing these specific examples, Bryan suddenly remembered the

Circle of Affirmation:

> I try and do the Circle of Affirmation with my choirs at the end of the year. Everyone makes a circle and you sit with your back to the circle so that you can't see the inside. I call a group of students to the inside, and I read off questions that say something like, 'Tap the shoulder of someone who you think is a leader,' or 'Someone who is important to you,' or 'A new friend that you made in choir this year.' And the people in the middle walk around and tap whomever they want. The idea is that you have no idea who's tapping your shoulder, but hopefully at some point you get your shoulder tapped… and so hopefully you feel and recognize some of those often unspoken things. For Seniors, it's a great way to highlight or recognize Freshmen that they see doing a great job or…the people they may not have those side conversations with, but know are an important part of the choir. So, that's become kind of an annual thing, but the long-term goal is that everyone feels comfortable when we get to that point. (Interview 3)

Bryan was emphatic about linking early-in-the-year relationship-building activities and smaller moments of relational connection throughout the year to his students' eventual comfort in activities like the Circle of Affirmations.

While activities like the Circle of Affirmation may unify students in a shared sense of recognition and purpose, Bryan also spoke about trying to create opportunities for students to bring forth their individuality, such as during the Passion Presentations assignment. Bryan described the Passion Presentations as an assignment that empowered students to share something with the full ensemble that is particularly important in their lives. He explained that past examples of student Passion Presentation topics included devoting their presentation to a favorite celebrity, talking about a dream travel location, sharing photos of a pet, or describing one's affinity for dinosaurs. Bryan's own eyes lit up as he talked about the Passion Presentations and acknowledged the deeper meaning he sees behind the activity:

> When you hear someone talk about something that they enjoy, and you hear the excitement in their voice, that is the best version of that person. And I want to see that. We know what we sound like [as a choir]…but a lot of our passions revolve around things that aren't choir. They may include choir, but some of them aren't, and so I want to give you a space to talk about that. We want to see the best of you, which is you excited about something. (Interview 3)

In this quote, Bryan discussed how a curricular project, such as the Passion Presentations, provide GLHS students an opportunity to share important and meaningful facets of their personhood with other members of the choral community. Bryan noted that not only does he and other students get to see “the best version” of individual students during these opportunities, but the sense of collective knowledge gained throughout the activities may in turn impact the relational dynamics and sense of trust throughout the ensemble.

As described above, examples of community and relationship-building activities at GLHS included getting-to-know-you activities and icebreaker activities at the beginning of the school year, the function of the couch corner, interspersing moments for student-student connection throughout instruction, as well as activities like the Circle of Affirmations and the Passion Presentations. Bryan believed that his efforts to cultivate community and foster relationships between students began in the first days of school and built a relational momentum until the end of the school year.

Fostering Community Through Repertoire

In addition to describing his commitment to helping guide students through shared relationship-building, Bryan talked about his intentional approach to fostering a sense of community through repertoire selection and performances. Though Bryan indicated he was committed to fostering community through repertoire and performances throughout the school year, at the time of data collection for this study, he was particularly enthusiastic about the GLHS end-of-year concert. He shared that this concert was, in fact, entirely devoted to themes of community. I present Bryan’s and his students’ reflections on this community-centered concert below.

An End-of-Year Concert Grounded in Community

Throughout my observations at GLHS, I observed Bryan and his students working toward their end-of-year concert. During our interviews, Bryan said that he purposely structured the concert, entitled 'Home,' around the notion of community. Bryan explained that the impetus for the concert emerged when he discovered a choral piece entitled *Home.* With music by Ryan Main and text by Stephen Rew, *Home* centers the importance of having a 'home' to return to—physically, emotionally, psychologically—no matter where one's life leads. Bryan spoke about how the song, *Home,* and its text represented the greater mission he has for his choral classroom:

> I came across that piece [*Home*] and I listened to it and went through the text and said, '*This* is the focal point.' This represents what we're talking about and what we share and embodies everything that I talk about constantly in our choir classroom—which is that this is a place that should feel like home…I tell [students], 'Your personal home might not be great, and that's okay. If you feel better in this space [the GLHS choir room], hopefully this is what you can use as your definition of home until you get to make your own. Because home can be more than one place. For some of you, home may be where you're hanging out with your friends. For others, home may be where you feel like you can be yourself. (Interview 3)

During our first focus group, multiple student participants talked about the upcoming concert when I asked them what it meant to belong in the GLHS choir. Acknowledging the special nature of the concert's theme of 'home,' one student participant shared:

> I feel like the theme of all of our songs this semester really drives the point that this does feel like home, in the sense that I think most, if not everybody here, feels safe, feels heard, and feels loved and seems to love everybody around them. And I think it just, well, encapsulates what it means to be in choir. At least in this choir. (Student Focus Group 1)

While the song *Home* became the musical and emotional centerpiece of the GLHS end-of-year concert entitled 'Home,' Bryan talked about other ways that he sought to weave notions of 'home' into the concert. For example, during the semester of data collection for this study, Bryan had three international exchange-students enrolled in his ensemble. In an effort to acknowledge the experiences of those students, Bryan decided to program three pieces of

repertoire from the countries those three students call home: Germany, Italy, and Thailand. In doing so, Bryan explained that he sought to honor and amplify the exchange-students' life experiences, especially since they were far from their homes. He also hoped to provide the exchange-students' a leadership opportunity by asking them to help the greater ensemble learn the language and text for each piece (he touched base with each exchange-student individually, first, to see if they were interested—they each agreed). Bryan explained that he hoped this was not only empowering to his three international exchange-students, but meaningful to the other students in his class who he hoped would perceive the opportunity as a chance to form a deeper understanding of their peers' life experiences:

> I thought, 'I could do a bunch of research, but they're [international exchange-students] still the expert, so please share that with us.' Their home is not the United States. So, we want to share what their home is, or at least a representation or a memory. That ties into the same idea that this is a place where you are seen and loved and heard and supported. (Interview 3)

During one of my visits to GLHS, I witnessed one of the international exchange-students, Lena (who was from Italy), assisting the class with the Italian text of their choral piece. As Lena recited the text and waited for her peers to respond, she exuded a certain pride—as well as a fun-loving expectation that her peers get each component of the language just right. The other students in the room, too, were enthusiastic about pronouncing the text correctly, and appreciative of Lena's patience. At the end of the lesson, I saw one of Lena's fellow Sopranos reach behind her, pat Lena on the knee and mouth the words 'Thank you.' Lena smiled and nodded her head. In the student focus groups, student participants shared that having the opportunity to learn these three songs was "really cool because we're embracing everyone's culture" and that they were "really glad that Mr. Dempsey chose to do that" (Student Focus Group 1). Though Bryan explained that he always asked students to write concert program notes

(another way he believed encouraged students to share their own perspectives of repertoire), for this end-of-year concert program, he wrote the program note about this special series of learning moments. That program note is included below:

> These first three pieces will be sung as a trio, a collection and celebration of the languages that have spent time in our classroom this year. *Sing Dem Herrn* (German), *Farfallina* (Italian), and *Shining Moon* (Thai) were pieces that were chosen to celebrate and honor the language of each of the foreign exchange students that was in choir this year. As a choir we had the rare opportunity to learn correct pronunciation from native speakers of a language other than our own, and that is beyond valuable even once, let alone three times! We are very grateful for [individual student names], the knowledge they were able to share of their own languages, and time they spent with us in choir this year. Danke schön, Grazie, and ขอบคุณ. (GLHS Final Concert Program)

This finding not only displays Bryan's general interest in acknowledging student perspectives in the GLHS choral classroom, but is representative of a relational and curricular choice that directly validated and amplified the cultural and life experiences of students originally from countries outside of the United States. By centering these international students' musical and cultural perspectives, Bryan was perhaps reducing the monolithic presumption that all students' life experiences are the same or that only certain musical/cultural perspectives are 'worthy' of study in his choral classroom.

In addition to *Home*, *Sing Dem Herrn*, *Farfallina*, and *Shining Moon*, Bryan also programmed the piece *Be Who You Are* in the GLHS final concert. Bryan mentioned that not only did he feel that *Be Who You Are* represented a central message of his teaching philosophy—that students can 'be who they are' in the GLHS choir room—but he felt like the piece acted as an intentional gesture of support to his students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community:

> It seems like a logical step like, 'Okay, we've now featured where we're from, which is an element of who we are.' Then we take the text of *Be Who You Are,* and we say, 'I want to be myself at home or in the places that feel like home. I don't want to feel like I have to be someone else because then it doesn't feel comfortable.' (Interview 3)

Samantha, a student who in the first GLHS focus group identified herself as a lesbian, shared that she was excited that Bryan selected *Be Who You Are* as a song to perform at their end-of-year concert. Samantha also shared that she was grateful to Bryan for preparing students to sing the piece at the Grove Lake Pride Festival. Given the text of *Be Who You Are*, her identity as a lesbian, and the sense of unity she believed she and other queer-identifying students in the GLHS choir felt when singing the song, Samantha shared that the performance ultimately took on a special meaning:

> I think a lot of it is the power behind us when we come together and sing, it represents more than what it physically is…I love that song [*Be Who You Are*] because I've never felt so united. It feels like you take a bunch of individuals and individual voice parts and you put them together to create this strong positive force, which for something is controversial as Pride, just like, really protects us. (Student Focus Group 1)

Similarly, another student participant acknowledged that songs about themes of empowerment, like *Be Who You Are*, positively impacted his state of mind: "If you're singing a song about feeling better, I think it's bound to at some point affect you in your root a little bit" (Student Focus Group 1). These two findings display how Bryan's selection of a specific piece of repertoire empowered and affirmed students' identities—in this case, students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Finally, though not part of the end-of-year GLHS concert, the song *Homeward Bound* was identified by Bryan and student participants as representing a sense of community in the GLHS choir. Bryan explained that *Homeward Bound* is performed by seniors at the GLHS graduation ceremony each Spring, and that preparing and performing the song has become a meaningful tradition for his students:

> *Homeward Bound* is the song we sing every year at graduation. During rehearsals, Seniors start tearing up and we can't sing through it too many times, actually… the text is talking about leaving, talking about being able to return, which then informs the

> conversations we'll have in this class related to 'Yeah, you're graduating, but you're not leaving. You're still a friend. You're still a former student. You're still a choir member.' (Interview 2)

Echoing Bryan's reflections, a Senior student in the focus group also spoke about the special meaning for her behind *Homeward Bound*:

> *Homeward Bound* is our graduation song and I think one of us cries every time we sing it…at the end of the year. It just really emphasizes that we've built a community here that doesn't just go away when we leave the classroom or when we leave the school. (Student Focus Group 1)

Echoing messages embedded in *Homeward Bound*, Bryan and his students shared the vision of a long-lasting community stemming from the walls of the GLHS choir room. Bryan's vision for the GLHS end-of-year concert, 'Home,' was an example of his efforts to embed notions of community into the repertoire he selected for his students. In addition to this broad example, Bryan also shared that he tries to convey a value for all students in the ensemble community by finding repertoire that prominently features each voice part/section. He described this approach as trying to "find songs where every voice part gets an opportunity to sing the melody or be featured…that comes back to a sense of community" (Interview 2). To make sure I fully understood his intention, I asked Bryan to clarify this approach, to which he responded: "It seems silly, but when I'm able to find a really good SSAB piece, I get super excited because all of a sudden, the Soprano Twos get to put their name in the ring and feel, like, 'Hey, I'm important too'" (Interview 2).

Relying on Community in the Aftermath of a Nearby School Shooting

In addition to fostering and experiencing a sense of community through repertoire and relationship-building, Bryan and his students separately brought up a challenging experience that, although devasting, brought members of the GLHS choir community closer together. I first

learned about this experience when I asked Bryan to tell more about why nurturing community in his classroom was important: "[Throughout the year] we're building off the community and comfort that we feel together. Especially when we have to have hard conversations" (Interview 1). When I asked Bryan to elaborate upon what an example of a "hard conversation" might be, he initially provided examples like showing support for a student who might be going through a break-up or a difficult situation in their home life. After a pause, however, he brought up a specific period of time the previous school year that elicited a series of difficult conversations and displayed to him and his students just how important their GLHS choral community was.

The school year prior to data collection at GLHS, a mass shooting at a nearby high school left four students dead and multiple more students and teachers injured. Bryan explained that, though stress and anxiety is often heightened in the aftermath of a school shooting, this particular incident "hit our community pretty hard" because many GLHS students and teachers had family and friends who attended/worked at the other school (Interview 1). After the nearby school shooting, GLHS suspended classes for over a week, and once the decision to return to school was announced, Bryan said he grappled with how he would facilitate his choral classes. At first, he thought it might be best to return to music instruction through a "business as usual" approach (Interview 1). However, after much reflection, he felt it would be best for his students—and himself—to have a space to speak and process their feelings aloud—if desired. Reflecting on the first day back after the school shooting, Bryan said the following about his initial moments with students: "We took a long time. At least a full day or two…just talking about, honestly, 'What are you feeling?'" (Interview 1).

During our first focus group, student participants also brought up this period after the nearby school shooting, speaking at length about how they especially looked to Bryan and their

peers in the GLHS choral community during that time. One student shared:

> We were all sitting on the stage thinking about practicing for our concert and we were just not doing well because it was our first day back and it was a rough time. And I remember Mr. Dempsey was like, 'Honestly, I have no idea what you're feeling like right now, but I'm so sorry.' And things like that—where he acknowledged that he didn't know everything, but he also did his best to help—meant a lot. (Student Focus Group 1)

Another student described how they felt after Bryan provided them space to collectively process the shooting:

> I feel like he let school stop for a minute in this room… I feel like a lot of teachers were guided by the fact that this is school: 'We have a deadline, there's things I need to teach you' or 'We might as well just get back to it, it'll be a distraction from what's going on.' But Mr. Dempsey let everything stop for a minute and gave us two or three days to just be in a space that felt safe and that felt welcoming in a time when we really needed it. That was really strong of him. (Student Focus Group 1)

A third student participant immediately responded:

> I really agree. I feel like for me, I don't want to be distracted. I want to be able to face things. And I think that being able to face things helps us learn and grow…and yeah…like you said [gesturing to the previous student], a lot of the other teachers just tried to ignore it or just go back right away. And we spent some time talking about it…and I could tell that Mr. Dempsey really cared and that was nice because I know that all of us were really scared back then. (Student Focus Group 1)

Bryan believed that an already established sense of community and relational foundation between he and his students (and among students) helped them collectively lean into the support of the GLHS choir community during those difficult days after the nearby school shooting. Further, he shared that in addition to providing the optional space for students to process their thoughts aloud that first day, he made the conscious decision to also bring music into the classroom, though he told me he gave students the option not participate:

> We did pick up music that day…[but] it wasn't until at least halfway through class. Because as any musician knows, music is a great way to express your emotion. And it's also a great release. So, I told them, 'We're going to sing because, personally, I need to sing. I need this today. And I know how good this class makes you feel on other days. And so, if you're not there mentally right now, that's fine, but we're going to try and work through the emotions right now in hopes that it kickstarts something…No stopping, no

> spot-checking things. Let's just complete a song, use our voice, and we'll go from there'… But it was hard. And the students, some of them reacted with, 'Yes, let's sing.' Some of them just needed to sit and hold back tears for a little bit. And that was fine as well. I probably stared at my music so that I also didn't cry. But again, we kind of realized at the end of class that maybe we needed this. And if we can do this on the worst days, it'll only be better on the better ones. (Interview 1)

The reflections presented above display how the sense of choral community in the GLHS choir program grounded a care-based response to a traumatic event, such as a nearby school shooting. Student participants, specifically, shared that Bryan's acknowledgement of their psychological and emotional tumult was deeply impactful during a frightening time in their lives when they described feeling "really scared" (Student Focus Group 1). Students stated that Bryan's willingness to modify curricular plans to tend to their wellbeing was an especially meaningful expression of care.

Student Agency Within Community

Bryan said that, in addition to his own efforts to create community among his students, he marveled at the ways that students initiated their own paths toward developing community with each other. Student support of each other in the immediate aftermath of the nearby school shooting was one instance that Bryan and student participants provided as an example of students fostering community together. Student participants also shared that their time together before concerts was often full of moments when they built upon a sense of community. For example, students shared that the 30-45 minutes before a concert—when Bryan is often in the auditorium preparing items for the evening's concert—is a time when they are facilitating aspects of community together. For example, during the focus group, students excitedly called out aspects of their special, 'student-only,' pre-concert rituals. "I'll often say 'Hey, who wants to go the piano and pluck out a few notes so we can get this [vocal line/harmony] right before the

concert?" one student exclaimed. A different student said that on many occasions, she will "gather all the Sopranos in the bathroom to review something" and another said they enjoy when "we gather in a circle and run through a song together before heading out [to the stage]" (Student Focus Group 1). While some students looked at these peer-led moments as a final component of their concert preparation, one student felt that these moments were all about "the fun," sharing "we just act like weirdos and let off steam" (Student Focus Group 1). Another student seemed to condense each of their peers' previous comments into one thematic premise: "When we have a concert…there can be more anxiety. But, I feel like we soothe each other. And I think while that may seem small, it's huge" (Student Focus Group 1).

Sustained Commitment to Community No Matter What

Bryan acknowledged that some colleagues might question his choice to devote so much instructional time to socialization and community-building. But Bryan told me he sees the value: "Yes, we will waste a day talking about our names and our favorite ice cream flavors, because it's going to be important in the long run," he shared. Parallel to this response from Bryan, student focus group reflections also conveyed a deep appreciation for what Bryan's commitment to building community meant for them as people:

> He's teaching us and we're teaching him and we're learning more than just music and how to read music and how to sing. We're learning about ourselves and how to interact with people and how to work as a team…Every day is not a day lost if we don't sing. It's just a day that we used for something different. (Student Focus Group 2)

Another student shared that the sense of community support in the GLHS choir positively impacted their overall vocal and musical growth: "We try to be very encouraging of each other and not judge each other…and I think it makes us feel better and then we can improve as singers" (Student Focus Group 2). Finally, one student spoke about the potential long-lasting

impact of the bonds they have formed in choir: “Look at what we have. This is somewhere to go. We've built a community and a home…and that doesn't just go away when we leave the classroom or when we leave the school” (Student Focus Group 1).

As discussed in detail later in this chapter, as evident in the participant reflections above, Bryan recognized the intersection between students’ sense of community, trust, and support and their musical endeavors: “Day one, I tell them that if you don't feel safe or comfortable in this room sharing how your weekend was, you're not going to feel safe or comfortable sharing your voice—because that's way more personal” (Interview 1). Bryan viewed these dimensions of “comfort” as key: “The comfort level is important so that anyone can walk into the classroom and share their voice in some capacity. Singing is obviously the goal of the class, but making sure they build their confidence is, too” (Interview 1).

Summary

In this section, I described the ways that Bryan and his students perceived aspects of community and belonging in the GLHS choir classroom. Data and observations suggested that a sense of community and belonging in the GLHS choral music classroom was cultivated through (a) relationship-building activities at the beginning of (and throughout) the school year; (b) care-based responses in the aftermath of a nearby school shooting; (c) efforts to foster student agency; and (d) a continued commitment of Bryan’s relational practice. Further, a sense of community and belonging were fostered through the selection, rehearsal, and performance of repertoire, displayed in examples that included Bryan’s validation of the musical and cultural experiences of international exchange students as well as his decision to program repertoire that affirmed students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Later in this chapter, I delve deeper into Bryan’s perspectives on student “confidence” and “comfort” in the choral classroom.

Specifically, I highlight some of Bryan's reflections wherein he acknowledged that not every student will, in fact, feel comfortable engaging in every facet of one-on-one or group-based relationship/community building.

The Importance of Relationships in the GLHS Choir Home

In this next section, I share reflections from Bryan and his GLHS students about their experiences related to notions of care and trust in the teacher-student relationship. In addition to centering care and trust as foundations of the teacher-student relationship, I describe how Bryan and his students contextualized notions of care and trust when talking about the importance of daily greetings, knowing students as people, attending to student mental health and wellbeing, and the benefits of relational longevity.

Foundations of Care and Trust

The previous section highlighted ways that Bryan attempted to cultivate a sense of community in the GLHS choir room. While often guided by Bryan, that sense of community was often driven by students and informed by the relationships they formed with each other. In addition to his commitment to fostering a sense of community amongst students in the GLHS choral classroom, Bryan described his relational approach as involving the development of relationships with individual students. Throughout my conversations with Bryan, it seemed that his efforts to form meaningful relationships with students broadly centered on expressions of care. When I asked Bryan to share what he thought was most important for his students to know in his classroom every day, he replied by sharing the following:

> I would hope they would say that I care. I hope that would be the main thing that they get. Because I've had bad days and I've been helped with music… I care and I want them to be seen and feel safe and feel supported by me. (Interview 1)

I was curious to know more about what Bryan conceived as care in the context of his classroom. He told me that he perceived his care for students as all encompassing, not isolated expressions, or surface-level care:

> You have to genuinely care about students. If you are even half-hearted about it…then they won't think it's genuine. As soon as they get that feeling, that is what lingers. Perhaps you don't have to know the personal details of every single person's life, but you do have to project that you genuinely care. (Interview 3)

Bryan believed that a central component of 'projecting genuine care' meant acknowledging and supporting all facets of his students' varied identities. Specifically, Bryan noted the intersection between recognizing/affirming his students' identities (including race, gender, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, and socioeconomic status) and the development of a trusting teacher-student relationship: "I think it all comes down to trust," he shared. "If I don't care, or if you don't think that I see you for who you are, then you're going to hate this class. You're not going to like me" (Interview 3). Staying on this topic, Bryan added a point of critical reflection, explaining that he attempts to form bonds with specific students through a lens that acknowledges what makes them unique:

> We all, on a surface level, may think that being colorblind is a good thing, but then it leaves you with your bias like, 'Oh, I don't see color' or 'I don't see race or sexual identity'…I would love to think that almost all of my interactions with students are influenced by their character, their identity, their long list of what they would like to use to describe themselves. (Interview 3)

In fact, student participants spoke at length about the trust they have in Bryan due to their realization that he sees them for who they are. "It finally feels like an adult in this building is on our side," one student shared. "And a lot of that is due to respect…respect he's earned because he shows so much respect for all the students, and that's really cool" (Student Focus Group 1). Similarly, other students spoke about Bryan's willingness to acknowledge facets of their individual identities. Multiple student participants in the GLHS focus group shared with me that

they identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community and that they perceived Bryan as an active ally and source of support. For example, one student, Chase, who identified as queer, acknowledged:

> He knew that a few students in the school were calling me not very nice names related to me being queer…and Mr. Dempsey pulled them aside and spoke very strongly with them. And it made me feel very safe…and shortly after that, I gave him this little rainbow Pride sticker, and he put it on his teacher badge. He still wears that badge. (Student Focus Group 1)

As noted in this chapter's opening vignette, I noticed this rainbow Pride sticker during my first observation at GLHS. While I had initially perceived the sticker as a visible sign of solidarity for the LGBTQ+ community, Chase's reflection illuminated an even deeper meaning behind its origin. Another student, Samantha, who in our focus group described herself as a lesbian, shared that the year prior she had organized Grove Lake's first LGBTQ+ Pride festival. As an extension of the festival, Samantha explained that she made small Safe Zone posters for GLHS teachers and staff to hang in their classrooms. Samantha went on to share that given Grove Lake's reputation as a socially conservative community, she was met with consistent refusals to hang the sign from teachers throughout the school—except for Bryan:

> I went to different groups in the school because it was really important to me to be able to show other people that they can feel safe in our school—that there are teachers and students that care. And every single teacher, other than Mr. Dempsey said, 'No, I can't do that.' Every single one. The other arts programs, theater, band, all of them…one of the teachers said that it would be a risk to their job to do it. But Mr. Dempsey said, 'I'm going to do it anyway because I think that it's important.' (Student Focus Group 1)

As Samantha spoke, she pointed to the poster, which was prominently displayed above the piano in the center of the GLHS choir room, and smiled. In a subsequent interview, I followed up with Bryan about his decision to hang the LGBTQ+ Safe Zone poster. He shared the following:

> I care and I want students to be seen and feel safe and feel supported by me—simply putting up a poster. But for me it's just, why wouldn't I put that up there?...Because this is something they care about, and the absolute least I can do, and also the easiest thing I can

> do. I don't have to point and say, 'Everyone, look at this. This is important. This is the right opinion and if you don't agree with that, you're wrong.' And that's not what I would say, but simply by being there and having that there, they know this is OK and another space that hopefully is safer than others. (Interview 3)

The decisions to place a rainbow Pride sticker on his teacher badge or hang an LGBTQ+ Safe Zone poster are just two examples of Bryan's commitment to explicitly supporting students who identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Later in this chapter, I will discuss additional ways that Bryan honors his LGBTQ+ students within his repertoire selection, uniforms, and rehearsal practices.

Daily Greetings and Points of Interaction

Bryan mentioned that one of the best aspects of returning to a 'normal' schedule after months of COVID-19 related modifications was that he was able to see his students in-person every day [during his first year at GLHS, the school was still functioning on a pandemic-related schedule where teachers only saw students every third day]: "Now, I get to be a part of their daily lives" he shared (Interview 3). Bryan indicated that one of his favorite parts of his teaching routine is greeting students at the door as they enter the classroom. During each of my observations, Bryan spent seven to ten minutes before class in the hallway, just outside the door to his classroom, greeting students as they entered the room. In addition to viewing this daily ritual as one of the highlights of his job, Bryan said that he also viewed daily greetings as a way to convey care to his students:

> Saying good morning to every student is important. I try and say their names as well. And I try and get them all. Because, I don't know the research behind it, but I know that there's a lot of science behind hearing your name spoken aloud by people is important. It's not just, 'Hey, you.' It's, 'Hey Sally,' or, 'Hey Timmy.' Something like that is more important. So that's a day-to-day thing. (Interview 1)

Multiple student participants brought up Bryan's daily greetings in our focus group discussions.

“He wants to go out there [outside the classroom door] and see us and tell us ‘Good morning,’ and that he's happy to see us,” one student shared. “Then he comes in with us and then we do this choir thing together” (Student Focus Group 1). Another student emphasized how something as seemingly simple as a daily greeting held a deeper meaning for them: “It's nice that [Bryan] takes the time to do that, because it's so inconsequential and he might not even realize the effect it has. But it's nice to be told somebody's happy to see you when you come in here” (Student Focus Group 1).

In addition to the ritual of daily greetings at the classroom door, Bryan said that he is intentional about seeking out other ways to connect with students individually. He provided examples that included making eye contact with students when rehearsing repertoire or finding moments for one-on-one conversations:

> I try and make eye contact with at least a few students while we're going through a piece. I still am a newer teacher, so sometimes I'm just stuck looking at the page. But when I do look up, I try to make eye contact with the people that are looking at me. I do this to, one, reaffirm, ‘Yes, please watch me and I appreciate that you're watching my conducting so that we stay together.’ But two, just to convey that I see you as a part of this choir and appreciate you. (Interview 1)

The ensemble-based realities of Bryan’s class did not deter him from finding ways to foster one-on-one interactions with students. In addition to daily greetings at the classroom door, Bryan said that he tried to connect with students during midweek check-ins on Wednesdays or by intentionally moving around the classroom to speak with individual students in the 2-3 minutes they are packing up their materials before the class change. It was during this time that he added details to the ‘File,’ described below.

The File

Choosing to invest in individual points of interaction—whether through daily greetings at the door to his classroom before rehearsal, while students were putting away their choir folders,

or during impromptu discussions during class—was an important component to Bryan's approach to building relationships with students. Similar to his reflections on community, Bryan felt that devoting time and effort to knowing students tended to increase their trust in him, which he believed impacted students' engagement with music-learning experiences in his class. I was curious to know more about how Bryan got to know details about his students and their lives outside of the classroom.

Bryan began by telling me that when he did learn information about a student (whether in a one-on-one interaction, in a team-building event, or during instruction), he stored the detail(s) in a special "memory bank" (Interview 2). In this memory bank, "each student has a file" wherein he explained kept a "running tab" of information about each of his individual students (Interview 2). When I asked him to elaborate on what exactly went into each "file," he shared that often the file involved "finding out who they [the students] are as a person…and as a student. What they succeed at and what they struggle with. All of that comes up in passing and gets filed away" (Interview 2). Additionally, Bryan explained that he tries to remember to follow-up on the information students share with him that gets stored in 'the file'—such as details about where they work, a recent occurrence at home, or other triumphs/struggles they may be experiencing. Bryan believed that daily greetings at the door, mid-week check-ins, and sporadic before/after class conversations are prime moments to learn more about students' lives:

> A few of my Baritones are gone at the World Robotics Competition right now. And I knew that that was coming up, so I asked them, 'Hey, you guys told me you're going to be gone, tell me about what you are doing.' So, being aware of the other things they're involved in. Some people are in dance or in sports. And I try to ask and keep up with what the other things [they're] involved in because I care about [them] as a person, not just as a choir student. (Interview 2)

Many GLHS student participants seemed keenly aware that Bryan made these efforts and was interested in their lives. Speaking about Bryan's efforts to learn about his life outside of school,

one student participant, Grant, provided this reflection:

> It really just proves that he doesn't only care for our wellbeing as students and that we get a good grade or that we'll grow up to be good people. He cares about us as people. He'll be like 'Oh, you're doing this thing outside of school? I love that. I'm going to support that. (Student Focus Group 2)

Following up, I asked Grant to share more about how this awareness of Bryan's care made him feel:

> It's really nice. Other teachers can be nice, but I feel like none of them are truly thinking about who we are as people outside of school when they go home. But I feel like [Bryan] is always keeping in mind everybody a person rather than just as a student. (Student Focus Group 2)

When asking the student focus group whether knowledge of Bryan's care for them impacted their musical efforts in choir, many students nodded their heads. One student then shared that knowledge of Bryan's care "makes you feel a little bit more safe and comfortable…it lets [this classroom] be a space where you can be more confident and start to grow musically" (Student Focus Group 2).

Attuned to Student Emotional and Mental Health

As displayed above, student participants in the GLHS focus group acknowledged an awareness of Bryan's care for them and articulated that they felt cared for when Bryan greeted them at the door and expressed an interest in their lives outside of the choral classroom. That said, the most frequent example of care brought up by student participants at GLHS was Bryan's attuned and responsive approach to elements of their emotional and mental wellbeing. Multiple GLHS students shared personal memories of moments when Bryan recognized that they were struggling with an aspect of their mental health or wellbeing. One student described going through a two-week period of high-anxiety related to a problem at home, and as a result, struggled to make it through Bryan's 7:15am choir class: "He told me, 'If you need to take a

break, then you need to,'" the student explained. "And he didn't make me feel as though I was not committed to this class. It was really important that he put me over everything else. It's just something that he does" (Student Focus Group 1). Another student followed up with a similar sentiment: "Mr. Dempsey is very good about making sure that he puts you as a person over everything, even if we have a performance in two days," the student echoed. "I think most other choir teachers would say 'No, you can't spend half the class sitting in the hallway. We need to work.' But he'll never tell you that something isn't important or that you can't talk about something" (Student Focus Group 1). A third student suggested that Bryan's classroom is one of the few settings where they feel they can speak about, and process, issues related to mental health: "I think a lot of students have problems with mental health and how they feel about themselves," the student indicated. "I feel like here [the GLHS choir room] is the only place where you can acknowledge those problems. You can acknowledge them, accept them, and let them go. What Mr. Dempsey has done here is almost make that the main point" (Student Focus Group 1).

In our interviews, Bryan asserted that while he did not directly address the clinical/medical specifics of mental health in his classroom, he recognized that his own journey with mental health often informed how he responded to students in the classroom:

> I haven't necessarily discussed mental health [with students]. But I've struggled with that so I'm aware, and I think that helps me see my classroom in a slightly different way. You can tell the signs of burnout when you've been burnt out before. So you know when we need to shift gears or when we need to do a fun activity. (Interview 1)

For example, Bryan discussed how he perceives and manages moments in the classroom when it appears that he needs to 'shift gears' based on what he sees in his students' individual or collective mindset. He shared that noticing—and responding—are critical in these moments: "When you see everyone in a different position than what their normal might be, that's kind of

the first flag," he said (Interview 3). Rather than berating students for seeming tired, unmotivated, or disinterested, Bryan said he instead attempts to meet students' energies where they are, acknowledge their feelings, and move forward from there:

> If I walk in and they're quiet and tired, I will just be honest with them and say 'Let's check in. How are we doing? Are we tired? Because I'm also raising my hand, I'm tired too, but we know that we love this class, so let's try and ease into it a little bit." It's one of those things where you have to know the students first, but there's obvious signs that adults can see that [they're] a little frustrated or didn't fully wake up or are already having a bad day for whatever reason at 7:15 in the morning. There's no need to ignore that. Let's honor that and then let's work through it. Let's get into the routine in hopes that going through the motions gets us started, and then from there perhaps we will get the energy to be our normal selves halfway through class. That's worth it. (Interview 3)

Though Bryan explained that he strives to be intentional about using supportive language like this in the classroom, he told me he recently realized that a phrase he had previously used, in hindsight, went against his values of acknowledging and responding to student wellbeing. He explained that he used to have a sign in his classroom that encouraged students to 'leave everything at the door.' He told me that he used to think of this message as conveying that, for the 50 minutes students were in his class, they could put aside all other aspects of their lives and focus solely on the musical tasks at hand. That said, a keynote speaker at a recent state conference prompted Bryan to rethink this entrance adage. He shared that continued reflection after the state conference helped him to understand that by invoking a 'leave everything at the door' environment, students "will not be their full selves" and not acknowledge their emotional wellbeing—and that is the last thing he wants (Interview 3).

Bryan's decision to remove the sign was observed by at least one of his students, who brought up the topic during a focus group: "At the beginning of the year he told us we should not be upset or anything in here, but then halfway through the year, he went back on it and even said he was wrong to have said that," the student recalled. Noting Bryan's point of reflection, the

student continued: “It's just interesting to know that he's constantly thinking about stuff like that, and the stuff he says to us, and how it might affect us” (Student Focus Group 1). While Bryan acknowledged his disappointment in the fact that the sign was present for so long, he said he is now increasingly intentional about creating a classroom space where students feel supported to be their full selves—even if that involves baring elements of their emotional of mental health and wellbeing. Below, I provide a glimpse into a specific moment during an observation where I witnessed Bryan tend to his students’ wellbeing.

Responding in the Moment to Student Wellbeing: During my fourth visit to GLHS, I observed Bryan navigate a moment like some of the scenarios described above. As students entered the classroom, the collective energy seemed noticeably different than during my previous visits. Many students, who during previous observations tended to be cheerfully socializing, seemed detached and not themselves. As Bryan began to provide his daily announcements at the start of class, one of the students who seemed especially disconnected suddenly stood and quickly stepped out of the room and into the hallway. One of her classmates followed. Bryan began to walk sideways toward the door, maintaining his eye contact with the rest of the class and continuing his announcements. Then, he paused and stepped into the hallway, and after a few moments returned to the classroom and continued instruction (he later told me that when he stepped out, he asked the students if they were OK or if they needed anything—to which they said they ‘just needed a moment and would return to class shortly’). Back in the classroom, as Bryan continued with his daily vocal warm-up sequence, the two students returned to the room—both looked as if they had been crying. Bryan then progressed into a warm-up routine that seemed noticeably different than warm-up routines I observed Bryan facilitate in past observations. This vocal warm-up involved more physical stretches, slower-paced vocal

exercises, increased opportunities to interact with peers, and a few strategically placed jokes. By the time the warm-up routine was complete, the ensemble—including the two students who had exited and returned—seemed more like the smiling, jovial individuals I had come to know. All outward signs of tears were gone.

This observation brought to life many of the components that Bryan had mentioned in previous interviews, specifically how he tries to notice and respond to both group and individual student dynamics: "I can tell now if students are having a good day or not having a good day just by [their] body language or how [they are] walking into the classroom" (Interview 3). And as he modeled during the example described above, Bryan said that he makes every effort to establish himself and the GLHS choir room as a place where students can acknowledge their emotion and seek support:

> They can tell me anything that's an issue, [but] a lot of times they don't tell me. But if there's tears in your eyes, I'll ask 'Do you need to go step out in the hallway right now?' And even if [they] sit out there the whole hour, that's fine. I don't care. Because I care about you as a person first and as a choir student second. So if you need this time to reset or regroup as a person before you can be a choir student, you need that. That's fine (Interview 1).

I asked Bryan to describe any additional examples of times when his awareness of the full ensemble's emotional or mental needs prompted him to change an element of his lesson plan or pedagogical approach. He shared that in the past, such modifications have included (a) giving students a chance to sit in their chair and number the measures of their music; (b) exploring a particularly achievable sight-singing example; (c) asking students to choose what warm-ups or songs to sing; or (d) spending a few minutes watching a choir-related video on YouTube. He explained that in the overall arch of a school year, these moments/days are important, especially after a period when the students have been working hard, like after a concert:

I don't love giving them free days, but after concerts, we have easier tasks: It's erase all

> the markings that you put in your music and make neat piles. Maybe we'll play the concert recording while we do that and we'll fill out a rubric. Then they can have a quiet conversation while they're doing that. But those wins help. We need a little win today so that we can build the stepping stones to getting back to where 'normal' might be. (Interview 1)

Bryan continued, laughing, as he shared that on days that his students seem collectively stressed, he allows them to go outside and "scream to the sky" (Interview 1). "He'll let us go outside and scream at the sky," a student participant brought up on their own accord. "Sometimes when the vibes are just off, he'll be like, 'Does anyone need to go outside and just scream at the sky and the world for a little bit?" And a bunch of people will go outside and just scream" (Student Focus Group 2). When Bryan elaborated upon this activity, he shared that this choice is often one of the most cathartic and effective responses to mental health or wellbeing stressors for his students: "Every once in a while I'm like, 'Sure, go scream at the sky once, and then come back in.' And sometimes that's all they need" (Interview 3). Ultimately, when responding to implications of student mental health and wellbeing, Bryan felt that a few moments in the hall, time viewing a YouTube video, or the chance to scream at the sky are important for his students. He believed that acknowledging and compassionately responding in moments like this conveys care, fosters, trust, and often leads toward increasingly meaningful musical experiences:

> They know that if they need a minute, they got it because I care about them. Then they'll be better equipped for class. They will make better music if they give themselves a break than if they try and pretend that they're OK. (Interview 3)

Benefits of Longevity

Finally, Bryan indicated that a sense of longevity with certain students over multiple years in choir has significantly enhanced the depth of relationships they share. "Naturally, knowing your choir teacher for more than a year, you develop those relationships," he indicated (Interview 1). He went on to say that two or three years of interaction—whether through daily greetings at the door, community building activities, or a deepening awareness of student

emotional and mental health—not only increased the amount of information catalogued in each student's "file," but also increased his insight into the greater contexts of students' lives. For example, Bryan said that he felt particularly connected to his Senior cohort of students largely due to the fact that they shared three years of relational foundations: "I've seen them grow from Sophomores to Seniors…so I certainly know them a little better than everyone else" (Interview 1). Still, Bryan hoped that in the future he can continue to develop strong relationships with his underclassmen students as well, particularly through more time at GLHS and by maintaining enrollment from his classes at the middle school into his high school classes.

Summary

In this section, I demonstrated ways that caring and trust-based relationships were experienced in the GLHS choral community. I specifically emphasized Bryan's and his students' perspectives on relationships with regard to Bryan's efforts to know information about students' lives (which he keeps in "the file"). Prominent in participant reflections was Bryan's commitment to actively supporting students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as his sustained commitment to acknowledging and supporting students' mental health and wellbeing. This finding displays how meaningful teacher-student relationships may be especially impactful for individuals who have heightened relational disconnections or vulnerabilities due to factors associated with their identities or life experiences.

Community and Relationships: Foundations to Music-Making at GLHS

In Bryan's high school choral classroom at GLHS, he believed that his efforts to foster community and relationships with students were directly tied to his approach to music teaching and learning. Bryan felt that relationship- and community-building events throughout the year, daily greetings at the door, knowing students as people, and supporting student mental health and

wellbeing ultimately enhanced his—and his students'—capacities to explore vocal music together:

> I want [students] to come in here and focus on singing… I want them to be who they are because if they don't feel comfortable as a person here, they're not going to share their sound, which is really way more intimate than people think. (Interview 2)

GLHS student participants, in turn, acknowledged the intimate nature of 'sharing their sound' in the high school choral classroom. Specifically, the act of singing—alone and with others—brought forth considerable student comments related to vulnerability. During focus group conversations, GLHS student participants used terms like "self-conscious," "scary," "insecure," "exposed," and "afraid" when talking about how they feel when navigating elements of the singing voice, breath support, being part of a small vocal section, finding one's harmony, and making mistakes in choir (Student Focus Group 2).

Bryan described his relational teaching approach as the foundation for guiding his students through these vocal and musical challenges. He believed that his efforts to build relationships and community contributed to, and informed, his efforts to support students through vulnerabilities associated with singing in a choral ensemble. In the following section, I elaborate upon specific ways that Bryan described addressing singing/musical elements through a relational approach rooted in supporting students' vulnerability. I organize this section according to emergent subthemes that include: (a) making mistakes; (b) singing alone; (c) singing with others; (d) using the body; (e) learning music; and (f) social, cultural, and emotional implications.

Making Mistakes

In our second focus group together, I asked GLHS student participants to describe the aspects of singing and choral music that make them feel nervous or uncertain. A resounding

commonality amongst student participants was the fear of making mistakes in choir. Speaking about mistakes, one student shared that choir can be “intimidating because you don’t want to mess up around older or better singers” (Student Focus Group 2). Another student explained that making mistakes in their voice section felt particularly exposing:

> I hate when it's just the Soprano One’s singing because we have the smallest section, just like four of us here every day. So, if one person's missing, even if nobody's missing, you can hear your voice so clearly. It's very easy to tell that somebody messed up and who it was. (Student Focus Group 2)

When I asked Bryan a similar question (*What do you think your students feel when singing in choir? Alone/with others?*), he also focused on students’ fear of making mistakes. Specifically, Bryan associated the fear of making mistakes with broader issues of self-efficacy related to students’ singing voice, learning music, using their bodies, or finding confidence within their vocal sections: “At the core of being scared or exposed or fearful in this class is [students] often thinking they're not good enough,” Bryan said (Interview 2). He believed that this sense of fear is often so palpable that it prevents some students from fully engaging in the ensemble. To counteract that mindset, Bryan explained that he tries to create a choral environment where making mistakes is normalized and celebrated:

> I’ll say that ‘I’m proud you tried and that you felt safe enough—knowing that it might not work well—to try. And shocker, it didn't work. But, I'm still proud of you because you didn't just sit there quietly or not try to sing the note. You tried. (Interview 2)

Modeling Vulnerability

As noted above, Bryan perceived his students’ broader fear of making mistakes as a representation of their self-efficacy and related vulnerabilities. Thus, Bryan explained that a significant part of his efforts to empower student risk-taking and responses to mistakes is to model his own vulnerability and propensity to make mistakes. He explained that he attempts to focus on “the good things that happen from taking a risk” by embracing his own risk-taking and

imperfections (Interview 2). For example, Bryan explained that he does not blame students for errors in the ensemble that arise due to his own conducting when rehearsing a challenging mixed-meter piece: “No, that was me again. I'm sorry. I'm still learning” (Interview 2). He also said that he attempts to not dwell on his own missed piano notes when he is playing vocal parts or warm-ups: “They know that I've never been the best piano player. So, when I make mistakes, I just make a funny face then move on and then we go from there” (Interview 2). Student participants acknowledged that witnessing Bryan’s responses to their mistakes—and his own—reinforced a refreshing mindset that mistakes are acceptable in the GLHS choir: “A lot of teachers are like, ‘How dare you make a mistake?” one student shared. “But Mr. Dempsey will say ‘I'm no perfect human’ and it’s nice being given that same leeway” (Student Focus Group 2). Another student expanded upon the importance of observing Bryan model his own vulnerability in the classroom:

> I think that Mr. Dempsey creates a space where it's okay to make a mistake by making his own mistakes and not trying to brush it off like he doesn't make mistakes…It show us that mistakes are okay and that we don't have to hide them and we don't have to pretend that they don't exist. And by doing that, it's like when you make a mistake, it's not that big of a deal and you can just move on and keep going. (Student Focus Group 2)

One student further supported this sentiment, indicating that Bryan is “very dismissive of negative thoughts about ourselves,” an approach they found empowering (Student Focus Group 1). Further, connecting varied threads of his relational practice, Bryan perceived the community-building activities at the beginning of the year onward as a collection of “small moments that build on each other” (Interview 2), each of which potentially expands student comfort with peers and their individual capacity to take musical risks. As a result of the long-term arch of relationship-building and “silly name games,” Bryan contended that if students make mistakes next to each other in the ensemble, they are often more empathetic in their responses “because

this human has a name…they're not just 'the person who messed up,' I know their favorite ice cream" (Interview 2).

Vulnerability in Aspects of the Choral Classroom

GLHS student participants' concerns regarding mistakes were often associated with aspects of self-efficacy related to singing alone and with others. Bryan stated that he also aimed to support student vulnerability when asking them to use their bodies as part of stretching and singing, when learning music, and when considering social, cultural, and emotional implications related to instructional facets of his classroom. I present findings related to each of those areas below.

The Individual Singing Voice

Multiple GLHS student participants spoke about their feelings of insecurity and worry when navigating elements of their individual singing voices. Their reflections spanned topics that included concerns over their vocal range, tone, and timbre. For example, one student described a sense of discomfort when singing due to an internal perception of their voice: "My singing voice is extremely nasally…so if I hear myself, yeah, I don't love it" (Student Focus Group 2). Another student spoke about their anxiety related to singing notes in the higher part of their range: "When it's a high note, I'm more likely to mess up because it's hard for my voice, physically. I especially don't want people to be like, 'You can't sing this song. You can't sing high enough to sing this" (Student Focus Group 2). A different student, who is also enrolled in the GLHS school band, shared the following comparison, noting the differences between navigating an instrument and the human voice:

> I feel like in band there's different instruments, but each instrument is trying to create the same sound in a section or something. But in choir, it's so much more vulnerable because it's just you and you are exposed. And I feel like that leaves a lot of room for feeling

really self-conscious or afraid. (Student Focus Group 2)

Another student immediately followed-up this statement, and further dissected the complex intersection between the physical apparatus of the singing voice as an embodied instrument with psychological and emotional implications:

> Something that makes me self-conscious about my voice is—if you're playing an instrument, it's an instrument. It's not really a part of you. If the instrument's broken, the instrument's broken. It's not your fault. But if you can't hit a note, you internalize this feeling of, 'Oh, *I'm* not good enough, it's *my* fault. So that's something that I feel like a lot of us struggle with. Just the concept of this is a part of *me*. [word emphasis from speaker] (Student Focus Group 2)

The two student quotes above notably emphasize the internal and personal layers often associated with singing, particularly for adolescents. The second student positioned the singing voice as "a part of me," and thus mistakes related to the voice were perceived as inferring that the student was "not good enough" as a musician, singer, and perhaps, human. As noted at the beginning of this section, Bryan acknowledged the "intimate" nature of singing that his students described above (Interview 2). In turn, he described his relational approach to choral music teaching and learning as directly affirming and reflecting students' feelings of unease and fear related to the complexity of the human vocal instrument.

When I asked if he could think of any additional approaches he takes to support his students' vulnerability when singing by themselves, Bryan explained that student fears often seem to be most acutely felt when he tests students' voices to check their vocal range. He said that students are "always terrified" to participate in voice tests due to the fear of having to sing by themselves. In an effort to make students more comfortable, Bryan explained that he encourages them to "bring an emotional support friend or friends" when they meet with him for their voice tests (Interview 2). While his ultimate goal is to hear each student sing individually (to assess range and general characteristics of a voice), he recognized that most students who

initially present as nervous during voice tests tend to become less anxious in the presence of their "emotional support friend" and ultimately sing alone by the end of the voice test process.

Singing With Others

In addition to these one-on-one scenarios, GLHS students also identified singing with others as a consistent area of concern and vulnerability in the choral classroom. Bryan, in turn, spoke at length about his efforts to empower students when they sing around others during class. In one of our interviews, he told me that he often reminds students that "Your notes are something we want to hear" (Interview 2) to remind them that no matter their sound or 'perceived' imperfections, they and their voice are celebrated in the GLHS choir room. Throughout my observations, I consistently witnessed Bryan champion his students' vocal efforts in the classroom. Words of support were frequent and directed at students and vocal sections across the classroom.

For example, during my fourth observation, Bryan spent a portion of the class period talking with his Alto section about struggles they were collectively having while singing a passage that included a B natural (B5, a note that straddles the top portion of the typical Alto range). When Bryan noticed that students in the Alto section seemed timid approaching this pitch, he paused, smiled, and then moved from the piano toward their corner of the choral risers. Once in front of the Alto section, Bryan first acknowledged that the pitch was potentially high for them. Then, in a supportive tone, he provided a possible solution: "It's right on the edge of most of your ranges…so it doesn't have to be strong, it can be nice and soft. So, if it's a little high for you, that's totally fine. You're sounding great, Altos" (Observation 4). After Bryan's explanation and affirmation, he moved back to the piano and asked the Alto section to attempt the passage again, which they did, producing considerably more sound on the B natural. Sitting

behind the Altos, I saw them turn to each other with smiles reflecting what appeared to be collective pride and satisfaction.

When I brought up this moment in our next interview, Bryan explained that two of the loudest and most confident singers in the Alto section had been absent that specific day, which he believed impacted the self-efficacy of the remaining, less confident, and younger students in the section. He acknowledged that, especially in the absence of their unofficial section leaders, he was able to "diagnose pretty quickly that it was fear" causing the remaining Alto students to timidly approach this part of their vocal range. Bryan said that in a similar situation, he had recently attempted to assist his Altos by asking guiding questions designed to decipher what their apprehension entailed, rather than making an assumption or ignoring their hesitancy all together. He shared that in this second instance, his questions included: "Are you scared of singing in front of me? Is there something about the notes? Is it you don't know what the notes are? Is it you're worried that your peers are going to judge you?" (Interview 2).

During each of my visits to GLHS, I also observed Bryan assist students in the Baritone section sing pitches in the higher register of their voice, as many students were singing pitches down the octave (this is common for many adolescent Tenor-Bass voices, especially if they are apprehensive about singing higher pitches). In one instance, I observed Bryan guide his Baritones through a passage that included the pitches C4, D4, and E4 (these pitches often feel uncomfortable in the higher portion of many adolescent Baritones' vocal ranges—which can in turn prompt adolescent singers to sing the pitches down an octave). Bryan first modeled the passage in his own Baritone voice then said, "Ok, Baritones. Let's try it, and if it doesn't work, we can make adjustments" (Observation 2). At first, some of the Baritones still sang the passage down the octave. Bryan paused, championed their effort, but acknowledged that some of the

students had again sung the passage down the octave. Bryan then stepped out from behind the piano: "This time, I'll sing with you." On the second attempt, with Bryan's singing voice as support, the majority of the Baritone section sang the notes in the correct octave, with only 1-2 students still singing the incorrect pitch. Instead of berating these two students—or permitting them to sing the entire passage down the octave—Bryan then created an alternative version of the vocal line which allowed students to move down the octave in place of the two highest notes only, while remaining in the correct octave for the remainder of the passage.

These minor adaptations—made in the moment—were laced in care, honored the dignity of the students struggling, provided a useful modification, and did not impact the other Baritones who had already begun to sing the correct pitches. When I recalled this moment in our second interview, Bryan provided further context on his Baritones' struggle with vocal range throughout the year, acknowledging that what I had witnessed was a substantial improvement from where they had been even weeks earlier. Thus, he was proud of his Baritones for their efforts: "That was our work for a long time. Now, thankfully at this point in the school year, I can say, 'You sing a few Ds [in the higher part of their vocal range] regularly'" (Interview 2).

Reflecting aspects of the Alto and Baritone examples provided above, student participants shared that they rely on each other's support when singing in the ensemble. One student shared that she likes singing in the Alto section because we can "look at each other and ask 'What are we supposed to do here?'" (Student Focus Group 2). Another student felt that the support she gained from peers in choir was "often not verbal support," but rather confidence in knowing section-mates' strengths well enough to know "who will get these high notes or who will sing louder here" (Student Focus Group 2). "There's safety in community," a third student shared. "I can look over my shoulder and see that somebody's having the same problems as me"

(Student Focus Group 2).

Using the Body

Related to the physicality of the voice, Bryan and his students also acknowledged the potential discomfort that can arise when using one's body in choir—particularly given the level of physicality required in singing/choral ensembles in the form of stretches, maintaining posture, breath support, or standing for long periods of time. For example, in a focus group conversation, one student participant shared that attempting to maintain breath support was a concern that made them self-conscious: "I have a lot of medical conditions that make it difficult for me to breathe. And I get lightheaded really easily. So sometimes it can be hard to take a full, deep breath...and it's become something I'm insecure about" (Student Focus Group 2). Multiple students also mentioned that the early class start time for choir at GLHS often meant that they simply did not feel physically ready for the day: "I wish that choir wasn't so early in the morning…it can be really hard to be physically ready for the day" (Student Focus Group 2).

Bryan seemed to be attuned to his students' perceptions related to the physical components of singing. During each observation, he led students through a series of methodical physical stretches and body centering exercises before starting the vocal warm-up. In interviews, Bryan also explained that he recognizes many students may not be comfortable with aspects of their bodies, so he does his best to diffuse any physical ideals in his classroom. He explained that he often reminds his students that "this classroom is not Instagram, we're not all perfect human beings just showing the best parts of ourselves" (Interview 2). Still, Bryan acknowledged that certain elements of the choral experience require—or are at least enhanced by—active and proper use of the body: "We can't ignore posture. You have to stand up straight. You have to be grounded and not huddled over yourself," he shared (Interview 2). That said, he was quick to add

that posture may be associated with psychological or social implications: “Part of that [huddling over] is more of a confidence thing” (Interview 2). I should also note, that it appeared that most students in the GLHS choir did not have a visible physical disability, and as such, certain challenges that may arise with choral-related physical expectations and students with physical disabilities did not come up in data collection at GLHS. During my observations, however, I did notice that one student had a walking cast and tended to sit throughout most of the rehearsal when the rest of the students were standing. When I asked Bryan how he addressed this, he spoke about that specific situation, as well as his general philosophy surrounding students who might not have the capacity to fully participate in choir due to a physical disability or injury:

> If [a student] says ‘I hurt my ankle. Is it okay if I sit today?’ Of course. Why would I say no to that? But for some students, especially just young people in general, the thought of approaching any authority figure and asking for something you need is terrifying. Even if it's like, "I'm in pain. Can I please sit?" Some students wouldn't ask. They would just struggle through the pain. So…hopefully modeling that every student can be themselves and can voice the things that they need has encouraged those things [asking for accommodations] to happen. (Interview 2)

Additionally, Bryan asserted that he tries to make most physical activities in choir light-hearted as well as supportive of student choice: “When we warm up, or do silly bodily exercises, a lot of the times it's do what you can” he explained (Interview 2). Further, he said that making certain physical activities “silly” reduced some students’ sense of body-related insecurity. He provided the following example:

> When we stretch an arm across, I sometimes tell them to play Rock, Paper, Scissors with the person next to them, so…even if they're not consciously thinking about stretching, something is happening, and they're more focused on winning Rock, Paper, Scissors than thinking things like, ‘Am I looking like a fool?’ or ‘Am I stretching the right way?’ or ‘Am I doing this correctly?’ (Interview 2)

He also elaborated on the ways he seeks to instill bodily comfort and student choice in activities like warm-up stretches.

> When we reach up high, for some of us, we have a belly and we don't want our shirt to lift up or we don't want that to be seen. So, when I tell them to stretch up—and I always do this with them—we look at the ceiling so no one's looking around at people as their arms are raised. Then we wave to the ceiling so that everyone's eyes are up and no one's looking at anyone else…Sometimes I'll also tell them 'My shirt's tucked in. I can't reach up that high' today and then the students who don't feel comfortable reaching up much higher, are like, 'I'm still stretching because this is what Mr. Dempsey is doing.' (Interview 2)

Bryan's efforts to increase student comfort while using their bodies in choir was an essential part of his relational approach to teaching. His care for students, and awareness of their needs, allowed him to recognize that some students may not feel comfortable engaging in certain physical activities in choir and/or need to stay seated during rehearsal due to a physical element. As evident in student participant quotes, Bryan's commitment to honoring students' individual needs and providing differentiated options contributed to students' comfort in the GLHS classroom.

Learning Music

GLHS students also shared that one of their areas of vulnerability in choir is the music-learning process. In the second GLHS student focus group, student participants shared concerns associated with learning music that included: "I actually have no clue how to read notes and stuff because my last choir class was in sixth grade;" or "I'm pretty bad at finding my note out of nowhere and keeping it;" and "I'm always scared that I'm sticking out and that it's obvious I don't know my note." Another student provided the following reflection:

> I think something that I struggle a lot with is just my ability to hit a correct pitch…it's especially hard on the first note, trying to get it perfectly on the dot, to hit the nail. It's just something I've always struggled with and it makes me really self-conscious. (Student Focus Group 2)

Though I did not observe the GLHS students use a specific music-reading system during observations (i.e. solfege, numbers, Curwen hand signs, etc.), two of my observations were early

enough in the students' preparation for the end-of-year concert that I got a glimpse into Bryan's approach to learning new musical material. In some instructional moments, Bryan had students sight-sing a cappella, in other instances he played parts on the piano, and in some cases he sang along with students. Regardless of the approach he used at any given point in the lesson, what stood out during my observations was Bryan's almost cheerleader-like persona. His energy was high, the affirmations flowed, and the instructional pace was fast. When describing his energetic and positive approach to guiding students through sight-singing or music learning moments, Bryan had this to say: "Part of how I approach [learning music] is just not letting them stop, which maybe sounds bad, but at this point in the year, we've gotten past the first hurdle, which is stopping as soon as it's uncomfortable" (Interview 2). The student tendency to stop singing when a passage seems difficult, Bryan believed, was again tied to vulnerability and students' fear of making a mistake and/or embarrassment:

> I try to focus on the good things that happen from taking a risk. I've told them many times, 'You kept trying. At the beginning of the year, you would've stopped. You would've said, 'I don't know this. I'm going to stop.' (Interview 2)

When I asked how he encouraged students to take risks when learning music, Bryan returned to some of the themes related to mistakes outlined earlier in this chapter. Bryan said that he unabashedly promotes mistakes and imperfections, especially when sight-singing or learning a piece of repertoire for the first time:

> I think that it's getting to a point now where everyone knows, 'Ok, we don't know the song. It's not going to be perfect, but we have an idea of where this is going. And it gets back to that they know I'm very proud of them that they're willing to try…they feel safe…and comfortable sharing their voice. They feel comfortable trying. They're willing to make a mistake. (Interview 2)

In addition to efforts based in creating an empowering, mistake-positive environment for sight-singing and learning music, Bryan also talked about how he introduces new music to his students

in ways he believes contributes to their overall comfort with unfamiliar material:

> There's different schools of thought about listening to a piece of music before learning it for yourself. I have conflicting feelings about that myself. But at least with this particular crew, it's helpful to play the song at least once to get them to discuss and notice the shape of the piece—A section, B section, returning themes, etc.. It's a lot easier to do that right off the bat rather than 'Hey, sing this part. Ready? Go.' (Interview 2).

Bryan acknowledged that ultimately, an approach that involved listening to a piece of music before beginning the music-reading process was best for his students' learning needs. Furthermore, as I observed during visits to GLHS, Bryan's attempts to scaffold music-learning experiences were conceived in ways that he believed would support his students' learning efforts and comfort:

> We go through the piece and we identify the melody line, where it comes back, where it switches parts. Then it's 'Let's all sing this together. Let's hammer that home.' The rest of it is just the scaffolding or the bricks around it. We [then] kind of have the through idea. (Interview 2)

When I observed Bryan and his students exploring new music during class, he consistently leaned into moments like this. He was intentional about helping students make connections between what they were singing in other sections of the piece as well as how their own voice part(s) related to other voice parts in the ensemble.

Social, Cultural, and Emotional Implications

In this last section, I outline how Bryan's awareness of certain social, cultural, and emotional entities—and the ways they might increase student (and teacher) vulnerability in the classroom—impacted his approach to music teaching and learning. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, at the time of this study approximately 83% of the GLHS student body was classified as white, 7% classified as Hispanic/Latinx, 3% Black, 3% Asian, 3% Two or More Races, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native. The GLHS ensemble that I observed was comprised of predominately white students. I asked Bryan whether he found interactions

between himself and his students were ever informed or impacted by his—or his students'—identities (including race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, language, religion, ability/disability, neurodiversity, implications of trauma, mental health). Broadly, Bryan explained that he primarily thought about students' identities within his considerations of repertoire selection, acknowledging that in the past he has been intentional about seeking out repertoire by composers of color, female-identifying composers, and LGBTQ+ composers: "Choosing repertoire like that is important because it's not just me affirming who they are, it shows students, 'Here is someone who is like you that also made music that we are now singing,'" he explained. "I know [students] may not want to be a composer, but it's just as powerful to show that there are people like my students who exist…who are out there successful and prominent with voices that we want to share" (Interview 3). In further reflections presented below, Bryan discussed how issues of identity and context related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status influenced his relational approach in the classroom.

Race. In our interviews, Bryan primarily conceptualized the presence of race within his relational practice when reflecting upon how he selected, introduced, and rehearsed African American Spirituals and other music reflective of Black cultural traditions. For example, Bryan explained that when introducing an African American Spiritual in class, he often shares a statement like the one below with his students in order to acknowledge the boundaries of his own racial identity:

> I'm a white male and perhaps I shouldn't be telling this history, because by nature, I'm likely not bound to give it its full service. This is not my experience. Now that being said, I have done my research. I've tried. I will share what I've found, but…I'm not perfect. I strongly encourage you to fact check me and please tell me if I'm wrong…this is important…and something that we need to be aware of. (Interview 3)

He also mentioned that his efforts to conduct adequate research about African American

Spirituals, and critically consider how to best introduce African American Spirituals to the class, are often reflective of an attempt to honor his students who identify as African American or Black:

> It's really important. I do a lot of research so that I don't sound like I'm shooting from the hip, like, 'Oh, here's Black History Month.' No. I want to do this tradition service because some of my students fall under that category [i.e. students who identify as Black or African American] and I don't want them to feel like I'm just another white person that's trying and failing to tell their history. (Interview 3)

I asked Bryan to tell me more about his approach to rehearsing and talking about African American Spirituals in a way that acknowledges what his Black and African American students might be feeling. He shared that a recent session at a state music conference prompted a shift in how he conceptualized the art form of African American Spirituals:

> At the [state conference] this year, the keynote speaker spoke about how Spirituals are always upbeat, and when choirs sing them, they're normally their favorite songs just because of the style and because of the tempo, and because of the harmonies and everything. But then he said, 'Think about when you have a jazzy version of *Wade in the Water*—there's nothing fun about running for your life.' That really struck me and I shared that with my students. It's like, 'This is something I want to be honest with you about. This is something that made me cry while I was at this conference because I realized I've done that before'…just singing *Keep Your Lamps* because it's a fun, jazzy song, but when you stop and think for even a second about the words or the context, that's terrifying. (Interview 3)

I followed-up by asking Bryan whether he thinks this personal shift in mindset has impacted his students. In reference to his small cohort of students of color, Bryan stated that he "would hope that [they] would know that I say things that I mean" and that his "white-identifying students have not asked 'Well, why is this important?'" (Interview 3). Still, Bryan recognized that he is still learning how to most effectively have conversations about race in the classroom, particularly as an early-career teacher, a teacher who is trying to learn and expand his own sociocultural awareness, and a teacher in a socially conservative school/district:

I still haven't found the best way to approach the topic [race], because I always feel like I

> have to have some sort of disclaimer. We're talking about history and we're talking about influence on music. I'm not making a political statement right now. Please do not cancel me if you don't agree with this. I don't know…it's not emotionless, but it's definitely a more reserved approach to this conversation. (Interview 3)

In the GLHS focus group, I asked students a similar question regarding whether aspects of their identities impacted their relationships with Bryan or each other. Race was not brought up. That said, as presented above, implications of race were present in Bryan's reflections about the selection, discussion, rehearsal, and performance of repertoire, particularly repertoire from the African American Spiritual tradition.

Gender and Sexual Identity. As noted earlier in this chapter, Bryan was actively invested in supporting his students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, an investment that his LGBTQ+ students in the GLHS focus group acknowledged and appreciated. In addition to conveying his allyship through the display of a Safe Zone poster and rainbow Pride sticker on his teacher badge, Bryan described supporting his LGBTQ+ students through repertoire choices and his approach to choral uniforms. During my first observation at GLHS, I learned that Bryan did not require his students to wear uniforms adhering to the traditional gender binary (in choral music, this is often the choice of *either* a tuxedo or a gown—and a tuxedo for male-identifying students and a gown for female-identifying students). That said, during the observation, when discussing details regarding students' appearance at State Choral Festival the following day, Bryan reminded students that they could wear any type of performance attire they wish, as long as their attire fit into the realm of 'concert black:' "You don't have to wear a dress, even if that's what you think you should" he explained to students. "And gentlemen, if you want to wear a dress to Festival tomorrow, you may. Everyone just wear what you like and feel comfortable in" (Observation 1). In a subsequent interview, I asked Bryan to elaborate on his approach to uniforms, to which he offered the following response: "I do

concert black so that everyone can wear something that they feel comfortable in," he explained. "Not every female-identifying student wants to wear a dress, not every male-identifying wants to wear slacks and a black shirt." He added: "It's a choir class. It's not a fashion class. It's not a gender stereotypes class. It's not a reinforcing social norms class" (Interview 2). Bryan further explained that this uniform decision was representative of his larger mission to support his LGBTQ+ students and to ensure that they felt empowered to focus on their musicianship, not anxiety regarding a choir uniform:

> The last thing I want is for someone to be conscious of what they're wearing when we're on stage, when what I want them to be conscious about is what they're singing. That's it. That's why we're up here. You should feel comfortable and confident because you're already nervous enough about singing in front of everyone else. Wardrobe could not matter less. (Interview 2)

In hearing about these LGBTQ+ affirming uniform policies—and recalling how meaningful repertoire like *Be Who You Are* was for GLHS student participant, Samantha (a lesbian)—I asked Bryan whether his attempts to validate students in the LGBTQ+ community stemmed into how he approached and discussed repertoire. He recognized that he was not always intentional about speaking to LGBTQ+ life experiences when talking about repertoire with his students. However, he suggested that when he does think to say something, it tends to come about when rehearsing a song about love. In these instances, Bryan said that he attempts to broaden the scope of love he presents when talking about repertoire text or themes:

> I always try and say, who are the people you care about? Because love means so many different things. For high schoolers, it's wildly different from what love means to you or love means to me. But caring is also something that we can do platonically. It's something that we can do truly and deeply and spiritually…and it can also relate to our family or our chosen family. (Interview 2)

A student in the focus group—who shared that they identify as queer—expressed feeling that they were very aware that Bryan was an ally and that Bryan consistently strove to support them

and their identity: “He can recognize that he might not understand or have experienced the things that we experienced, but he'll still have our backs. And that means a great deal” (Student Focus Group 2).

Further, student participants characterized the GLHS choir room as a place they feel acknowledged, celebrated, and empowered: “You don’t have to prove yourself in here,” a student asserted. “Everyone values you and everything you’re worth before you even sing” (Student Focus Group 1). As for Bryan, he told me that he hopes for just that—that his philosophy translates into a choral music learning environment at GLHS that supports each students’ individual personhood and needs.

Summary

In this section, I provided a glimpse into Bryan’s and his students’ experiences regarding the various vulnerabilities embedded within the high school choral classroom. Student participants expressed feeling particularly vulnerable when it came to concerns over making mistakes, singing alone and with others, and learning music. That said, Bryan explained that within his relational choral music practice he sought to validate and address his students’ vulnerabilities by modeling mistakes, talking about vulnerability, and establishing a holistically comfortable learning environment. In this section I also shared Bryan’s reflections regarding his attempts to acknowledge and support students who identify as members of historically marginalized communities. Specifically, I described how Bryan conceptualized his approach to selecting, discussing, rehearsing, and performing choral repertoire that honored the experiences of his Black and African American students. Bryan noted that as a self-identified white male, he was aware that he could not fully understand the perspectives of his Black and African American students, and thus, was devoted to sensitively considering how he approached genres like the

African American Spiritual tradition in his class. Further, Bryan spoke about supporting students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community through the ways he discussed aspects of love embedded in choral text as well as in a recent decision to modify the GLHS choral uniforms so not to adhere to stereotypical gender paradigms.

Navigating Relational Challenges

Thus far, I have highlighted how Bryan and his GLHS students fostered meaningful relationships and a sense of community within the GLHS choral classroom. I have also outlined how Bryan attempted to extend the relationships and sense of community he built with students toward meaningful support of their efforts to be vulnerable in choral music-making. While throughout this study Bryan spoke at length about instances of successful relationship-building, he also acknowledged that he has faced challenges when attempting to form bonds with students. In this final section, I present specific themes emergent from data related to Bryan's perspectives regarding the navigation of relational challenges in the GLHS choir community: (a) the importance of trust; (b) supporting introverted students; and (c) supporting students in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Importance of Trust

When speaking about his navigation of relational challenges, Bryan primarily spoke about struggles to initially build rapport with students when he was a new teacher at GLHS following a beloved predecessor: "Trying to connect with kids who fell in love with their previous choir teacher is always a difficult task," he shared. "I'm a new face and I'm asking you to sing, which is a little scary…that makes it hard to connect" (Interview 3). He said that the previous teacher's exit was unexpected and unannounced, leaving many students feeling "abandoned on top of having a teacher that they enjoyed no longer be there" (Interview 3). For

Bryan, attempting to work through this transition was difficult. He shared that approximately a third of the students enrolled in choir during his first year at GLHS year did not return to choir his second year at the school. “For some of them, it was like, ‘This isn't the animal that it was, and now I don't want it anymore,’” he shared. “And that's tough because I would love to think that if they had stuck around, they would've come around…I still see them in the hallways. I still say ‘Hi.’ I don't ignore them” (Interview 3). He acknowledged that losing those students was disappointing, but that his own experiences with past choir teachers helped him to empathize with what his GLHS students were going through. He tried to place himself in his students’ shoes, and realized that students were likely thinking, “I have to build up trust with this new person before I feel like I can share again and experience music in a new way” (Interview 3).

I then asked Bryan to tell me about how he attempted to build trust with his new students. Bryan explained he felt strongly that he needed to carve out his own identity and relationships with students separate from what they might have become used to with his predecessor: “I'm myself. Students are either going to buy into that or they're not… what makes the program yours is being yourself instead of trying to be the previous teacher,” he expressed (Interview 3). Bryan went on to explain that throughout his second and third years at GLHS, student trust in him began to grow—an evolution that he largely attributed to initiatives discussed in detail earlier in this chapter like community-building activities and his investment in getting to know students on an individual level.

Supporting Introverted Students

Bryan also acknowledged that he sometimes struggles to form relationships with students who appear to be introverted. “The students that are harder to connect with for numerous reasons are the students who are quieter and shy,” he explained. “It’s harder to connect in the sense that I

don't know them as well and a part of that may be that they don't feel comfortable sharing, and that's OK" (Interview 3). Though Bryan did not elaborate on specific reasons why some of his students might be introverted, he did express that he both affirmed and related to their experiences. "I'm an introvert by nature," he shared. "So, if you're the quiet choir student in here, that's me. This extroverted energy is a façade. Deep down I resonate with you" (Interview 3).

Bryan believed that his own identity as an introvert helped him form meaningful connections with his introverted students. For example, he explained that he is exceptionally conscious about not forcing students to speak or sing individually during class activities and rehearsal. Specifically, he believed that some students enjoy being part of the choral ensemble but are not necessarily comfortable—or interested in—the more social aspects of the GLHS choir space, which he fully supports. "If you're here and you're singing—and that's all you want to contribute, and then you need time to yourself and that doesn't include sharing how your weekend was with me—that's fine," he explained (Interview 3). Bryan said he hoped to engage in relationships with his students in a manner that validated their personal wishes. "I simply try my best to respect their space," he added. "If I say, 'Oh, hey, how was your weekend?' and they say 'Oh, it was good,' I'm not going to push that too much. If that's what they feel comfortable sharing, that's fine" (Interview 3). Ultimately, Bryan felt that his own experience as an introvert informed how he sensitively honors the wishes of introverted students in his class. He noted that he hoped the GLHS community ultimately reached every student, just like his past choral peers reached him when he was a shy and unsure adolescent singer. Reflecting on this experience, he mused: "Once I started to feel comfortable with the people and in the ensemble, then I knew, 'Oh OK, I can share my voice, too" (Interview 1).

Supporting Students in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

While Bryan was not necessarily able to pinpoint the reasons behind certain students' introverted nature, there was a broader cohort of students whose general relational hesitancy he attributed to the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bryan suggested that the countless missed days and various forms of modified schedules as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic made building interpersonal bonds with many students notably complex. Specifically, Bryan believed that scheduling restrictions at the middle school during the COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted his current freshmen and sophomore students—and how he interacts with them to this date. Bryan explained that district classroom spacing guidelines limited his middle school choir class size to 12 students, which when accounting for absences, often left only seven or less students in class—a number which he recognized was not conducive toward supporting middle school student's musical, emotional, or social vulnerabilities: "It was absolutely terrible," he disclosed. "Middle school choir students are shy in becoming who they are so those students easily got burnt out and weren't in choir the next year" (Interview 3). He added that though some of those students recently returned to the GLHS high school choir as sophomores, he found that his approach to the teaching relationship with them still required an added level of patience and support. "When they came back it's felt like they aren't the loudest voice" (Interview 3). That said, Bryan believed that his relationship with these students had ultimately grown: "[The middle school choir experience due to COVID-19] was something that was out of everyone's control, but the arc of that relationship is something that's certainly improved" (Interview 3).

Summary

In this section, I presented specific relational challenges identified by Bryan in our interviews. Specific challenges included establishing trust with students as a new teacher at

GLHS, supporting introverted students, and relationally supporting students in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within-Case Summary: Bryan Dempsey—Grove Lake High School

As discussed in this chapter, Bryan Dempsey was an early-career teacher, who at the time of this study was completing his fourth year of teaching—his third year at Grove Lake High School (GLHS). Bryan self-identified as a white male. Bryan's early time at GLHS, and subsequently his interactions with students, were significantly informed by the COVID-19 pandemic (he started at GLHS in the Fall of 2020) and the aftermath of a deadly school shooting at a neighboring high school.

Bryan attributed his own meaningful experiences in secondary and collegiate choral ensembles—particularly their impact on his sense of self and overall wellbeing—as important foundations to his own relational teaching practice within the GLHS choir room. Bryan spoke about his attempts to actively initiate the cultivation of community and relationships within the first days and weeks of the school year, during which he described facilitating various social opportunities (games, activities, and discussions) in order to help students create bonds with peers in their vocal sections and across the choral ensemble. Bryan and his students shared that moments of connection like these 'getting-to-know-you' activities, as well as moments throughout the year like the Circle of Affirmation and Passion Presentations, help to sustain meaningful interpersonal modes of understanding between teacher and student—and among students. Each of these components contributed to what Bryan and his students identified as a high school choral community that was very explicitly designed—and understood to be—empowering of all students, no matter their life experiences or identities. For example, GLHS student participants described an appreciation for learning repertoire reflective of the musical and

cultural perspectives of peers who were international exchange students, as well as gratitude toward performing repertoire affirming of LGBTQ+ students' experience.

In addition to facilitating community within the GLHS choral ensemble, Bryan asserted that he is also dedicated to fostering informed and caring relationships with individual students. Whether through daily greetings at the door or during intentional moments of connection as students pack up their choir folder at the end of class, Bryan found ways to know who his students are as people and what is happening in their daily lives. He shared that this information about students' lives is entered into individual 'files' for each student and—as expressed by Bryan and his students—impacts his capacity to support students in a variety of ways, particularly in relation to implications of mental health, emotional wellbeing, and navigation as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Bryan's efforts to foster community and develop meaningful relationships with students assisted him in creating a supportive choral music space at GLHS. Specifically, the foundations of care and trust formed between Bryan and his students—and among students—were identified as important channels of support for students as they navigated certain choral-related vulnerabilities such as singing alone and with others, making mistakes when singing/reading music, using their bodies in class, and sociocultural implications associated with repertoire. Further, as was evident in the theme of the GLHS choir's end-of-year concert, *Home*, Bryan sought ways to reflect and heighten notions of community and relationships in his repertoire selection process. Bryan also spoke about his attempts to honor the experience of his Black and African American students through how he approached repertoire like African American Spirituals in class. Further, he shared that he attempted to program and discuss themes of love and empowerment embedded within repertoire in ways that honored his LGBTQ+ students—a

finding GLHS students acknowledged. Each of these efforts display how Bryan strove to increase students' feelings of self-worth, validation, and empathy through curricular and pedagogical decisions.

Bryan also recognized that he is still learning how to most effectively foster bonds with students and sustain meaningful community in the GLHS choral program. He identified certain relational challenges throughout our interviews that included (a) developing student trust in the wake of his predecessor; (b) forming supportive bonds that acknowledge and affirm the needs of introverted students; (c) continuing to adapt his relational approach with students whose past choir experiences were particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; and (d) confronting his own efforts to ensure that he critically and sensitively addresses issues of race in his relational and instructional approaches in the GLHS choir room. That said, Bryan and his students provided multiple examples that exemplify how the relational threads they create together positively impacted their individual and shared choral musical experiences. As he mentioned, Bryan is steadfast in his belief that committing class time to community building is "never a day lost," and ultimately enhances the musical and social journeys he and his students take together. Ultimately, Bryan hoped that the GLHS choir community is a community that serves the needs of his students, no matter what those needs may be, so that each student "can come into the classroom and share their voice."

Chapter V
Participant Introduction and Within-Case Themes: Stephanie Johnson—Meadow River High School

Entering the World of the Meadow River High School Choral Program

My drive to Meadow River High School (MRHS) involves multiple junctures on intertwining freeway systems and local roadways, bustling with morning commuters. The city of Maplebrook, where MRHS resides, is located deep in the heart of a sprawling metropolitan area. The school campus, though only about a mile from the roar of the freeway, borders a neighborhood and is only a short distance from downtown Maplewood—a community strip comprised mostly of local businesses, coffee shops, and restaurants. As I approach the front entrance to MRHS, I notice an individual greeting students as they walk through the door. He cheerfully says hello to me and introduces himself as the MRHS principal. When I mention my name and that I am there to observe Stephanie Johnson and her choirs, he shares that he is aware of my visit and welcomes me in. He then directs me to the front office to check in, telling me that I am "in for a real treat" in Stephanie's classroom. The MRHS front office is brimming with before-school-energy: teachers are chatting behind the front desk, students are touching base with various school personnel, and almost everyone says hello upon seeing me. As I check in, an individual who I believe to be Stephanie is walking toward me. She is wearing a deep maroon turtleneck sweater, has a warm smile, eyes that twinkle, and greets me with a voice that is exuberant and kind. After a quick introduction and receiving my Visitor's badge, Stephanie and I are off to the choir room.

As we walk from the main office to the MRHS choir room, multiple students and teachers say hello to Stephanie, her returning the greeting each time. We traverse the long hallway from the main office to a stairwell, proceeding down to what appears to be the school's basement. At the base of the stairs is the MRHS choir room. From the door, I see that the MRHS choir room is long with a relatively low ceiling. Narrow basement windows meet the ceiling and line one wall of the room, shining light on to the choral risers and chairs on the opposite side of the room. Toward the far side of the room is an office. A brown, grand piano sits facing the choral risers and behind it is a small, carpeted stage set up against the windowed wall. Interspersed across the classroom walls are pictures of various past and present MRHS ensembles, as well as tour posters—one of which displays details about an upcoming informational meeting. I also notice a splash of multi-colored of Post-It notes spread across a bulletin board with a header that says 'Leave a Note:' each note is adorned with what appears to be hand-written words or statements of encouragement (I later found out from Stephanie that this board is a space where students can leave a Post-It note of affirmation for their peers).

Sitting next to the piano is a young man who Stephanie introduces to me as Nate, her student teacher from a nearby university. Nate is busy preparing the morning announcements which are projected on a screen behind the classroom's stage. Stephanie gestures to me to join her on the stage where we sit cross-legged for a few minutes as she fills me in on her recent international trip with students from which they had just returned. She speaks with an affable energy interspersed with laughter. After a few minutes of conversation, the bell rings and I move to a chair in the third-row corner of the risers to get set-up for my observation.

As I pull out my computer, students begin to stroll into the classroom. These are students in Stephanie's first high school ensemble of the day (an auditioned SATB Choir with

approximately 20 members from various grades). I notice that Stephanie has moved toward the door of the classroom and she, and her student teacher Nate, are greeting every single student as they make their way to the risers. Greetings range from 'Hello,' 'Hey there!' and 'How are ya?' to compliments about student fashion choices as well as brief comments about the prior day's class. Students talk with each other as they settle into their seats and pull black binders out of their backpacks. As the second bell chimes, announcing the start of class, Stephanie walks to the side of the grand piano and amplifies her voice with an enthusiastic 'Hello, everyone!' This is returned with varied student verbal responses and a few waves. Stephanie then asks, "So, how's everyone doing? How are rehearsals going for the musical?" Some students comment about the late hours rehearsing for the MRHS musical. Other students talk about stressors related to a recent test or project and a few reflect on recent events with family or friends. I notice that during these reflections, Stephanie is intently focused on each student who is sharing—she is not taking attendance, or shuffling music, or organizing materials on the piano. She is making direct eye contact, smiling, and consistently following up each students' reflection and comment with a question or acknowledgement of the students' experience. Students smile, nod their heads, or exhale satisfyingly as Stephanie validates what they have just shared. The energy in the room is calm and comfortable, with students seeming to converse with Stephanie and peers via a notable sense of ease. It seems like conversations like this are, perhaps, common in the MRHS choir room (I later came to find out that they are). After a few minutes of this collective sharing, Stephanie gestures to her student teacher, who bounces up and directs students' attention to the projection screen and proceeds to run through announcements and reminders for the day. As the announcements conclude, students are asked to stand, and the vocal warm-up begins.

School and Community Background

Meadow River High School (MRHS) is located in the city of Maplebrook, which is a suburb of a midsize midwestern city. According to the United States Census Bureau, Maplebrook has an estimated population of 14,961 people (86% white, 5.6% two or more races, 3.9% Hispanic or Latinx, 3.2% Black or African American, 1.2% Asian, 0.3% American Indian and Alaskan Native). Maplebrook has a median household income of $96,993 with 57.1% of residents aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2022). MRHS serves students in the community of Maplebrook as well as two surrounding communities—one of which does not have its own school system—and is identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) as a suburban school. Approximately 74% of the MRHS student population is classified as white, 17% Black or African American, 3% Hispanic or Latinx, 2.6% two or more races, 2.1% Asian, and 0.7% American Indian and Alaskan Native (NCES). Approximately 17% of the school population is eligible for free or reduced lunch (NCES). My second participant, Stephanie Johnson, was the choir director at MRHS.

Who is Stephanie Johnson?

At the time of this study, Stephanie Johnson was in her twenty-fifth year of teaching. Stephanie had spent all 25 years of her teaching career in the Maplebrook School District; teaching first at the elementary level before moving to the middle and high school level (MRHS), where she had been for 10 years. Stephanie self-identified as a Caucasian female. Stephanie told me that she grew up in a predominately white, upper-middle class community in the Midwest region of the United States about 30 miles from the city of Maplebrook—a childhood which she described as "very privileged" (Interview 1). Stephanie indicated that she always knew she

wanted to be a music teacher, so much so that as a child she liked to dress up as her elementary general music teacher and "play music" (Interview 1). She graduated with a degree in music education from a midsize public university in the same state where she now lives and teaches. Stephanie received a Master of Music in Choral Conducting from a different local university where, at the time of data collection for this study, she was currently enrolled in a doctoral program in educational leadership. Stephanie splits her day between the Maplebrook middle school, where she teaches sixth, seventh, and eighth grade choral ensembles—and MRHS, where she teaches two auditioned choral ensembles—one treble-voiced and one mixed-voice. Though Stephanie teaches all of the choral music classes at the Maplebrook middle school, she shares choral teaching duties with another colleague at MRHS who teaches a non-auditioned introductory mixed-voice ensemble and a mixed-voice show choir. For my observations, I observed both of Stephanie's auditioned high school ensembles at MRHS. The MRHS student focus groups for this study consisted of a mix of students from each of those two high school ensembles.

Stephanie told me that she cannot imagine teaching anywhere else but in Maplebrook, and specifically at MRHS. She shared that she lives in the city of Maplebrook, not far from MRHS, which she explained helps her feel even more connected to the community and to her students. Stephanie also pointed to the philosophy of the Maplebrook district—particularly the high school—as a central reason for staying at MRHS for so long:

> Our school, in general, is incredibly inclusive. When you go to get a Band-Aid at MRHS, they come in every skin color. We all have pronoun pins. We have a Gay-Straight Alliance that meets every week and does marches and protests and has events and is very much a big part of our school. And I think that overreaching culture makes our choir culture a lot easier…because I'm like 'Yes, everyone come just the way you are.' (Interview 1)

In addition to personally aligning with the broad MRHS culture, Stephanie maintained that she

has chosen to remain in Maplebrook because of the sense of support she receives from her principal at MRHS and the district: “They’ve let me do what I want to do—to try new things and to explore” (Interview 1). Appreciation for that pedagogical freedom, resonance with the mission of MRHS as a whole, and a commitment to her students, has grounded Stephanie’s teaching life in Maplebrook. Themes related to this sustained longevity in the Maplebrook district and at MRHS permeated throughout Stephanie’s reflections on building relationships, community, and supportive musical experiences for her high school choral students.

Presentation of Within-Case Findings:
Stephanie Johnson—Meadow River High School

In the sections that follow, I present within-case findings bound by the experiences of Stephanie Johnson and her students within the high school choral music classroom at Meadow River High School (MRHS). Within-case findings were synthesized from data collected during this study, including (a) three 75-minute, semi-structured interviews with Stephanie conducted via Zoom; (b) two in-person 60-minute student focus groups with nine of Stephanie’s students in the MRHS choral program (the same group of students participated in Student Focus Group 1 and Student Focus Group 2, though two students were not available for Student Focus Group 2); (c) fieldnotes from four 55-minute observations at MRHS; and (d) various forms of material culture and artifacts. Findings are organized based on themes emergent from within-case analysis: (a) the power of in-depth relationships rooted in longevity and care; (b) a legacy of community; (c) bridging community and relationships into the vulnerable act of choral music-making; and (d) navigating relational challenges. Excerpts from Stephanie’s interview transcripts, student participant reflections from focus groups, and observation fieldnotes are included as data. A within-case summary is provided at the end of the chapter.

The Power of In-Depth Relationships Rooted in Longevity and Care

When I first emailed Stephanie Johnson to gauge her interest as a participant for this study, I shared that I was hoping to speak with high school choir teachers about their efforts to form relationships and a sense of community in the classroom. In Stephanie's initial written response to my email inquiry, she wrote that "relationships are the single most important thing that I do" (Email, April, 2023). In the interviews with Stephanie that followed, and during student focus group conversations, this notion of a commitment to relationships was consistently prevalent. In the first section of this within-case analysis, I present Stephanie's and her students' perspectives on teacher-student relationships rooted in longevity and care in the MRHS choir room. Based on data collected, the following subthemes emerged when participants spoke about teacher-student relationships: (a) the impact of relational longevity (multi-year relationships and perceiving the teacher-student relationship in choir as akin to that of a mentor/mentee or family member); (b) building relationships with students (through daily greetings at the door, check-ins, and "taking the temperature of the room"); and (c) extending knowledge of students into the classroom community.

Relational Longevity

Data collected during this study reflected that aspects of relational longevity were perceived as a significant influence on the strength of teacher-student relationships in the MRHS choral community. This subtheme emerged in discussions regarding (a) multi-year relationships (during a students' time in middle and high school choir); and (b) the possibility for relationships to evolve into relational bonds reflective of mentor-mentee or family-like dynamics. I discuss findings related to those two subthemes below.

Multi-Year Relationships

Stephanie and MRHS student participants identified their multi-year history as influential to the strength of the teacher-student relationship in the MRHS choir room. Specifically, Stephanie felt that her position as a middle and high school choir teacher in Maplebrook allowed her a unique opportunity to develop relationships with students over multiple years. Stephanie explained that, depending upon when a student joins choir in Maplebrook, and which specific ensembles they audition into at MRHS, students have the potential to work with her for a span of one to seven years. For Stephanie, this multi-year potential represented a certain relational responsibility that she took very seriously—and which she indicated stemmed back to her time teaching elementary general music:

> Stephanie: I realized that if I didn't form a relationship with someone in first grade, I was still going to be with them for a number of years afterwards. I could either make or break their school day—make or break their love of music. And I just decided which side I wanted to be on.
>
> Sean: And what side did you want to be on?
>
> Stephanie: I wanted to be on the side that gave students success. I wanted to be the class that kids couldn't wait to get to, the class that brought kids in the door. (Interview 3)

In the MRHS student focus group, all but one of the nine student participants had been enrolled in choir with Stephanie since middle school. When I first asked MRHS student participants to describe their perceptions of Stephanie, many students were quick to acknowledge their multi-year history with her as an important factor in their relationship:

> When I'm with Ms. Johnson, I feel like I'm a lot less isolated than when I'm in any other class because I've been in [choir] for years, ever since I was in sixth grade…So, when you're doing that for years, you form a certain bond. (Student Focus Group 1)

Hearing this comment, another student participant offered a nod of agreement, and then offered the following:

> She’s not like the other teachers. But I also think that that comes with the job that she has...you transfer from middle school to high school still knowing the same teacher…she puts in a lot of the effort that not many other teachers do because they know that you're not coming back next year to their specific class. (Student Focus Group 1)

A third student leaned into the circle and placed their hands on their knees before saying: “She's literally watched me grow up” (Student Focus Group 1). These comments display that multiple MRHS student participants were aware that Stephanie had been part of their ‘growing up’ process—particularly throughout their middle and high school years—and that this history together contributed to a unique relational bond, especially when compared to other teachers. As described below, for many MRHS student participants, and Stephanie as well, this dimension of longevity led to relationships that reflected bonds with a mentor or family member.

Role as Mentor and Family Member

Reflecting the student comments above, Stephanie expressed “the joy” of multi-year relationships with students that allowed her to be alongside them as they grow up (Interview 1). Stephanie defined this opportunity as a “privilege,” which in turn, she explained impacted her own perception of relationships with many students as being similar to that of a family member (Interview 1). For example, Stephanie explained that her long-term presence in Maplebrook—both as a teacher and resident—led to significant time spent with students across multiple birthdays and notable moments in their lives, a relational history she believed contributed toward a familial sense of connection: “They become like nieces and nephews,” she shared. “I know their favorite foods. I know who their favorite artists are, and I know what they don't like. It's like an aunt, niece, and nephew kind of relationship, which is wonderful” (Interview 1). Multiple student participants described their rapport with Stephanie as similarly special and explained that they look to her as an important figure in their lives. One student participant likened her relationship with Stephanie as akin to that of a mentor:

> Having the same choir director for so long, you get past the teacher relationship. You have other teachers for one year, once a day, and then you say 'Bye'…With Ms. Johnson, it's really nice—she ends up taking more of a mentor position where she's not just your teacher, she's someone that you can actually go to for guidance. Someone who's actually there to help you and will have that time because you've known her for seven years. (Student Focus Group 1)

Another student described their relationship with Stephanie as similar to that of a family member because Stephanie had been present for the arch of their teenage ages—from when they were "a little more annoying and insufferable in middle school" to their present-day self (Student Focus Group 1). Even student participants who decided not to enroll in choir for a semester, or who had Stephanie's colleague as a choir teacher for a year or more, mentioned that returning to Stephanie's classroom reignited a certain layer of relational comfort with Stephanie herself: "…even though there were two years apart, it was like coming back to the same family sense of understanding" (Student Focus Group 1).

Throughout our conversations, Stephanie shared stories that further brought to life her presence as a pseudo-family member in many of her students' lives. For example, Stephanie described leading fundraising efforts to help two students attend a summer music camp or using her discount at a local music store to purchase a ukulele for a student's use at home. She also shared that she tried to be present for students during difficult times in their lives—such as when visiting students or students' family members at the hospital or attending the funerals of students' loved ones. Further, Stephanie described going above and beyond in her efforts to be available to her students, even outside of class time. She acknowledged that due to the unique nature of a thriving secondary choral program's event calendar (filled with afternoon/evening rehearsals, off-campus performances or field trips, and group travel), her students have her cell phone number. In addition to recognizing the logistical sensibility of this decision in the context of off-campus choir events, Stephanie believed that providing her phone number conveyed a

different level of trust, presence, and accessibility to her students:

> I willingly give my phone number to my students because if they are in trouble, I want to help them. If they do need something, or if they need to tell me they can't come to rehearsal or a concert, or they have a flat tire or something, I want to know that. (Interview 3)

Related to this choice, during one of our interviews, Stephanie brought up a specific instance when two of her female-identifying students reached out to her via phone in the midst of car trouble while on their way to an off-campus MRHS choir performance in an unfamiliar area. Speaking of the situation, the two students, and her response, Stephanie stated:

> They were terrified. So, they called me. I had them take a selfie of themselves and I sent it to the director of security [of the off-campus performance venue], and I took a picture of him, sent it to the girls, and I said, 'Okay, this is the director of security. He's coming out to get you. So, when you see this man, this is the safe person.' When he got there, they still didn't trust it. So, I called them and I said, 'Okay, I'm going to tell you the answers to some questions that only he would know.' I asked him questions and he answered through the window of the car. I was like, 'This is the right person.' That was an unfortunate incident, but a case where had they not had my cell phone number... But yes, I was able to fix that. (Interview 3)

Stephanie explained that instances such as the scenario described above were not uncommon in her relationships with students. Because of that, she remained adamant in her decision to share her cell phone number and keep communication open with students—especially because she was grateful that students trusted her enough to contact her when they found themselves in challenging situations.

In addition to providing her phone number to students, attending funerals of students' family members, purchasing resources for students, and arranging fundraisers to get students to music-oriented summer camps, Stephanie (and her students) also identified that their teacher-student relationship seemed to take on a more family-like quality because Stephanie developed relationships with students' *actual families*. Stephanie explained that over multiple years "you get to know the family, and you get to know the parents [of students]," (Interview 1). "You get to

know which parents you can count on to support you, which parents want to know if their child just seemed off that day, and what parents you can call for bigger things" (Interview 1). Speaking to this dynamic, a student participant also expressed that his relationship with Stephanie assumed a more familial dynamic because Stephanie had forged a friendly rapport with his parents:

> It's like she meets your parents outside of the concert, she emails them a lot, and then at conferences they just make jokes together and they don't actually talk about you and then they follow each other on Facebook and you know she's [Stephanie] cooking chicken Marsala for dinner tonight. (Student Focus Group 1)

Colleagues of Stephanie's also corroborated her investment in Maplebrook students and families. For example, as I checked in for one of my observations, the MRHS front office manager made a point to share how connected Stephanie is to students and families throughout the school community, a sentiment a nearby guidance office assistant echoed from behind the front desk. Though Stephanie seemed to try to pass off some of the credit for her interpersonal efforts with families to the Maplebrook environment as a whole ("The most important part about Maplebrook is that we really, really strive to have relationships with our families," Interview 1), these colleagues and her students made a point to emphasize Stephanie's unique relational endeavors. "She knows your family. She knows your siblings," one student participant revealed (Student Focus Group 1). Another student noted that their own comfort-level with Stephanie grew when attending their older siblings' choir events as a youngster:

> Even before I had Ms. Johnson myself, I had five plus years where I knew who she was because my sister was talking about her or I was seeing her at my sister's concerts…so Ms. Johnson and I already knew each other when I walked in the door. (Student Focus Group 1)

Fostering a mentor-mentee or family dynamic within the teacher-student relationship also meant that Stephanie's students felt comfortable coming to her in the wake of significant life moments. For example, two student participants (who in the MRHS student focus group shared

that they identified as transgender and non-binary, respectively) mentioned that Stephanie was the second person in their lives that they came out to. When I asked these two students why Stephanie was someone they wanted to share that information with, Dylan, the student who identified as non-binary, replied:

> She was somebody I felt completely comfortable with. She's a really central figure in a lot of our lives, somebody who cares. And she's been so accepting…so having a very safe space and somebody I know who will completely validate my feelings and will be very accepting and accommodating is really nice. (Student Focus Group 2)

Dylan's experience with Stephanie reflects findings outlined in further detail later in this chapter related to Stephanie's presence as an important adult in the lives of students who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Maintaining Ethical Lines. Stephanie acknowledged that she was grateful students like Dylan trust her enough to share such personal details of their lives. That said, Stephanie also acknowledged that she remains attentive to ethical lines when it comes to the type of information students share with her and how she responds. For instance, she explained that if she ever feels that a student shares information that is "too personal," but not related to the student's safety, she will kindly, but firmly, remind them to not share that type of information with her (Interview 3). In instances where students have shared information that might be related to their safety, Stephanie indicated that she always follows up with MRHS guidance counselors or administration. Stephanie described those specific moments as interpersonally delicate because students may perceive her reporting duties as a breach of trust. Still, Stephanie explained that she does her best to convey to students that her care for them is ultimately why she must pass such information along to school staff. As an example, she described her response to a student who once confided in her that they were committing forms of self-harm:

> I told them 'I love you and I want you to trust me, but by law, I have to tell someone that you're hurting yourself. And I don't want that to ruin our relationship, but you're too important to me to not do this.' (Interview 3)

Stephanie acknowledged that in some cases, her duty to report such information has indeed caused a severance in relational trust with certain students. That said, she explained those isolated moments of disconnection have not changed how she ethically responds when students share sensitive information with her. She believed that in most cases, students have understood her obligation to ensure their safety, "especially when it's framed from 'I love you and don't want you to be in pain'" (Interview 3).

Building Relationships with Students

Thus far, I have presented Stephanie's and her students' perspectives regarding the nuanced meaning of their teacher-student relationships. I focused particularly on participants' reflections related to (a) relational longevity between teacher and student cultivated over multiple years together; and (b) perceptions of the teacher-student relationship in the MRHS choir as akin to that of a mentor or family member. Below, I illuminate how Stephanie builds relationships with students in the classroom, specifically focusing on two facets that she and her students identified during data collection: (a) the importance of daily greetings and check-ins; and (b) "reading the room."

The Importance of Daily Greetings and Check-Ins

Over the course of data collection, it became increasingly evident that multi-year relational bonds—often perceived in terms of mentorship and family-like dynamics—were important to Stephanie and MRHS student participants. Still, I was curious to know more about how those relational connections formed. Though Stephanie maintained that her relationships with students often formed over time, she acknowledged that daily points of connection were

essential building blocks to long-term bonds. She explained that many of these relational building blocks were established in daily, intentional acts, such as noticing students as they enter her room:

> I try to make a connection with every kid, every day. I greet them at the door. That's important to me, to greet them at the door, and greet them by name. Or a high five or fist bump. Or I'll say 'Hey, I really like your shoes,' or 'Hey, did you get your hair cut?' Just something that lets them know that I see them. (Interview 1)

During each of my visits to MRHS, I observed Stephanie enacting this commitment. As the first student entered her room, Stephanie would pop up from her desk and move toward the classroom entrance. In a cheerful voice, she would often greet each student by name ("Hey, Alexis!" or "Mark, so great to see you!") and typically follow-up that greeting with personalized questions or comments similar to those outlined in the extended quote above. Students often responded to Stephanie by answering her inquiries, providing a follow-up greeting of their own, and in some cases, a simple head nod or wave. Often, I noticed that as students passed Stephanie post-greeting, their eyes brightened and a smile crossed their face as they walked to their assigned seat. On one occasion, a student entered the room who had been absent for significant period of time and Stephanie exclaimed, "Oh my gosh I missed you SO much!" while throwing her hands up in the air and inviting a hug, which the student quickly accepted. The student then bounced toward their chair, their physical energy appearing effervescent (MRHS Observation 2).

In addition to observing personalized daily greetings as students walked through the door, I also noticed that Stephanie carved out a few minutes (typically 2-3, usually not more than 5) at the beginning of each class period to check-in with students. These check-ins ranged from opportunities for students to share how they had spent Mother's Day, details about their Prom preparations, special events they had attended with friends and family, or stresses about Advanced Placement exams. In one instance, Stephanie used this time to congratulate students

who had participated in a voice studio recital she had attended over the weekend, going through the recital program song by song, naming and complimenting each student for their efforts. As noted in the opening vignette of this chapter, during these check-in moments (no matter their form), Stephanie remained intently focused on students when speaking to them, maintaining eye contact and giving them her full attention. During our interviews, Stephanie explained that these daily moments of relational investment had become a cornerstone of her teaching practice and stem back to a conversation she had during her student teaching experience: "My cooperating teacher said to me ‘If you want to make friends, ask people about themselves. That's their favorite topic’" (Interview 3).

Stephanie explained that her commitment to daily greetings and check-ins with students is a reflection of her cooperating teacher’s advice. She told me that these interpersonal moments ultimately represent an opportunity for her to “meet that person [student] in a common arena” of interest (Interview 1). For example, Stephanie mentioned that when greeting a student at the door or when having a brief conversation with a student before class, she is often able to discover a point of relatability that she can follow-up on the next time she sees them. Furthermore, she believed that connecting through points of relatability can be especially meaningful when attempting to connect with students who are shy or who are less inclined to automatically share information about themselves. Stephanie explained that this is an approach she often shares with her own student teachers, especially as they are first learning how to form bonds with students. She told me that she often provides the following advice to her student teachers regarding how to initially form connections with students:

> Whether it's TV shows or video games or YouTube videos or TikTok, whatever, I’ll tell them [student teachers] to find something. If [a student] mentions that they listen to a band, go home and listen to the band and come back and say, ‘You mentioned that. I listened to them. I really like this song.’ But I think if you always wait for the student to

> make that move, that's not going to happen. You're the adult. You're the most flexible one in the room. You're the one who has to initiate and continue that relationship and honor how uncomfortable they [students] might be during that day. If you have the opportunity to create a place where they are comfortable, why wouldn't you? (Interview 3)

MRHS student participants expressed that they, too, feel closer to Stephanie because they are aware that she knows—and is interested in—details of their everyday lives. "Ms. Johnson keeps up with what you're doing outside of her class," one student shared. "She's genuinely interested. If you have a job, she knows what it is. She wants to know about it" (Student Focus Group 1). Another student noted that Stephanie's interest in them and their lives separated Stephanie from other teachers:

> I just feel like Ms. Johnson is so human, she's not like other teachers. She's relatable. You talk to her and she responds. She's a typical human being. Other teachers almost seem like they're reading off a script when talking to you. But [Stephanie] has connections with you emotionally and about regular everyday life, unlike other teachers. (Student Focus Group 1)

This student acknowledgement—that Stephanie seems to not 'read off a script' when connecting with her students—reflects comments shared by Stephanie above (such as the advice she gives her own student teachers) related to tailoring interactions with individual students based on knowledge of them as people.

I asked Stephanie to describe why she chose to express such an interest in her students' everyday lives. I was especially curious to know her rationale for extending a relational bridge to students on a daily basis—whether through greetings at the door or devoting class time to check-ins—given that in many high school music classrooms, it may be more common for a teacher to emerge from their office just before the start of class and begin instruction without any greeting or direct interaction with students. Stephanie explained that committing to these interpersonal moments was important to her as a person, helped her get to know her students, provided opportunities to convey care, and allowed her to "take the temperature of the room"—an

approach described below (Interview 3).

Taking the Temperature of the Room

Stephanie employed the terms “taking the temperature of the room” and “reading the room” to describe an important aspect of her relational approach when assessing students’ dispositions and wellbeing on a given day (Interview 3). She explained that sometimes “reading the room” or “taking the temperature of the room” entailed “watching students’ body language, and when you say hello to them, [assessing] how they answer” (Interview 3). She went on to explain that she then follows-up based on students’ responses:

> If I notice a kid is off, I always stop and say, ‘Hey, is everything okay? You don't seem like yourself.’ And then, ‘Is there anything that I can do?’ And then, ‘I'm here for you if you need me.’ (Interview 3)

Speaking to these types of interactions, a student participant noted that their relational longevity with Stephanie often seemed to contribute to Stephanie’s attunement to student needs and her overall capacity to notice when students do not seem like themselves:

> She [Stephanie] has that different opportunity to really get to know all of her choir students, which helps in the way that she can tell when there's something wrong with her students or she can tell when her students need a little pick me up or when we need to have our Circle Time [described later in this chapter] that we desperately need. (Student Focus Group 1)

During one observation at MRHS, I watched Stephanie notice and respond to a student who seemed disconnected. At the time, most of her students were in one corner of the choir room enjoying celebratory cake in commemoration of their student teacher’s last day. Amidst the celebration, I watched as Stephanie noticed one student sitting by themselves, arms crossed, head down. Stephanie walked over, sat next to the student, and spoke with them. I do not know what they spoke about, but after Stephanie stepped away, the student seemed to regain a bit of energy and ultimately joined the rest of the class in the cake celebration.

Stephanie explained to me that “reading the room” or “taking the temperature of the room” was an essential component of her larger effort to gain an understanding of her students’ wellbeing and state of mind. She explained that this knowledge not only informs how she supports students relationally, but how she may need to adjust her choral instruction. Stephanie felt that the combination of daily greetings, check-ins, and “reading the room” are often her best indicators for knowing how to provide effective and meaningful choral music instruction to her students on a given day. For example, she explained that sometimes, her responses involve an extension of her daily check-in process:

> Sometimes I’ll do a Word Du Jour[1] or start the class with a Rose and a Thorn.[2] It might take five minutes, but that five minutes will make the next 55 minutes effective or not effective. If it's a low energy class, if they're sad, I try and get them moving. Or I try and do funny and goofy things that they don't expect. Something that's completely off the wall so that they're not focused on whatever it was that was really bothering them. (Interview 3)

When I followed-up this answer by asking Stephanie how she might respond on days when students had high amounts of energy (that perhaps needed to be focused for instruction), she described the following potential response:

> I'd probably take advantage of some of that energy, but then I'd also kind of reign that energy into some concentrated thinking, capitalize on that excitement. Sight-reading maybe, focusing on the text, focusing on color and emotion and sound that comes with the text. (Interview 3)

Relatedly, student participants also noted that Stephanie is “aware that they [they] are humans with feelings and lives” and quick to adjust her lesson plans in response to their needs (Student Focus Group 1). “If she sees that we're having a bad day, she's not going to be like, ‘Well, we need to work on our music’” one student shared. “She'll sacrifice the music. She’ll put

[1] Stephanie explained that ‘Word Du Jour’ is an activity where students share a word that describes their day and how they're feeling.
[2] Roses and Thorns is an activity wherein a facilitator asks participants to share a positive aspect of their day (a ‘Rose’) and/or a challenging or negative aspect of their day (a ‘Thorn’).

our mental health before what we work on [in class]" (Student Focus Group 1). Stephanie similarly recognized that she will pivot her instructional plans based on what she notices when "taking the temperature of the room:" "It helps in knowing whether you need to do a little buildup before they can be vulnerable to sing" (Interview 3).

Implications of Trauma. In our third interview, I asked Stephanie to share a bit more about her approach to "taking the temperature" or "reading the room." In this conversation, she linked the act of "reading the room" to her own experience as an individual who experienced trauma during her life. At various points during our three conversations, Stephanie shared with me that she is "a child of trauma," and that throughout her childhood, her father was "a sociopath" who "hurt her physically" and that as a result, she "grew up afraid all the time" (Interview 3). She acknowledged that the implications of that trauma still deeply impact her and that her experiences with trauma have been a factor throughout her teaching career (Interview 1). For example, Stephanie described how her own trauma has informed the way she looks at, acknowledges, and manages instances with students who may be experiencing aspects of trauma in their own lives. Stephanie suggested that "reading the room" in the MRHS choir room was "a trauma response, because kids from trauma have to be able to read the room because that'll tell them whether or not they're safe" (Interview 3). Stephanie expressed that "reading the room" not only aided the processing of her own feelings and surroundings in a given moment within the MRHS choir room, but helped her to remain open to what her students may be experiencing as well. She also explained that sometimes a shared frame of reference with regard to trauma has informed how she responds to—and connects with—certain students:

> The trauma I do get. The being afraid, I do understand that. And I understand a lot of the safety mechanisms that kids with trauma have to protect themselves. And humor, of course, is a big one. And I'm probably funny because of my upbringing. And so, I am able to make inroads to kids that I can't identify with other ways, but I can perhaps

identify with them through trauma. (Interview 3)

Stephanie felt that her personal experience navigating trauma provided her with a certain form of attunement when supporting her students' needs through various challenges of their own. At this point in her life, Stephanie said that she now views her own trauma as a "superpower" (Interview 3). That superpower, she believed, allows her to "see who needs my love," especially during a time "in education where so many kids are hurting" (Interview 3).

A moment from my second MRHS observation, as well as comments shared by student participants during an MRHS focus group, may point to the impact of Stephanie's attention to implications of trauma in the classroom. During my second observation, one of Stephanie's students, Ren, entered the room at the start of class and gave Stephanie a hug, saying, "Sorry for being weird at the concert last night" (MRHS Observation 2). Stephanie acknowledged she had noticed that Ren did not seem themselves at the concert, then asked Ren how they were doing that morning. Ren proceeded to explain that they "had not heard one nice word or positive affirmation from my family" before the concert (MRHS Observation 2). Stephanie asked if there was anything she could do for Ren in that moment. "No, but thanks," Ren replied before taking their seat in the choir (MRHS Observation 2). In a subsequent student focus group conversation, Ren shared the following when I asked the group to share what comes to mind when they think of Stephanie:

> I have a hard time interacting with people. I have really bad social anxiety and I'm also really paranoid. But Ms. Johnson, she reaches out to me and she treats me like a normal person. Most people, if I do something weird, they'll look at me like I'm weird and that makes me uncomfortable. I love Ms. Johnson though. She's weird in the way that I'm weird. If I walk into class and I'm not having the best day or I'm not feeling too good or something bad happened, I know that Ms. Johnson is just going to be Ms. Johnson. She's going to be weird, and make weird jokes, but in a loving way. (Student Focus Group 1)

This quote from Ren pointed to Stephanie's efforts to be open and responsive to students who

may be dealing with internal and external struggles related to their wellbeing. Ren also acknowledged that perceiving Stephanie as someone who was as equally “weird” as them, and who made “weird jokes,” helped them feel more comfortable in the MRHS choir room. Ren’s comments also aligned with reflections shared by Stephanie when she acknowledged that humor is part of her own response to working through implications of trauma and when connecting with students who may be experiencing similar challenges in their lives.

Though not necessarily related to implications of trauma, another student participant, Alexis, shared that she appreciated Stephanie’s sensitivity when she was dealing with challenging emotional moments in her life:

> If I'm having a difficult time or get really overwhelmed, [Stephanie] knows that sometimes I'll have to leave the classroom or just sit down for a bit. And it doesn't happen very often, but when it does happen, she doesn't draw attention to it or make it a big deal, which every single other teacher does. So, choir is pretty much the only time when I actually feel comfortable actually doing something about being in pain. (Student Focus Group 2)

Alexis’ and Ren’s reflections, though not linked to any formal documentation of trauma, may represent meaningful links between Stephanie’s life experience and her practice. Specifically, these students’ stories may reflect components of Stephanie’s discussion regarding how aspects of her own trauma informed facets of her approach to teaching, as well as her interactions with—and responses to—students.

Extending Knowledge of Students into the Classroom

Thus far, I have presented how Stephanie cultivated relationships with her students in daily (greetings at the door, check-ins, taking the temperature of the room) and long-term (mentor and family dynamics over multiple years) approaches. Stephanie believed that the relational foundations she established in her classroom informed how she ultimately facilitated a

supportive and empowering choral music learning environment for her students: “It starts and ends with me, right? How I navigate my relationships with them, how I include them in decisions, how I make decisions about the group…it goes all the way back to that relationship with a teacher” (Interview 2). As presented in the reflections throughout this chapter thus far, while Stephanie’s navigation of relationships with students centered on forming an understanding of her students as people—she subsequently incorporated that knowledge into the fabric of her choral pedagogy. Stephanie expressed that her efforts to know her students opened further opportunities to weave their humanity into instruction in ways that “happen organically” (Interview 1). Speaking to this intersection between knowing students and the work of the choral classroom, she shared: “When I've had instructors who acknowledge me and the things that are important to me, I am far more engaged and far more likely to listen to what they have to say because I feel seen” (Interview 1).

Stephanie explained that, for her, paths to acknowledging students, and what is important to them, involved finding ways to lean into their unique qualities as individuals and then draw those qualities into her teaching:

> It involves just trying to make everybody an expert on something. Sometimes we'll have a student who is super well-dressed and when it’s time to pick uniforms we'll say, ‘I think you should really be part of this decision because you're so stylish’…Just trying to make that bridge to every kid, regardless of what it is that they bring to the table. Even if they're comical, or if it is that they always follow directions, or always have their stuff, or they're always on time. (Interview 1)

Stephanie went on to describe additional examples of extending knowledge of students into the choral rehearsal process: “I have a great watercolor artist in the room and I try to talk with that child, and then the class together, about painting and all of those analogies that a choral director uses” (Interview 1). She also mentioned that she has a student who is interested in the Civil War and that once when preparing a piece of music from that era, she asked the student to share their

expertise with the class. Regardless of the entry point, Stephanie said she attempts to consistently center the experiences of her students in the musical/vocal work they explore in the classroom: "I try to find the things in each kid that makes us a better whole, and use it to remind us all that we're very different, but that we're coming together to make this beautiful thing" (Interview, 1).

Summary

The notion of "coming together" to the make the "beautiful thing"—choral music—in many ways exemplified the core of Stephanie's approach to building informed and meaningful relationships with students on the path toward communal choral music-making at MRHS. Thus far, I have presented a combination of reflections from Stephanie and her students, as well as details from fieldnotes, that illuminate Stephanie's approach to fostering relationships with individual students. I presented data that reflected aspects of relational longevity, forming relationships with students reflective of a mentor/mentee or family relationship, and daily greetings at the door and check-ins that were central in Stephanie's attempts to know her students as people. I also presented Stephanie's approach to "taking the temperature" of her classroom in order to gauge her students' wellbeing. Stephanie asserted that her approach to "taking the temperature" of the room or "reading the room" was linked to her own experiences with trauma. She noted that this approach helped her develop a better understanding of her students' emotional, mental, and psychological wellbeing on a given day. Stephanie further explained that the information gained when "reading the room" often informed future interpersonal and instructional decisions in the classroom. Stephanie also stated that there are certain students with whom she can empathically identify with through their shared experience of trauma. In the next section, I will discuss how Stephanie builds upon her knowledge of—and relationships with—students to weave together a vibrant sense of community amongst students

in the MRHS choir classroom.

A Legacy of Community at Meadow River High School

Stephanie's investment in relationships not only informed her one-on-one interactions with students, but contributed to the greater environment she sought to co-cultivate with students. Throughout each of my four observations at MRHS, I viewed a choral learning atmosphere based in a thriving sense of community. While Stephanie was in many ways the figurehead of this community, data suggested that students were empowered and active agents in the co-creation of a shared sense of community in the MRHS choral classroom space. Subthemes related to the legacy of community in the MRHS choir included: (a) MRHS choir as a family (rooted in multiple years of shared legacy and traditions); and (b) cultivating a musical community rooted in student agency and support of each other.

MRHS Choir as a Family

At the start of my first MRHS student focus group, I asked student participants to share what came to mind when they think about choir at MRHS. One student participant said, "a family that enjoys singing together" (Student Focus Group 1). Another student shared, "I think of a family that likes to sing together and work together to make beautiful music" (Student Focus Group 1). A third student described the MRHS choral program as a "puzzle" and that it is "cool to find your puzzle piece in the mix of the culture" (Student Focus Group 1). When I asked Stephanie to tell me how she developed a sense of community among students in the choral ensemble, she identified the beginning of the school year as a crucial starting point:

> My primary goal in that first few weeks is for them to get to know each other and then to trust each other, and for them to trust me. So we do a lot of name games. We do a lot of get-to-know you games. We do a lot of goofy singing. I wouldn't say choral singing, but we do rounds, folk songs with games that go with them, the *Cup* Song, and just things

> that get them having fun with each other and making music. (Interview 1)

One student supported this point in our first student focus group: “Ms. Johnson is building a relationship with you from the first day of class,” they shared. “She made it not seem like it was not going to be hard to fit in or be part of the team. It was just really easy to find your place” (Student Focus Group 1).

Stephanie explained that merging getting-to-know-you activities with informal music-making opportunities is an essential component to developing community within her choral ensembles early in the year. Examples she shared included playing music like Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody* and encouraging students to be “silly” as they sing along, karaoke sessions on Fridays, and facilitating class activities like Music Fests. Stephanie told me that Music Fests—a tradition she starts with students in her middle choir school classes and carries on throughout high school—involves providing students the opportunity to perform a song of their choice in front of the class for compliments only. Stephanie explained that activities like Music Fests provide relaxed musical and performance opportunities that also instill social/interpersonal foundations for what it means to be a supportive peer and audience member. Speaking about Music Fests, Stephanie described the following:

> You can go up in front of the class and the only thing we're going to do is be an awesome audience and clap for you. And then people can raise their hands and you get three compliments, only compliments, and so we talk about not backhanded compliments… and if you don't have a sincere compliment you don't have to give one, you just sit there and be a nice audience. We practice that. (Interview 2)

During one of my observations, I witnessed a Music Fest with the MRHS A Cappella Choir the day after their Spring concert. As I sat next to Stephanie during the Music Fest, she pointed out the students’ excitement, noting that part of their excitement during Music Fests is likely that the activity represents an entity many students have shared together since middle school choir.

During this specific Music Fest, Stephanie's student teacher sat at the computer taking song requests from MRHS students who then hopped up on stage individually or in small groups to perform repertoire that primarily spanned musical theater, movie, and pop genres. Students in the 'audience' casually sat, feet propped up on chairs, sipping their morning coffees and gleefully cheering on their friends [I should note that during this time, students were not engaged in side conversations nor was there a phone in sight]. It was evident that not only was the protocol of the Music Fest understood and adhered to, but students felt genuinely comfortable performing for one another, even as they missed entrances, forgot words, or ran out of breath (MRHS Observation 4).

Multiple Years with MRHS Choral Peers

Given Stephanie's placement at both the middle and high school, her decisions to introduce activities like the Music Fest and other community-based experiences at the middle-school level are intertwined with her hope that such experiences will inform student interactions and the learning environment at the high school-level. Reflecting the hopes of their choir teacher, MRHS student participants spoke a great deal about the impact of building a learning space together with peers over multiple years. "I think there's something really cool about being in choir with the same group of people every year," one student shared (Student Focus Group 2). Another student followed-up saying that in addition to many shared years together, being with the same group of peers within the setting of a choral ensemble seemed to further deepen their relationships:

> I know the people here [MRHS choir] more than I know other people because this class is very collaborative. You have to work together with other people and so you get to know them better than in a class where you would do most of the work yourself. In here you have to reach out to other people and have them help you. So, we connect. (Student Focus Group 2)

Other students pointed to the potency of shared memories and experiences as meaningful in building a lineage of shared community together in the MRHS choirs. One student explained that "there's certain memories that you share, like when something funny happened…so then you form these little inside jokes and you can always look back and be like, 'Oh remember when this happened?' And that's just fun" (Student Focus Group 2). Another student described the unique synergistic nature of learning and performing certain repertoire with a group of people "that we all either hated or loved as a collective" and subsequently having the capacity to recollect or relive that shared musical experience together again in the future (Student Focus Group 2). This prompted a different student participant to jump into the conversation to say that they recently heard that the current Maplebrook middle school choir students performing the piece *Rattling Bog,* a piece that many student focus group participants had also performed with Stephanie when they were enrolled in middle school choir. At the mention of this piece, the entire student focus group erupted in giggles that quickly turned into an impromptu sing-a-long of *Rattling Bog* as the students musically recalled their own memories singing the piece together in middle school. This point of data exemplifies how repertoire selection in the choral classroom can come to represent—and enliven—a sense of unity, community, and belonging felt amongst a group of individuals, particularly those with a shared history, such as the students in the MRHS choral program.

Traditions and Legacy

This student excitement expressed surrounding *Rattling Bog* perhaps linked to a deeper dimension of collective experience discussed by Stephanie and her students: a notion of tradition and legacy. Throughout data collection, it became clear that this feeling of an extended shared history seemed to enliven the sense of community experienced by Stephanie and her students at

MRHS. Stephanie explained that a sense of tradition was paramount in the MRHS choir program and manifested in a number of ways. Examples she provided included featuring a certain song in a concert (such as the MRHS Alma Mater at the end of every concert and inviting alumni to join on stage) or including a specific song as a rite of passage in an ensemble (like *Rattling Bog* during middle school). Stephanie explained that traditions and legacy also evolved through an assortment of annual in-class or extra-curricular events. For example, she shared that a sense of community tied the MRHS choral program developed through annual traditions that included choir trips (nationally and internationally), an Ugly Sweater Holiday Music Tour to Maplebrook elementary schools, and a Valentines Day bonding event between Maplebrook choir eighth graders and members of the MRHS high school choirs. Stephanie firmly believed that traditions like these directly contributed toward a deeper meaning of what the MRHS choral community stood for: “legacy” (Interview 2). She also believed that events like the Ugly Sweater Holiday Music Tour to elementary schools are often the reasons some students stay in, and even join, choir. She alluded to this when telling me that sometimes students will join the Maplebrook choral program because of a specific tradition or activity: “They may say to me, ‘I want to be in that choir group because of…” a certain annual event or tradition, such as those outlined above (Interview 2).

The MRHS Choir Banquet. One of the events that Stephanie felt inspired a sustained legacy and membership in the MRHS choral community was the MRHS Choir Banquet. Stephanie told me about the MRHS Choir Banquet when talking about seminal examples of community and legacy in the MRHS choral program. She described the Choir Banquet as a special, end-of-the-year event, held outside as a picnic with students and their families. Stephanie explained that the Choir Banquet is an event where students receive choir-related honors (Solo

and Ensemble/Honors Chorus pins, special plaques, choir varsity letters), performed the song *Maybe Someday* (every year, with Seniors performing their own verse), and Seniors are recognized with flowers and personalized tributes from peers:

> Families get together and sit in little circles. And then after dessert is served, all the underclassmen sign up for a senior and they give them a small gift and then they talk about why that Senior was important to them. Every single Senior is honored and recognized, but by their peers. I like that because *that's* legacy [emphasis placed by Stephanie]. (Interview 3)

Stephanie’s eyes brightened when she emphasized the word “legacy.” When I asked her to frame her perception of “legacy,” Stephanie said the notion centered around getting students to think about “How does this last forever? How are [they] making an imprint that's going to leave a mark?” (Interview 3). The “this” is the deeper meaning behind the MRHS choral program. She went on to say that the many traditions identified above help to strengthen the sense of legacy felt amongst the MRHS choral community, which is why she believed they are so important:

> I think we all want to matter. I think we all want to have been looked at as someone good and significant, at least I do….So when we have those traditions, when we all know the same song, when we've all been together in a foreign country and we've experienced the same thing, those things, I think, fundamentally change us. And they fill up all those puzzle pieces that make you your adult self, that give you that window into who you're going to be…[and] when they go off to college they know that there's a whole group of people there who are cheering for them. We call our graduated members on their birthday and sing *Happy Birthday* to them. Or sometimes they'll call us during class, or they'll just show up. That’s because they know they were a part of something and we know that they were there. And that the kids sitting in my chairs now are there because of you, and then it's going to happen where the kids who are in the chairs now are going to be you later and someone else is going to be here… I think that's part of the tradition and legacy. (Interview 3)

I had the opportunity to see a layer of that legacy come to life during one of my observations. I was present in the MRHS classroom on the day that Stephanie began to teach *Maybe Someday* in advance of the annual Choir Banquet performance. As the music was passed out, student faces began to light up as they scanned the title, almost like seeing an old friend

again. Stephanie then focused the conversation toward the importance of *Maybe Someday* as a MRHS Choir Banquet tradition that spanned back to her predecessor. She framed the piece as both a celebration of the Senior class and their leadership, as well as a "passing of the torch" to underclassmen (MRHS Observation 3). Once Stephanie began to rehearse the piece, and got to the verse that only Seniors sing, I witnessed Seniors across the room look at each and other smile, seemingly beaming with pride as it was now, finally, 'their turn' to sing the Seniors-only verse. One Senior even called from their chair: "Wow, it's finally our time to sing this part, I can't believe it" (MRHS Observation 3).

In the sections above, I outlined some of the ways that Stephanie facilitates a sense of community with and among her students, particularly through sustaining certain traditions and cultivating a shared understanding of the MRHS choral program's legacy. That said, Stephanie also described her level of intention when ensuring that the MRHS community is not just conceived in her vision, but co-created with her students. Details regarding those efforts are shared below.

Cultivating a Musical Community Rooted in Student Agency and Support

Below, I present reflections from Stephanie and MRHS student participants regarding the ways that students have a voice in the MRHS choral community. Based on data, these findings are organized in relation to (a) student agency; and (b) student relational support for each other.

Student Agency

Throughout my interviews with Stephanie, observations at MRHS, and during student focus groups, I learned that students were active in shaping the social and musical fabric of the MRHS choral classroom community. "I think giving the students a choice and a voice is important," Stephanie said in our first interview. She then added: "We're a team…it's their

choir." In addition to the previously identified moments where Stephanie described opening up her classroom up to student perspectives (such as during daily check-ins), she explained that she is also adamant about ensuring that students are directly involved in the core aspects of music making, music selection, rehearsal procedures, and the facilitation of peer support systems:

> I try really hard to be part of the team, and not have my classroom be teacher-centered. On Wednesdays we have sectionals. We have section leaders. [Students] lead the rehearsals. They get to have input and suggestions toward things that we're doing. I record them and they make feedback. We try things a bunch of different ways, and then I let them decide what they think is the right way. I guess it's more of a team approach, a more constructivist approach to being a conductor or being a music teacher than being a conductor. (Interview 1)

Stephanie also explained that she actively involves students in discussions regarding how many songs to prepare during each concert cycle, musical decisions (related to phrasing, dynamics, and tempo), and in facilitating interpersonal elements of the rehearsal process. I noticed this student-led learning dynamic during each of my observations at MRHS, noting that student questions, observations, and suggestions were as—if not more—frequent during instruction than comments from Stephanie. Speaking to this collective learning dynamic within their ensemble, one MRHS student shared: "It feels like more of a team effort and less of a director/choir thing" (Student Focus Group 2).

Stephanie told me that students are also actively involved in the repertoire selection process: "I'm not the one being vulnerable—they are," Stephanie explained. "So, they should get to have a say" (Interview 1). For example, Stephanie explained that before a concert cycle, she will bring a collection of pieces to each ensemble and give them the opportunity to consider each selection, how songs might pair together, and whether or not songs seem musically or developmentally appropriate for the ensemble. If students collectively express an interest in different and/or additional repertoire options, "I'll come back the next day with more," Stephanie

said (Interview 1). Stephanie discussed a specific example of this type of exchange when describing an instance when one of her African American students sent her an email on the same day that Stephanie first presented an African American Spiritual to one of her ensembles as an option for an upcoming concert:

> She [the student] sent me an email and said, ‘I don't want to sing a slave song with white girls.’ So the next day I collected the song and I wrote back to her and I said, ‘First of all, thank you for trusting me. Second, I'm going to collect the song the next day because you are more important to me than any one song. And three, I am sorry I don't know enough yet to know that that would've bothered you. So thank you for helping me become smarter about that.’ I know that there are going to be things that I miss. And so I try to be aware when someone says, ‘Hey, this makes me uncomfortable…’ Earlier in my career, I probably would've said, ‘Nope, that's what we're doing. I'm the director and I know what's best for us.’ (Interview 1)

Stephanie explained that after that email correspondence with her student, and choosing to remove the song from the ensemble’s repertoire, the student sent a follow-up email in which they wrote: "Thank you. I didn't know you would do that." Stephanie indicated that she responded to the student email and said: "You mean everything to me. Of course I would do that" (Interview 1). Stephanie went on to say that she hoped moments like the scenario described above show her students that she is committed to them and their perspectives: “I’d like to think that builds my credibility with them about how I see them individually and care about them individually to be part of the team. At least I hope that they see that” (Interview 1).

In the second student focus group, multiple students did in fact speak about Stephanie’s commitment to their perspectives and involving them in decisions regarding the choral ensemble. Student participants mentioned that Stephanie is especially invested in engaging them in discussions regarding the intersections between instruction and sociocultural implications—and that Stephanie consistently takes student feedback and makes adjustments based on student perspectives. A Black student participant, Trina, shared that Stephanie “tries her best to educate

herself" with regard to issues of race and presents herself as someone who is open to student feedback, so that in the future "she can know how to approach situations properly" (Student Focus Group 2). A different student shared that Stephanie is "very accommodating" and will "definitely take criticism if it's needed" (Student Focus Group 2). Dylan, a student who in the first focus group shared that they are non-binary, explained that they were grateful for Stephanie's recent response to student feedback regarding the normative gender paradigms reflected in their Treble ensemble's performance uniforms:

> Dylan: This year she [Stephanie] actually asked us, 'Do you want to change the uniform so it's not just the dresses? So, we can wear what we're most comfortable in rather than be forced to all just wear those unflattering dresses.
>
> Sean: And did y'all make the change?
>
> Dylan: Yeah, we decided as a group and made the change. Now it's just concert black…and that's why we did make that change, to something that everyone can be comfortable in. It was so sweet of her [Stephanie]. (Student Focus Group 2)

In one of our interviews, Stephanie also brought up the collaborative decision to change the uniforms in her treble ensemble:

> I have a treble choir, and not everyone identifies as a cis female, and we have these gowns. And I said to them, 'I'm feeling a little weird about the dresses and here's why. I don't know that I'm providing a uniform to you that represents everybody. What do you think about that? There's no wrong answer.' We had a great, great conversation and we wear concert black now. They're going to sing better if they're comfortable. (Interview 3)

These reflections from Trina, Dylan, and Stephanie, as well as the additional example provided above (removing an African American Spiritual after an African American student expressed discomfort), emphasized critical intersections in Stephanie's practice. Specifically, this data highlight intersections between Stephanie's investment in supporting student agency, involving students in a variety of decisions in the classroom, and her commitment to increasingly broadening her understanding of sociopolitical issues in ways that shows students her desire to

learn from them and create learning spaces that reflect—and are supportive of—their varied identities.

Student Support of Each Other

Interviews, student focus groups, and observations also permitted me to witness that the MRHS choral community was infused with students' support of each other. Though committed to co-cultivating a sense of community alongside her students, aspects of Stephanie's teaching philosophy and pedagogy established that the sustainment of a nurturing and supportive learning environment *amongst* students was paramount. "There's very much a sense that we're all connected, and if one of us is hurting, it's time to step in," Stephanie asserted. She elaborated, explaining that examples of 'stepping in' have included in-school moments like rallying around a student who seems sad during class as well as out-of-school moments like when the ensemble sang at the funeral of one of their classmate's mother. "They [students] are valued by their classmates, they're valued by their teacher," she affirmed (Interview 1). In addition to these broader expressions of communal support, Stephanie felt that students share a sense of support with her and each other because "they're cheered on for the things that they like and the people they are" (Interview 1). Stephanie was quick to mention that she is "not an outlier" at MRHS when it came to a commitment to inclusive and supporting classrooms: "I'm not special in that way. That's what Maplebrook does, that's how Maplebrook groomed me. That's the expectation—if you can help, you will help" (Interview 1). She expressed that facilitating her classroom upon supportive and inclusive principles was easier because her philosophy aligns with the greater environment of the school. Further, she believed the wider school philosophy also contributed to her students' readiness to support each other as well.

Circle Time. During MRHS focus groups, as student participants relayed perceived

channels of support between themselves and Stephanie—and amongst each other—one specific activity was mentioned frequently: Circle Time. Circle Time was discussed so often in our student focus groups that in my final interview with Stephanie, I asked her to tell me a bit more about the genesis behind the activity. Stephanie acknowledged that Circle Time was often the result of "taking the temperature of the room" at the beginning of class. She described Circle Time as an opportunity for her to "get out of the way and let them [the students] tell me and each other what their experience is and how they feel" (Interview 3). She went on to say that Circle Time is sometimes planned, but is often an impromptu moment when she and students gather in a circle to share, process, and reflect on a variety of topics from how their day is going to sharing challenging moments from their lives (both personally and on a societal level). Words and phrases used by students to describe Circle Time included "a mental health circle," "an update circle," "an opportunity to feel vulnerable," "a tradition," and an activity that "expands the vulnerability in the classroom as a whole" (Student Focus Group 1). One student participant described Circle Time as the following:

> We sit in a circle and Ms. Johnson will ask us 'What's going on? Is everybody okay? Give us an update.' It's a 'what's going on with your life' type of thing. And she gives us the entire hour to just talk to each other and let it all out. And it's a really safe space to do all of that, which a lot of people actually need. (Student Focus Group 1)

Mirroring her student's perception of Circle Time as a "safe space," Stephanie elaborated upon the trust-based scope that she seeks to weave into the activity:

> I always try and say, 'Whatever we talk about stays here. If you're uncomfortable sharing, you don't have to share. But I think it's important for all of us to know that we're connected to each other and we're not alone.' (Interview 3)

Student participants also shared that Stephanie was intentional about bringing up current local or societal events during Circle Time, especially if they might be impacting students: "She tries her best, especially when there's something going in the world, she tries her best to acknowledge it

and talk about it," explained one student (Student Focus Group 1). Another student, a Black female-identifying student, said that Stephanie will also open space for students to talk about racism and sexism—which she described as especially meaningful.

Two student participants added that they appreciated that Stephanie did not require them to speak during Circle Time if they were not interested or feeling up to it. "She doesn't force you to say anything if you don't want to," one student shared. "She doesn't make a big deal about things if she can tell you don't want to make a big deal about something, which is key as a teacher I think" (Student Focus Group 1). Students also shared that Circle Time topics can be lighthearted as well, ranging from "random funny questions" to questions like "what is your favorite animal?"

Regardless of topic, students expressed that opportunities like Circle Time were important because they did not experience other moments like it throughout their school day. "We need it after going to other classes that are all serious," recognized one participant (Student Focus Group 1). Further, some student participants recognized the power of an activity like Circle Time to strengthen their peer relationships, as well as their understanding of each other:

> [Circle Time] not only allows you to speak about things that are important in your life, it allows people to know things about you that maybe happened before they existed in your life. Maybe it's about something that happened to you when you were five years old that was just so meaningful to you and maybe impacts who you are today and now everyone gets to know that and we all get you and know you who you are on a far deeper level. (Student Focus Group 1)

Similarly, student participants tied the importance of expanded communal/interpersonal knowing during Circle Time to the choral music work they embark upon together during class:

> Circle Time changes the vulnerability in the classroom as a whole. You build relationships with people that you probably wouldn't have…and that definitely does help with the whole 'sound thing' because it's like you want to make music with people that you know and like. (Student Focus Group 1)

Similarly, another student shared that "when you get to know each other in a Circle Time or just in the class, it's not awkward when there's only three people in vocal sectionals" (Student Focus Group 1).

Echoing her students, Stephanie expressed that the impact of Circle Time is felt not only in the relational moments that students share in the circle, but throughout the span of a school year and beyond:

> I think a lot of good things have come out of [Circle Time]. Sometimes students have shared that someone's being really rough on them or bullying them and they've stuck together with that class member…some of my students have shared some incredibly personal things and I'm always grateful when someone will open up and say something incredibly personal like, 'Sometimes I feel like I don't have any friends.' And then the other kids in the circle will be like, 'Sometimes I feel that way too.' And they'll look at each other like, 'You feel that way?' And then they will be looking at each other like, 'How could you feel that way? You're amazing' (Interview 3). It is so beautiful to be able to stand back and let them speak. (Interview 3)

Circle Time was framed as a meaningful relationship- and community-building activity amongst students in the MRHS choral classroom. Circle Time was described as a place where students feel empowered to share and discuss aspects of their lives with their choral peers. Further, student participants and Stephanie acknowledged that the sense of relationship-building and shared vulnerability expressed during Circle Time often directly extends into students' willingness to confront some of the more vulnerability-laden aspects of their choral music experience.

Support Extended in Learning. As noted above, expressions of support in the MRHS choral community were not just between Stephanie and her students, but deeply felt between MRHS students. Based on student participant reflections, threads of support (whether cultivated during activities like Circle Time or in other instances) seemed to buoy students' co-creation of a choral music learning community rooted in compassion and empowerment. Multiple students

suggested that their shared love for singing and choral music established certain parameters for the type of learning environment they sought to sustain together: “We all joined choir because we love to sing, and we love being part of a group of people who also love to sing,” a student participant affirmed. “When we have that shared interest, it's easier to connect with people and be nicer” (Student Focus Group 2). Student participants also acknowledged that while Stephanie initially establishes the expectation for a supportive learning environment, they, as students, are ultimately responsible for maintaining that environment:

> Ms. Johnson definitely establishes the judgment free zone and controls some of the controllable aspects…but I think that the overall tone of the classroom is ultimately kind of up to us [students]. I think the students are the ones who create that because I mean, there are definitely classes with very positive, supportive teachers but the class has very negative vibes and a really uncomfortable feel. So I think it is having that strong group of people who all are able to understand each other. And I think the music component, the fact that everything is so personal in music actually really helps. (Student Focus Group 2)

Upon hearing this comment, a different student nodded in agreement and stated, “Ms. Johnson is mostly responsible for creating the environment that we're in, but as the people there we need to be willing to participate and do the things” (Student Focus Group 2). “Choir is more than just being good singers,” another student shared. “It's about the chemistry within the group as well” (Student Focus Group 2). This comment prompted one of their peers to again point to the element of multi-year relationships with peers as influential when developing their capacities to know and support each other, musically, socially, and emotionally:

> I think working with the same people for multiple years, you also get to know them better and how they work better. So if you need to help them, it's a lot easier than trying out seven different things. You know, ‘Oh this is what helps this person’ or ‘This is how I can interact with them that'll be the most productive.’ (Student Focus Group 2)

That said, even amidst students’ reflections on the need for their self-led expressions of support and facilitation of learning, they acknowledged that there are still times they rely on

Stephanie’s leadership, especially when it comes to interpersonal challenges or individuals that might negatively impact the greater MRHS community. “Knowing Ms. Johnson, the best singer could audition, but if she knows that they're not a good person, she's not going to let them in the choir,” one student shared. A different student added: “If someone comes into this space and they're causing negativity, we are going to be a worse choir. Of course, Ms. Johnson knows that, and she wouldn't bring someone in if she knew that they were going to harm us” (Student Focus Group 2). In our interviews, Stephanie explained that though she often tries to reduce her authoritative presence in the classroom, there are times when it is important for her to ensure that the supportive climate of the classroom stays intact:

> When I notice somebody is critiquing the group in a way that I think is not productive, I will say, ‘Hey, let me be the bad guy. Let me deliver the bad news’ or ‘Let me be the conductor on this one,’ or ‘It's my turn to lead right now.’ (Interview 1)

Stephanie further acknowledged, that even in those instances, she still strives to maintain an environment that encourages student contributions and feedback. Thus, she shared that sometimes she will respond to a student by saying something along the lines of “Can you share that with me later? I want to know what you have to say, but you're not helping us when you say, ‘That was really out of tune’” (Interview 1).

Ultimately, Stephanie explained that she is committed to sustaining a choral community that is reflective of the students in her room and *co-created by* the students in her room. That community, she believed, relies on students knowing they are seen, validated, and empowered as people and musicians: "You're important. This is where you go, this is your room. It's about you and it's for you” (Interview 3).

Summary

In this section, I described the ways that Stephanie and her students at MRHS co-

cultivated a legacy of community in the choral classroom. At MRHS, the choir community was conceived as a 'family' that built strong relational connections through multiple years together interwoven with traditions and a sense of legacy. In conceiving notions of community, Stephanie and her students spoke about the importance of student leadership, agency, and peer support. Activities like Circle Time were described by participants as crucial moments in the MRHS choir room in which they could strengthen growth-fostering relationships with peers and Stephanie through trust-based and vulnerability-laden interpersonal moments. Further, data suggested that the centering of students' voice and agency in the MRHS choir room led to moments when sociocultural implications related to race, gender, and sexual orientation were foregrounded in relational endeavors. For example, this was demonstrated when Stephanie removed an African American Spiritual from class repertoire in response to an African American students' concern or when engaging students in her Treble Ensemble in discussions about changing the gender binary-based choral uniform so to honor the experiences of students in the choral program who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Bridging Community and Relationships into the Vulnerable Act of Choral Music-Making

Stephanie believed that developing relationships with students, and a sense of community amongst students, directly informed and enhanced the choral music teaching and learning occurring in the MRHS choir room. She expressed that relationship- and community-building were the "inroads to students being able to trust [her], make music, and to try difficult things" in the classroom (Interview 1). Stephanie felt that knowing and supporting her students as people helped her and her students meaningfully traverse the pathways to singing and the exploration of choral repertoire together: "I feel like their heart comes through the door first and their body and their voice comes in second" (Interview 1). This quote reflects a theme that Stephanie centered in

our first interview and that sustained throughout all subsequent conversations: the intersection between student self-efficacy, vulnerability, and the act of singing/choral music. In this section, I detail how Stephanie and her students perceived and navigated the intersections between relationships, community, and the vulnerable nature of singing and choral music. Findings are organized by the following subthemes: (a) vulnerability; (b) making mistakes when learning music and sight-singing; (c) the singing voice (low-risk singing, singing alone, singing with others); and (d) repertoire, text, and emotion (racial and religious implications, emotional implications related to text).

Vulnerability

"Why would you sing and be vulnerable if you're not seen?" Stephanie posed this question in our first interview. Stephanie's reflections on the importance of relationships and community often reflected the emotional root of this question, which in turn served as the underpinnings for how she spoke about guiding her students through vulnerable learning moments in the choral classroom. "I think, at least in my community and with my students and my own personal style of teaching and personality, the vulnerability in singing comes from trust in the relationship first," she shared (Interview 1). For Stephanie, developing a sense of relational trust with and among her students was essential to establishing the trust necessary to pursue vocal and choral music experiences in the high school choral classroom. Thus, Stephanie believed that her commitment to relational endeavors, as outlined thus far in this chapter, directly informed her pedagogical work as a choral music educator: "I think they're more vulnerable for me as singers if they're vulnerable for me as people. And I think it's easier for us to be vulnerable with our speaking voice first, and then vulnerable with our singing voice second" (Interview 1).

When discussing their experiences of singing alone and with others, MRHS student

participants shared that they sometimes felt "fear," "nervous," "anxious," "timid," "frustrated," and "vulnerable" in choir, linking these emotions to their attempts to singing as well as notions of their broader self-efficacy (Student Focus Group 1). One student described their perceptions of this complex intersection:

> I guess when singing becomes such a big part of your life…it kind of means more in a way. It determines a lot of my self-worth. I know if I mess up, there will be the voice in the back of my head for forever telling myself that I'm awful. (Student Focus Group 1)

That said, similar to Stephanie's perspectives on melding relational work with aspects of vulnerability in her classroom, MRHS student participants also noted that through relational experiences with Stephanie and each other, they often felt more comfortable and empowered to maneuver through singing-related vulnerabilities: "I think as a performer, you need to be vulnerable or you're not going to do it. So, you have to be vulnerable," one student shared (Student Focus Group 2). Another student expressed an awareness of feeling less vulnerable when around peers they know and trust: "When you walk through the door, and you are already vulnerable because these people know things about you, then you don't care if you make a mistake singing" (Student Focus Group 1). Similarly, a different student echoed that the climate of the MRHS choir classroom was an important factor in forming their perception of vulnerability and mistakes when singing: "I think when we have a safe environment to fail in, it does help. It really makes it easier to not spiral after you fail" (Student Focus Group 1). These quotes from students, and Stephanie's explicit reflections on vulnerability, amplified an implicit (and sometimes explicit) realization of how the relational work outlined previously in this chapter may be an especially important foundation to the learning experiences in the MRHS choir room. In the passages below, I provide further insight into specific areas of the MRHS classroom where Stephanie and her students explicitly described an awareness of the bridges

between relationships, community, and vulnerability in the high school choral classroom.

Making Mistakes When Learning Music and Sight-Singing

Stephanie identified the process of learning music and sight-singing as an instructional area where cultivating support was particularly important for her students. She recognized that student stress related to learning music is often associated with their perspectives of traditional choral music learning processes that are, in many instances, frenzied, rigid, and stressful (for students and teacher). "Singing with that kind of tension and fear? It's just a matter of time before the house of cards falls," Stephanie posited, before adding: "I don't want to be vulnerable for that kind of director. Sure, you might get results, but at what cost?" (Interview 2). Stephanie went on to explain that she is diligent about making music-learning a calm process where mistakes are normalized. She added that a way she mitigates the impact of mistakes is by modeling vulnerability and being forthright about her own mistakes during instruction. For example, she described a typical approach to learning a new piece or challenging section of a current piece:

> I will say, 'Okay, we're going to try this. I'm going to play a lot of wrong notes, so you can sing a lot of wrong notes." Or I'll say 'Okay, we're going to sight-read through this, and we're going to see what happens. And if you make a mistake, make a loud mistake then I can fix it.' (Interview 2)

Multiple student participants acknowledged the mistake-positive mindset articulated by Stephanie in the quote above. "Ms. Johnson is like, 'Sing wrong notes, please, so we can fix them,'" one student shared (Student Focus Group 2). Another student added that in the MRHS choir, "it doesn't matter if you sing the wrong note" (Student Focus Group 2). A different student shared that this mindset surrounding mistakes helps them feel comfortable when navigating errors in class: "Ms. Johnson has created an environment where we can feel free to ask

questions," the student shared. "Like, we can say 'Can you repeat this part?' or 'Can you sing this part for us?' and it just makes it easier to learn the piece when we're actually allowed to make mistakes and ask questions" (Student Focus Group 2). Acknowledging Stephanie's willingness to be visibly vulnerable and embrace her own mistakes, a student participant observed that "whenever Ms. Johnson makes mistakes, she laughs it off and makes funny jokes" (Student Focus Group 2). Another student explained that, at MRHS and with Stephanie, they feel that they are not only encouraged to make mistakes, but are given tools to fix them:

> It makes it easier for me to learn [music] because in past experiences that I messed up, I would just get so frustrated and I would keep doing it over and over again and I would get so anxious about it and I would end up not being able to learn it as well. But with Ms. Johnson, it will be like, 'Oh, okay, you're singing this wrong, here's a way that you can do it better.' And that will give me skills to fix mistakes instead of just repeating them. And then I can fix them on my own instead of just being like, 'Oh shoot, I sang the wrong note. I suck at singing and I should never open my mouth ever again.' (Student Focus Group 2)

One student participant shared that they did not realize how mistake-affirming Stephanie was until they joined a local community chorus where the instructor's "attitude toward messing up was a really big thing" and that the student and her community chorus choirmates were "made to feel bad" if they sang wrong notes: "It was wildly different from what I was used to here [at MRHS] because this [the MRHS choral program] was my only choir experience and this is so much more chill and welcoming and better" (Student Focus Group 2).

Student participants also conveyed that they felt Stephanie's overall approach to making mistakes when learning music was something that impacted their music-learning mindset as a group. They identified the meaningful nature of being in a choral learning space—and with choral peers—affirming of imperfection. A student described the MRHS choir as a place where "you really get people who enjoy doing music and who don't care about messing up." They went on to add that "in here we know that messing up is part of learning the music. When everybody

has that attitude, it makes it a lot easier to mess up and not get super upset over it" (Student Focus Group 2).

I observed an example of this music-learning mindset during my third observation at MRHS, which was a day that Stephanie introduced/began teaching a song in both of her high school classes. In both the mixed-voice and treble ensembles, I noticed how Stephanie thoughtfully extended the interpersonal foundations she established during daily greetings and check-ins into the choral rehearsal. Her instructional approach was noticeably warm, calm, and supportive. Stephanie began by giving a frame for the rehearsal: "We will go through the piece first to give an overview and then will come back to look at parts." As the rehearsal progressed, she continuously checked in with students, with questions like "How are you all feeling so far? Ok?" Other times she asked students to give a thumbs up/down/in the middle to convey how they were feeling during the learning process. Positive reinforcement during the lesson was frequent—in one instance she celebrated a student who knew to circle eighth rests in their music: "I love that you knew to do that" (MRHS Observation 3). In response, the student smiled and bounced in his seat. Further, Stephanie elevated simple instructional comments into opportunities to instill warmth into the rehearsal. For example, when preparing students to sing, she said, "From the beginning my loves." During other portions of the rehearsal her language was also inviting, through the use of phrases like "join me" and "I encourage you to…" instead of more authoritiative or demanding options (MRHS Observation 3). In her treble ensemble, she wove in empowering directives like "Let's begin at Letter A for Awesome" or "Letter B for Beautiful" (MRHS Observation 3). She also was consistent in modeling her own vulnerability, quick to acknowledge if she made a mistake on the piano before laughing it off and moving on. Finally, in both classes, once she had reviewed voice parts, she beckoned students to move from their

assigned seats on the choral risers to a close-knit circle around the piano—"Come to me my loves…come gather around the piano"—a tacet way to emphasize closeness and community (MRHS Observation 3).

While each of the instances above may seem nondescript when isolated, they each contributed to an overall choral rehearsal at MRHS that was compassionate, affirming, empowering, and efficient. Stephanie's rapport and connections with students were not sidelined or reserved for after the rehearsal—they informed and enlivened the reheasal. In addition to reflecting Stephanie's approach to learning music activities in the classroom, this approach was also evident in how Stephanie guided her students through elements related to students' use of their singing voices.

The Singing Voice: Alone and With Others

Student participants at MRHS spoke at length about issues of self-efficacy and vulnerability in relation to use of their voices when singing alone and with others. Below, I present findings from Stephanie and her student participants related to these voice-related vulnerabilities. I organize findings in relation to the following emergent subthemes: (a) "low-risk singing;" (b) the individual singing voice; and (c) singing with others.

Low-Risk Singing

Stephanie said that she attempts to acknowledge student vulnerability and self-efficacy related to their singing voice from the very beginning of the school year: "My goal is to create so many safe experiences that they'll follow me onto the stage and try new things," she explained (Interview 2). In addition to the community-building activities and daily check-ins outlined earlier in this chapter, Stephanie articulated that an initial approach to supportive musical experiences is her inclusion of instructional opportunities for "low-risk singing" (Interview 2).

Stephanie explained that “low-risk singing” is based in finding ways to immediately involve students in the act of singing, while keeping the stakes low and the energy positive. Previously identified activities like Music Fests or singing along to songs like *Bohemian Rhapsody* were examples Stephanie provided as representative of “low-risk singing.” She explained that “low-risk singing” can also entail basic vocalization activities, rounds, cannons, and introductory part-singing. She added that low-risk singing is typically accompanied by “lots of encouragement and laughing. I will be singing too. If someone is moving I'll be like, ‘Yeah. Yeah.’ Just bringing out the joy of the moment” (Interview 2).

Stephanie mentioned that these “low-risk singing’ moments also give her a chance to respond to individual students’ vocal efforts or attempt to “find things about each kid to celebrate,” providing her the chance to impart comments like "Oh my gosh, you sang that so well, would you mind singing that for the class so everybody can hear how good that was?" (Interview 2). She explained that she may also find ways to provide encouragement to students privately (before/after class or during warm-ups), at which point she will share affirmations like "You sing really well, and you seem like you're being shy about your voice. You don't have anything to be shy about” or “Wow, you sound great today. Get it!" to “I can see you're figuring this out and you're waiting until you're ready. I think that's cool. I get that” (Interview 2). As displayed in these examples, the notion of “low-risk singing” and working through vulnerability was woven throughout much of Stephanie’s pedagogy and instructional choices, including the process of learning music.

The Individual Singing Voice

“Singing can be a very vulnerable, emotional thing,” expressed one MRHS student (Student Focus Group 2). Stephanie’s relational approach to teaching acknowledged this innate

vulnerability of the singing voice expressed by the student above, and informed how she approached singing instruction in her classroom. For Stephanie, she perceived the voice—in both speaking and singing form—as directly tied to who her students are as humans. “The voice is connected to our hearts and our souls and how we're feeling,” she shared. “There's something incredibly vulnerable about admitting that the sound came out of your body and not an external instrument” (Interview 2). Because of this interconnectedness, Stephanie said she believed it is important to explicitly help her students understand just how embedded their musical instrument is with their personhood:

> I say to them, ‘What you do is really special. Your instrument is actually you. It's so intimate because your instrument is affected by every emotion you have. It's affected by what you ate for breakfast, how well you slept last night. It's affected by how your parents talked to you in the morning before you got out of the car. It's affected by everything… your voice is a reflection of what's going on with you right now in this moment. (Interview 1)

Stephanie told me that she attempts to place the personal nature of the voice in contexts that students understand:

> I think you can't divorce the difference between ‘this is me and how I'm feeling’ and ‘this is what my voice sounds like today.’ I was at a Taylor Swift concert last night and screamed my brains out, or my boyfriend broke up with me or I have four AP tests today. Whatever that is, the piano is still going to sound like middle C regardless of what's going on with that person. (Interview 1)

Stephanie went on to explain that she often uses the following example in class when explaining the complexity of the singing voice: she reminds students that if they were to call a friend on the phone, they will immediately how that friend feels upon hearing their voice: “You can tell just by the way they respond. Just that little glitch in their throat or just the way they say something, or they're really excited to hear from you, you can tell” (Interview 2).

In addition to guiding students through typical facets of the adolescent voice change, data reflected that Stephanie’s efforts have also supported one of her students who identified as

transgender, Ren. In our student focus group, Ren explained that navigating challenging elements related to their speaking voice impacted their approach to singing as well: "Being trans is a very difficult thing. So, I also have pretty bad vocal dysphoria. I don't like how high my voice is," Ren explained. "And Ms. Johnson won't, like, actively make a big deal of it, but she does tell me that my voice is pretty" (Student Focus Group 2). Here, Ren described how Stephanie's compassionate and affirming approach to their gender identity and vocal dysphoria increased their feelings of comfort when singing in the MRHS choral classroom.

Singing With Others

Most of the comments from MRHS student participants regarding vulnerability and the singing voice related to concerns regarding singing around peers in the ensemble. "I feel like when singing in private, my voice will sound good but then I get around other people and I'm just like, 'Wow, I' guess I'm really not that good,'" shared one student (Student Focus Group 2). Another student suggested that "it really depends on who you're around that will determine how nervous you are or what happens when you mess up or what goes on in your brain as you're singing, if that makes sense" (Student Focus Group 2). Because of her personal relationships with students, Stephanie felt that she is better equipped to support them through insecurities related to their voice and singing with others. She again referenced the benefits of having students for multiple years as an immensely helpful factor when attempting to build learning spaces in which students may feel comfortable singing: "I think it changes, since I have them from 6th through 12th grade. I think it evolves," she reflected. "When they start singing with me in middle school, they're nervous and worried that they're not going to make the right sound at the right time, or their voice isn't going to be good enough" (Interview 1). Overtime, however, Stephanie felt that the combination of her one-on-one support of students and the empowerment

they gain from their community of peers, enhances their vocal confidence. “I try to create space in my room where they are able to just experiment and practice performing in front of each other,” she explained, again harkening back to activities like Music Fests as important components in cultivating that atmosphere (Interview 1).

Given Stephanie’s placement at both the middle and high school level, she explained that she can introduce activities like Music Fests and other community-based experiences with students at an early age with the hopes that they will inform student interactions and the learning environment of her classroom into high school choir as well. For example, in her middle school classes, she told me she cultivates an early foundation of peer support and sense of community by splitting students into small groups to consider choir-based relational scenarios and discuss the most impactful potential ways to respond:

> For example, a scenario could be ‘Someone right next to you is singing all of the wrong notes. They're singing them loudly and you aren't able to sing your part. What do you do?’ And then I have students in small groups and they talk about it and they come up with some ideas of how you could handle it. And then we present it to the class…What do you think about that? What if you were the person who was singing badly? Would you be okay with these solutions? So I try really hard to get ahead of the problems before they happen. (Interview 1)

MRHS student participants similarly noted that strong peer relationships and a sense of community (in sectionals and across the ensemble) improved their confidence when singing alongside others. One student shared that they perceive their MRHS ensemble as based in “connections and friendships” (Student Focus Group 1). Other students expressed that they understood the link between the relational foundations of the MRHS choir community and their efforts as an ensemble. “It's very important for us to form connections with each other,” reflected one student participant. “If we're going to be singing together collectively as a group, it's important to have everything actually locked together because that's how a choir works” (Student

Focus Group 1). A second student suggested that it was important to “know the people in your section because if you don’t, then you’re not going to blend well,” while a third student asserted “I think when a choir fits together really well as people, we sing really well together. When we're given the chance to form connections with each other, we connect better as singers” (Student Focus Group 1).

This final student quote perhaps best exemplifies Stephanie’s belief that a commitment to relationships and community directly enhances the choral music education in her classroom. Stephanie and her students expressed understanding that relational bonds—whether between teacher and student or amongst students—often led to a sense of interpersonal trust and support that were expressively meaningful in the high school choral classroom.

Repertoire, Text, and Emotion

Beyond implications related to the singing voice, Stephanie also viewed instructional decision-making related to repertoire and text as directly aligned with her efforts to build a choral community responsive to her students. As detailed earlier in this chapter, part of Stephanie’s approach to programming music that resonates with students included involving them in the repertoire selection process. “I try and pick music that they can connect with. That is a big part of what I think is building relationships with kids,” she shared (Interview 2). Stephanie suggested that programming music students enjoy and relate to enhances the community of the choral program. She specifically spoke about this dimension when discussing her commitment to selecting repertoire reflective of the diverse students included in her ensembles. For example, below, I present some of Stephanie’s reflections regarding selecting repertoire in relation to religious and racial implications reflective of her students’ identities.

Repertoire Selection: Implications of Religion and Race

Religion. Though Stephanie described herself as “not religious,” she expressed a commitment to sensitively incorporating religious music in the MRHS choral community (Interview 2). She specifically described efforts to honor her students’ varied religious perspectives, which she revealed included a substantial subset of students who identify as Jewish and another subset who identify as Christian. “During our concerts we try to represent the faiths that are in our district as well as the appropriate weight of the holiday,” Stephanie said (Interview 2). She said that in Maplebrook, this has often meant attempting to program both secular and sacred repertoire reflective of Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Christmas. In addition to selecting religious music related to the holidays and traditions mentioned above, Stephanie explained that she has also attempted to engage her students in conversations surrounding the religious and cultural contexts behind these musical choices:

> We spend some time before the holidays explaining that the Hebrew tradition is based more in a soloist and canter with a response from the congregation in unison. It wasn't a choral tradition. And so we will talk about how the Hebrew faith and the Christian faith, musically, are different…They understand that when we sing our songs in Hebrew, they're more of a solo line. We can make up harmonies to them that, but that's not the tradition. So when we perform those, we often will perform them with unique accompaniment like harp or guitar, or we'll do something with it to make it special. (Interview 1)

Further, Stephanie mentioned that despite running into challenges finding music that represents the breadth of the Jewish faith, she has made an effort to seek out songs related not just to Hanukkah, but Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as well:

> We recognize that Hanukkah is not ‘the Jewish Christmas.’ Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are more comparable with Christmas. And we talk about that when we do our holiday concert. We do songs from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur instead of only Hanukkah songs. (Interview 3)

Stephanie also explained that she is adamant about talking with her students about why

certain religious pieces and texts are valuable to learn. Given the prominence of religious choral music, she shared that it is important to "have the conversation, just talk about [religion]" in class when approaching religious choral repertoire (Interview 3). She added: "My thinking is the more [religion] is in the dark, the more you keep it as a taboo topic and the more people make assumptions" (Interview 3). She said that facilitating conversations regarding music also gives students from diverse religious backgrounds an opportunity to ask questions and provide their own reflections on repertoire selections:

> I will say, and I have said before, "All right guys, I don't have a horse in this race. I'm not religious. I don't believe in God, and I don't believe in organized religion. I have this piece for you that's in this faith." And I explain to them what the song is about, the musical reasons why I picked it. And then we have a conversation about it. (Interview 3)

Ultimately, Stephanie expressed that when it came to exploring religious music in her classroom of religiously diverse students, "acknowledging that we're not all coming from the same place when you start is invaluable" (Interview 3). For Stephanie, choosing a diverse set of religious repertoire—and actively talking about it the classroom—is an attempt to validate students' varied religious backgrounds. Specifically, she shared that while she believed delving into the musical components of Hebrew music is important pedagogically, it is also an opportunity to convey acknowledgement and care to her many students who identify as Jewish. She further mentioned that her individual relationships with students who identify as Jewish are often heightened because they "feel seen" and affirmed by certain repertoire selections or by the sensitive nature of the conversations surrounding repertoire in class (Interview 3).

Race. In the student focus group conversations, MRHS African American student participants described feeling affirmed by Stephanie because of certain repertoire selections and choir class conversations that they felt meaningfully centered aspects of race and elements of the Black experience. For example, three participating students of color expressed their gratitude

toward Stephanie for her generally inclusive approach to racially diverse repertoire. Alexis, a Black student, shared that her most memorable moments in the MRHS choir were when singing African American Spirituals. She shared that she was "really appreciative" of Stephanie for including that repertoire in her school choral experience. Bailey, a Black student, shared that she was especially excited about Stephanie's decision a few years prior to program a choral arrangement of the *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the Black National Anthem, for the MRHS choir: "She taught us the Black National Anthem, and that was nice, especially because at that time, a lot of people didn't even know there was a Black National Anthem," Bailey reflected (Student Focus Group 2). Sydney, also a Black student in the MRHS focus group, spoke about how meaningful it was to have Stephanie, a white teacher, include music in class that represented Sydney's racial and cultural experience as a Black individual:

> I was pretty glad that she was doing that because she could've easily just not. But she would rather help us learn something even about our own identities that we may not know that's important to our history. It just means a lot that she cares, essentially. Especially as a white woman, it means a lot that she cares. There's a difference between being not racist and anti-racist. (Student Focus Group 2)

Since Sydney used the term "anti-racist," I asked if she perceived Stephanie as anti-racist. Sydney replied, saying, "Yeah, she's a bit of an activist really. She really is. She does her best to speak out against injustice and bring awareness to certain issues that don't even involve her" (Student Focus Group 2). At this point Bailey spoke up again, and shared: "there definitely have been times where Ms. Johnson has chosen a piece of music with a positive political messaging behind it. And I mean positive as in liberal" (Student Focus Group 2).

A different student then added that they felt Stephanie's commitment to inclusivity also expanded beyond issues of race and religion, stating that Stephanie was broadly considered an ally to students from multiple backgrounds and communities at MRHS. "Ms. Johnson is

generally accepting. [In choir] we have neurodiversities, we have other races, other ethnicities, we have it all. And it's like... I don't really know how to word it, but this the bar and [student holds hand up] and she is above it [places other hand above first hand]" (Student Focus Group 2).

These student reflections again present MRHS student participant awareness of the interwoven nature between teacher/student identity and the unique musical/cultural facets of choral music education. Stephanie's attempts to foster a choral learning community that validated students' religious, racial, and cultural identities were noticed and appreciated by MRHS student participants. Specifically, from their perspectives as Black individuals, Alexis, Bailey, and Sydney explicitly associated perceptions of validation with Stephanie's selection and teaching of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, as well as African American Spirituals.

Emotional Implications Related to Text

Acknowledging the emotional implications of text—and bringing students into conversations about those implications—was discussed as another cornerstone of Stephanie's practice. "Text is the world's greatest thing," she shared (Interview 2). Stephanie said that she is passionate about helping students connect the deeper meaning behind a choral text with the emotion in their voice and greater being:

> I definitely experiment with helping [students] understand how our voice can be inflective of feelings and emotions, and also connect it to you. So [I'll ask questions like]. 'What was the composer going after here? Out of all the notes and all the rhythms they could have written they wrote these. Why do you think they wrote these? This was a choice, what do you think they're going for?' (Interview 2)

Stephanie expressed an awareness that those types of conversations may sometimes be emotionally challenging for students, and that if she is going to ask her students to take emotional leaps related to text and repertoire, she has must first model how to do so. Once again,

Stephanie said that she felt her work building relationships and community directly informed how she approached the intersection between repertoire, text, and emotion during such conversations: “They need to see me as a person and I need to see them as a person, so that we can both talk about text” (Interview 2).

To build an emotional bridge with her students when discussing song text, Stephanie explained that she relies on modeling her own vulnerability and sharing experiences from her own life. She went on to describe an example of this approach:

> I've shared some pretty serious personal stuff…There's this moment in the Jonathan Smith arrangement of *Loch Lomond* at the end where the phrase comes back to ‘But me and my true love will never meet again.’ And it's very somber. And [when discussing that phrase] I explained to them [students], ‘I lost my mom when I was 26,’ and right after that, I remember my fiancé took me to Disney because I was so sad and I explained I was having so much fun. And then all of a sudden, I remembered she was gone and I'd never see her again and how that just stopped me in my tracks. That's what this [choral phrase] is. Life is still wonderful and there's so many possibilities, but my mom's gone. That's never going to change. And so I do try and use personal things in my life with texts and so forth, but I also invite them to share. (Interview 3)

While this was an especially personal and emotional example for Stephanie, she believed that extending those moments of emotional modeling might convey to students that the MRHS choral community is a place where they can feel and express emotion as well. Further, Stephanie explained that she talks with students about the power of melding choral music and text, especially when feeling and expressing emotion:

> We have talked about there are some songs, that when you need a good cry, you know you can listen to the song because it'll help you. And how beautiful that that is. That's not a bad thing, that's a beautiful thing. That you care so much and so deeply that you are moved to tears. That's a beautiful thing. (Interview 3)

Stephanie reiterated that she is passionate about assuring her students that in the MRHS choir room feeling and expressing emotion is “not a bad thing” (Interview 3). Still, Stephanie acknowledged that moments of such high emotional potency can be difficult for students to

handle (especially around others), so, she is vigilant to monitor students' emotional reactions when rehearsing during class, especially if she knows they are traversing a difficult situation in their own life. In such moments, Stephanie explained that sometimes she will have conversations with students one-on-one, but other times students may bring up their emotional concerns in front of the ensemble. In those instances, she said students may say something such as: "This is a really hard song for me to sing because…" which Stephanie shared often leads to a peer-led expression of collective love and support:

> What I like most about that is that they show the group how they're feeling and then the group usually surrounds them with love. They'll get up and move closer to them, or put an arm around them, or sometimes hold their hand. And then when we do that song, I notice there's a shift in the group like, 'We're on your team' kind of thing. (Interview 2)

Noting that moments like the scenario described above can sometimes be challenging to navigate as an instructor, I asked Stephanie whether she has always championed students' capacity to discuss their emotions in the classroom, even when they are complex. She paused, and then responded by saying: "I guess as a younger teacher I leaned away from those hard conversations. And now as an older teacher I feel like that's the most important thing I do" (Interview 2).

During the aforementioned third MRHS observation when Stephanie introduced the song *Maybe Someday*, I observed her directly center the emotional core of the song: tradition. Before students started to sing, she asked students to sit and contemplate traditions within their own lives, whether with family or friends. Students began to share special moments with loved ones, ranging from favorite foods baked during the holiday season, annual outings on birthdays, and other meaningful experiences linked with important people in their lives. As students shared, I observed their energy—which seemed excited, but also reverent. This conversation lasted a few minutes, and as each student put forth their personal vignette, words of interest and affirmation followed from Stephanie and peers across the room. Even in this brief moment of observation, I

viewed Stephanie merge students' emotional ties to a concept meaningful to them into the greater sense of community among the ensemble. She tapped into students' lived experiences and emotional capacities when embarking on a shared choral music experience (MRHS Observation 3).

Summary

The previous section outlined the various ways that Stephanie weaves her approach to relationships and community into a coalesced relational choral music pedagogy. MRHS students talked about the presence of vulnerabilities in the choral classroom, specifically with regard to issues related to making mistakes, their singing voices, learning music, and expressing emotion in repertoire. In turn, Stephanie articulated various ways that she built a relational choral practice that aimed to support students through these varied vulnerabilities. Stephanie also spoke about her efforts to validate and support her MRHS choir students through her approach to repertoire selection and facilitation. For example, she spoke in detail about her intent to critically and sensitively approach repertoire reflective of her sizeable subset of Jewish students and students who identify as Black or African American. While thus far I have presented Stephanie's reflections about many of her perceived relational triumphs in the classroom, she also shared with me how she confronts challenges in her relational practice. Those challenges are described below.

Navigating Relational Challenges: Stephanie's Commitment to Continued Relational Awareness and Growth

In this final section, I present specific themes emergent from data related to Stephanie's perspectives regarding the navigation of relational challenges in the MRHS choir community.

These themes were: (a) confronting her privilege; (b) commitment to critical learning; (c) commitment to humility; and (d) self-care and boundaries.

Confronting Her Privilege

Throughout our conversations, Stephanie conveyed that deepening her relationships with students required continued personal commitment to broadening her critical awareness and self-growth. On multiple occasions, Stephanie acknowledged that the level of financial and racial privilege she grew up within was something that she had—and will continue to—grapple with when developing relationships with students. “I had no understanding of my privilege when I taught at [first school in her career], which is a Title I school. No understanding,” she shared (Interview 3). She went on to say, that over time, “I think I must have made every mistake you could make four or five times before I got better at it. I didn't understand,” referring to difficult moments with students and families tied to her own sociocultural biases (Interview 3).

For instance, early in her career while still at the elementary level, Stephanie told me that she taught an African American male student with behavioral challenges. When she sent a note to the student’s mother about the behavior, the mother asked for a meeting. Stephanie told me that at the meeting, the mother called Stephanie racist and suggested that Stephanie only disciplined Black and Brown students. Stephanie recalled how she responded to the parent:

> During the parent meeting, I said, ‘Statistically, if I'm not able to get your child's attention in Music, what are the chances of him paying attention in Math and Science and Social Studies? And if that's the case, then he does he have the kind of future you want for him to have? We need to deal with this.’ And I thought I was being helpful [Stephanie paused before continuing]. I was not helpful. I was condescending, not intending to be. My intent was to be helpful. But I was condescending. I was channeling this child into a future that they supposedly would have. And instead of being a partner to this parent, I was part of the problem. I was part of the education built for white men and that begrudgingly allowed white women in, but it hasn't really allowed too many other people in. And so I was part of that systemic problem. I didn't know it then, but looking back, I am ashamed that I had that interaction. (Interview 3)

In instances like this—and especially as a new teacher—Stephanie recognized that, in addition to her biases, relationally she was “looking for compliance and rule followers. I was rigid in my thinking and narrow in my understanding of how people live” (Interview 3). That said, over time, after “a lot of growing pains,” she said that she began to shift how she interacted with students—and relationships were that catalyst:

> I think that as a young teacher, the music was more important to me than the kids, and that's why it didn't ever turn out the way I wanted it to. When I started putting the students first, the music happened…and I kind of tripped over that. I had students year after year after year, and the relationship evolved and I couldn't just demand them to do what I wanted them to do because I had a relationship with them. They weren't just people who filled out my classroom anymore. They were nieces and nephews. And when I stumbled across that, things changed a lot. (Interview 3)

Stephanie explained that now, her priorities in the classroom at MRHS are much more person-centered, as opposed to strictly music-centered, though she did share with me that all of her high school ensembles had recently received Superior ratings at the recent state music festival. Still, the dichotomy between the two perspectives shared above was something she perceived as glaringly clear: “What hill are you dying on? Are you dying on a hill for a kid? Or are you dying on a hill for something you think would be great at a concert?” (Interview 1).

Commitment to Critical Learning

Such shifts in Stephanie’s approach to pedagogy also suggested a shift in her thinking and philosophical approach overall. I asked Stephanie to tell me more about how facets of her personal and professional life impacted how she perceived and formed relationships with students. She offered that continued reflection and learning were essential for her personally and professionally: “I have a work journal and I have a home journal, and I reflect and I reflect and I reflect and just try and get better every time” (Interview 1). She later mentioned that critical

reflection and learning have been important aspects of her efforts to form fully aware relationships with students who may have different identities than her own: “I’ve tried really hard to unpack how my privilege impacts my teaching” she shared (Interview 3). She mentioned that, in addition to points of contemplation spurred by experiences like the early-career example shared above, she became increasingly committed to learning more about systemic issues of injustice—particularly related to race and socioeconomic status—through personal learning:

> I started doing a lot of reading on my own and recognizing my privilege and having some difficult conversations at school about race…and this was in the early 2000s, far ahead of the Black Lives Matter movement, COVID, and us all watching the murder of George Floyd. (Interview 3)

Stephanie felt that overtime, her commitment to critical learning has shown her that “there are things [she] is going to miss” as a result of her own positionalities and biases (Interview 1). She said that learning opportunities have helped her understand how to be increasingly aware of someone else’s life experience, and how to respond if someone (even a student) pointed out one of her biases or missteps, specifically with regards to race or class. When a moment like that happens, she explained that the following responses have been meaningful:

> I think it's perfectly okay to say, ‘You've given me a lot to think about,’ or, ‘I'm so glad you gave me that perspective. That wasn't something I thought about before.’ Or, ‘Boy, I can really see this through your eyes now.’ But I also think it's perfectly okay to say, ‘That never occurred to me,’ or, ‘I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say.’ Or, ‘I care about you. And I'm so glad that you trusted me with sharing that.’ (Interview 3)

These responses echo the underlying themes in a scenario outlined earlier in this chapter when an African American student in Stephanie’s class raised their concern regarding singing an African American Spiritual with white students. In that instance, and across many others, Stephanie felt that the personal critical reflection she has committed to in her personal and professional life has informed her concerted response in the classroom.

Commitment to Humility

Relatedly, Stephanie expressed that meaningful relationships with students will continue to rely on her commitment to channeling personal humility and conveying that vulnerable humility to her students. She believed that humility is important when working with adolescents, especially through a medium like choral music that is so closely tied to emotion: “We wield such great power with our words. I know I’ve blown it in the past, have not said the right thing…but boy, do I try really hard to get it right” (Interview 1). Relating back to previous reflections about the importance of modeling emotional capacities for her students, Stephanie again asserted that emotional potency is especially present between teacher and student in the choral classroom:

> It is unreasonable to expect that as choir directors, who deal with emotions right under the surface all day long, that we're not going to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. But I think we're modeling how to handle making things better, that's our job. (Interview 2)

Similar to how Stephanie modeled making and acknowledging musical mistakes, she also believed it is important to acknowledge—and apologize for—interpersonal missteps with students as well. For example, Stephanie shared that after an interpersonal challenge or misstep with a student, she might say the following:

> I will say ‘You know what, I really messed that up. I'm sorry.’ Not just at the piano, but in speaking to kids. Sometimes the next day I'll go back and say, ‘You know what, I thought about what I said to you and I didn't like it. Can I try again?" Just being able to have the humility to say, ‘That wasn't my best. I'm really sorry. You're important to me. Can I try again?’ (Interview 2)

Though Stephanie was aware that channeling humility is “not something [she] sees in other colleagues” within the choral directing sphere, she firmly believed that such humility, honesty, and vulnerability is key to forming relationships with students in the MRHS choir room: “I think it only builds trust and allows them more safety in my classroom” (Interview 2). She also added that she believed her own humility reemphasized the complexity of being human that she hoped

empowered her students who are still learning how to navigate their emotions amidst relationships in their own lives:

> I think about everybody as walking around with barrels full of dark, thick, sticky, smelly liquid, and then they're all full to the brim. And when we walk around, we knock into people and we get our stuff on them, and they get their stuff on us. (Interview 2)

Self-Care and Boundaries

Traversing the landscape of relational practice with a “full barrel” has also prompted Stephanie to explore ways to establish certain interpersonal boundaries and acts of personal self-care. Stephanie expressed that being a teacher committed to relational work—and an important figure in her students’ lives—often left her feeling emotionally exhausted:

> The amazing music teachers that I know all have this story. They all have this same story that it got to be too much at one point. It may not have looked like mine looked, but it was the same kind of wall that they hit where there's too much output and not enough input. (Interview 3)

She explained that about five years before our interviews, the emotional weight associated with her job and attempting to be relationally present for all of her students caused her to temporarily abuse alcohol. This in turn prompted her to start therapy:

> I was self-medicating because it is so hard. I was trying to find that line between doing my job really well and caring about the people that I care about, but also putting a wall there so that I can build myself up and keep myself going and keep growing emotionally…and it's just not sustainable to be that uber teacher all the time. It's not…I was holding myself to an unreasonable standard. (Interview 3)

As a result, Stephanie said that she took a medical leave which allowed her to ultimately form important boundaries and routines of self-care. Specific examples of boundaries and self-care practices that she spoke about from her own experience included seeking support from a licensed therapist, reaching out to family and friends, using wellness applications, taking medications when prescribed, and placing her phone on Do Not Disturb after school hours—subsequently not responding to student texts and emails after a certain hour in the evening. Stephanie said that it

took her a long time to accept that such boundaries and self-care methods did not negate her care for students, but allowed her to be more fully present:

> These sound really simple. But when you're driven to offer kids yourself, those feel like selfish acts instead of self-care. And I think for a long time we've treated self-care as selfishness, but you can't pour from an empty pot. You don't want an airplane pilot flying at 60%. I mean, we all know these little anecdotes, but I think it is really hard for people pleasers to take some of those things on and say, 'Okay, I don't have to be everything for everyone all the time, but I have to be everything for myself all the time.' (Interview 3)

Her efforts to protect her own relational and emotional boundaries have thus, in turn, allowed her to sustain more effective relationships with students.

Stephanie's efforts to confront her privilege, commit to critical learning, sustain a sense of humility, and maintain boundaries and methods of self-care, are all facets of a relational practice that she suggested, like her, is still growing. That said, she perceived the necessity of those elements as additional layers to the complexity of relational practice in general. For Stephanie, the cultivation of relationships and a sense of community amidst the vulnerable nature of choral music teaching and learning requires these layered elements of the human experience.

> I feel like if you're going to be that teacher with relationships, you can't be a sterile person who gets charged in the closet at night and comes out to teach during the day. You have to be a living, breathing, bleeding human being. If you're going to have relationships with any sort of depth, I really do think it's okay to say, 'Life has beaten me up a little bit and here I am. So, let's go.' (Interview 3)

Summary

In the section above, I described some of the relational challenges Stephanie described as part of her teaching practice. Specific challenges that Stephanie identified included her ongoing attempts to confront her racial and economic privilege, a commitment to critical learning, a commitment to humility, and efforts to enact self-care practices and establish relational boundaries. Stephanie conveyed an awareness of how systemic and structural issues related to implications of race and class impacted her instruction and interactions with students. Further,

she was adamant about critically reflecting upon, and navigating, how her racial identity as a white woman from an upper-middle class background influenced her work with Black and African American students.

Within-Case Summary: Stephanie Johnson—Meadow River High School

At the time of this study, Stephanie Johnson was in her twenty-fifth year of teaching, all within the Maplebrook School District, the last ten years as choir teacher at Meadow River High School (MRHS). Stephanie perceived relationships as the core to her choral music teaching practice. Implications of longevity significantly informed Stephanie's—and her students'—relationships with each other. For example, Stephanie had been teaching in Mapleview and MRHS for so long that she intimately knew many students' siblings and families. Also, because Stephanie taught at both the middle and high school level in the district, she felt she had the potential to foster uniquely personal relationships with students over multiple years. This type of bond led Stephanie and many of her students to perceive their teacher-student relationship as akin to that of a mentor or family member. Stephanie conceptualized the formation of relationships by developing a deep knowledge of each student through both daily and long-term means. She was adamant about "taking the temperature" of her students on a daily basis, whether through greetings as they entered her classroom, when creating time for students to share elements of their weekends/personal lives with the class, or during one-on-one check-in moments throughout rehearsal. Reflecting facets of empathy, Stephanie felt that her own experience with trauma growing up informed her understanding of—and attentiveness to—her students' emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing, as well as her subsequent efforts to support them.

The relationships that Stephanie formed with her students acted as the foundation for a MRHS choral community that both Stephanie and her students described as a family. Stephanie prioritized moments during instruction for students to form relationships with each other through opportunities for relationship- and community-building, especially at the beginning of each school year. Through a combination of getting-to-know-you activities, "low risk singing," and events like 'Music Fests' and 'Circle Time,' Stephanie sought to incrementally co-create an environment that emphasized trust, taking chances, empathy, empowerment, and peer support. Stephanie and her students noted that this environment was equally heightened by their many shared years together in the classroom as well as the presence of special traditions that have become emblematic of the greater legacy embedded within what the MRHS choral community represents.

A sense of community amongst Stephanie and her students also contributed to a choral music setting at MRHS rooted in student agency and empowerment. Stephanie ensured that students are significantly involved in decisions related to repertoire, uniforms, and even performance calendars—an approach that she believed deepened student investment in the collaborative entity of the MRHS community. She perceived herself as co-creator of community, never as an all-powerful conductor. As a result, student participants reflected an awareness of their heightened roles in the MRHS community as well as a sustained relational and musical commitment to each other.

MRHS student participants spoke at length about certain vulnerabilities they face within the act of singing and the collective activity of choral music. Student participants specifically emphasized vulnerabilities associated with making mistakes, the singing voice (alone and with others), learning music, and when discussing aspects of repertoire. Stephanie spoke at length

about her efforts to bridge her relational work with students in an effort to actively acknowledge and support their vulnerabilities. She also emphasized her commitment to explicitly discussing racial, religious, and sociopolitical implications of repertoire during instruction. This was perhaps especially prominent in Stephanie's attempts to (a) center the religious perspectives of both her Jewish and Christian students, as well as her Black and African American students, in repertoire reflective of their life experiences; (b) respond to student concerns regarding sociocultural implications of repertoire selection—such as in her decision to remove an African American Spiritual from class after an African American student expressed their discomfort; and (c) modify the MRHS choral program uniform so to validate the comfort of students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Stephanie's relational approach conveyed nuanced forms of empathy as well as her commitment to empowering her students' sense of validation and self-worth.

Throughout our conversations, Stephanie was candid about the intersections of her relational choral music teaching approach with elements of her own experience with trauma. Stephanie believed that her experiences navigating trauma in her own life helped her identify and support students dealing with similar challenges. Stephanie also spoke freely about challenging moments in her approach to cultivating a relational teaching practice. She spoke specifically about instances when (a) relationships with her students were impacted by moments of personal bias related to her own racial and economic privilege as a white woman from an upper middle-class background; and (b) her efforts to remain dedicated to "the music" took precedence over her dedication to students as people. When speaking about these challenges, Stephanie acknowledged how systemic and structural sociopolitical/cultural implications informed her biases, as well as her attempts to foster an increasingly equitable choral-music practice. For

example, Stephanie affirmed that a commitment to continued humility and critical learning regarding issues of race, class, and sexuality/gender would continue to be a necessary component of her own growth as an individual and teacher in the future. She also identified personal challenges related to the realities of being a choir teacher who sought to be interpersonally present for her students. In these moments, when her efforts to be present for the MRHS community became “too much,” Stephanie’s personal life was significantly impacted, ultimately leading to a self-directed establishment of boundaries and self-care routines. Ultimately, Stephanie’s own vulnerability and willingness to be “a living, breathing, bleeding human being” powerfully grounded the meaningful relationships and sense of community she built with students at MRHS.

Chapter VI
Participant Introduction and Within-Case Themes:
Helen Curtis—Woodland Falls High School

Entering the World of the Woodland Falls High School Choral Program

As I drive to Woodland Falls High School (WFHS) to meet Helen Curtis, I maneuver through the city of Woodland. Much of the downtown area reflects the arrival of trendy restaurants and coffee shops, changes the city has experienced due to elements of gentrification. I pass through this area as I approach WFHS. WFHS is located off a busy suburban road, approximately one mile north of the downtown center of Woodland. When I arrive to WFHS for my first visit, I meet Helen Curtis at an exterior door to her classroom. She is wearing a brightly colored dashiki and enthusiastically waves as I approach the door. She greets me with an expansive smile and warmly welcomes me into her classroom.

As I step through the door of Helen's classroom, I am immediately transported to an ambient learning environment. Most of the overhead lights of the WFHS choir room are turned off, allowing for twinkle lights spread across the walls to cast a warm glow. The classroom is large, with a tall ceiling, and built-in, carpeted choral risers adorned with blue plastic chairs. Hanging in the back of the room is a Black Lives Matter flag flanked by two rainbow LGBTQ+ flags and a poster that says 'Protect Kids Not Guns.' Next to these flags and posters are a variety of photos of WFHS choral ensembles from past decades. Other walls showcase student projects and large, glossy posters that say 'Diversity,' 'Hope,' and 'Life.' In the front of the room are two grand pianos. One of these pianos is covered with an assortment of greeting cards

and handmade pictures, as well as a framed photo of the WFHS choir circa the 1980s with a sign that reads 'Can You Find Your Choir Teacher?' Spread across the other piano are various personal care items including moisturizing lotion, Vaseline, tissue, Q-tips, breath mints, and bandages (I will learn later that these are for student use). Behind the piano is a collection of food and beverage items such as water bottles, juice, and crackers (these items, also, I learn, are for student use).

Helen and I speak for a few minutes, her sharing highlights from her day thus far. Then, the bell rings and Helen floats from next to the piano toward the classroom entrance. Students begin to enter the room quietly, periodically touching base with peers. Helen moves in and out of the classroom to greet students at the door and in the hallway: "Hey! How are ya?" or "Hi there, how's it going?" As one student approaches Helen, I hear them exclaim, "Ms. Curtis, I missed you!" to which Helen cheerfully replies, "I missed you, too!" This exchange is then followed by a brief discussion about why the student had recently been out of school. Other students, upon dropping backpacks at their seats, head to the area behind the piano and reach for a water bottle. Helen slips back into the classroom from the hallway and passes one of these students a black marker. Students take the marker and proceed to write their names on their new water bottle. A few students also reach beyond the stack of water bottles to retrieve a bag of peanut butter crackers before heading to their chairs on the risers. Multiple students smile and say hello to me as they take their seats.

When the second bell rings, Helen tells students that they can sit quietly for a few minutes to "get centered" as she sets up her materials at the piano. Students seem to react differently during this period: I notice that some students are scrolling through their phones, two seem to be writing in a planner, one is sitting with their eyes closed, and another is sprawled across a few

chairs with their sweatshirt pulled over their face. After a few minutes of silence, Helen directs students' attention to a large screen hanging above the piano where a digital slideshow awaits. Helen formally begins class by reading an assortment of affirmations (a ritual that I find out later is a daily occurrence). Affirmations seem to be specifically directed to specific students in the class or the group as a whole, and are related to recent choir performances in the Woodland community. The projected affirmations include screenshots of multiple posts shared on the WFHS choir Facebook page from audience members from a recent performance praising students for their successes; an email from a Woodland community member who is interested in funding future WFHS choir travel; and a message from a Woodland school board member commending students for their exemplary represention of the community. As Helen reads each of these affirmation messages on the projector screen, I notice that students are fully attentive and smiling, sometimes responding with phrases like "Aw, that's so nice" and "Wow—cool!" After discussing a few additional announcements related to reminders about an upcoming community performance, Helen asks students to stand. She connects the virtual program 'Just Dance' to the classroom projector and turns on the song 'Get Low' by Lil Jon and the East Side Boyz, featuring the Ying Yang Twins. Students rise from their seats and join Helen and the virtual dancers in a physical dance warm-up to the song. I look around and see that each student is enthusiastically participating. Within seconds of the dance warm-up song ending, and with student energy heightened, Helen moves to the piano, and the vocal warm-up begins.

School and Community Background

Woodland Falls High School (WFHS) is located in the city of Woodland, which is a suburban city in the midwestern region of the United States. According to July 2022 data from the United States Census Bureau, the city of Woodland has an estimated population of 19,732

(61.9% white, 25.5 % Black or African American, 7.2% two or more races, 6.0% Hispanic or Latino, 3.2%, 4.5% Asian, 0.2 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.1% American Indian and Alaskan Native). Woodland has a median household income of $40, 256 and 43% of residents aged 25 and older hold a Bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) designates WFHS a Title I, large suburban school with a student population that is approximately 57% Black or African American, 18% Hispanic or Latinx, 15% white, 8% two or more races, 0.9% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian and Alaskan Native (NCES). Approximately 77% of the WFHS school population is eligible for free or reduced lunch (NCES). My third participant, Helen Curtis, was the choir teacher at WFHS.

Who is Helen Curtis?

Helen's Background

At the time of this study, Helen Curtis was in her thirty-sixth year of teaching, all within the Woodland Community Schools: "I'm supposed to be here. I am Woodland," she shared (Interview 1). Helen self-identified as an African American female. Helen spent most of her life in the community of Woodland and attended the Woodland Community School district throughout her own P-12 education. When she began to consider collegiate options, Helen was initially interested in becoming a piano performance major at a nearby large public institution. After her undergraduate audition, a professor at the university planted the idea of Helen pursuing a degree in music education instead of performance, highlighting Helen's background in vocal music and experience on a variety of instruments. Helen said that this suggestion resonated with her background tutoring and giving piano lessons to local youth in Woodland. Subsequently, she decided to follow the professor's recommendation by pursuing a degree in music education.

While she characterized her undergraduate experience as largely positive ("things worked out well"), she acknowledged that she faced challenges as well:

> I struggled with some things. They [professors] would tell me problems in my lesson plans and they would be like, 'You should do it this way' and 'You should do it that way. 'I'd be feeling like, 'That's not me.' But I knew that once I got into my own classroom, I would have to find my own way. (Interview 1)

The first step to finding her own way involved returning to the city of Woodland for a teaching job immediately after her college graduation:

> I graduated and got a job in my hometown, in Woodland, and that made all the difference in the world. I was home. Two of the people on my interview committee had been my principals when I was a kid. They're like, 'Oh yeah, we're going to hire her. She's one of ours.' I got to work at the elementary where I went to school. (Interview 1)

Helen also expressed that, as a beginning teacher, teaching in the community of Woodland where she grew up was meaningful because she had a robust personal and professional network:

> The connections were just incredible. The kids I was teaching at that point, I knew them. I knew their families. Either they had an auntie or somebody was related to a neighbor. Some of the kids were my neighbors because I lived in the apartment complex next door to the school… When I was at home, it was, 'Hi Ms. Curtis, Hi Ms. Curtis.' It was love at first sight. (Interview 1)

Helen's commitment to living and teaching in the community of Woodland continued throughout her thirty-six year career. Helen taught elementary general music in Woodland for 30 years before transitioning to teaching choir and piano classes at WFHS in 2016. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, her investment in the community of Woodland—and particularly in the community's youth—deeply informed her approach to teaching and the culture she created in her WFHS choir classroom.

At WFHS, Helen taught one piano class and four high school choir classes, each choir class with approximately 8-12 students. Helen explained that the curriculum was the same for each of her four choir classes and that the four individual classes combined into one larger

ensemble of approximately 40 students for all performances. WFHS was on a block schedule, so Helen saw each of her classes on a rotation three times a week. That said, during the 30-minute WFHS Advisory Period that met before the first period of school each day, Helen met with her all of her choir students. It is only during this Advisory Period that Helen had the opportunity to work with all of her students at the same time as one SATB ensemble—though due to district bus transportation issues, she explained she often only had half (or less) of her students present. For each of my three observations at WFHS, I attended both the before school 30-minute Advisory Period (in order to observe students from all four of Helen's high school choir classes rehearse together) and her 90-minute fourth period class (with 9 students enrolled of mixed grades and voice parts). The singular WFHS student focus group contained students from this fourth period choir class only.

Factors Impacting Data Collection at Woodland Falls High School

During my partnership with Helen Curtis and her WFHS students as part of this study, Helen was placed on disciplinary leave by the Woodland Community School District. Though not of a concern for me as an educator and researcher, components of this study were impacted due to Helen being placed on disciplinary leave. Due to the confidential nature of personnel matters, I was unable to confirm the exact reason why Helen was placed on disciplinary leave, though Helen told me she believed the district's decision to place her on disciplinary leave was connected with her activist-based teaching practice. To protect the anonymity of Helen, her students, and the Woodland Community Schools District, I do not include any quotes from Helen directly about her disciplinary leave and will refrain from further discussion of the situation in this dissertation. At the time of Helen's notification, I had completed two of three interviews with Helen, three of four observations at WFHS, and one of two WFHS student focus groups.

Though my first two interviews with Helen were held in the WFHS choir room during her planning period, the third and final interview was completed via Zoom after she was placed on disciplinary leave. I was not able to complete the fourth and final observation nor the second student focus group at WFHS. Quotes from WFHS student participants were gathered before Helen was placed on disciplinary leave.

Presentation of Within-Case Findings:
Helen Curtis—Woodland Falls High School

In the sections that follow, I present within-case findings bound by the experiences of Helen Curtis and her students in the high school choral music classroom at Woodland Falls High School (WFHS). Within-case findings were synthesized from data collected during this study, including (a) three 75-minute, semi-structured interviews with Helen; (b) one in-person 60-minute student focus group with nine of Helen's students in the WFHS choral program; (c) fieldnotes from three 90-minute observations at WFHS; and (d) various forms of material culture and artifacts. Findings are organized based on themes emergent from within-case analysis: (a) bridging the Woodland community into the WFHS choral community; (b) fostering student relationships rooted in care and trust; (c) intersections between community, relationships, and choral music at WFHS; and (d) navigating relational challenges. Excerpts from Helen's interview transcripts, student participant reflections from focus groups, and observation fieldnotes are included as data. A within-case summary is provided at the end of the chapter.

Bridging the Woodland Community into the WFHS Choral Community

Analysis of data suggested that facets of community grounded human connection in the WFHS choir room. In this section, findings are organized by the following subthemes: (a)

building community through daily affirmations; (b) building community through performance opportunities; (c) building community through civic pride and activism; and (d) the WFHS choir community as a "safe family."

During our interviews, Helen Curtis consistently spoke about how dynamics of WFHS, the Woodland Community Schools District, and the city of Woodland impacted her approach to choral music teaching. For example, she shared that long-term shifts in the district contributed to current challenges at WFHS—related to resources, programming, and academics—that severely impacted the student body:

> They [the county] started having charter schools, we started losing kids, and then once we had the consolidation… that's where everything really went south. Everybody who had any kind of resources put their kids elsewhere, anywhere except here. This is where you go when you don't have a choice, if you don't have a car, if your family doesn't have a car to drive you someplace else…these are the kids that can't go anywhere else. (Interview 2)

Helen suggested that this overall climate directly impacted her students' mindset at WFHS: "They are so used to being disappointed that when something great happens, they don't even know how to act. They don't know how to accept it," she explained (Interview 1).

That said, Helen's personal and professional roots in the Woodland community provided her with a unique motivation to counteract the larger school- and district-based issues in the environment of her classroom:

> What breaks my heart, as a graduate of Woodland Schools, and as one who has taught here for 36 years, is that there has been so much greatness to come out of our school district and out of our schools. Out of this school in particular. There has been so much greatness. And I just feel like nobody's even trying to get greatness from these kids. That's why I kill myself trying to get greatness from these kids. To let them know, 'It's been done before. It's actually the history and heritage of this school. Greatness is all of these awards and things that they won back in the day. We can have that again. I'm trying to give that to you now.' (Interview 2)

Helen explained that her commitment to providing students with a meaningful music education was interwoven with her efforts to acknowledge their experiences as current students in the

Woodland Community Schools District. She believed that core to this commitment was building a community space in school where, no matter the lack of resources, her students know they are valued, affirmed, and supported. Though the paths Helen described to form this community varied, an investment in daily student affirmations, performances throughout Woodland, and a cultivation of student activism contributed to the sense of community Helen shared with her students.

Building Community Through Daily Affirmations

A cornerstone of Helen's choral community at WFHS were the daily affirmations she shared with students at the start of each class. As described in the opening vignette of this chapter, Helen began each class period by projecting a variety of affirmations for her students on the large projector screen at the front of the classroom. Helen asserted that it was important for her students to hear words of encouragement and to know that she—and others across the community—were proud of them. Many of the affirmations she shared with students were related to the WFHS choir's numerous performances throughout the community:

> These kids do so much all the time in this choral program. I think we've done 20 performances at this point this year, and we've got more through the summer… these kids are fricking rock stars in Woodland County, but they never hear shit from their school district. Nothing in the announcements…so I decided they need to hear it…So, I've been screenshotting every positive thing I see in social media and in class I'm like, 'Put your phone down and read this. Listen to this, because you're not hearing it elsewhere.' (Interview 1)

Helen believed that sharing affirmations was particularly important for students because of the lack of support they experience at WFHS: "I share the affirmations because students don't hear them here" she explained. Thus, she explained that she actively reached out to friends and other public figures in the greater Woodland community to convey how meaningful their affirmations are to her students: "I'm on Facebook and say 'Everything that you guys post here, I'll share with

the students. So please be liberal, be generous. Because they need to hear it. They're not hearing it at school.' And I don't mind telling people that," she asserted (Interview 1).

During each of my observations at WFHS, I witnessed Helen share daily affirmations with her students. Affirmations sometimes pertained to a specific student but were primarily directed toward the full ensemble. During the instructional time that Helen shared affirmations, students were attentive and often responded with smiles and verbal exchanges that ranged from expressions of happiness to surprise. "I don't' even think my students realize how good they are," Helen noted, responding to my acknowledgement of students' genuine surprise upon hearing a positive comment from a community member's Facebook post (Interview 1). Helen went on to suggest that the daily affirmations strengthened the identity of the choral community as a whole: "I am telling them that, 'All that good you've been doing in this class all year paid off. Somebody out there heard you and wants you to be great.' And they just get so excited" (Interview 1). She felt that each of those moments of affirmation ultimately increased motivation and collective pride amongst her students.

During the WFHS student focus group, student participants shared that Helen's affirmation rituals were an especially meaningful component of their daily choral experience. Student participants broadly described the affirmations ritual as a time in their school day that positively influenced their mood and overall concept of self: "Ms. Curtis really makes this feel like a safe place when we do affirmations, because she constantly tells us how great we are. And other people think it too. And it just makes it feel even more safe," one WFHS student participant explained (Student Focus Group). Another student shared that the daily affirmations not only impacted his personal mindset and work ethic within the ensemble, but positioned Helen's class as a unique setting in school. In speaking about how he feels after hearing the

affirmations, the student shared the following:

> I think the motivation that I have here is, when I come in here there's just good energy. Though sometimes you may have a bad day outside of choir, when you come in here all you feel is that good sense. And everybody's nice to each other. We may have our laughs and jokes, but it's all lovable and we're all caring for each other. I think that we believe in each other. (Student Focus Group)

These quotes reflect student participants' sense of validation after hearing affirmations shared by Helen during class. As Helen indicated in her own reflections, student participants perceived the affirmations ritual as not only meaningful to their individual self-efficacy, but influential in the development of collective feelings of unity, pride, and community—and in the instance of the student reflection above, care for one another.

Building Community Through Performance Opportunities

As presented above, the affirmations Helen shared with her students were often associated with recent WFHS choral performances in the local community. Helen said that she perceived these performances as an opportunity to give back to the city of Woodland and foster a sense of community within her choral program: "You got to get out there and go out in the community and perform. You got to go serve," she reflected (Interview 2). Helen told me that because of the WFHS choir's roots in service and community, they were in high-demand across the city of Woodland and surrounding county. For instance, examples of recent WFHS performing opportunities shared by Helen included performing at Woodland civic events like the Christmas tree lighting, New Year's Eve ball drop, African American Festival, Juneteenth Festival, Pride parade, Martin Luther King Jr. Diversity Day, and events in neighboring communities like performing for residents at nursing homes. Helen explained that she makes a point to tell her students that no other schools in the county are getting such an influx of invitations to perform at community events. She hoped that sharing this information would

convey to students “that it means something” to be acknowledged for their talents across the greater Woodland community (Interview 2).

Helen also believed that extra-curricular performances contributed to the cultivation of a shared sense of identity, purpose, and community amongst her students. For example, she explained that after community performances, her students often “feel like rock stars. They feel like successes. And they're not used to success” (Interview 2). In our third interview, Helen acknowledged that in addition to the musical and performance benefits of these extra-curricular events, the events have also come to represent special social bonding opportunities for students: “They interact really well with each other during field trips, I'm really proud” she beamed. “We stay after school and maybe enjoy a meal together, and then get on a bus and go perform someplace. Those have been the most magical times” (Interview 3).

Multiple student participants echoed this sentiment during the WFHS student focus group. Many students acknowledged that they enjoy extra-curricular performances because they lead to an increase in social bonding and “chill time together” (Student Focus Group). One student spoke about the power of these events in impacting their shared sense of community with WFHS choir peers, noting that having the opportunity to “experience new things together” during performance events was their favorite part of being in the WFHS choir program (Student Focus Group). Additionally, one student participant recognized that for them, participation in these community performance events not only enhanced their relational bonds with WFHS peers, but contributed to a greater sense of shared experience and identity within the WFHS choir community:

> They [the community performance events] make me feel like I'm more connected to others. You can have a conversation with each other in the future and be like, ‘Remember this?’ And then it's like, ‘Yeah.’ And then it's evermore growing friendship and communication with each other. It just works more. That's how I feel from them

[performance experiences in the community]. (Student Focus Group)

Ultimately, Helen believed that the bonds formed in preparation for, during, and after these performance events create a sense of unity between her and her students—and amongst students—that is particularly special:

> You get out there in front of that crowd and hear that applause and see those kids beaming. Oh my God, that is everything. You're singing together, you're doing it together. You're vibing together. That's just magic. You go through that a couple of times with a kid and they're your best friend. (Interview 1)

In our second interview, Helen elaborated upon the potential for an increase in student trust after community performances. Specifically, Helen explained that after the first community performance each school year, she often witnesses a noticeable shift in students' attitudes in class as well in their trust in her as a person and as a teacher: "After our first performance in October you can see everything just switch over after that. It is like, 'Okay, we trust you. We'll do what you tell us to do'" (Interview 2).

Community Built Through Civic Pride and Activism

Interwoven with Helen's and her student's presence at community events, was Helen's broader commitment to activism and developing students' pride in the Woodland community at large. "Choir is all about serving the community," she shared. "That's it" (Interview 2). Commitment to the Woodland community, blended with notions of service and activism, were palpable throughout my observations at WFHS. Even during my first visit, I joined Helen and her students outside on the WFHS grounds as they completed their weekly trash pick-up (an event that Helen has each of her classes complete once a week in an effort to beautify the WFHS campus). Empowering her students to beautify their school campus was only one example of the activist-based and justice-oriented spirit embedded in Helen's classroom and teaching practice.

As described in the opening vignette of this chapter, upon first stepping into Helen's classroom, I noticed that symbols often associated with activism adorned the walls—a Black Lives Matter flag, two LGBTQ+ rainbow peace flags, a poster that read 'Protect Kids Not Guns,' and various pictures commemorating the history of WFHS. During my first visit, I also noticed white posters with various handwritten statements in black marker sitting atop some of the classroom chairs. Upon closer observation, I noticed that statements on these posters included phrases like 'We Need Better Education and More Opportunities,' 'Make Them Hear Us,' and 'Fix the Parking Lot.' The story behind these signs is described in further detail later in this chapter.

As I spent more time in Helen's classroom, and with Helen and her students, I learned that calls for activism and civic pride not only graced the walls of the WFHS choir room, but were infused within the totality of Helen's pedagogy, relational approach with students, and shared sense of community and purpose amongst students in the classroom. These themes became an undercurrent in my conversations with Helen and her students. In the section below, I discuss how Helen and her students built a sense of community together in the WFHS choir room rooted in notions of activism and civic pride.

Activism, Civic Pride, and Community Cultivated Through Song

During my visits to WFHS, I was intrigued by the sizeable number of class songs that seemed centered on topics related to WFHS itself, as well as the community of Woodland. The lyrics of these songs appeared contemporary, seemed focused on specific details pertaining to the WFHS/Woodland experience, and were strikingly powerful. As I packed up my belongings after my first observation, I asked Helen about these songs. She explained that many of the songs were original compositions and arrangements that Helen had created or that Helen and her students had co-created together. Speaking to these songs during our first interview, Helen explained that

“they [the original arrangements and compositions] all have a very specific purpose” (Interview 1). As described below, the “purpose” of these songs were largely rooted in notions of civic pride and activism.

Civic Pride. Most of the original compositions and arrangements in the WFHS choir room reflected a deep sense of civic pride in the community of Woodland. One piece, *Returning to Woodland* (title changed to protect anonymity), was a choral arrangement of a rousing pop song from the 1980’s arranged by Helen (though the original version was recorded by a musical artist born and raised in Woodland that Helen knew). Helen described *Returning to Woodland* as “the official song of Woodland” and excitedly told me that her students “just clicked with it immediately because they think ‘Hey, this song's about my city’”(Interview 2). Because of her students’ love for the song, Helen explained that *Returning to Woodland* had become a unifying piece of repertoire in her classroom akin to an anthem. I noticed student affinity for the song during my observations at WFHS, as every time that Helen started the digital accompaniment, student shouts of “Yes!” burst across the classroom. As students sang the piece and carried out their original choreography, it appeared that the song was a highlight of students’ rehearsal repertoire. Further, due to *Returning to Woodland’s* historical legacy in the community dating back to the 1980’s, Helen felt that students also seemed to experience an increased level of civic pride when performing the song during public performances and when bonding with family members while singing the song at home.

Another piece of repertoire that centered the notion of civic pride at WFHS was an original choral piece composed by Helen, entitled *Stay*. Helen described *Stay* as “a song about gentrification in Woodland” (Interview 2). Helen elaborated upon her vision for *Stay* during our second interview:

> [*Stay*] is about staying in Woodland because so many people just leave. Our kids can see it. How are we going to teach our history? How is anybody going to learn about Woodland? How are we going to make it better? If you don't know your history, you're going to repeat it, which is exactly what we keep doing. (Interview 2)

Helen suggested that the lyrics to *Stay* provided her and her students a chance to collectively connect with each other through potentially shared feelings about gentrification and the changing landscape of Woodland. Below is an excerpt from *Stay* showcasing Helen's original lyrics:

> *When you're feeling so defeated disappointment is repeated*
> *And nothin' 'bout your situation is okay.*
> *So you figure you can't win it, there's no other way to spin it*
> *And you pack it up and say it's time to move away.*
>
> *But one the one thing you can consider, 'stead of leaving hurt and bitter*
> *You don't have to live your life in disarray.*
> *You can fight for what's your own and you won't have to fight alone*
> *Stand your ground in your town so you can stay.*
>
> *You got to stay.*
> *Stay, Stay, Stay.*
>
> *It's our heritage and history and it shouldn't be a mystery,*
> *but who's gonna tell our story if you run away*
> *Woodland and I love it, We say 'Woodland, Damn proud of it!'*
> *Take the good but fix the bad so we can stay.*
>
> *You got to stay.*
> *Stay, Stay, Stay.*

This excerpt from *Stay* demonstrates how Helen, through her original lyrics, attempted to guide her students through a larger sociocultural issue that directly impacted their lives. She told me that through the lyrics she hoped to both acknowledge the challenges of gentrification while instilling messages of hope and empowerment for her students. This is perhaps best exemplified in the passages 'Stand your ground in your town so you can stay' and 'We say Woodland, Damn Proud of It!' During observations, when WFHS students reached this second lyric example in the song, they shouted the text with vivacity. Though I was not present for any of the discussions

that Helen and her students had about the themes of *Stay*, Helen told me that she and her students talked about *Stay's* themes a great deal during the initial learning phases. Ultimately, like *Returning to Woodland,* Helen believed that *Stay* resonated with her students because it is "a song written specifically about people who live in Woodland" (Interview 2).

Both *Stay* and *Returning to Woodland* centered the experiences of Helen, her students, and the community they lived in together. Helen believed that including songs like *Stay* and *Returning to Woodland* as part of the curriculum in her classroom heightened student engagement, meaningfully enhanced their approach to repertoire, and fostered a social cohesion within the ensemble. "They [the songs *Stay* and *Returning to Woodland*] have certainly struck a chord with the students because they love them. They love singing them. They like singing about their city" (Interview 2). Both songs were also brought up by student participants in the WFHS focus group. One student shared that she preferred learning "personalized songs" like *Stay* and *Returning to Woodland*, as opposed to other choral repertoire: "If we would just do songs that are already made for choirs, I feel like that would be boring," she expressed. Instead, this student felt that "[*Stay* and *Returning to Woodland*] feel like *our* voices" [emphasis from student participant] (Student Focus Group). Helen believed that these specific musical opportunities rooted in civic pride fostered a deeper level of student connection with course material, while also unifying students together through a shared sense of experience and identity. This amalgamation was also prevalent in Helen's and her students' reflections about the repertoire they experienced together rooted in activism.

Activism. As described above, Helen considered elements of service and civic pride as foundations to her choral music teaching practice at WFHS. Specifically, she felt that centering songs like *Stay* and *Returning to Woodland* in her choral curriculum was a way to weave notions

of service and civic pride directly into choral music teaching and learning. Closely aligned with her investment in musical manifestations of civic pride was Helen's commitment to activist-based musical projects designed to empower students' social and musical voices. Choral arrangements of *Yes, My Lord* and *What About Me?* (both titles changed to protect anonymity) were two examples of Helen's efforts to empower student-driven activism in the WFHS choral community. Though *Yes, My Lord* was performed at WFHS before the start of this study, both Helen and her students brought up the piece during data collection. Helen explained that *Yes, My Lord* was conceived as an opportunity to give students a platform to share their thoughts about their challenging experiences at WFHS:

> The students actually wrote the words. It was a call and response type thing: 'Would you like a cleaner school?' 'Yes, my lord!' Don't you wish we had a swimming pool? 'Yes, my lord!' Wouldn't you like a better auditorium? Don't you wonder where the money went? 'Yes, my lord!' It was hard hitting. (Interview 2)

Multiple student participants also spoke about the experience of co-writing the lyrics for the arrangement of *Yes, My Lord*. One student described the experience of coming together with their peers to center a social message through music as especially empowering:

> *Yes, My Lord* was a song that was made up by the entirety of the class. Beforehand, we were just going to sing the original words to it, but then we threw in our own words because of the fact that we wanted to get our word out as to how we felt about the school and what we wanted to change. (Student Focus Group)

Echoing this comment, another student, Camryn, acknowledged the special nature of conveying their own individual and collective perspectives into a set of lyrics that they would later sing together: "It's more interpersonal when we get our input into it," she said. "It's us." After a pause, Camryn continued: "Perhaps now more people will hear our voices and more people will listen instead of just talking at us. They'll feel what we're saying" (Student Focus Group). After this final comment from Camryn, multiple students nodded their heads across the focus group

circle.

The notion of ‘listening’ emphasized by Camryn above, and grounded in the student-created lyrics of *Yes, My Lord* described by Helen and other WFHS student participants, seemed to reflect a greater impetus for the collective activist spirit in the WFHS choir room. These calls for listening were also the root of another choral arrangement that Helen and her students happened to be working on during my observations at WFHS—*What About Me?* (title changed to protect anonymity). Similar to *Yes, My Lord*, Helen described *What About Me?* as an R & B arrangement focused on her students’ perspectives of being ignored by WFHS administration and the Woodland Community Schools District. Helen explained that in *What About Me?* she and her students “directly called out our school district and our whole community, [asking] ‘How can you leave these kids at this school and in this school district under-resourced?’” (Interview 2).

During my first observation at WFHS, Helen proudly showed me a video of the WFHS choir students performing their arrangement of *What About Me?* at a recent school assembly. As the performance video glowed across the classroom projector screen, students in the classroom sang along and recreated the dance moves near their seats as they watched themselves in the video. In the video performance, each WFHS choir student wore a traditional African dashiki shirt and black pants. They sang with fervor and executed unified choreography filled with bold, sharp movements. In the video, as *What About Me?* came to an end, students ran behind the curtain of the auditorium stage before re-emerging with one of the hand-made white signs that I had noticed when I first entered WFHS. In the video, students raised a sign above their heads, displaying their sign’s message, and stood powerfully facing the audience. The video captured loud cheers emitting from the student body audience (at this point, students reliving the video in

the WFHS choir classroom cheered as well) (WFHS Observation 1). In a later conversation, Helen told me that each WFHS choir student chose what to write on their individual sign and that each message was based on a specific issue they felt impacted their educational experience at WFHS. Examples of student sign messages included: ‘Equal Educational Opportunity,’ ‘Give a Damn,’ ‘Give Us Heat,’ ‘Fix the Parking Lot,’ ‘Fix Transportation,’ ‘New Auditorium,’ ‘New Sound System,’ ‘More Electives Now,’ and ‘Better Resources.’

Though Helen said the greater WFHS student body celebrated this assembly performance, she was aware that WFHS school administration disapproved of her choice to feature a musical number like *What About Me?* Ultimately, however, Helen stated that she felt foregrounding her students’ perspectives and creative efforts was most important: “The kids wanted to do this. They wanted to tell you how they feel. I'm giving them a voice and this is what we're doing’” (Interview 2). In turn, Helen’s students described feeling grateful for the opportunity to come together and share their voices when advocating for a better educational environment at WFHS. One student spoke about their pride in the aftermath of the school assembly performance of *What About Me?*:

> It makes me happy that people are really hearing us and really listening to us, because for so long these things have gone unheard. Now everyone's listening. Everyone can see that there are problems that they have ignored for too long and now they're listening to us. And even though as a Senior I might not see these changes before I go, at least I'll know that people who are coming behind me will get the changes that they deserve. (Student Focus Group)

Another student, Caleb, characterized the process of preparing *What About Me?* as an experience that united him and his WFHS choral peers. Caleb explained that not only did he and his choral peers bond together when thinking about/writing the song’s lyrics, but they felt an even greater sense of solidarity as a choir—and with their peers across the WFHS community—after the assembly performance: “We were more connected with the school and with everyone in the class

as a whole because we all connect to that experience," Caleb explained. "Everyone goes in the parking lot and everyone goes on the stage. So, we know how that feels when we're putting our own creativity into the song itself" (Student Focus Group). I asked Caleb to continue his reflection and tell me more about how the experience creating and performing with his peers in the WFHS choir made him feel. Caleb went on to express an empowered understanding of the potential to enact change when he and his WFHS choir peers collectively proclaim a social-justice and activist-based message through music:

> Honestly, I think what we communicate is that, if you have a voice, you can use it at any time. You just can't be the only one to use it. Your words can mean a lot. Even if it's something small, it can mean a lot to the entire school and could change how it works. I feel as if now that we did that performance, a lot of things may change around the school. Even though they may not seem major, they are small changes and that's what matters. As long as something changes, that means what you did wasn't for nothing. It means something. (Student Focus Group)

In his own words, Caleb conceptualized the amalgamation of shared purpose, common experience, community, and potential to catalyze change that Helen sought to foster within the WFHS choral community. Further, Caleb's reflection demonstrated how his and his peers' civic pride and activism were cultivated through song, especially when the lyrics and messaging of the song were co-created by students who shared similar life experiences.

The WFHS Choir Community as a "Safe Family"

As evident in data presented thus far, a sense of community in the WFHS choir room was created through a collective activist spirit and civic pride, the ritual of daily affirmations, bonding during extra-curricular performance activities, and a shared identity as members of the greater WFHS and city of Woodland contexts. Student participants, specifically, reflected that these relational and pedagogical moments held both an individual and collective meaning. Though perhaps implicitly present in some of Helen's and her students' reflections presented

thus far, the amalgamation of these experiences ultimately contributed to participants' perspectives of what the WFHS community stood for—what it 'meant' to be a part of the WFHS choir community.

Helen told me that she perceived every activity and point of curriculum in the WFHS choral program as an opportunity to solidify a sense of community and purpose amongst her students: "My intention is always that they get closer together," she explained. "They learn that you have to work together, you got to rely on each other. You don't have to be best friends, but you got to work together. You have to be able to get along" (Interview 2). With that sentiment as a foundation, Helen believed that the WFHS choir room represented a unique place for her students during the school day. In fact, she described the WFHS choir as "a covenant" (Interview 3). In response to my request to know more about what she meant by "covenant," Helen provided the following consideration: "There's just this spirit, this vibe, that everything is okay in choir. When they leave, they might be ready to fight, but probably not each other," she affirmed. "And I really do foster that. I've got 'Do not let hate enter' hanging on the door and 'Welcome to paradise.' I feel like everybody just lets their guard down once they're in choir, once they're all together" (Interview 3).

Reflecting the hopes of their teacher, WFHS student participants described the WFHS choral program as a loving and supportive musical family. Some students identified musical aspects as the threads that enhanced their collective experience. For example, one student suggested that the WFHS choir represented "community and unity because we come together to make one sound," while another student said they felt a communal spirit in choir "because we're working together using our voices, using a gift" (Student Focus Group). Other student participants focused on increasingly interpersonal dimensions when describing their notion of the

WFHS choral family. For example, one student shared the following:

> I think that this feels like a family because we all believe in each other. We all make mistakes and we're not perfect. I feel like it just takes that one thing: If you believe in me, then that'll give me the confidence to stick up for myself and you. (Student Focus Group)

Hearing the responses of her peers, another student went on to also evoke the term ‘family,’ specifically referencing her evolving awareness that her WFHS choir peers were people she could turn to in times of need:

> I’d say family because of the fact that whenever I come in here, I feel like everybody in here I've gotten to know greatly over the year. And now I can talk to them about pretty much anything if I really needed to. And they could do the same to me if they wanted to talk. (Student Focus Group)

These student participant reflections emphasize the varied ways that students perceived the WFHS choir as a musical and social environment of support, often akin to a family. Going a step further, student participants also expressed that within the WFHS choral community, there was an understanding that all students were welcomed and valued as individuals. Reflecting on this notion, one student shared that they “just feel comfortable in here,” while another explained: “This is a safe place because people can be their selves when they're here and they don't have to be changed for anybody. Here, nobody judges each other. We can all be who we want” (Student Focus Group). Echoing his peers, a student new to the WFHS choir the year of this study said he felt affirmed immediately upon entering the choir room:

> The first time I walked in this room I had like, new kid vibes. Which I don't really like, because honestly, whenever I feel like I'm walking into a room and feel like a new kid, I just feel like I should probably walk back out and be better off. But instead of doing that, I decided to stay in here and go with the flow, which I did. And I got to know a lot of good people in here. And I'm pretty happy about that. (Student Focus Group)

The student participant quotes above reflect many of the goals for the WFHS choral community espoused by Helen. She explained that she is grateful for the community she has co-created with her students in the WFHS choir room and is thrilled that “the kids are really starting

to get it" (Interview 2). Further, she shared that she is proud of her students for their growing support of each other and their shared commitment to Woodland, WFHS, and activism through music. And it seemed students do, in fact, "get it," as evident in the various quotes throughout this section, and as conveyed in this emphatic student participant reflection: "We hate this school. But this place [the WFHS choir room]? We like this place" (Student Focus Group).

Summary

In the section above, I described how Helen and her students at WFHS perceived facets of community in the WFHS choral classroom. Based on collected data, I centered examples that included Helen's ritual of affirmations, efforts to build community through performances, a commitment to weaving notions of civic pride and activism into repertoire co-created between Helen and her students, and the cultivation of a perception of the WFHS choral program as a 'family.' Helen and her students' reflections about a commitment to civic pride and activism were based in a shared cultural understanding of living in the community of Woodland and being members of WFHS. Specifically, Helen and her students spoke about creating and performing repertoire that addressed issues of disappointment and abandonment associated with the impact of gentrification in the city of Woodland, a lack of resources and attention to student success at WFHS, and the importance of advocating for fair and equitable treatment. Helen's and her students' shared cultural understandings ultimately heightened the ways that they collaborated together in social and musical endeavors in the choral classroom. The unifying themes of their repertoire, the experience of co-creating that repertoire together, and a general foundation of support and validation (between Helen and her students and amongst students) contributed to participant perspectives of the WFHS choral classroom as a 'safe' and affirming 'family.'

Fostering Student Relationships Rooted in Care and Trust

While a sense of community formed the branches of the WFHS choral program tree, relationships between Helen and her students seemed to serve as the roots. Throughout our interviews, Helen identified trust and care as central foundations of her relationships with students. Further, she believed that implications of racial and cultural representation intersected in important ways with her efforts to establish trusting and caring bonds with her students at WFHS. In this section, I will present reflections from Helen and her students that demonstrate the varied ways relationships were conceived and sustained in the WFHS choral community.

Foundations of Care: "The Mother of Choir"

Findings reflected that facets of care—how care was communicated, received, and preserved—grounded Helen's approach to relationships with students. Helen believed that care and trust were aligned in the teacher-student relationship and that her students' awareness of her care subsequently informed their trust in her. During our first interview, Helen and I had the following exchange related to her perspectives of the intersection between care and trust in her relationships with students:

> Sean: You mentioned trust. What do you think is the foundation of trust with your students? Why do they trust you? I want to make sure I understand that.
>
> Helen: Because I care. Because I give a damn. Because I care about them…and they're concerned about me. A lot of stuff they'd do for me they wouldn't do for anyone else. It's definitely a relationship. It's a two-way relationship and it's a beautiful thing. (Interview 1)

This care-based, "beautiful two-way relationship" was discussed in detail by both Helen and her students. For example, in our focus group, one student participant shared: "Ms. Curtis is the source of support to help the school out and we're the source of support to help Ms. Curtis out" (Student Focus Group). Helen and many students characterized this mutual support and unique

bond as being similar to the bonds one might share with a special family member. When I asked Helen to consider how her students might describe her, she answered with the following: “Like a mother or a grandma. Loving. They know I love them. They know I take care of them” (Interview 1). In turn, during our student focus group, I asked WFHS students to describe Helen—and they had similar perceptions. Student participants described Helen as “like a mom, honestly,” or “the mother of choir,” and “she's one of the best mothers that you could ever ask for” (Student Focus Group). When I asked these specific student participants why they looked to Helen as a parental figure, one said “because not only is she there for you when you sing, but she's also there for you in times when we're not singing. She could be there for you just because you simply want to talk to her” (Student Focus Group). The passages below further bring to life how Helen and her students formed and sustained meaningful relationships.

Care Through Action

When I asked Helen to tell me more about how she conveyed care to her students, she was quick to contend that care should be conveyed through action. “You don't have to tell somebody that you care for them,” Helen affirmed, “You know when somebody actually gives a damn about you” (Interview 1). One entity Helen believed contributed to students ‘knowing’ she cared for them was her diligence in ensuring that certain personal items were always readily available for student use in her classroom. For example, the items I noticed during my observations—such as lotion, bandages, tampons, breath mints and Vaseline, as well as sources of sustenance like crackers and water bottles—were examples of items that Helen provided to her students that she felt in turn conveyed care:

> I take care of them. Simple as that. The water fountain is broke and singers got to stay hydrated, so I get them water. There's a need, you fill it. They're hungry all the time. So I have crackers and snacks for them. It's just basic care…I see their needs. They don't have to ask me. I can see what they need (Interview 1).

As Helen noted, it was her steadfast belief that students should know she cared for them based on her actions, such as providing these essential resources in her classroom. She also felt that it was important not to wait to convey acts of care if she knew that care was needed. Further, Helen believed that her knowledge of students, their lives, and her deeper awareness of the contexts they lived in throughout Woodland influenced her overall attunement to their needs.

Helen asserted that this general attunement to students' human needs extended to support beyond the classroom as well. For example, during my second observation, a student approached Helen to share that they had lost their winter coat during the previous day's choir field trip. Helen immediately said that she was sorry to hear about the lost coat and that she would be in contact with the venue where they performed to see if it was found. When Helen and I spoke after class that day, she mentioned that she empathized with the student and was committed to the student and to finding a solution—a commitment she indicated other teachers might not be as concerned with: "How many teachers you think are really going to care about this little girl losing her coat? I will buy her another one if it doesn't turn up," she said (Interview 2). Before my third visit, I asked Helen whether the student's coat had turned up. She excitedly shared that the performance venue had found the coat and returned it to the student. While she was glad the student had her coat again, Helen told me that she lost sleep knowing the student was without a coat for a few days during cold weather.

In the focus group, a student participant named Gabriela, shared her own story about an instance when she felt cared for by Helen, sharing that the previous year Helen took extra steps to ensure that Gabriela could attend a special choir performance off-campus:

> If you truly want to be in choir, if you want to do these events, Ms. Curtis will find a way. She got an Uber for me to come out and perform at a concert. She didn't have to do that. I could have stayed home, but I wanted to come out and sing. And she made it happen. Not

a lot of teachers will go out of their way for students like that. (Student Focus Group)

Another student participant, Trey, felt similarly to Gabriela, suggesting that Helen is unique in her consistent expressions of care toward students:

> Trey: A lot of these teachers, let's be honest, are here for that check, which might not be much, but they're just here for that. A lot of teachers do not care about what happens to us. Let's be real.
>
> Sean: But you feel like Ms. Curtis does care?
>
> Trey: Absolutely.

WFHS student participant reflections, like Trey's and Gabriela's, may point to a broader student awareness of Helen's care in the WFHS choir community. Further, student participant perspectives seem to give credence to Helen's belief that "you know if somebody actually gives a damn about you," which WFHS students expressed knowing based on Helen's actions. Further, student participants emphasized that Helen's expressions of care are uncommon when compared to other teachers across the school community.

Care Through Interactions

A willingness to replace a student's winter coat, the act of purchasing an Uber for a student to attend an off-campus concert, and having certain personal items available in her classroom to ensure that students have the resources to fulfill their basic needs, all represent specific actions through which Helen conveyed care to her students. That said, Helen also talked about the importance of lacing care throughout all short-term and long-term interactions with her students. For example, when I asked Helen to describe her care-based approach to interacting with students, she chuckled at first: "It's not that difficult," she sighed, before marveling upon the premise that more teachers do not understand how to express care to their students (Interview 1). When I encouraged Helen to tell me more about her personal approach to conveying care in

student relationships, she explained that she believed the most consistent and effective way to convey care to students was to be intentional about interpersonally connecting with them. Specifically, she spoke about the importance of conveying care by frequently touching base and checking in with her students. Helen explained that such connections might range from complimenting a student on a recent haircut, asking about a student's pet, or touching base about specific elements of students' personal lives:

> You have conversations. For example, if they're absent, I'll say 'I missed you. Where were you?' And then they tell me what's going on. 'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that,' If they tell you something is going on in their lives, ask them later, 'Is that thing better?' Basic. But people don't do that. A lot of people just don't do that. That's real. Everybody appreciates it when you actually remember anything they do that you hear about. (Interview 1)

Helen again evoked notions of family and parental dynamics, suggesting that she considered her care for students to be unique "because they're my babies" and therefore she "acts like their mother" (Interview 1). Helen asserted that (a) expressing an interest in the details of students' lives; (b) following up on those details in subsequent interactions; and (c) reminding students that she is proud of them, collectively enhances students' perception of her as a caring adult: "It makes them feel great…[because] they know that I took an interest in their life…I cared enough, I remembered" (Interview 1).

In turn, WFHS student participants expressed perceiving Helen's interest in their lives as meaningful. "Most teachers don't really care about what their students do after school, but Ms. Curtis does," one student shared (Student Focus Group). Other students identified Helen's listening ear as indicative of a care-based rapport: "Ms. Curtis actually listens to students instead of gaslighting them. And that's rare" (Student Focus Group). Similarly, a different student offered the following:

> I feel like it makes a lot of people feel comfortable in class when they have an environment where a teacher actually listens to the students instead of just ignoring them

> or saying things never happened. Or if they just don't care. It feels nice to have that comfortable relationship with a teacher. (Student Focus Group).

Again, the importance of teachers listening to their students was centered in student participant reflections. Further, Helen mentioned that in addition to expressing an interest in—and knowing about—students' lives, she also makes a point to be visible in their lives outside of the classroom as much as possible:

> If they have a death in their family and I can make it, I go to the funeral. I'll get them a card. If they ask me to go to their games and watch them lose, I'll go at least once. Is it important to you to see me there? Then I'll be there. (Interview 1)

In addition to showing an interest in her students' lives, Helen stated that she also tries to share elements from her own life with students in an effort to form stronger bonds: "I think it's important to let your students know some of your tastes in music or movies. I mean, just let them know who you are so they can get to know you" (Interview 3). Ultimately, however, Helen believed that learning about students' lives—and subsequently being intentional and consistent in following up about those life details—are two of the most important steps toward conveying care in the teacher-student relationship:

> Listen. Give a damn. Pay attention to your students. They appreciate that. If they did something, if they achieved something, if you heard they achieved something, for goodness sakes, tell them congratulations, or ask them, 'How did it go?' (Interview 1)

Helen was grounded in a commitment to caring for her students at WFHS and expressing that care through a combination of interactions and specific acts. Helen believed that expressions of care validated and affirmed students' self-worth and strengthened the teacher-student relationship. As presented at the beginning of this section, Helen asserted that students' knowledge of her care for them—whether expressed through word, action, or sustained presence—is the most central component to fostering trust in teacher-student relationships. Student participant reflections also suggested an awareness and appreciation of Helen's care,

with students specifically acknowledging that Helen was one of the few teachers in their lives who took an interest in them as people, especially with regard to their lives outside of the classroom.

Foundations of Trust

As demonstrated at the beginning of this section, Helen believed that trust is the glue that holds care-based relationships together: “Trust is everything,” she shared in our first interview (Interview 1). Helen conceived the notion of trust in teacher-student relationships as multi-layered and interwoven with facets of care. For example, Helen explained that she announces on the first day of every school year that she will never lie to her students: “They get lied to so much…they need somebody they can trust,” she shared (Interview 1). “So, I tell them I'm real. That's it. I'm real. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. If I'm angry about something, I tell them. I explain why” (Interview 1). She felt that this declaration of honesty and transparency, when met with actionable proof, displayed her credibility—and that she is a person her students can rely on:

> They trust me. There's too many people in their lives who have proven to them that they can't be trusted. And I'm one that they can trust. I always do what I say. I would never lie to my students. That's just too important. (Interview 2)

Hearing this, I asked Helen to tell me more about the ways she established trust with students. Similar to expressions of care, Helen believed that establishing trust with students was not just reliant on explicit verbal declarations, but based in nonverbal acts of commitment. She described one of those acts of commitment as being a consistent and dependable presence in students’ lives:

> They trust me because I stay after school with them. I'm spending time with them. I'm not yelling at them. I'm not trying to get away from here every day. I'm here every day. They know I love them. They know I want to be with them…I want the best for them. I

want great things for them. And I demonstrate it every day. (Interview 2)

Echoing the theme of dependability laced throughout Helen's reflection, a WFHS student participant named Jeremiah expressed an acute awareness of the difference between the lip service of trust and genuinely earning trust, especially with teachers. Jeremiah identified Helen as someone who had earned his trust:

> Jeremiah: Being real, when it comes to people that I don't know, I don't pay attention to words most of the time…What I pay attention to is what they do for you. I pay attention to your actions. What you do to show that you actually mean what's behind your words. Because most of the time those words can have a whole different meaning when I see your actions. But if I see people that put out those words and then actually put action behind the meaning of those words, that's the people I know I can trust. So that's what I pay attention to. I pay attention to the actions that you do rather than the meaning of the words.
>
> Sean: Does Ms. Curtis show those actions for you?
>
> Jeremiah: Most definitely. She always puts the actions to back it up every time.

When I asked Jeremiah to elaborate upon what "the actions" might be, he shared that "whether it's something small or major, she's there" (Student Focus Group).

Developing Trust Through Shared Racial, Cultural, and Community-Based Experience

In addition to developing trust with her students as a dependable, consistent, and supportive adult presence in their lives, Helen also spoke about the facets of her and her students' identities that she believed impacted students' trust in her. Specifically, Helen believed that her identity as an African American woman with lifelong ties to the community of Woodland influenced her capacity to establish trust with her predominately Black student cohort.

"So Woodland:" Trust in Shared Community and Culture. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted various ways that Helen incorporated her identity as a lifelong resident of Woodland into her teaching approach. Whether through incorporating a sense of community in her choir or choosing repertoire reflective of the Woodland experience, Helen felt that her

reputation in—and historical knowledge of—Woodland provided her with a certain level of credibility with students that often translated into trust: “I think I just come across as somebody you can trust,” she suggested. “Even the kids I don't teach, when I see them in the hallway, they’re like, ‘Oh, that's the choir teacher. Hi, Ms. Curtis.’ It's just a level of respect that I've earned. That I have truly, truly earned” (Interview 2).

I asked Helen to reflect upon what contributed to her reputation as a trustworthy adult at WFHS. Initially, she pointed to her legacy at WFHS itself: “I was a kid at this school. I am a fixture. I belong here. That makes it very personal” (Interview 2). After more contemplation, she added that she thinks students’ trust in her may emerge from her overall presence, personality, and way of communicating:

> Helen: I mean, there's maybe just something about the way I carry myself in Woodland. I'm so Woodland that maybe I'm just someone that's easier for them [students] to listen to, easier to relate to.
>
> Sean: What’s ‘so Woodland?’
>
> Helen: Honestly, I would say maybe the rhythms in which I speak. I know I slip into colloquialisms a little bit. I always bring it back. I always try to be professional with them, but they see me as, I don't know. I guess I’m just easier for them sometimes. (Interview 2)

After another pause, Helen again brought up her long-term connections with many students’ family members and the surrounding community as contributing to what it meant to be ‘so Woodland:’ “I went to school with [students’] grandparents. I taught their mom” (Interview 2). Helen felt that these personal connections with the Woodland community—a community where she herself grew up, still lived, and had devoted over thirty years as a public school teacher—fostered a unique sense of trust:

> It was always very easy for me to care about my students because I've been teaching in my hometown the entire time. When I started teaching in elementary school in 1987, some of the kids I taught, I had gone to school with their parents or I knew them. So there

> was automatically a different level of caring because when they would talk about their home lives I would know exactly what they were talking about because so many of them lived around the corner from me…they literally lived in my neighborhoods. So, it was automatically a different level of caring. (Interview 3)

Helen believed that this “different level of caring” tied to her Woodland roots continued with her current WFHS students as well. She also felt that additional layers of trust are solidified each time she sees students out in the Woodland community, whether at church, the grocery store, or when they are riding their bike through her neighborhood. “They see me everywhere. They see me walking in their neighborhood and driving my car through their neighborhood. So, they know I'm one of them” (Interview 2).

Helen added that while she believed it is possible for other teachers to gain trust from students at WFHS without sharing her same Woodland lineage, it is not common: “A lot of teachers will go home to [local suburb] at the end of the day and never think about those kids again ‘til they’re back in the building” (Interview 2). Relatedly, she felt that developing a strong rapport with WFHS students ultimately required a certain level of awareness of the Woodland community at large:

> I’m not saying that if you don't live in Woodland, you don't get it. But you should be invested. If this is where you're going to teach, then you should know something about this community. Do some research, go to a couple events. Why don't you? Your choir is going to be performing there, you might as well go find out something about your city. (Interview 2)

Helen further believed that other teachers’ lack of knowledge about Woodland, the residents of Woodland, and/or WFHS students themselves, often contributed to students’ distrust of them:

> The students are very intuitive. They can pick out fake real fast. When they say teachers don't care, I think what they mean by that is that they're fake, that they're not genuine. They may say the right things. They may even do the right things, but students can tell when it's not real. (Interview 3).

Helen further recognized that her status as an alumnus of WFHS likely impacted students’ sense

of trust in her. “They can especially relate with me because my picture is on the wall [of the choir room],” she explained. “I was a kid in this school just like they are. It helps. It's easier to relate to them” (Interview 3). She added that her status as an alumnus of WFHS, paired with her shared identities with many students, prompts a certain sense of relational nostalgia: “Some kids remind me of myself when I was a kid. So, you have that great bond” (Interview 3).

Racial Identity, Trust, and Connection. In addition to forming trust with students through shared cultural experiences as members of the Woodland community, Helen believed that her identity as an African American woman contributed to a depth of trust between her and her students—most of whom are Black or African American. “My racial identity and the way I relate to my kids is something I can't separate,” she stressed (Interview 3). I inquired whether Helen felt that sharing racial and cultural demographics with her students impacted their interpersonal interactions, to which she felt confident they did: “It helps in our relationship. They can relate to me” (Interview 3). Helen went on to elaborate upon how she felt her racial identity impacted the way students communicate with her, again suggesting that some students likely look to her as a family member:

> As an older African American female who resides on the south side of Woodland, I'm sure a lot of my students look at me as either an auntie or a grandma or a mom. So, when they speak to me, they speak to me that way. They ask me for my advice. Probably things they may not say to another teacher. (Interview 3)

I asked Helen if she could recall specific instances when she felt that her racial identity had directly impacted her relational approach with students. At first, she asserted that “it all works together,” broadly referencing the culminating dimensions of her investment in Woodland, her commitment to activism in the classroom, and her role as a mentor and source of support at WFHS (Interview 3). Helen then proceeded to speak about how her identity as an African American woman had previously acted as a bridge for some of her African American

students, particularly if those students did not feel comfortable approaching other teachers at WFHS. Helen felt that this nuanced sense of racial and cultural knowing—paired with her role as a mentor/family figure—sometimes provided her a general level of understanding and empathy that other teachers might not possess. For example, she brought up a recent conversation with a student who shared that they could not turn in a field trip permission form because they had not seen their mother in a week. While Helen recognized that other teachers might not believe the student, she did:

> I know they're not lying. You kind of have to step in and be that surrogate parent. So when things go wrong for them, when I see my students suffering, I internalize that. I can't just turn it off and go home at the end of the day, and they know that. I'm very close with my students. (Interview 3)

Helen also suggested that her role as a mentor and family figure in many students' lives ranged from moments like the example provided above, to instances where her life-experience as an African American individual informed an even deeper relational thread with students.

An example shared by Helen of a meaningful interaction with a student based on their shared racial identity involved a student named Jeremiah, who as noted earlier in this chapter, was also in the WFHS student focus group. In order to fully illuminate the depth of relational interaction between Helen and Jeremiah, I am including a longer quote below. This longer quote is designed to center Helen's voice, and though indirectly, Jeremiah's perspective:

> He [Jeremiah] came into class really, really sad one day, and I asked him, 'What's wrong, what happened?' He told me that someone outside of choir told him that he was the darkest—a racial slur—which unfortunately, African Americans, we tend to rank each other by skin tone. And Jeremiah is very, very dark. I mean, he is a beautiful young man. He should be a model. Beautiful skin tone. But apparently he's been teased about how dark he is, and I knew that was a thing that he's already self-conscious about because we had talked about it. And so, first I asked him to sing a solo for our Black History Month assembly, and that brought his confidence up a whole lot. And then I also asked him to read the Langston Hughes poem, *I, Too*, because the poem says 'I, too, sing America. I am the darker brother.' And so I told him, 'I think that would be a good poem for you to read.' And a lot of kids in choir said, 'Yeah, yeah, Jeremiah, you should read that.' He

> first thought it was a joke. But I responded, 'But you know this really does describe you,' because the poem talks about 'they'll tell me to eat at the kitchen, and one day they'll realize that I am beautiful and they'll be ashamed of themselves.' Which is really what happened to him. When he walked up to the mic at the Black History program, the whole school started cheering for him before he even said a word. And when he read the poem, they cheered louder. And then when he sang the solo, everybody turned on their phones and were waving their hands in the air. And he got huge applause for that. Afterward I said, 'Wow, Jeremiah, when I grow up, I want to be popular like you,' and I said 'I didn't realize you were that popular.' And he said, 'I didn't know either.' I think it's been a real awakening for him. And I'm so proud that Choir had so much to do with that. It's been an awakening for him because he didn't even realize what he had going for him. (Interview 3)

After hearing this story, I asked Helen why she thought Jeremiah felt comfortable approaching her in this specific instance. She believed that, as an African American individual herself, with a similar skin tone to Jeremiah, Jeremiah might have felt comfortable seeking her advice. Further, she explained that her empathy when supporting Jeremiah was informed by parallel moments in her own life:

> I am dark complected myself, and I have actually gone through some of that trauma with my own family…I was teased about it…I could definitely identify with what he was saying, and I hate that. I speak to my students about that when they start talking about, 'Well, he's dark-skinned or she's light-skinned,' because I have to listen to whether they are simply describing someone or are being derogatory. And that's something else that another teacher can't bring into it…Other people might think a conversation about race and skin tone is not one we need to have in the classroom, whereas I feel more comfortable with it. (Interview 3)

Though perhaps not directly related to this specific instance, Jeremiah spoke in the WFHS student focus group about perceiving Helen as an adult who he felt comfortable approaching during difficult moments during the school year. For example, when reflecting upon Helen and the WFHS choir, Jeremiah stated:

> A word I'd use to describe Choir is gratefulness. I'm very grateful that I've gotten to know Ms. Curtis as both a teacher and as a person that I could honestly go to whenever I need to. This year probably would've been way worse if it wasn't for me getting to know Ms. Curtis. (Student Focus Group)

In the example above, Helen not only acted as a critical listening ear for Jeremiah, but

thoughtfully created a path toward empowering him through the material she selected for him to perform at the WFHS Black History Month assembly. Further, Helen's self-described identity as a dark-skinned African American individual informed her connection with a dark-skinned African American student who was struggling with elements of his own identity—a specific experience Helen empathized with due to parallel experiences in her own life. Not only was Helen able to meet in relationship with Jeremiah in a shared sense of understanding and depth of empathy based on a facet of race, but her knowledge of African American culture (in this case, the Langston Hughes poem, *I, Too*) informed a subsequent curricular recommendation that in turn positively enhanced Jeremiah's self-image and performance capabilities.

Fostering Relationships with All Students in the WFHS Choir Room

Though Helen told me that most of her students identified as African American or Black, she explained that she did have a small subset of students in the WFHS choral program who identified as white (2 students) or Hispanic/Latinx (2 students). I asked whether Helen considered these students' identities when forming her relational approach or classroom environment. "I think about it a lot," she shared. "I think to myself, are they [white and Hispanic/Latinx students] getting the same experience?" (Interview 3). Helen suggested that she felt much of the WFHS choral community united through shared experiences as residents of Woodland, particularly since that theme grounds so much of her musical and pedagogical mission. That said, she explained that repertoire selection is an area where she often took an extra moment to consider issues of representation for her non-African American or Black students:

> I do stop and think 'Do they value all of these songs? I will actually sit down and count how many of these songs were written by Black people and ask, 'Is everything all Black?' I think about that. But I think it ends up always balancing out. (Interview 3)

Helen also described her attempts to make sure that she is “reaching” students from the LGBTQ+ community and students who may be navigating physical, cognitive, or emotional (dis)abilities (Interview 3). For example, Helen believed that over fifty percent of her students have an Individualized Education Plan, so she strove to make sure that each student felt supported in their learning endeavors by her and by their peers: “They know everybody's got their own disability, so they don't make fun of other kids with disabilities. We're definitely warm when it comes to that” (Interview 3). Helen also shared that she and the WFHS choirs are “very progressive on the LGBTQ front” and explained that she had a student “who uses them/they pronouns…and when I said that we were going to perform at Woodland Pride, they were very, very happy. So I know that I'm reaching that student. I know that we're getting there” (Interview 3). Helen also mentioned that she hoped the rainbow peace flags hanging in her room were sources of support for that student and others who may identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Summary

Above, I foregrounded Helen’s and student participants’ experiences of care and trust-based relationships in the WFHS choral community. I began by centering Helen’s notion that care and trust are closely linked in her relationships with students. I then presented data reflecting Helen’s belief that care is conveyed through specific expressions, acts, and interactions—an approach that WFHS student participant responses corroborated. I then outlined how Helen sought to foster trust with her students, particularly through elements of their shared racial identity and shared cultural experiences as members of the community of Woodland. For example, Helen stated that much of her capacity to connect with her WFHS students was related to being “So Woodland,” an identifier she suggested was associated with her status as a life-long

resident of Woodland (Interview 2). Helen felt that being “So Woodland” directly contributed to her students’ ability to relate to and trust her in that they had similar ways of perceiving and navigating life experiences. In further discussing what it meant to be “So Woodland,” Helen acknowledged the “rhythms” in which she speaks (including certain “colloquialisms”), as well as her relationships with many students’ family members outside of school (Interview 2). Further, speaking to issues of race, specifically, Helen also felt that her identity as an African American individual positively solidified relational trust with her predominantly Black and African American student cohort. Helen’s considerations regarding the impact of shared racial identities with her students reflected nuanced forms of empathy and empowerment, which were particularly centered in her story about her student Jeremiah. However, during the singular WFHS student focus group, student participants did not explicitly address issues of race when talking about their relationship with Helen.

Intersections Between Community, Relationships, and Choral Music at WFHS

Thus far in this chapter, I have presented an overview of Helen Curtis and her students’ experience of connection in the choral classroom. I described ways that Helen and her students cultivated community in the WFHS choir classroom through shared civic pride, activism, a ritual of affirmations, and extra-curricular performances. I then presented how Helen fostered relationships with her students that were grounded in care, trust, and in some instances, shared racial and cultural understandings. I will now bring forth Helen’s and her students’ reflections regarding how facets of community and relationships inform choral music teaching and learning in the WFHS classroom. Findings are organized based on the following emergent subthemes: (a) sustaining a comfortable and empowering singing environment for students; (b) supporting students through singing alone and with others; and (c) acknowledging and supporting students

through repertoire.

Sustaining a Comfortable and Empowering Singing Environment for Students

Helen indicated that her investment in building relationships and a sense of community with her students at WFHS acted as a foundation for the "comfortable" music-making environment she sought to create in the classroom. Helen believed that since "students already trust me," they are more willing to take risks individually and with each other when singing by themselves and as part of the greater ensemble (Interview 2):

> They get encouragement from me and from each other. We don't make fun of how people sing. We all realize it's not going to do anybody good to say, 'Hey, you sounded bad.' We don't do that. I don't do that. (Interview 2)

Helen attributed some of her devotion to student encouragement in the choir classroom as a response to her own less-than-encouraging choral music experience when she was a student at WFHS. Reflecting on this time, Helen described scenarios when her high school choir director would call out students for singing wrong notes and then subsequently go down each row of the risers and force students to sing individually until the student making the mistake was identified:

> I would never want to do that to my students. You have to have a softer approach. Make it a comfort thing. Because they'll try. You just encourage what they do and say, 'Okay, you're almost there, you just need to do a little bit of this.' Just try to be encouraging to them. (Interview 2)

That said, Helen believed that the trust she builds with students—paired with her direct, yet caring reputation—has also allowed her to teach through a level of honesty that propels her students' musicianship forward:

> They don't mind it [her direct nature]. I'll say, 'Man, I know y'all can do better than that. That sounded awful. You can do better than that.' And a kid might say, 'Well, that was rude, Ms. Curtis' to which I'll say 'But that was the truth. Don't get mad at me for telling you the truth, because I know you can do it better than that. If that was the best you could do, I would tell you. But I know you can do it better than that.' (Interview 2)

Making Mistakes

Helen contended that within her honesty-based teaching approach, she also encourages her students to make mistakes and ask for help. Helen was proud that her students appeared to be comfortable with being imperfect and seeking support when necessary: “I think my kids are really good at realizing that needing help doesn't mean you're bad at something,” she shared. “That if you're not doing that thing great, it's okay. So, they don't mind taking help” (Interview 2). Though they acknowledged general vulnerabilities when it came to aspects of singing and choral music, Helen’s students ultimately expressed an appreciation for the WFHS choral classroom as a learning environment where imperfection was embraced and not perceived as a deficit. “Everybody in here isn't perfect,” shared one student. “No one is. Ms. Curtis, she ain't perfect, but she makes mistakes a part of life, part of our lives. So even if you make a single mistake, that doesn't change who you are” (Student Focus Group). Another student expressed that she and her peers often feel more comfortable making mistakes in Helen’s class knowing that Helen will support them: “She's just a welcoming person. That's why everybody feels at home, you know? If people are making mistakes, Ms. Curtis will help you. I mean a lot of people make mistakes and then they overcome it” (Student Focus Group).

Other student participants shared that the empowering environment created by Helen helped them form new perceptions of mistakes. One student shared: “Mistakes make you better. A better person overall. If you don't make mistakes then you won't change,” stated one student. “When you do make mistakes, change is a possible thing. And most of the time, change is for the better” (Student Focus Group). To this point, another student raised their hand and said, “Yes, sir. It’s all about the mindset. You can make mistakes in here and you can ignore them, or you can make mistakes, take it in, and learn” (Student Focus Group).

Supporting Students Through Singing Alone and With Others

Helen believed that making mistakes while singing was her students' most prominent fear in the WFHS choral classroom. "That's a big human fear," Helen stated. "But the kids that take the chance and get in here seem to get over it really fast" (Interview 2). Still, I was curious to know more about how Helen supported her students through their nerves related to singing alone and with others. Below, I describe how Helen used the trust she earned with students to inform a caring pedagogical approach to singing and choral music.

Supporting Individual Voices

Similar to the importance of knowing details about students' lives outside her classroom, Helen's approach to supporting individual students' vocal development relied on knowing as much as possible about their vocal range, tone, and overall singing-related confidence. She explained that having a grasp on these details helped her know how to best support students' unique needs in the classroom. Given Helen's class sizes (typically 8-10 students per class period), she felt she was able to develop a thorough understanding of each student's individual vocal profile. During my second observation, I witnessed one variation of Helen's approach to learning more about her students' voices. As students sang during the rehearsal, I watched Helen move throughout the room, often bouncing up and down on the choir risers and across vocal sections, exclaiming words of encouragement like "Get it!" and "Yes! And "You got this this!" (WFHS Observation 2). Her smile was constant as she danced alongside students, often patting them on the back or placing her arm around their shoulder. As Helen moved through her students, I noticed that she was subtly pausing and listening to individual students sing. While her actions likely came across to students as if she was joyfully interacting with them, it seemed to me that Helen was leaning in to each student just long enough to make an assessment about

their voice and/or musicianship. After class that day, when I Helen asked about this approach, she explained that weaving her way throughout the ensemble helped her inconspicuously listen to individual students so that she could then be specific and intentional with feedback and support. For example, she shared that if students seem unsure about whether they could sing high notes in a certain song, she might say, “I've heard you sing that note. You can sing it. I know you can hit that note” or offer a specific suggestion about breath support or placement based on what she knows about their vocal instrument (Interview 2).

Helen went on to explain that the more she knew about individual students based on her relationships with them, the more she could respond to their individual vocal needs during instruction. For example, because Helen encouraged students to select vocal solos to perform at concerts, she admitted that they sometimes chose arrangements that did not align with their range or capabilities. She told me a story about a Bass student who chose a song in a Tenor range—resulting in the student singing much of the song in his falsetto. Though she applauded the student’s confidence and felt it was important to provide him the learning experience of performing a song he chose for himself, she did follow-up with him privately to offer a few range-specific items to consider in the future. Helen also told me about an instance when a female student, with whom she shared a special bond, struggled while singing a solo in class. Helen explained that amidst the students’ worries about singing a solo in front of others, her trust in Helen was ultimately what impacted her willingness to take a vocal risk:

> I am an adult that she trusts…I’ve definitely got the mother, grandmother kind of thing going on and she feels very close to me. And I can see that for some reason she needs a little more during class to participate. And so I have brought her out a lot. The very first event of the year, I needed two soloists and after some encouragement, she was like, ‘Well, okay, I'll do it.’ And she sang a solo in front of all these people and they stood up for her and you could just see it on her face that it was at that moment that her life changed. And I just grabbed her and gave her a big hug and said, ‘I'm so proud of you, you did it." And she's been my granddaughter, daughter ever since. (Interview 2)

Here, Helen's relationship with her student was described as heavily influenced by the "mother, grandmother kind of thing." Helen believed this relational dynamic was essential in guiding the student through implications of vulnerability related to singing in the choral music classroom.

Supporting the Ensemble of Voices

Helen believed that her efforts to support individual students' voices also directly impacted her efforts to support students in their vocal sections and within the greater ensemble. During observations, I noticed that Helen would jump up from the piano and dart toward certain vocal sections and begin singing with them. I asked her to tell me more about why she made these decisions:

> I usually do that because that's the group that's low in numbers. I'll sing with the section that I can't hear. That means you need support. Doesn't mean you suck as an individual, it means you need support right now. And they'll even ask me, 'Come sing with us 'cause we need help.' (Interview 2)

Helen explained that she was always pleased to support students in these instances and does not feel that doing so takes away from student learning. She also said that once students feel confident in their vocal line without her support, their pride is increasingly heightened, and there is a noticeable shift in ensemble sound and energy. "You can see it on their faces when they're singing and it sounds good—when we're all vibing," she noted. "It's a beautiful thing. I think they all feel that" (Interview 2). In those moments, she believed that students often shed their vulnerability and feel most free, which she asserted is the ultimate goal of singing:

> When you get the kids singing and they get a song that they love, they often don't have any inhibitions at all. Even if a kid is singing very loud and out of tune, it's still just the love of singing. I think you get that from singing with other people. (Interview 2)

Students Musically Supporting Each Other. Though Helen actively talked about supporting her students during vocal and ensemble instruction, she also insisted that her students were often the most prominent sources of support for each other. She conveyed that there are "so

many moments" when her students provide powerful motivation and empowerment to each other, and that she marvels when students take risks in front of each other—especially when those risks are met with cheers of affirmation: "When we do solos…some brave voice will sing the solo part and everybody will go, 'Yeah, yeah, go girl, you got it. You got it,' which makes kids feel comfortable" (Interview 2). A student participant also shared how appreciative they are for this type of support from their choral peers: "If we're in the Bass section and one of us messes up, it's OK because we have people that can help us. If one person's nervous, the choir can help them out" (Student Focus Group).

Helen described a specific instance when this form of student support came into play in the classroom. She explained that as a male-identifying student tried out for his first solo, he succumbed to a voice crack and immediately exited the classroom in embarrassment, secluding himself in a nearby restroom. Helen told me that that she followed the student into the hallway and encouraged him to return to the classroom. Once the student eventually re-entered, Helen said that the student's peers showered him with support:

> When he came back in, everybody in the class was like, 'Man, you sounded really good. It was just one crack. Everybody's voice cracks. It sounded really, really good.' And then he did it again, maybe on a different day. But he tried it again. (Interview 2)

A student in the focus group also pointed to the importance of peer support when navigating nerves related to singing:

> I mean, I really feel like we're just all comfortable with each other because we all just go through the same thing. We're all nervous to do concerts and we're all pushing ourselves to get the wind through our esophagus and to sing. So I mean that's why it feels like home or we feel safe because we all just do the same thing. You know what I mean? We just kind of come to each other because we just went through it all. (Student Focus Group)

This student participant's reflection displays how a sense of community, belonging, and shared experience amongst students can potentially inform feelings of student comfort and safety in the high school choral music classroom.

Gaining Emotional Strength Through Singing

In addition to attempting to instill confidence in her students' singing skills individually and with each other, Helen said that she attempts to convey to her students that it is 'OK' to display and process emotion when singing in choir. She explained that she often models ways to articulate the bridges between emotion and choral music: "I've been so honest, and maybe a little bit too much, sharing my life," she revealed. "But I bear my emotions for them. I don't think it's a bad thing" (Interview 2). Helen indicated that in the past when she has shared her own emotions in a discussion about a song's text or thematic scope, students seemed more prone to also contribute to the conversation: "Then they turn right around and tell me everything…and I feel honored that they want to share that with me" (Interview 2).

Student participants shared that their time with Helen in the WFHS choral program had indeed helped them view singing as a powerful medium through which to better understand and process their emotions. "Singing can do a lot for people," one student shared. "That's what I've learned ever since I've been in here with Ms. Curtis—that as long as you use your voice, you can sing out a lot of things. A lot of good things can come your way" (Student Focus Group). A different student shared that "singing makes my mood reset to what it was before I came in or at the beginning of the day" (Student Focus Group). Similarly, a different student acknowledged that the WFHS choir room was an environment that helped her confront and process emotions, particularly with regard to the emotional themes embedded in song text that might otherwise be difficult to articulate:

> Whenever we're full of emotions, even if they are not released on others, they're usually released when we sing. People can understand what we're feeling and how we feel by the song and when we sing. So in a way, when we're singing the songs with the emotions that we're feeling, it's not just the song that we're feeling, but we're also feeling our emotions—our own emotions as they're being released within the song. So I feel like any song that we sing within this classroom is releasing an emotion that we sometimes might

try to keep down. (Student Focus Group)

Finally, a fourth student discussed the cathartic experience of using his voice when singing a song with lyrics that mirrored the pain of a recent break-up:

> In a way, the song was a way for me to relieve the stress and the pain from losing them and also was able to express how I felt. So the song wasn't just something that I could sing or listen to, because I felt it. It was something that was able to tell me that no matter what happens, no matter where you go, where you may be, there's always sorrow that follows, but at the same time that doesn't mean that you can't make it better. (Student Focus Group)

As displayed in the student participant reflections above, within the WFHS choir community, the vulnerable intersections between emotion, repertoire, and the singing voice were buoyed by the care- and trust-based culture that Helen and her students created together. Helen strove to make her classroom a setting where students felt "comfortable" exploring their voices and ensemble singing. Helen's commitment to learn about her students' individual voices helped her construct learning moments that were supportive and attuned to student needs. Encouragement was prevalent in Helen's classroom, often leading to one-on-one and collective moments of student empowerment and emotional releases through students' personal emotional connections with repertoire and lyrics. Students were also perceived as a significant source of support for each other and often central in the celebration of peers' vocal pursuits in the choral classroom.

Acknowledging and Supporting Students Through Repertoire

Helen asserted that her approach to guiding students through learning repertoire was tied to her relationships with, and knowledge of, students' identities and learning needs. Broadly, Helen was committed to reflecting her students in repertoire selections. As described earlier in this chapter, Helen was particularly committed to choosing repertoire that spoke directly to the

history of Woodland and what it meant to live there, especially in songs like *Stay*, *Returning to Woodland*, *Yes, My Lord*, and *What About Me?* Helen believed that repertoire selection was an important component of the student relationship-building process, in part because repertoire had the power to draw relational threads between teacher, student, and song topic. Thus, by being attentive to repertoire choices, Helen believed that she not only affirmed her students' varied identities, but also developed a nuanced level of trust as someone who shared and amplified much of their experience.

Selecting Repertoire That Reflects Students

In an effort to better understand how she considered repertoire as a component of her relational practice, I asked Helen to tell me about how she identified and chose songs that she thought might resonate with her students. "I can't teach them all European songs, which is what I was raised on when I went here," she explained. "We sang Mozart masses and all that kind of stuff all the time, nothing else" (Interview 2). When it came to describing her own approach to choosing repertoire for her current students, Helen said that certain elements of the repertoire selection process were practical in nature. For example, she explained she often looked for songs that "travel well" and can be performed at the variety of community performances the choir books every year (Interview 2). Beyond that, Helen explained that she often attempted to program "a lot of Spirituals, African folk songs, and American folk songs" because "they're songs that people can feel, they're songs that people can relate to, and they're songs that people can understand" (Interview 2). When I asked Helen why those specific genres grounded her repertoire selection, she replied by saying: "Well, that's kind of easy. We're predominantly Black. So, of course we have to sing the songs of our culture. We have to sing the songs of our heritage" (Interview 2). Helen went on to add that singing songs reflective of Black and African

American culture/heritage was an important component when performing throughout the Woodland community that also had a large Black and African American population. “If you’re invited to do a Juneteenth or New Year’s Eve performance, people don’t want to hear festival songs. They want to be entertained, they want to be moved. We want to sing songs that will move our audience” (Interview 2).

Though most of Helen’s students were African American or Black, and much of the music she programmed reflected the facets of the Black cultural experience and musical tradition, she still acknowledged her dedication to finding music that represented all of her students:

> We try to get all of our cultures. We sing in Spanish and we're singing a song that's Hawaiian. I have one student who is from Hawaii and she was able to share with the class, ‘Oh, I know this song. My grandparents used to sing it to me all the time. So that was great…we love the cultural diversity because we are culturally diverse. (Interview 2)

While Helen believed that “it’s important for [students] to know their own culture,” she also described being intentional about finding a balance between music that may hold relevance for students and music that holds a specific curricular, musical, or social value. “The songs we sing are not the songs they hear on the radio, the stuff they listen to in their ears all the time. I’m still definitely exposing them to something else” (Interview 2). For example, when I was in the WFHS choir room, repertoire written on the board as part of the choir’s rehearsal rotation included the Black National Anthem *Lift Every Voice and Sing,* the South African song *Shona Malanga,* the American gospel song *Down to the River to Pray,* the Spanish folksong *Ya Basta*, *Make Them Hear You* from the musical ‘Ragtime,’ *Yes, My Lord, People Get Ready*, *Stay*, *Returning to Woodland*, and *What About Us?* Each of these songs, Helen explained, embodied the themes of activism and/or community pride described earlier in this chapter. By selecting this type of repertoire, Helen explained that she is aiming for “the whole inspirational, people get

ready, make this world a better place" type of song (Interview 2). Helen said that her students often identified with the themes of these songs and further, she hoped that rehearsing, talking about, and performing this type of music contributed to their shared sense of civic pride and activism. Ultimately, Helen said that no matter the genre of music, the repertoire she chooses must resonate with her students on some level: "I try to only give them songs that they can engage in. Everything has a meaning. Everything has a purpose… Everything they sing has relevance to their life" (Interview 1).

Teaching Repertoire in a Way That Reflects Student Needs

In addition to her approach to repertoire selection, the process through which Helen taught repertoire to her students was informed by her relationships with them as people and as learners. Throughout all of my observations at WFHS, I noticed that students never held sheet music or choral octavos. Instead, Helen projected repertoire and curricular materials on a large screen at the front of the classroom. This projected repertoire took various forms, including enlarged sheet music (for the WFHS alma mater and sight-singing exercises), stanzas of written lyrics that were timed with background digital accompaniment as part of YouTube videos (*Returning to Woodland, What About Me?)* and videos of notated voice parts written out in timed video slide show form (*Make Them Hear You*, *Stay*). For certain songs, such as *Stay*, it was common for Helen to switch back and forth between various videos based on student needs (i.e. videos that prominently featured a certain voice part vs. videos featuring the full accompaniment). Helen told me that each of these digital resources were also housed in an online learning platform that students had access to at home if they wanted to practice. Depending on the in-class rehearsal, Helen would sometimes be seated at the piano playing voice parts, while other times, she was moving throughout the classroom while the digital track played, interacting

with, and assisting students.

As an observer, I internally acknowledged that I was initially surprised by this teaching format. I had not previously observed a teacher rely solely on projected repertoire, nor repertoire primarily in digital slide show form (and often without notation). Yet, by the end of my first visit to WFHS, I was aware that this approach seemed meaningful and effective for Helen and her students. Students were always standing when singing, remained engaged, maintained tall posture when staring at the projector screen, and were not distracted by sheet music.

After observing Helen implement this approach, I asked about her pedagogical rationale. Below is an extended excerpt from a portion of our conversation when we discussed this aspect of her teaching approach:

> Sean: Tell me about why you have the projector, and why you have some songs that have notation and some songs that only have the lyrics. Tell me more about why you have made those decisions, especially if someone new to your classroom might ask, 'Why do Ms. Curtis' students not have sheet music in their hands?'
>
> Helen: First of all, resources. We can't afford a lot of sheet music. Second, if I project it, then they all have to sit up to sing it. And with sheet music, they lose their way. We have kids with reading problems. I mean, it's not a secret. Five years below reading level, they're not going to be able to keep up with a 16-page document…so the projection definitely works. It's a time saver. You just click it, and it's right there, and everybody's always on the same page and they learn much quicker that way.
>
> Sean: I used to do a lot of that with my students, too, where we would just have just the words on the page.
>
> Helen: Well, sometimes that's all you can get from them.
>
> Sean: But on some songs, I also noticed you have the Soprano, the Alto and the Baritone line laid out [in separate vocal lines, on digital staff paper].
>
> Helen: Yeah, that was pretty cute the way I did that, right? They don't realize it, but they do know how to read music a lot better than they think they do. They are looking to those notes for guidance a lot more than they think they are…Yet, I know it is kind of hard. I know they should know how to take a piece of sheet music, count the measures, if I say, 'Go back to page three, measure four, and this is where we're going to start from.' But it ain't going to happen. They are four or five years below grade level, most of them. This is

> it. Let's keep it real here. I got to teach them so that they can get it quickly. Don't want to frustrate them. I don't want learning a new song to be so much of a chore that they don't want to do it. And this way is quick. I was amazed. I mean, I've always done it this way since I've been at the high school. But this year, this is a really special group. These kids were knocking off one new song per class, like learning two new songs a week and getting it and mastering them. (Interview 2)

In her response above, Helen touched upon multiple points that conveyed her understanding of her students as people, her understanding of her students as learners, and her dedication to incorporating that knowledge into a music teaching approach that sustained her students' motivation and learning. Beyond financial reasons for not purchasing individual copies of sheet music for all of her students, Helen conveyed an awareness of her students' learning needs in how she structured music-learning processes in the classroom. Further, she knew her students well enough to recognize that a music-learning process perceived as frustrating to students might impact their motivation.

Though I did not specifically ask about music-learning processes in my single focus group with WFHS student participants, one student did share that he felt Helen's approach when teaching music in the WFHS choir room centered student comfort, success, and motivation:

> What Ms. Curtis wants is, if you want to sing, you shouldn't be afraid of it. What she wants is for you to feel that it's OK to sing. It may seem scary, it may be nerve-wracking and everything, but what she doesn't want you to be is scared. She wants you to be able to sing your heart out. So then other people can understand that you're not up there just because you were told to, but because you wanted to be up there, and that you felt that your voice could be heard if you just let it be. (Student Focus Group)

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In many ways, the student reflection (above) highlighted an awareness that Helen's choral music teaching approach was focused on her students as humans/learners, and not solely predetermined musical or instructional objectives.

Summary

In this section, I described how Helen and her students expanded upon their relational

foundations when embarking on choral music teaching and learning. Student participants shared that their central concerns related to choral music experiences in the WFHS classroom were related to making mistakes, singing alone and with others, and expressing emotion in their musical repertoire. Reflecting her students' experiences, Helen described her relational teaching approach as a broad attempt to empower her students' musical, social, and emotional efforts in the midst of their choral music education. This approach manifested in sensitive voice-related instruction, an active approach when working with students in the choral ensemble, and an intentional approach to selecting and teaching repertoire in a manner reflective of students' needs, identities, and life experiences. Helen's approach to supporting student vulnerability in the high school choral classroom was tied to knowing her students as people and learners, and using that knowledge to directly inform how she addressed students' personal, relational, musical, and academic needs in the classroom.

Navigating Relational Challenges

In this final section, I present specific themes emergent from data related to Helen's perspectives regarding her navigation of relational challenges in the WFHS choir community. During our conversations, Helen only explicitly discussed one relational challenge in her practice: maintaining rapport with students who she perceived as disconnected from the WFHS choir mission.

Maintaining Rapport with Students Perceived as Disconnected from the WFHS Choir Mission

Though Helen was proud of her relationships with students at WFHS, she acknowledged that there were also times when navigating relationships in the classroom had been challenging. She recognized that "some students will gravitate toward you and others won't" (Interview 3). Helen explained feeling that she only lacks rapport with students who do not consistently

participate in the WFHS choral program and the plethora of extra-curricular performances she plans: “You get the kids that come to every single performance and you get the kids who don’t. You love them all, but it's just different. The ones who perform with you, it's just different because you've been through more” (Interview 2).

Still, Helen explained that she is happy to have students in class that do not attend every performance as long as those students are not disrespectful to her, their peers, or the mission of the WFHS choir. That said, Helen specified that in past instances when students have been disrespectful toward her, her students, or the WFHS choral mission, she was quick to address the relational dynamic: “I think I've established the choir enough within the building that the kids already know this is not where you go to play,” she asserted (Interview 3). She went on to say that when certain students have been disruptive in class over a period of weeks or months—and chose not to adapt their behavior despite Helen’s continued efforts—she has asked WFHS guidance counselors to remove them from the choir: “If they don't get it, and they've been in here four months, then they're hurting the choir. They're disrupting rehearsals. That I won't tolerate” (Interview 3). Even though she voiced disappointment in having to address such situations, she was adamant in her belief that these decisions benefited the choir as a whole and the remaining students who she is attempting to honor:

> Students are so happy that I act on behalf of the choir and put people out who aren’t helping us. I am a hero to students on those days. That says a lot because these kids, they lose a lot of education because of the behavior of other students and that's not fair. I get that. (Interview 3)

Reflecting on these moments, Helen suggested that her protective and forthright approach again contributed to students’ perceptions of her as an “auntie,” “grandma,” or “mom” and gained her a certain a level of credibility: “For them [students], I will always be the teacher who will kick you out if you are disrupting a rehearsal, which I think means a lot” (Interview 3). She

felt that having this direct, pseudo-parental rapport with students was helpful when navigating potentially challenging interpersonal moments, and that as such, she can discern when a more direct relational approach is appropriate and when it is not: “I wouldn't reprimand a kid just to show I'm a boss. I wouldn't reprimand a kid just because they're getting on my nerves. I would reprimand a kid because I don't want them to grow up to be a jerk,” Helen explained (Interview 3). This prompted Helen to provide a recent example of a student (also in the student focus group) who was late and missed the bus to a performance, despite multiple calls from Helen:

> When Trey walked to school and the bus was gone, I didn't do that to be mean, I did that so that he would learn he has to be on time, that there are rules and you have to follow them. (Interview 3)

In the focus group, Trey happened to mention this story when reflecting on how much Helen showed care for her students. When recounting the story, Trey chuckled as he recalled the details of the memory, as well as his initial frustration, before ultimately acknowledging that he knew Helen “still loved him” (Student Focus Group). Helen went on to say that in instances like this, and throughout her daily interactions with students, her direct relational approach is ultimately tied to care:

> I want my kids to have a future. Some teachers may care about the kids enough to get through the day, to get through the school year, but are you really going to be there in their community? Are you going to be there when that kid goes to court? Are you going to go to that kid's funeral? (Interview 3)

Helen said that she sustained this direct, protective, and caring approach with all students, even amidst challenging interpersonal reactions. WFHS student participants also seemed to recognize this dimension of Helen’s care, which may have contributed to their perception of her as ‘the mother of choir:’ “Most teachers don't really care about their students,” student participant Jeremiah shared. “But Ms. Curtis is able to be there to not only just teach you, but to help you. And that's rare among teachers in schools nowadays” (Student Focus Group).

For Helen, ‘being there’ for her students was something she took very seriously. She described facets of ‘being there’ as compassionately holding students accountable and providing a listening ear on any issues that are relevant in her students’ lives:

> Any conversation the kids want to have, if they bring it up in front of me, then it's important enough that they brought it up. It's an important conversation. I want to hear everything they got to say. I want them to be open with me. (Interview 3)

Summary

In this section, I described Helen’s discussion of relational challenges she experienced in the classroom. The only prominent challenge that Helen discussed in our interviews was maintaining rapport with students who exhibited behavioral challenges or who she perceived as disconnected from the WFHS choir mission. Helen asserted that her approach to this type of student/challenge was to either empower the student to adhere to her expectations or ask WFHS personnel to remove the student from her choral classroom. While this approach may reflect aspects of an authoritative power dynamic between teacher and student, Helen felt that in addressing challenges with an individual student—and perhaps having them removed from her classroom—she was ultimately honoring the capacity for her remaining students to receive a meaningful and disruption-free choral learning experience.

Looking Ahead

As noted earlier in this chapter, at the time of my last interview with Helen, she was still on disciplinary leave from WFHS, a leave that she told me she felt was related to her activist teaching approach and advocacy for her students. Though I chose not to include specific details about her disciplinary leave in this chapter, I will include Helen’s last response when I asked what she hoped the future held for her and her students:

I just want to be back in the classroom. Going forward after this experience, I would like

> to go back to when we were completely and totally ignored. I now realize what a blessing that was. I will focus all of my energy on teaching my students and loving on my students to the best of my ability and going out into the community, doing as much as we can. But being recognized by the administration has absolutely no value now…We did what we needed to do. I don't regret that. We got the word out. We brought a lot of pressure. I can sacrifice myself for that. I don't regret any of that. But if, when, I'm back in the classroom, I just want to go back to quietly being rock stars that are ignored. (Interview 3)

When I reached out to Helen in the months after data collection, she shared with me that she had retired and was no longer working at WFHS.

Within-Case Summary: Helen Curtis—Woodland Falls High School

At the time of this study, Helen Curtis was a thirty-six year veteran teacher in the city of Woodland, where she taught elementary general music for 30 years before transferring to Woodland Falls High School (WFHS) to teach choir in 2016. Much of Helen's approach to teacher-student relationships and community-building was rooted in her identity as a life-long resident of Woodland and a graduate of WFHS. Helen attempted to provide her students with a level of care and support that she felt they were not receiving in the rest of their experiences at WFHS. She attributed this reality to a lack of resources and teachers/administrators who were not fully invested in the students and community of Woodland at large. Helen built an empowering community for her students through the ritual of daily affirmations, expansive performing opportunities throughout Woodland, and through a choral music instructional approach that sought to foster her students' civic pride and activism. Helen explained that an important component of these varied community-building efforts was programming repertoire (some of which was composed/arranged by Helen and her students) that directly spoke to the experience of her students. Many repertoire selections mirrored students'—and Helen's—shared cultural experiences living in Woodland, as well issues of civic pride and activism. The process

of creating, rehearsing, and performing such repertoire was perceived as a powerful shared experience for WFHS choir students, not only uniting them as choristers, but as members of a greater community.

Student participants described the WFHS choir community as a supportive “family” and Helen as the “mother of choir.” Helen perceived relationships with her students as the foundation of the community she sought to build with her students. For Helen, the core principles of such relationships were care and trust. Helen conveyed care for her students by attempting to see and respond to their needs. This included having food, water, and personal items available for students in the classroom; greeting and checking-in with students as they enter the classroom every day; and actively listening to students as they shared elements of their lives with her and each other. Helen believed that “trust is everything” in the teacher-student relationship, particularly for her students who she described as needing adults in their lives who they can depend on. Dimensions of trust formed between Helen and her students in a variety of ways, though she believed that (a) her lifelong knowledge of—and visibility in—the community of Woodland; and (b) identity as an African American woman teaching a predominately Black cohort of students had earned her a distinct level of trust and credibility with students in choir and even throughout the school. Helen believed that this shared racial and cultural understanding influenced how she understood and conveyed empathy toward her students at WFHS.

Ultimately, Helen sought to coalesce her relationships with students, and the community they built together, toward creating vocal musical experiences that empowered students and reflected their needs as learners and people. Instilling “comfort” for her students was paramount so that students felt less fearful of making mistakes and more prone to taking musical risks in the WFHS choral classroom. Helen extended personal knowledge of her students and individual

points of connection toward empowering them through insecurities they were having regarding their vocal range, singing in front of others, finding their vocal line in harmony, exploring textual implications, and learning music. Relatedly, WFHS students spoke about their willingness to take risks in the choir room because of the environment that Helen created and the subsequent support they showed for each other. Finally, Helen sought to reflect her students in the repertoire she chose, a catalogue of songs that often reflected the Black musical and cultural experience, as well as themes of activism, civic pride, strength, and resilience.

Even after 36 years in the profession, Helen acknowledged that she still faces challenges when forming relationships and community with her students. She recognized that she formed stronger bonds with students who participated in extra-curricular performances than with students who did not. While Helen was willing to maintain rapport with students who did not participate in performances, she described getting frustrated with students who were blatantly disruptive—actions she perceived as disrespectful to her, her other students, and her overall mission for the WLHS choral program. Further, Helen was aware that her interpersonal approach with students may sometimes come across as direct, in some instances potentially reflective of an authoritative teaching dynamic. That said, Helen believed that students ultimately knew that her direct nature was rooted in care and her students' best interest. In many ways, Helen's experience navigating professional challenges (related to her disciplinary leave) throughout the duration of this study reflected the core teaching principles of activism, justice, and perseverance woven throughout her instruction at WFHS and the choral music learning experiences she creates with her students.

Chapter VII
Cross-Case Analysis

Chapter Overview

In this study, I examined how dimensions of human connection were experienced in the high school choral music classroom. Cases were bound by the experiences of three teacher participants and their students within three specific high school choral music classrooms. Chapters Four, Five, and Six of this study provided detailed within-case analyses for each case. In this chapter, I will present cross-case findings in relation to the study's purpose and central research question. I will begin by restating the purpose of this study and my guiding research question. Next, I will then briefly review the methodology and analysis procedures for the study as grounded in Yin's (2018) multiple case study design. I will then reassert my commitment to researcher reflexivity (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017) and recenter critical aspects of context, identity, and experience in the stories of my teacher and student participants. The cross-case analysis will synthesize commonalities and nuances amongst cases with findings organized based on the following five emergent themes reflective of this study's participants' experiences of connected teaching in the high school choral classroom: (a) the importance of care; (b) the importance of trust; (c) supporting vulnerability; (d) sense of belonging; and (e) navigating relational challenges.

Review of Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand how human connection was experienced in the high school choral music classroom. The central research question guiding the study was:

> How is human connection experienced in the classrooms of three high school choral music educators?

Review of Methodology and Analysis Procedures

A multiple case study design (Yin, 2018) was employed to examine how human connection was experienced in three high school choral settings. Individual cases were bound by the experiences of teacher participants and their students within three specific high school choral music classrooms. Data sources for this study included: (a) three semi-structured interviews per teacher participant/research site; (b) two semi-structured student focus group interviews per research site; (c) four observations per research site; and (d) the collection of material culture and artifacts (dependent on research site). Data was triangulated through analysis of these varied forms of data within and across cases (Patton, 2015). Data was analyzed using a multi-stage coding framework (Yin, 2018) that involved the use of both open and axial codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this study reflect emergent within-case findings based on data analysis. Based on each within-case analysis, in this chapter I present cross-case findings reflective of synthesized patterns and nuances from across the three individual cases (Yin, 2018).

Continued Researcher Reflexivity

Throughout this study—and particularly during data collection and analysis—I engaged in the process of critical reflexivity (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017). Central to this reflexivity was centering—and recentering—how my positionality as a white, gay, cisgender gale male

from an upper middle-class background impacted how I witnessed, listened to, and interpreted participants' stories and their high school choral music contexts. Reflexively centering my positionality also required considering what I might (and might not) be hearing, seeing, and interpreting from my participants' stories. Further, engaging in critical reflexivity required me to acknowledge that my identities and positionalities likely impacted how teacher and student participants at all three research sites perceived my presence in their classroom communities, functioned during class observations, and communicated during interviews and focus groups.

This study's within-case chapters, particularly, were developed within a commitment to present teacher and student participant reflections in a manner that conveyed their perspectives as they were relayed during interviews and observation notes in a manner that reflected the context of each research site. Finally, my role as researcher not only required me to confront assumptions, biases, or judgements based on my sociocultural positionalities, but also assumptions, biases, or judgements based in my own background as a secondary choral director with experience fostering connection in the classroom. In this sense, it was crucial that I observed classroom interactions, and posed interview and focus group questions, in a manner that allowed for participants at each research site to convey *their* stories and relational realities.

Cross-Case Analysis

Re-Centering Context, Identity, and Experience

The purpose of this cross-case analysis is not to directly compare individual cases, but rather to illuminate emergent patterns and nuances related to the experience of human connection in the choral programs at Grove Lake High School (GLHS), Meadow River High School (MRHS), and Woodland Falls High School (WFHS). Further, to suggest that dimensions of human connection are unilaterally similar across cases would wrongly overlook critical

implications of context, identity, and experience that informed the perceptions of teacher and student participants. Considering findings through the lens of (a) Jordan's (2018) and Walker's (2004, 2020) conceptualization of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT); and (b) Schwartz's (2019) RCT-based notion of connected teaching required critical examination of how issues of identity, context, and power influenced participant meaning-making—as well as the schools, communities, and society they inhabit. These sociopolitical and sociocultural facets remained "an active agent in relational processes that shape human possibility," and subsequently impacted participant perspectives shared in this study (Walker, 2004, p. 48). Thus, before I discuss areas of commonality and nuance between cases, it is important to re-center the context and identities of my participants and research sites to fully elucidate their experiences and meaning-making outlined later in this chapter.

Participant Identity and Research Site Demographics

In this section I provide a composite glimpse into certain demographics and identity-based implications of this study's participants and research sites. Information on teacher participant race and gender reflects each participant's self-identification. These details were outlined at the beginning of each within-case chapter and are included here to consolidate details for use in the cross-case analysis. Table 4 (p. 322) displays general demographic information for each teacher participant.

Helen Curtis. Helen Curtis self-identified as an African American female. At the time of this study, Helen was in her thirty-sixth year of teaching—her sixth as choral music teacher at Woodland Falls High School (WFHS) in Woodland, a suburban city in the midwestern region of the United States. WFHS is classified as a Title I, large suburban school where 57% of the total student population is Black or African American, 17% is Hispanic/Latinx, and 77% of all

Table 4

Teacher Participant Information B

Name	Self-Identified Race	Self-Identified Gender	Total Years Teaching	School	Years at Current School
Helen Curtis	African American	Female	36	Woodland Falls High School	6
Bryan Dempsey	White	Male	4	Grove Lake High School	3
Stephanie Johnson	Caucasian	Female	25	Meadow River High School	10

students are eligible for free and reduced lunch (NCES). The WFHS choral ensemble observed for this study was predominately African American or Black. As outlined further in this chapter, Helen asserted that elements of her racial identity and her identity as a lifelong resident of Woodland deeply impacted her relational approach in the classroom.

Bryan Dempsey. Bryan Dempsey self-identified as a white male. At the time of this study, Bryan was in his fourth year of teaching—his third year as choral music teacher at Grove Lake High School (GLHS) in Grove Lake, a town in the midwestern region of the United States. GLHS is classified as a rural-fringe school where 83% of the total student population is white and 34% of all students are eligible for free and reduced lunch (NCES). The GLHS choral ensemble observed for this study was predominately white. As outlined further in this chapter, Bryan spoke primarily about the intersections between his racial identity, his students' racial identities, and the relationships he formed with students when discussing his approach to repertoire. Further, Bryan spoke at length about how his personal journey with mental/emotional health and wellbeing, and identity as an introvert, influenced his relational approach in the choral classroom.

Stephanie Johnson. Stephanie Johnson self-identified as a Caucasian female. At the time of this study, Stephanie was in her twenty-fifth year of teaching—her tenth as choral music teacher at Meadow River High School (MRHS) in Maplebrook, a suburb of a midsize city in the midwestern region of the United States. MRHS is classified as a suburban school where 74% of the total student population is white, 17% is African American or Black, and 18% of all students are eligible for free and reduced lunch (NCES). Of the MRHS choral ensembles that I observed for this study, one was comprised of predominately white students and one was comprised of approximately two-thirds white students and one-third African American or Black students. As outlined further in this chapter, Stephanie was conscious of her identity as a white woman from an upper middle-class background and how that impacted her relational approach in a classroom with diverse student racial, socioeconomic, and religious identities. Stephanie also recognized that her own experiences with trauma as an adolescent significantly influenced the lens through which she taught.

Presentation of Cross-Case Themes

"What hill are you dying on? Are you dying on a hill for a kid? Or are you dying on a hill for something you think would be great at a concert?" Stephanie posed these questions in our first interview, in many ways encapsulating a commitment to dimensions of human connection reflected in each of the three cases examined in this study. Prominent across the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral communities was the intersection between trust and care within dimensions of human connection in choral music teaching and learning. Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie were aligned in their belief that expressions of care and the development of trust were the core principles of meaningful teacher-student and student-student relationships in their classrooms. Further, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each believed that caring and trust-based relationships

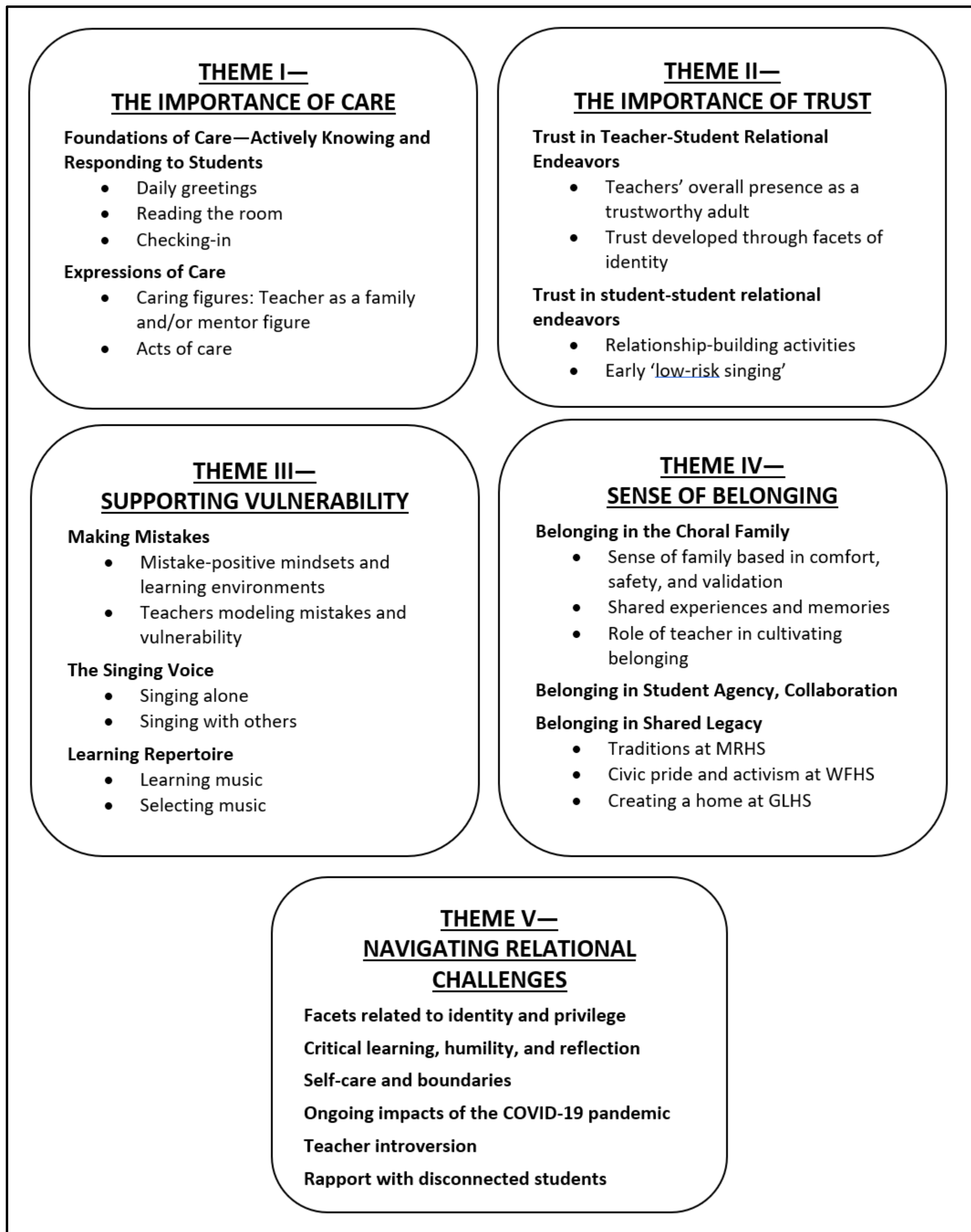
were important in their own right, but also served as foundations when supporting their students through vulnerable vocal and choral music learning endeavors, fostering a sense of community and belonging in the classroom, and navigating relational challenges as they arose. In the sections below, I present commonalities and nuances distilled from the experiences of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students related to the experience of human connection in the choral classrooms of GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. Based on analysis, emergent cross-case themes were: (a) the importance of care; (b) the importance of trust; (c) supporting vulnerability; (d) sense of belonging; and (e) navigating relational challenges. I have organized the presentation of this cross-case analysis based on each emergent theme and its' subthemes. Emergent themes and subthemes for this study are displayed in Figure 3 (p. 325).

Theme I: The Importance of Care

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each stated that care was an essential element when forging relationships with students. Helen most consistently evoked the word 'care' and 'caring' in her interviews: "I take care of them. Simple as that," she asserted (Helen, Interview 1). Bryan and Stephanie also frequently spoke about notions of care. Bryan posited that as a teacher, "you have to genuinely care about students" (Bryan, Interview 3) and Stephanie suggested that "how [she] cares about [students] individually" ultimately "builds her credibility" with students (Stephanie, Interview 1). Further, both Helen and Bryan indicated that conveying care for students must be consistent, personal, and infused with authenticity. "If you are half-hearted about [care]…then they [students] won't think it's genuine," Bryan suggested (Bryan, Interview 1). Helen provided a similar perspective: "The students are very intuitive. They can pick out fake real fast. When they say teachers don't care, I think what they mean by that is that they're fake, that they're not genuine…students can tell when it's not real" (Helen, Interview 3).

Figure 3

Emergent Themes and Subthemes



Thus, as demonstrated in teacher participant reflections above, elements of care were woven throughout this study's interviews, focus groups, and observations. In the sections below, I present various ways that Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie conveyed care for their students as part of forming trusting teacher-student relationships, choral music learning environments supportive of student vulnerability, and a greater sense of care-based community and belonging in the choral classroom. I specifically highlight commonalities and nuances among teacher and student participants in the following subthemes: (a) foundations of care: actively knowing and responding to students as people (through daily greetings, reading the room, and checking in); and (b) expressions of care (with an emphasis on teacher participants' impact as caring figures and their specific acts of care).

Foundations of Care: Actively Knowing and Responding to Students as People

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each shared that committing to knowing their students as people was a crucial foundation when conveying care in their high school choral classrooms. For Helen, getting to know her students meant consciously committing to understanding who students were as people and then consistently weaving that knowledge into her interpersonal interactions and pedagogy: "Everybody appreciates it when you actually remember anything they do that you hear about" (Helen, Interview 1). Bryan also articulated the significance of developing relationships with students as human beings beyond a mere one-dimensional teacher-student relational paradigm: "I care about [them] as a person, not just as a choir student" (Bryan, Interview 2). Stephanie further centered the humanity in her students when thinking about how to approach her caring choral pedagogy: "I feel like their heart comes through the door first and their body and their voice comes in second" (Stephanie, Interview 1). One of Stephanie's students echoed their teacher's perspective, acknowledging that Stephanie's relational

commitment to knowing students as people is apparent from early interactions: "Ms. Johnson is building a relationship with you from the first day of class" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1). Helen, Stephanie, and Bryan centered knowing—and responding—to students as people within their choral teaching practice. Below, I point to three subthemes that emerged from data analysis as common relational approaches across all three research sites related to getting to know, and care for, students: (a) daily greetings; (b) reading the room; and (c) check-ins.

Daily Greetings

Data from interviews and observations demonstrated that all three teacher participants acknowledged that daily interactions with students were a key factor in establishing caring and trusting relationships. During observations at each research site, I consistently noticed Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie interacting with students as they entered the classroom. All three participants made a point to stand near their classroom door and extend greetings to students that ranged from simple salutations to personally curated mini-discussions. "I try to make a connection with every kid, every day," Stephanie asserted, explaining that connections may be physical (such as a high-five or fist-bump) or a verbal greeting. "That's important to me, to greet them at the door and greet them by name" (Stephanie, Interview 1). Bryan also recognized the importance of speaking students' names when greeting them at the classroom door each day: "I try and say their names and I try to get them all…there's a lot of science behind hearing your name spoken aloud by people…It's not just 'Hey you'" (Bryan, Interview 1). One of Bryan's students affirmed the impact of this daily ritual, acknowledging that even though the act of greeting someone daily may seem "inconsequential…it's nice [Bryan] takes the time to do that." This same student added that he valued the opportunity "to be told somebody's happy to see you when you come in here" (GLHS, Student Focus Group 1).

In addition to greeting students by name, teacher participants were also unanimous in their commitment to using time before (or during or after) class to notice and interact with students in especially personalized ways. For example, Stephanie explained that she often individualizes her greetings with students by inserting a comment or question tailored specifically to them, such as about their shoes or a haircut: "I'll say 'Hey, I really like your shoes,' or 'Hey, did you get your hair cut?' Just something that lets them know that I see them" (Stephanie, Interview 1). Similarly, Helen said that if a student is absent, then the next time she sees them walk through her classroom door she will say, "I missed you" and inquire about the reason(s) the student was not in class (Helen, Interview 1). During my observations at GLHS, MRHS, and WLHS, I observed students earnestly responding to Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's greetings and/or developing a smile or seemingly brighter eyes while passing their teacher, post-greeting, on the way to their seat.

Reading the Room

Both Stephanie and Bryan also explained that daily greetings and interactions with students as they arrive for class provided crucial glimpses into students' overall wellbeing on a particular day. Bryan and Stephanie felt that these glimpses not only informed subsequent interpersonal responses but future pedagogical decisions. For example, Stephanie said that daily interactions with students as they walked through the door helped her to recognize when a student did not seem like their typical self: "If I notice a kid is off, I always stop and say, 'Hey, is everything okay? You don't seem like yourself.' And then, 'Is there anything that I can do?'" (Stephanie, Interview 3). Bryan similarly described these daily interactions as a chance to notice students' mindsets on a given day: "I can tell if students are having a good day or not having a good day just by [their] body language or how [they are] walking into the classroom" (Bryan,

Interview 3).

Stephanie evoked the terms “reading the room” and “taking the temperature of the room” to characterize her own approach to using a combination of greetings/interactions/noticing student behavior and body language to influence subsequent conversations and instruction: “It helps in knowing whether you need to do a little buildup before they can be vulnerable to sing,” she explained (Stephanie, Interview 3). As discussed in further detail later in this chapter, Stephanie’s approach to “reading the room” is associated with her own experiences as an individual who navigated trauma during adolescence. That said, though not using the terms “reading the room” or “taking the temperature of the room,” Bryan’s approach to noticing and responding to students mirrored Stephanie’s. Both Bryan and Stephanie believed that information gleaned from observing student behavior/mindsets as students entered the classroom impacted how they facilitated instruction and navigated future interpersonal interactions.

Greeting and individually interacting with students at the door of their choral classrooms was a common practice of Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie. All three participants also noted that these interactions often informed how they formally began class—typically through the incorporation of a verbal check-in process (described below).

Checking In

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie also spoke about extending interpersonal moments as students entered the classroom, and opportunities to ‘read the room,’ into initiatives during class time designated to checking-in on student wellbeing. In addition to daily greetings at the door, data gleaned from observations indicated that all three teacher participants often spent a portion of their daily class period (usually the beginning) facilitating group conversations with students. These conversations seemed to be based in gauging a collective understanding of students’ frame

of mind. During these conversations (which typically lasted anywhere between 3-10 minutes based on the research site, day of instruction, general mood of students, etc.), students shared and talked with each other and their teacher about items on their mind, weekend plans, recent outings with family and friends, or stressors related to school or their personal lives. At each research site, the conversations were predominately facilitated before the vocal warm-up routine.

Both Stephanie and Bryan spoke about their intentionality associated with making space for these group-based interpersonal moments at the start of class. "When you see everyone in a different position [i.e. emotional or mental state] than what their normal might be, that's kind of the first flag," Bryan said (Bryan, Interview 3). As noted in the first subtheme of this section, Bryan explained that knowing students as people helped him to identity shifts in their wellbeing. Further, he believed that acknowledging those wellbeing or mindset shifts—instead of disregarding them—is crucial to informing subsequent interpersonal and instructional decision-making:

> If I walk in and they're [students] quiet and tired…I'll say 'Let's check in. How are we doing? Are we tired?...It's one of those things where you have to know the students first, but there's obvious signs that adults can see that [they're] a little frustrated or didn't fully wake up or are already having a bad day…There's no need to ignore that. Let's honor that and then let's work through it. Let's get into the routine in hopes that going through the motions gets us started, and then from there perhaps we will get the energy to be our normal selves halfway through class. That's worth it. (Bryan, Interview 3)

Similarly, Stephanie explained that checking-in with the full ensemble was an extension of her approach to "reading" or "taking the temperature" of the room. For example, in a group setting, she shared that a combination of informal conversations as well as activities that involved students sharing a Rose and a Thorn[3] or Word Du Jour[4], or the student-led Circle Time

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[3] Roses and Thorns is an activity when individuals share a 'positive' and 'challenging' component of their day or current state of mind.
[4] Word du Jour is an activity where Stephanie asked students to share with the class one word that described how they were currently feeling.

(described in detail in a later section of this chapter), are important moments toward better understanding and responding to student wellbeing on a given day of instruction. One of Stephanie's students specifically identified an appreciation for Stephanie's blend of noticing and responding to student wellbeing: "If she sees that we're having a bad day, she's not going to be like, 'Well, we need to work on our music.' She'll sacrifice the music. She'll put our mental health before what we work on [in class]" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1).

Helen also devoted time at the beginning of class for students to "center themselves" (usually manifesting in a moment for students to sit quietly, update their school planner, or scroll through their phone), during which she would touch base individually with students throughout the room (WFHS Observation 2). Like Bryan and Stephanie, Helen acknowledged the importance of knowing about students' lives—a knowledge she attributed to listening to what her students have to say: "Listen. Give a damn. Pay attention to your students. They appreciate that," Helen affirmed (Helen, Interview 1). Helen further asserted that intently listening to what students share in moments of interaction is only the first step of building a relational bridge—it is also important to consciously remember what students share and commit to following up with them: "If they did something, if they achieved something…for goodness sakes, tell them congratulations, or ask them, 'How did it go?'" (Helen, Interview 1). Bryan also spoke about his concerted effort to learn—and follow-up regarding—details pertaining to his students' lives, details which he described as storing in individual mental "files" for each student: "I try to ask, and keep up with, the other things [they're] involved in because I care," he said (Bryan, Interview 2). Similarly, Stephanie emphasized the importance of making the conscious effort to take details students share in one moment of connection to launch a subsequent moment of connection:

> Whether it's TV shows or video games or YouTube videos or TikTok…find something. If they mention that they listen to a band, go home and listen to the band and come back and say, ‘You mentioned that. I listened to them. I really like this song’…You're the adult. You're the most flexible one in the room. You're the one who has to initiate and continue that relationship. (Stephanie, Interview 3)

Students at each research site noted that Bryan’s, Helen’s, and Stephanie’s efforts to listen to, respond to, and know them as people—whether through daily greetings, one-on-one interactions, group check-ins, or in other interpersonal moments—were key in their own perceptions of their choir teacher as someone who cared about their greater personhood. One of Helen’s students specifically noted their appreciation for Helen’s efforts to listen to her students: “It makes a lot of people feel comfortable in class when they have an environment where a teacher actually listens to the students instead of just ignoring them…it feels nice to have that comfortable relationship with a teacher” (WFHS Student Focus Group). A student at GLHS felt that Bryan’s efforts to know them beyond their identity as a choir student was similarly meaningful in conveying care: “It really proves that he doesn't just care for our wellbeing as students and that we get a good grade…he cares about us as people” (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). An MRHS student explained that Stephanie’s interest in students’ lives was not only meaningful, but painted Stephanie as more personable, especially when compared to other teachers:

> I just feel like Ms. Johnson is so human, she’s not like other teachers. She's relatable. You talk to her and she responds. She’s a typical human being. Other teachers almost seem like they're reading off a script when talking to you. But she has connections with you emotionally and about regular everyday life, unlike other teachers. (MRHS Student Focus Group 1)

These reflections from all three research sites point to student participants’ acknowledgement of the intersection between Bryan’s, Helen’s, and Stephanie’s efforts to convey care through knowing them as people and expressing a deeper interest in their lives.

Further, Helen, Bryan, and Stephanie all shared that devoting time to interpersonal check-ins with students did not detract from the musical objectives of their classroom—but rather, directly informed and enhanced their choral music instruction. Stephanie believed that these check-ins "might take five minutes, but that five minutes will make the next 55 minutes effective or not effective" (Stephanie, Interview 3). Referring to 'getting-to-know you' activities at the beginning of the school year, Bryan similarly expressed that though he and his students may "waste a day talking about our names and our favorite ice cream flavors…it's going to be important in the long run," (Bryan, Interview 3). Helen acknowledged that finding time to learn about students' lives and wellbeing also made a sustaining positive impact on students: "It makes them feel great…[because] they know that I took an interest in their life…I cared enough, I remembered" (Helen, Interview 1).

Expressions of Care

Centering the importance of knowing and responding to students—through daily greetings, points of interaction, and check-ins—often led to deeper expressions of care in Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's choral classrooms. Data analysis demonstrated that teacher participants expressed care through establishing themselves as caring adults, through specific acts, one-on-one interactions, and through the broader environments maintained in their choral classrooms. Based on these findings, I discuss the following subthemes below: expressing care as (a) caring figures—choral music teacher as family and mentor; and (b) acts of care.

Caring Figures—Choral Music Teacher as Family and Mentor

Findings conveyed that expressions of care often led teacher and student participants to conceptualize the relationship between choral music teacher and student at a heightened level—often akin to that of a mentor or family member. This finding was especially prevalent in the

stories shared by participants at Helen’s school (WFHS) and Stephanie’s school (MRHS). For example, Helen referred to WFHS students as “her babies,” in turn acknowledging that students likely perceive her as a “mother,” “auntie,” or grandmother” because “they know I love them” and “they know I take care of them” (Helen, Interview 1). Helen further acknowledged that she often feels that she has to “step in and be that surrogate parent,” especially “when things go wrong for [her students]” (Helen, Interview 3). She added: “When I see my students suffering. I internalize that. I can’t just turn it off and go home” (Helen, Interview 3). In one example of this dynamic, Helen explained that her efforts to empower a female-identifying student who was nervous to sing in front of others was buoyed by “the mother, grandmother kind of thing going on,” which ultimately galvanized the student to successfully sing a solo in class. After the student’s success singing by herself, Helen said: “I just grabbed her and gave her a big hug and said, ‘I'm so proud of you, you did it.’ And she's been my granddaughter, daughter ever since” (Helen, Interview 2). Similarly, Stephanie felt that over multiple years as her students’ middle and high school choir teacher, the types of bonds they form often become similar to those one might experience in a family: “They become like nieces and nephews,” Stephanie reflected. “I know their favorite foods. I know who their favorite artists are, and I know what they don't like” (Stephanie, Interview 1).

Helen’s and Stephanie’s students echoed many of their teachers’ sentiments. At Helen’s school (WFHS), multiple student participants shared that they look to Helen as a parental figure, with students dubbing her “the mother of choir” and asserting that “she's one of the best mothers that you could ever ask for” (WFHS Student Focus Group). One WFHS student explained that Helen has developed the reputation as a pseudo-family member for many students “because not only is she there for you when you sing, but she’s also there for you in times when we’re not

singing" (WFHS Student Focus Group). Stephanie's students also echoed their teacher's reflections when speaking about the special nature of a multi-year relationship in shaping an interpersonal bond that felt similar to that of a mentor or family member. One student participant affirmed that Stephanie is "really a central figure in a lot of our lives, someone who cares" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2) and another student noted the benefits of longevity in their relationship with Stephanie when sharing the following: "Having the same choir director for so long, you get past the teacher relationship…she [Stephanie] ends up taking more of a mentor position where she's not just your teacher, she's someone that you can actually go to for guidance" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1). And one student explained feeling closer to Stephanie as a result of Stephanie's long-term bond with their parents: "She meets your parents outside of the concert, she emails them a lot…and then they follow each other on Facebook and you know she's cooking chicken Marsala for dinner tonight" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1).

Though neither Bryan nor his GLHS students spoke about the teacher-student relationship using terms directly associated with family or a mentor/mentee dynamic, details about the unique qualities of the relationship did emerge. When asked to describe his hopes for his students' biggest take away from the GLHS choir room, Bryan replied: "I would hope students say that I care. I hope that would be the main thing that they get" (Bryan, Interview 1). Similar to Stephanie, Bryan noted that the benefits of having students for multiple years enhanced his capacity to "develop those relationships" and convey deeper levels of care (Bryan, Interview 1). Though GLHS students did not describe Bryan as a family member or mentor, one GLHS student participant did identify Bryan as a caring adult in her life because "he shows so much respect for all students" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1).

Acts of Care

Embedded within their presence as caring figures, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie enacted specific acts to convey care for their students. Data reflected that acts of care in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral classrooms involved specific moments of kindness or validation, providing resources that fulfilled student needs, and generally maintaining a supportive learning environment. Helen was emphatic in her belief that care was conveyed through action: “You don’t have to tell somebody that you care for them,” she affirmed. “You know when somebody actually gives a damn about you” (Interview 1). Findings demonstrated that a specific act reflecting Helen’s embodiment of care was her dedication to stocking certain resources like personal items (bandages, tissue, lotion, Vaseline, tampons) and food (crackers, chips, water) in her classroom for student use. When describing her decision to provide these resources, or “basic care,” Helen again referenced her perceived responsibility to her students in the role of a “mother,” “auntie,” and “grandmother:”

> There's a need, you fill it. They're hungry all the time…so I have crackers and snacks for them. It's just basic care…I see their needs. They don't have to ask me. I can see what they need. (Helen, Interview 1)

A GLHS student perceived Bryan’s decision to hang an LGBTQ+ Safe Zone poster on the choir board at the socially conservative GLHS as an act of care and validation. Bryan stated that this act was “the absolute least [he] can do,” further sharing that he hoped students “feel safe and feel supported by me simply putting up a postcard” (Bryan, Interview 3). The student who gave Bryan this poster (and who in the GLHS student focus group identified herself as a lesbian), shared how meaningful it was that Bryan hung the poster in the classroom, noting that Bryan was “the only teacher” at the school who did so (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). Findings also suggest that another specific act of care at GLHS was Bryan’s multi-day response in the

aftermath a deadly school shooting at a nearby high school which deeply impacted his and his students' wellbeing. Many of Bryan's students spoke about this period in the GLHS focus groups, expressing gratitude for how Bryan centered their needs during that time. One student shared: "Mr. Dempsey let everything stop for a minute and gave us two or three days to just be in a space that felt safe and that felt welcoming in a time when we really needed it" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1).

Reflective of Bryan's response above, both Helen and Stephanie also shared examples of particularly notable acts of care. For example, Stephanie felt that providing her cell phone number to students was an important gesture of care. While she recognized that it was logistically necessary for students to have her cell phone number given the amount of time she and students spend at events outside of the classroom, ultimately, she viewed the act of providing her phone number as a way to convey that she is an available presence in students' lives: "I willingly give my phone number to my students because if they are in trouble, I want to help them" (Stephanie, Interview 3). Relatedly, both Stephanie and Helen described instances when they helped students arrive safely to an off-campus performance by coordinating a ride via an Uber or through a performance venue's security guard. One of Helen's students spoke about one of these instances in the WFHS focus group, sharing that Helen ensured the student's participation in an off-campus event by securing her an Uber ride, acknowledging that "not a lot of teachers will go out of their way for students like that" (WFHS Focus Group).

Finally, Stephanie also conveyed care through acts such as leading fundraising efforts to help two students attend a summer music program, purchasing a ukulele for a student to use at home, and attending the funerals of student family members. Helen also spoke about conveying care through similar actions outside of school:

> If [students] have a death in their family and I can make it, I go to the funeral. I'll get them a card. If they ask me to go to their games and watch them lose, I'll go at least once. Is it important to you to see me there? Then I'll be there. (Helen, Interview 1)

Providing a personal cell phone number to students for times they are in need, attending the funeral of a student's family member, purchasing personal items and class snacks, or opening the classroom space to process a difficult moment of grief after a school shooting, were all examples of specific acts of care conveyed by Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie.

The Importance of Care: A Summary

In the section above, I described how care was conveyed and experienced as part of the infrastructure of human connection in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choir rooms. I began by presenting how participants perceived the process of laying foundations of care, particularly through knowing and responding to their students as people via daily greetings, reading the room, and checking in. I then outlined various ways that participants extended those foundations into expressions of care, in which the importance of being a caring figure akin to a mentor or family member and initiating acts of care were discussed. In the next section, I describe how Bryan, Helen, Stephanie and their students conceptualized—and expanded upon—notions of care when cultivating trust in the choral music classroom.

Theme II: The Importance of Trust

Woven within dimensions of care, the notion of trust was also prominent in the choral programs at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. As outlined in Chapter 6, Helen distinctly identified care as the basis for trust in teacher-student relationships. When asked why students trusted her, Helen emphatically replied: "Because I care. Because I give a damn. Because I care about them" (Helen, Interview 1). While Helen was the most explicit in suggesting care as a pre-requisite to

trust, teacher and student participants from all research sites spoke about trust in ways that reflected an intricately symbiotic relationship between notions of care and trust. Though teacher participants perceived and cultivated trust in different ways, the broader notion was central in their conceptualization of building relationships and community in the choral classroom. Student participants spoke about trust in ways that similarly aligned with notions of care. In this section, I present findings from data in which trust was emphasized. Trust-based data is organized in the following sections based on subthemes emergent in findings: (a) trust in teacher-student relational endeavors (overall presence as a trustworthy adult, trust developed through facets of identity); and (b) trust in student-student relational endeavors (relationship-building activities and early low-risk singing).

Trust in Teacher-Student Relational Endeavors

Teacher participants were unified in their perceptions of trust as a central component of teacher-student relationships. “It all comes down to trust” Bryan stated (Bryan, Interview 3), with Helen echoing that “trust is everything” (Helen, Interview 2), and Stephanie reaffirming that “you can’t get to a kid without trust” (Stephanie, Interview 1). As referenced in the previous section, teacher participants linked the cultivation of trust with knowing personal information about students’ lives, expressing care through specific acts, and by establishing themselves as a caring and trustworthy adult. Drawing important threads between expressions of care and the development of trust in teachers, one of Helen’s students shared:

> I don't pay attention to words most of the time…What I pay attention to is what they [teachers] do for you. I pay attention to your actions. What you do to show that you actually mean what’s behind your words…if I see people…put action behind the meaning of those words, that's the people I know I can trust. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

Below I outline ways that Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie fostered trust with their students by (a) establishing themselves as trustworthy adults; and (b) cultivating trust through facets of their and their students' identities.

Overall Presence as a Trustworthy Adult

Teacher participants shared that, similar to establishing themselves as a caring adult, developing a reputation as a trustworthy adult is also critical in their teaching practice. Bryan's, Helen's, Stephanie's, and their students' reflections often suggested that conceptualizations of care and trust were interlocked. For example, Bryan and Stephanie spoke at length about using their knowledge of students as people—and their knowledge of students' needs—to enact care-based responses in the classroom, particularly with regard to supporting student mental health and wellbeing. During my observations at GLHS, I witnessed Bryan empower students by reminding them that it was 'OK' for them to step out of the classroom in moments of distress (after which he typically followed to check on them). During an observation at MRHS, I observed Stephanie notice a student sitting by themselves, prompting her to walk over, sit next to the student, and check-in with them. In an interview, Bryan said that he often reminded his students that "if you need this time to reset or regroup as a person before you can be a choir student, then you need that, and that's fine" (Bryan, Interview 1). He firmly believed that students will "make better music if they give themselves a break, than if they try and pretend that they're OK" (Bryan, Interview 3).

In turn, student participants' reflections suggested that trust in their choral teacher often developed from demonstrations of care. "If I'm having a difficult time or get really overwhelmed, she knows that sometimes I'll have to leave the classroom or just sit down for a bit," one of Stephanie's students shared. "When that does happen, [Stephanie] doesn't draw attention to it or

make it a big deal, which every other teacher does. Choir is pretty much the only time when I actually feel comfortable…doing something about being in pain" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). A GLHS student participant had a parallel perspective of Bryan's efforts to make the choir room a place acknowledging and supportive of student wellbeing:

> I think a lot of students have problems with mental health and how they feel about themselves. I feel like here [the GLHS choir room] is the only place where you can acknowledge those problems. You can acknowledge them, accept them, and let them go. (GLHS Student Focus Group 1)

Another of Bryan's students shared that Bryan's commitment to students' wellbeing has earned him a great deal of respect, and that with him as a teacher, "it finally feels like an adult in this building is on our side" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1).

As a figure committed to her students, Helen also believed she is one of the few adults in some of her WFHS students' lives that has proven she is deserving of their trust—a trust Helen believed is earned through supporting her students' needs, advocating for their rights, and creating meaningful musical/performing experiences: "They trust me because I stay after school with them….they know I love them. They know I want to be with them…I want great things for them…and I demonstrate it every day (Helen, Interview 2). Helen went on to say that she often perceives a shift in student trust after their first performance of the year when students experience feelings of pride related to a successful performance—successful due to Helen's high standards and commitment to student achievement. It is often at this point, Helen recognized, that students begin thinking "'Okay, we trust you. We'll do what you tell us to do'" (Helen, Interview 2).

Trust Developed Through Facets of Identity

Teacher and student participants also discussed how varied facets of identity impacted a sense of trust and understanding in teacher-student relationships in the choir rooms at GLHS,

MRHS, and WFHS. As noted earlier in this chapter, every aspect of human relationships (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2020) and relational practice (Freire, 2005; hooks, 2003; Schwartz, 2019) is ultimately impacted by implications of context (school, community, societal) and identity (teacher's and students'). Below, I present a few examples from collected data wherein specific aspects of teacher and/or student identity were described as active components in the development of relational trust. Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each spoke about how they perceived certain aspects of their identities as informing student trust. For example, Helen primarily spoke about her racial and cultural identities and lifelong status as a resident of the city of Woodland. Stephanie primarily spoke about her racial identity and her identity as an individual who experienced trauma. Bryan primarily spoke about aspects of mental health and his introverted personality. In an effort to highlight how each teacher fostered relational trust with students based on aspects of their own identities, I have chosen to present the findings in this section organized by teacher participant.

Helen. Helen asserted that her racial identity as an African American individual and as a life-long resident of Woodland earned her certain levels of credibility and trust with her predominately Black student population. With regard to her identity as an African American individual, Helen asserted: “My racial identity and the way I relate to my kids is something I can't separate” (Interview 3). When asked how a shared racial identity with the majority of her students impacted her relational connections, Helen responded by saying: “It helps in our relationship. They can relate to me…It's easier to relate to them. They trust me” (Helen, Interview 3). Helen explained that ‘relating to students’ also involved “the rhythms in which I speak” (Helen, Interview 2), certain “colloquialisms” (Helen, Interview 2), and her presence as

an adult in students' lives that often functions as an "auntie or a grandma or a mom" (Helen, Interview 3). Related to these specific elements, Helen said:

> As an older African American female who resides on the south side of Woodland, I'm sure a lot of my students look at me as either an auntie or a grandma or a mom. So when they speak to me, they speak to me that way. They ask me my advice. Probably things they may not say to another teacher. (Helen, Interview 3)

A direct example of this specific form of identity-based relational trust was especially prevalent in Helen's story about her student Jeremiah, an African American student who sought out Helen after being bullied by students for his darker skin tone. Helen explained that she felt a certain empathy for Jeremiah due to her own experience as an African American individual who in the past had also been chastised for her darker skin tone. Helen explained that she responded to Jeremiah by empathically listening, affirming his skin tone, and by assigning him the Langston Hughes poem, "*I, Too,"* to read at a school assembly—at which Jeremiah received rapturous applause and support from the greater WFHS student body. Helen explained that after the assembly, Jeremiah's self-confidence in her classroom seemed noticeably heightened. Jeremiah was in the WFHS student focus group and shared the following perception of Helen:

> I'm very grateful that I've gotten to know Ms. Curtis as both a teacher and as a person that I could honestly go to whenever I need to. This year probably would've been way worse if it wasn't for me getting to know Ms. Curtis. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

Though Jeremiah did not directly bring up the story relayed by Helen above, he did acknowledge that Helen was a teacher and a person that he "could honestly go to" whenever he needed. In turn, Helen believed that her identity as an African American individual, especially as an individual with a skin tone similar to Jeremiah's, may have been the reason that he trusted her enough to confide his own story.

Helen also suggested that she earned trust from students because of her status as a lifelong resident of Woodland and graduate of WFHS: "I was a kid at this school. I am a fixture.

I belong here. That makes it very personal," she explained (Helen, Interview 2). Helen recognized that her status as a lifelong resident of Woodland impacted student relationships throughout her career. She believed that due to her ties to Woodland, she and her students may perceive "a different level of caring because when [students] talk about their home lives I know exactly what they were talking about" (Helen, Interview 2). Helen described feeling that this reputation and visibility throughout the community had earned her a high-level of trust: "[Students] see me everywhere. They see me walking in their neighborhood and driving my car through their neighborhood. So, they know I'm one of them" (Helen, Interview 2).

Stephanie. During our interviews, Stephanie shared that she had grown up as a "child of trauma" and that her father was "a sociopath" who "hurt her physically" (Stephanie, Interview 3). Despite the challenges of growing up in a childhood infused with trauma, Stephanie felt that the implications of that trauma helped her identify and support the broader needs of many students at MRHS. Stephanie now considered her personal experience with trauma as a "superpower" that helped her identify "who needs my love" in the classroom (Stephanie, Interview 3). For example, Stephanie explained that she bases her approach to "reading the room" and "taking the temperature of the room" as both a response to her own trauma ("kids from trauma have to be able to read the room because that'll tell them whether or not they're safe") and a medium through which to assess whether certain students may be struggling with either aspects of trauma or other facets of their mental health and wellbeing (Stephanie, Interview 3): "I am able to make inroads to kids that I can't identify with other ways, but I can identify with through trauma," she explained (Stephanie, Interview 3). Stephanie went on to add that humor has always been one of her personal responses to trauma, and she believed that may be why she infuses humor so frequently in her teaching when attempting to connect with

students who may be struggling in their own lives (Stephanie, Interview 3). Relatedly, one of Stephanie's students, who during our focus group shared they suffered from social anxiety and paranoia, shared that Stephanie is unique in her ability to support them:

> I have a hard time interacting with people…most people, if I do something weird, they'll look at me like I'm weird and that makes me uncomfortable. I love Ms. Johnson though. She's weird in the way that I'm weird. If I walk into class and I'm not having the best day or I'm not feeling too good or something bad happened, I know that Ms. Johnson is…going to be weird, and make weird jokes, but in a loving way. (MRHS Focus Group 1)

This student's acknowledgement that Stephanie's "weird jokes" contribute to their feelings of safety in the choral ensemble, align with Stephanie's statements about employing humor as part of her own response to trauma and when attempting to support the wellbeing of her students in the classroom.

Though from a vastly different perspective than Helen, Stephanie also consciously considered aspects of race when fostering relationships and trust with students. As a white woman teaching African American and Black students, Stephanie explained that she "tried really hard to unpack how my privilege impacts my teaching," a process which she described as including "a lot of growing pains" (Stephanie, Interview 3). Stephanie said that devoting herself to channeling humility, daily reflection (she has reflection journals at MRHS and at her home), and sustained critical learning have helped her more consciously consider how her racial identity intersects with her African American and Black students' identities and experiences in her classroom. A specific example Stephanie provided involved an instance when an African American student sent Stephanie an email in which the student shared: "I don't want to sing a slave song with white girls" (Stephanie, Interview 1). Stephanie described her response to this student email:

> The next day I collected the song and I wrote back to [the student] and I said, 'First of all, thank you for trusting me. Second, I'm going to collect the song the next day because you

> are more important to me than any one song. And three, I am sorry I don't know enough yet to know that that would've bothered you. So thank you for helping me become smarter about that.' I know that there are going to be things that I miss. (Stephanie, Interview 1)

Stephanie explained that she hoped decisions like the instance described above "builds my credibility with [students] about how I see them individually and care about them individually" (Stephanie, Interview 1). Stephanie added that after her decision to remove the song from class, the same student wrote a follow-up email that may have displayed an increase in trust. In the follow-up email to Stephanie, the student wrote: "Thank you. I didn't know you would do that," to which Stephanie responded, "You mean everything to me. Of course I would do that" (Stephanie, Interview 1).

Stephanie's efforts to be critically mindful of the intersections of race in her classroom, particularly related to her identity as a white woman teaching African American and Black students, were also acknowledged by MRHS student participants of color in the focus group. For example, two Black students described Stephanie's efforts to program music representative of the wider Black musical and cultural experience (such as African American Spirituals and the Black National Anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*) as particularly meaningful. Speaking of Stephanie's efforts, one of the students shared: "Especially as a white woman, it means a lot that she cares. There's a difference between being not racist and being anti-racist," the student explained, suggesting that Stephanie's decision to program songs like *Lift Every Voice and Sing* represented a meaningful anti-racist pedagogical decision (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

Bryan. When reflecting upon how issues of identity impacted trust with students at GLHS, Bryan primarily spoke about elements related to mental health and his identity as an introvert. He shared that despite his efforts to energetically engage his students, he is an "introvert by nature" and therefore empathized with the experiences of his more introverted

students who may struggle with the extroverted aspects sometimes associated with the ensemble nature of choral music (Bryan, Interview 3). Because of his own experience as an introvert, Bryan said that he may be more attuned to the social needs of his introverted students. He believed that by acknowledging his introverted students' experiences, and not forcing them to participate in certain group-based team-building activities, he may garner a deeper level of their trust: "If you're here and you're singing—and that's all you want to contribute, and then you need time to yourself, and that doesn't include sharing how your weekend was with me—that's fine," he explained (Bryan, Interview 3).

Bryan also shared that his own journey with aspects of mental health provided him with a level of awareness of his students' mental health needs. He felt that his own mental health experience "helps me see my classroom in a slightly different way" (Bryan, Interview 1). Student participants' reflections suggested that Bryan's awareness of their wellbeing and mental health needs did indeed foster a deeper sense of trust. GLHS students confirmed that "putting [students] over everything else" is "just something that [Bryan] does" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1). Further, multiple GLHS student participants shared that Bryan has acknowledged their mental health needs in the past when allowing them to take breaks to care for their wellbeing. One student even shared that Bryan has emphatically centered the importance of mental health and wellbeing within the core mission of the GLHS choral program: "What Mr. Dempsey has done here is almost make [support of mental health] the main point" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1).

Finally, in ways that mirrored aspects of Stephanie's experience, Bryan acknowledged his own efforts as a white male when developing relational trust with his Black and African American students. He shared that his attempts to acknowledge and affirm the experiences of his students of color involved completing "a lot of research" before programming, introducing, and

rehearsing repertoire such as African American Spirituals so that he's not "just another white person that's trying and failing to tell their history" (Bryan, Interview 3). Further, Bryan explained that a recent experience at a state music education conference had deepened his awareness regarding how to sensitively approach the themes of African American Spirituals in class: "…When you have a jazzy version of *Wade in the Water*—there's nothing fun about running for your life.' That really struck me and I shared that with my students. This is something that made me cry" (Bryan, Interview 3).

Trust of LGBTQ+-Identifying Students. Finally, Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students spoke about how aspects of validation informed trust for students identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, Bryan expressed his awareness that student trust would not be maintained at GLHS if students "don't think I see [them] for who [they] are" (Bryan, Interview 3). This stance seemed to align with Bryan's efforts to affirm students' varied identities—especially those who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community or who conveyed struggles with mental health. For example, one of Bryan's students who identified as a lesbian spoke at length about Bryan's support of her efforts to build a Pride organization at GLHS—and further, as noted earlier in this chapter, that Bryan was the only teacher at the school who placed a Safe Zone poster in his classroom. Another of Bryan's students, who in the GLHS focus group shared that they identified as queer, disclosed that they grew closer to Bryan after he stood up for them when they were bullied:

> He knew that a few students in the school were calling me not very nice names related to me being queer…and he pulled them aside and very strongly spoke with them. And it made me feel very safe…and shortly after that, I gave him this little rainbow Pride sticker and he put it on his teacher badge and he still wears that badge. (GLHS Student Focus Group 1)

Some of Stephanie's students also shared that Stephanie actively validated their identities as members of the LGBTQ+ community. When speaking about their struggles with vocal dysphoria, one of Stephanie's transgender students explained that Stephanie "won't…actively make a big deal of it, but she does tell me that my voice is pretty" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). Two MRHS students also noted that Stephanie was one of the first people they came out to (as non-binary and transgender, respectively). When asked why they felt comfortable coming out to Stephanie, one of those students, Dylan, replied:

> She was somebody I felt completely comfortable with. She's a really central figure in a lot of our lives, somebody who cares. And she's been so accepting…so having a very safe space and somebody I know who will completely validate my feelings and will be very accepting and accommodating is really nice. (MRHS Student Focus Group 2)

Finally, reflective of a commitment to developing student trust by "seeing" them for who they are, is Bryan's and Stephanie's parallel commitment to dismantling heteronormative traditions in their choral program's uniform expectations. For example, at the time of data collection for this study, both Bryan and Stephanie had recently made the decision to move away from choral uniforms based in the traditional binary of 'dresses and tuxedos.' Rather, both teachers switched to uniforms that were instead 'concert black' [meaning students could wear whatever they prefer as long as it was formal black attire] in an effort to honor their transgender and nonbinary students. Speaking about this change, Bryan asserted: "Not every female-identifying student wants to wear a dress, not every male-identifying wants to wear slacks and a black shirt" (Bryan, Interview 2). "I do concert black so that everyone can wear something that they feel comfortable in," Bryan further explained, noting that "the last thing [he wants] is for someone to be conscious of what they're wearing when we're on stage" (Bryan, Interview 2). Stephanie echoed Bryan's statement, acknowledging that students "will sing better if they're comfortable" (Stephanie, Interview 3). Furthermore, Stephanie directly involved her students in

the broader decision-making process surrounding the program's uniform change. An MRHS student participant was grateful not only for the uniform change, but to have been a part of the decision: "This year she [Stephanie] actually asked us, 'Do you want to change the uniform so it's not just the dresses?" one of Stephanie's students shared. "We decided as a group and made the change. Now it's just concert black…we did make that change to something that everyone can be comfortable in. It was so sweet of her [Stephanie]" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

Trust in Student-Student Relational Endeavors

In the section above, I presented data related to the experience of trust in teacher-student relationships at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. Though teacher participant reflections primarily emphasized their efforts to form trust with students, data also revealed that they and their students actively consider ways to foster trust between students in the classrooms. Those subthemes are expanded upon below and organized according to data related to: (a) relationship-building activities and (b) early low-risk singing.

Relationship-Building Activities

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each talked about the importance of incorporating opportunities for students to build trusting relationships with each other into the broader scope of their relational pedagogy. Helen recognized that the social moments built around extra-curricular/off-campus performances were often when she saw relationships solidify between her students: "They interact really well with each other during field trips," she shared. "We stay after school and maybe enjoy a meal together and then get on a bus and go perform someplace. Those have been the most magical times" (Helen, Interview 3). Helen explained that she finds these times special because she loves watching her students shed their social inhibitions and build bonds when sprawled on the classroom floor "playing games together and eating together"

before an off-campus performance (Helen, Interview 3). One of Helen's students similarly shared that he enjoyed the social aspects of this "chill time together" with peers before and after extra-curricular performances (WFHS Student Focus Group). Another WFHS student echoed this sentiment, affirming that off-campus performances are a highlight of her involvement in choir because she and her peers get to "experience new things together" (WFHS Student Focus Group).

Bryan and Stephanie both acknowledged that incorporating team-building activities at the beginning of the school year was essential when fostering trust amongst students. "My primary goal in the first few weeks is for [students] to get to know each other and to trust each other and for them to trust me," Stephanie said. "So, we do a lot of name games. We do a lot of get-to-know-you games" (Stephanie, Interview 1). Stephanie felt that such activities were important foundations in building the student-student trust necessary to take future musical risks together in class. Similarly, Bryan said that social games and icebreakers were essential steps toward opening up student comfort and trust with each other. Bryan and Stephanie described some of these activities as ranging from 'Word du Jour' (at MRHS, where students go around and provide a word for how they are feeling), to games associated with student names, to sharing information about one's favorite color, music, or food. Bryan explained that "the silly name games that we play at the beginning of the year" not only created initial layers of trust amongst students, but contributed to a greater sense of empathy amongst students throughout the year (Bryan, Interview 2). He suggested that when mistakes inevitably occurred in the ensemble, foundations of relational trust set at the beginning of the year were crucial because they initiated bonds that may lead to more compassionate student responses to their peers' mistakes:

"…because this human has a name…they're not just 'the person who messed up,' I know their favorite ice cream" (Bryan, Interview 2).

One of Stephanie's students shared that the influx of relationship-building activities with Stephanie and peers at the beginning of the year "made it not seem like it was not going to be hard to fit in or be part of the team. It was just really easy to find your place" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1). Similarly speaking about early-in-the year opportunities to bond with their choir peers, one of Bryan's students acknowledged: "We're learning about ourselves and how to interact with people and how to work as a team…Every day is not a day lost if we don't sing. It's just a day that we used for something different" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2).

Opening the Classroom to Students. Earlier in this chapter, I described Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's attempts to provide their students with opportunities to share aspects of their lives in various forms of 'check-ins.' While those moments represented important instances for each teacher participant to learn about their students' lives, student and teacher participants also acknowledged that those moments developed trust amongst students. For example, all three teacher participants devoted time at the beginning of class for students to socially bond with each other. These moments included formal group check-ins during which students shared general aspects about their lives (weekend plans, current stressors, etc.) or during informal opportunities for students to casually sit and connect with each other or their teacher. For example, during each of my three visits to WFHS, I observed Helen establish instructional time at the beginning of class for her students to converse with each other. Sometimes Helen would join the conversations, but often she provided students a few minutes to drag their chairs into make-shift circles to connect socially over topics of their choice. Helen believed this time was important for her students to form trust with each other.

Stephanie and her students frequently brought up a specific activity they called Circle Time, which they described as an opportunity for students to develop a trust-based social and emotional cohesion together. Stephanie said that Circle Time was an important chance for her to "stand back and let [students] speak" (Stephanie, Interview 3). An MRHS student described Circle Time as the following:

> We sit in a circle and Ms. Johnson will ask us what's going on? Is everybody okay?...[it's a] 'What's going on with your life?' type of thing. And she gives us the entire hour to just talk to each other and let it all out. And it's a really safe space to do all of that, which a lot of people actually need. (MRHS Student Focus Group 1)

A different MRHS student participant suggested that Circle Time enhanced student trust in their vocal sections because "when you get to know each other in a Circle Time…it's not awkward when there's only three people in sectionals" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1). Another student shared that the vulnerability fostered during Circle Time not only influenced their interpersonal connections, but impacted how they make choral music together: "Circle Time changes the vulnerability in the classroom as a whole," the student shared. "You build relationships with people…and that definitely does help with the whole 'sound thing'" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1).

Early "Low-Risk Singing"

Mirroring the MRHS student participant quote above, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie similarly acknowledged that establishing trust amongst students at the beginning of the school year involved the facilitation of supportive musical experiences. "My goal is to create so many safe experiences that they'll [students] follow me onto the stage and try new things," Stephanie said (Interview 2). Stephanie believed that the first days of school require many opportunities for students to engage in what she framed as "low-risk singing"— which she described as the following: "I wouldn't say choral singing, but we do rounds, folk songs with games that go with

them, the *Cup Song*, and just things that get them having fun with each other and making music" (Stephanie, Interview 1). She also shared that "low-risk singing" early in the year (and throughout the year) might include activities like singing along to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, karaoke sessions, or Music Fests—to encourage student comfort and vulnerability. For example, Stephanie's Music Fests (which I observed during an observation) are an in-class, cabaret-style opportunity for students to sing a song of their choice (often from movie, musical theater, or pop genres) for their peers. As I observed, students in the audience are permitted to only provide compliments, which appears to lead to a joy-based and affirming vocal activity. Stephanie told me that most of her students have been participating in Music Fests since their time together in middle school choir. As a result, she indicated that multiple years of shared, low-risk singing experiences like Music Fests and the other activities described above, likely contribute to greater trust felt between students in the MRHS choir.

Bryan and Helen also talked about ways they attempted to reduce the level of student risk during beginning of the school year vocal experiences. For example, Bryan mentioned that he encourages students to bring an "emotional support friend" with them during first-quarter individual voice tests, a process which he explained not only eases student anxiety around singing but fosters greater trust amongst their peers (Bryan, Interview 1). At WFHS, Helen mentioned that at the beginning of the year, she focuses on cultivating students' trust in each other when introducing the procedures for singing solos in class. Like Stephanie, during these solo singing activities, Helen explained that she encourages students to be lively and verbal with their support of each other "which makes kids feel comfortable" (Helen, Interview 2).

GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS student participants also talked about the ways they developed trust with each other within the choral ensemble. One WFHS student shared that he

often found comfort and trust in the support of his choir peers: “If we’re in the Bass section and one of us messes up, it’s OK because we have people that can help us. If one person’s nervous, the choir can help them out” (WFHS Student Focus Group). A student at MRHS recognized that participating in a multi-year journey between middle and high school with choir peers also established a certain level of trust amongst the ensemble:

> I think working with the same people for multiple years, you also get to know them better and how they work better. So if you need to help them, it's a lot easier than trying out seven different things. You know, ‘Oh this is what helps this person’ or ‘This is how I can interact with them that'll be the most productive.’ (MRHS Student Focus Group 2)

Similarly, a GLHS student identified the influence of early in the year social and musical moments within the formation of a unified spirit across the choir: “There's a sense of camaraderie between us and I think a lot of that is just because we have moments towards the beginning of the year…that we would just talk” (GLHS Student Focus Group 1).

The Importance of Trust: A Summary

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie described a variety of approaches to developing trust in their classrooms. Trust was expressed as being built upon care and as directly related to the social and musical vulnerability they hoped to create in their classroom environments. Teacher participants sought to foster trust in the teacher-student relationship through establishing themselves as trustworthy adults and through various aspects of their and their students’ identities. Trust was fostered between students in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choir rooms through beginning of the year relationship-building and community-building activities as well as within early and frequent opportunities for ‘low-risk singing.’

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each shared that facets of their identity informed how they developed trust and relationships with students. However, the links between student trust and

teacher participant identities and life experiences were nuanced. Stephanie felt that her personal experience with trauma significantly impacted how she facilitated trust and relationships in the classroom. Bryan brought up how his own experiences with mental health and experience as an introverted personality informed his relational approach with students. As an African American teacher teaching a predominately Black student population, Helen's perspective was singular within the parameters of this study. Implications of shared racial, cultural, and community-based experiences with her students were woven throughout much of Helen's discussion of her trust-based relationships and pedagogy. That said, as white individuals, both Bryan and Stephanie spoke about ways they attempted to foster trust with students who identified as Black and African American through their approaches to selecting, introducing, and rehearsing repertoire representative of racially diverse perspectives.

Theme III: Supporting Vulnerability

During the interview process, teacher participants were asked to reflect upon what their students might feel when singing alone and with others in choir. Teachers' initial reflections shared common themes: Helen felt that her students were often "nervous about singing" especially at the beginning of the year, and that singing with/in front of others was "a big human fear" (Helen, Interview 2). Bryan believed that when it came to singing, students had "the fear of 'I'm not good enough so I'm scared to share my sound'" (Bryan, Interview 2). Echoing both Helen and Bryan, Stephanie felt that students were "nervous, and worried that they're not going to make the right sound at the right time, or that their voice is not going to be good enough" (Stephanie, Interview 2). In focus groups, student participants from GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS were similarly asked to describe how they felt when singing alone and with others in choir. GLHS student participants brought up terms like "self-conscious," "scary," "insecure,"

“exposed,” and “afraid” (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). Student participants at MRHS mentioned terms that included “fear,” “nervous,” “anxious,” “timid,” “frustrated,” and “vulnerable” (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). At WFHS, student participants used the words “scared,” “anxious,” and “nervous” (WFHS Student Focus Group).

Below, I will present examples of how Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students conceptualized the symbiotic threads between care, trust, relationships, and vulnerability in the choral music classroom. Findings reflect that, within the high school choral classrooms at each research site, teacher and student participants acknowledged and experienced varied forms of vulnerability typically associated with singing and choral music. Further, based on those expressed vulnerabilities, teacher participants described their efforts to extend relational bridges infused with care and trust (between teacher and student, and amongst students) toward the support of student vulnerability in their high school choral classrooms. Thus, findings in this section reflect how participants extended a blueprint of relational trust and care into the process of choral music teaching and learning. In an effort to present salient findings, I have organized this section similar to the within-case chapters of this dissertation study, with findings presented according to the following subthemes: (a) creating the blueprint for vulnerable choral music-making; (b) making mistakes (mistake-positive mindsets and teachers modeling mistakes and vulnerability); (c) the singing voice (the individual singing voice and singing with others); and (d) rehearsing choral repertoire (learning and selecting music).

Creating the Blueprint for Vulnerable Choral Music-Making

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each believed that their relational investments with students directly impacted how they facilitated choral music teaching and learning, as well as how their students engaged in the acts of singing and choral music instruction. Stephanie expressed that

relationship- and community-building were the “inroads to students being able to trust [her] to try difficult things” in the classroom and that “vulnerability in singing comes from trust in the relationship first” (Stephanie, Interview 1). Stephanie asserted that her efforts to cultivate relational foundations of care and trust directly impacted her capacity to guide students through the often vulnerable acts of singing and choral music: “I think [students] are more vulnerable for me as singers if they’re vulnerable for me as people” she shared. “I think it’s easier for us to be vulnerable with our speaking voice first, and then vulnerable with our singing voice second” (Stephanie, Interview 1). Similarly, Helen believed that because “students already trust [her],” they were more willing to take vocal and musical risks during instruction (Helen, Interview 2). Bryan recognized that when he was a new teacher at GLHS, he needed to develop trust with students before they would engage in initial musical journeys with him. Aligned with the cultivation of trust and vulnerability, both Bryan and Stephanie emphasized the importance of affirming students’ identities and their unique personhood before asking them to embark on vocal or choral music endeavors. Speaking to this point, Stephanie posed the following question: “Why would you sing and be vulnerable if you’re not seen [as a person]?” (Stephanie, Interview 1). Relatedly, Bryan contended: “I want [students] to be who they are, because if they don't feel comfortable as a person here, they’re not going to share their sound, which is really way more intimate than people think” (Bryan, Interview 2).

The philosophical underpinnings of these blueprints for supporting vulnerability impacted how Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie guided their students through making mistakes, using the singing voice (alone and with others), and learning choral music. In the following sections, I present data from student focus groups to frame their perspectives on specific vocal/choral-

related vulnerabilities, as well as data from teacher participant interviews and observations to contextualize how each area of vulnerability was addressed at each research site.

Making Mistakes

Bryan asserted that "at the core of being scared or exposed or fearful in this class [choir] is [students] often thinking they're not good enough," (Bryan, Interview 2). The fear of 'not being good enough' and making mistakes in choir was a prominent concern of students at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. As presented at the start of this section, students at all three research sites associated feeling 'scared,' 'nervous,' 'anxious,' 'insecure,' and 'exposed' with the fear of making mistakes in the choral classroom. A student at MRHS said that their "main fear" associated with singing was "the fear of making a mistake" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). Student participants at MRHS and GLHS acknowledged that the ensemble nature of choir sometimes intensified their fear of making mistakes, with one student sharing that "the fear of messing up…is why most people would be timid to sing in front of the crowd" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). Other students noted that the small size of certain vocal sections often meant that "it's very easy to tell that somebody messed up and who it was" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2) and that they "don't' want to mess up around older or better singers" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2).

Mistake-Positive Mindsets and Learning Environments

Despite student concerns about making mistakes, student participants from all three research sites also displayed a noticeably resilient attitude toward the notion of personal and collective mistakes in their respective choral programs. Further, student participants largely attributed this mistake-positive attitude to their teachers and the supportive environment they, and their peers, had created. For example, a student participant at WFHS declared that in Helen's

classroom, “it’s all about the mindset,” suggesting that a collective notion of peer vulnerability and support ultimately influenced how mistakes where internalized in the WFHS choir: “We all make mistakes and we're not perfect…but if you believe in me, then that'll give me the confidence” (WFHS Student Focus Group). Similarly, a student at MRHS identified that being around peers they know and trust impacted their perception of mistakes in choir: “You are already vulnerable because these people know things about you [and] then you don't care if you make a mistake” (MRHS Student Focus Group 1). A GLHS student shared that in their choir, Bryan had established a culture where students “don’t have to hide [mistakes] and don’t have to pretend that they don’t exist,” which in turn leads students to feeling that mistakes are “not that big of a deal and you can just move on and keep going” (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). A student at MRHS shared a similar sentiment, explaining that “when we have a safe environment to fail in, it does help…it really makes it easier to not spiral after you fail” (MRHS Student Focus Group 1).

Student participants across research sites also acknowledged their teacher’s dedication to not only reducing the stigma of mistakes but providing students with the tools to fix errors in choir. “If we’re making mistakes, Ms. Curtis will help you,” a student from WFHS shared (WFHS Student Focus Group). Relatedly, a GLHS student explained that “Mr. Dempsey gives us a chance to learn from our mistakes and to correct them…he doesn't push it aside” (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). A student from MRHS described Stephanie’s similar approach: “With Ms. Johnson it will be like, ‘Oh, okay, you're singing this wrong, here's a way that you can do it better, to do it right” (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

Teachers Modeling Mistakes and Vulnerability

Student participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS also identified the importance of

viewing their choral teachers modeling mistakes and vulnerability in the classroom. "A lot of teachers are like, 'How dare you make a mistake?'" a GLHS student shared. "But Mr. Dempsey will say 'I'm no perfect human' and it's nice being given that same leeway" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). Another student at GLHS suggested that witnessing Bryan fully acknowledge his mistakes was personally empowering: "I think that Mr. Dempsey creates a space where it's okay to make a mistake by making his own mistakes and not trying to brush it off like he doesn't make mistakes…It show us that mistakes are okay" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). Similarly, a student at WFHS noted that an awareness of Helen's humanity and imperfection impacted his own approach to making mistakes. "Ms. Curtis, she ain't perfect, but she makes mistakes a part of life, a part of our lives," he declared. "So even if you make a single mistake, that doesn't change who you are" (WFHS Student Focus Group). And at MRHS, multiple students conveyed that Stephanie often followed-up her own mistakes with humor—"she laughs it off and makes funny jokes"—prompting them to approach mistakes with a sense of humor as well (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

For their part, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie were also adamant about their willingness to be vulnerable and make—and acknowledge—their own mistakes in the choral classroom. Bryan explained that he often attempts to model "the good things that happen from taking a risk," whether addressing imperfections in his vocal modeling, conducting gesture, or part-playing on the piano, each of which I observed during observations at GLHS (Bryan, Interview 2). Similarly, when observing classes at MRHS, I noticed that Stephanie was upfront with students about her own capacity to make mistakes when teaching music on the piano. In a subsequent interview, she said that she believed her willingness to confront her own mistakes in the presence

of students in turn reduced pressure on them: “I will say, ‘Okay, we're going to try this. I'm going to play a lot of wrong notes, so you can sing a lot of wrong notes’” (Stephanie, Interview 2).

Both Stephanie and Helen also talked about their willingness to be vulnerable with students when talking about the emotional components related to repertoire and text. “They need to see me as a person and I need to see them as a person, so that we can both talk about text,” Stephanie explained (Stephanie, Interview 2). As an example, Stephanie shared that she still remembered rehearsing the piece *Loch Lomond* with her students, and when the choir sang the lyric, ‘But me and my true love will never meet again,’ she was overcome with grief in front of her students when thinking about the recent loss of her mother. Stephanie recognized that instances like this, though difficult, offer poignant moments where she can display to her students that being affected emotionally by music and/or text is not only possible, but important to embrace:

> We have talked about there are some songs, that when you need a good cry, you know you can listen to this song because it'll help you. And how beautiful that that is. That's not a bad thing, that's a beautiful thing. That you care so much and so deeply that you are moved to tears. That's a beautiful thing. (Stephanie, Interview 2)

Helen also believed that it is ‘not a bad thing’ to express emotional vulnerability with students. Helen told me that if her students see her articulating emotion when discussing a song’s theme, they may feel increasingly comfortable sharing their own emotions as well: “I bear my emotions for them. I don't think it's a bad thing…then they turn right around and tell me everything…and I feel honored that they want to share that with me” (Helen, Interview 2). Like Helen, Stephanie considered being emotionally vulnerable with students as a powerful conduit when forming relationships: “I think it only builds trust and allows them more safety in my classroom” (Stephanie, Interview 2).

Student and teacher participants acknowledged that embracing vulnerability and making mistakes had become an important part of the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral music learning environments. Teacher and student efforts to create mistake-affirming mindsets and environments—and teacher participants' willingness to model their own vulnerability and mistakes—were viewed as influential toward shaping students' willingness to do the same. Again emphasizing this sentiment, Bryan reflected:

> I say that 'I'm proud you tried and that you felt safe enough, knowing that it might not work well, to try. And shocker, it didn't work. But, I'm still proud of you because you didn't just sit there quietly or not try to sing the note. You tried. (Bryan, Interview 2)

The Singing Voice

Discussions surrounding vulnerability and making mistakes in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral classrooms often centered on concerns related to the singing voice. During focus groups, student participants from all three research sites expressed deep insecurity when talking about their perceived self-efficacy related to singing alone and with others. Reflecting their students' concerns, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie talked at length about their efforts to use components of care and trust to compassionately guide students through their vocal vulnerabilities. Below, I present findings related to: (a) the individual singing voice/singing alone; and (b) singing with others.

The Individual Singing Voice and Singing Alone

In our second interview, Stephanie stated: "The voice is connected to our hearts and our souls and how we're feeling" (Stephanie, Interview 2). "There's something incredibly vulnerable about admitting that the sound came out of your body and not an external instrument" she added (Stephanie, Interview 2). Echoing Stephanie's reflection above, the complexity—and vulnerability—associated with the embodied nature of singing informed most student participant

reflections regarding self-efficacy related to singing. Multiple student participants directly associated their conceptualizations of ‘fear,’ ‘nervousness’, and ‘anxiety’ with use of their voice when singing alone and amongst peers in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral programs. Reinforcing this point, one student participant at GLHS shared the following:

> If you're playing an instrument, it's an instrument. It's not really a part of you. If the instrument's broken…it's not your fault. But if you can't hit a note [when singing], you internalize this feeling of, ‘Oh, *I'm* not good enough, it's *my* fault.’ So that's something that I feel like a lot of us struggle with. Just the concept of this [the human singing voice] is a part of *me*. [emphasis from student participant] (GLHS Student Focus Group 2)

A student at MRHS similarly shared that “singing can be a very vulnerable, emotional thing,” while additional students noted that the personal nature of the singing voice makes singing “much more vulnerable” (MRHS Student Focus Group 2), “leaves a lot a room for feeling really self-conscious or afraid” (GLHS Student Focus Group 2), and that successes and failures when singing often “determine a lot of my self-worth” (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

Students at both WFHS and GLHS talked about the heightened sense of fear they experience in choir if they feel like their individual voice is “exposed,” such as when they are one of a few students in a vocal section (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). Further, though only addressed at one research site, an MRHS student named Ren shared concerns about their vocal dysphoria related to their experience as a transgender individual. Ren explained that their vocal dysphoria was challenging enough when only related to their speaking voice (“I don’t like how high my voice is”), but exponentially more challenging when navigating their singing voice in a choral context. That said, Ren acknowledged that Stephanie had been a very supportive and understanding ally in helping them navigate their vocal dysphoria in choir: “Ms. Johnson wont…actively make a big deal of it but she does tell me that my voice is pretty” (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

In our second interview, Bryan said that he often tried to counteract some of the insecurities and negative self-efficacy his students internalize regarding their singing voices by telling them that "your notes are something we want to hear" (Bryan, Interview 2). This affirmation seemed to not only guide Bryan's practice at GLHS, but reflected elements of Helen's and Stephanie's approaches to vocal instruction as well. For example, Stephanie spoke about her efforts to identify specific students who seem nervous or appear to be struggling to sing comfortably in class. She explained that she intentionally offers these students affirmations such as, "You seem like you're being shy about your voice. You don't have anything to be shy about" or "Wow, you sound great today. Get it!" (Stephanie, Interview 2). Similarly, during each of my observations at WFHS, at some point during rehearsal, Helen would get up from the piano and move throughout her students on the choral risers, providing verbal support like, "Get it!" and "Yes!" and "You got this this!" as well as quieter comments shared as she leaned in closely to speak quietly into students' ears (WFHS Observation 2). Though I was not always able to hear what Helen shared with students in these moments, she later told me she is often providing students personalized vocal feedback and encouragement: "I might say stuff like, 'I've heard you sing that note. You can sing it. I know you can hit that note'" (Helen, Interview 2).

During my fourth observation at GLHS, I witnessed Bryan facilitate a conversation with students in which he acknowledged collective concern in his Alto section regarding the vocal range in a piece of repertoire. After becoming aware of the Altos' concern, Bryan stepped out from the piano, approached the Alto section, and provided the following supportive guidance: "It's right on the edge of most of your ranges…so it doesn't have to be strong, it can be nice and soft. So that means if it's a little high for you, that's totally fine. You're sounding great, Altos" (GLHS Observation 4). In this instance, Bryan's response provided support and constructive

vocal feedback to his students. Similarly, within her instruction at MRHS, Stephanie told me that she also tended to intersperse encouragement related to students' vocal efforts during warm-ups or when they were gathered around the piano rehearsing repertoire. She explained that she tries to remind—and in some cases console—her students that on any given day, their vocal instrument may be impacted by a host of factors related to their bodies or their lives outside of class:

> I say to them, 'What you do is really special. Your instrument is actually you. It's so intimate because your instrument is affected by every emotion you have. It's affected by what you ate for breakfast, how well you slept last night. It's affected by how your parents talked to you in the morning before you got out of the car. It's affected by everything… your voice is a reflection of what's going on with you right now in this moment. (Stephanie, Interview 1)

One of Helen's students provided a reflection that emphasized the impact of Helen's encouragement on their perception of self when taking vocal risks in the WFHS choir. The student acknowledged that Helen's support significantly impacted their own motivation, capacity to channel nerves, and belief in themselves when singing in the classroom:

> What Ms. Curtis wants is, if you want to sing, you shouldn't be afraid of it. What she wants is for you to feel that it's OK to sing. It may seem scary, it may be nerve-wracking and everything, but what she doesn't want you to be is scared. She wants you to be able to sing your heart out. So then other people can understand that you're not up there just because you were told to, but because you wanted to be up there and that you felt that your voice could be heard if you just let it be. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

As the WFHS student quote above suggests, a combination of encouragement, empowerment, and acknowledgement that the singing voice is tied to a students' self-efficacy and personhood is impactful when teaching choral music to adolescents in high school choral environments. Regardless of their specific approach, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each found ways to acknowledge the uniquely personal facets of their students' approach to singing and their

individual voice. Teacher participants' relational approaches, in turn, supported many of the vocal vulnerabilities their students faced when singing alone in the choral classroom.

Singing With Others

In addition to vulnerabilities related to singing alone, teacher and student participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS also talked about vulnerabilities related to singing with others. "It really depends on who you're around that will determine how nervous or what happens when you mess up or what goes on in your brain as you're singing," an MRHS student explained (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). A GLHS student mentioned that the small size of certain vocal sections means they are "very aware of who's doing something differently than you" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). Relatedly, students at both MRHS and GLHS brought up insecurities related to singing near a classmate they perceived as a "stronger singer" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2) or "more talented," especially early in the year when they were interpersonally unfamiliar with their section mates (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

Related to that concern, student participants at all three research sites acknowledged that the more comfortable, relationally, they feel around peers in their vocal section and throughout the choir, the more comfortable they feel navigating their singing voices within the choral ensemble. For instance, student participants spoke about the impact that social relations have on aspects like choral blend and comfort when approaching high or low notes in their individual vocal range. "It's very important for us to form connections with each other," a student at MRHS shared, before being quickly supported by another peer who suggested: "I think when a choir fits together really well as people, we sing really well together. When we're given the chance to form connections with each other, we connect better as singers" (MRHS Student Focus Group 1). Similarly, a student at GLHS attributed social bonds, and the power behind shared experience in

the GLHS choir, as indicative of her comfort singing with others: “There’s safety in community…I can look over my shoulder and see that somebody’s having the same problems as me” (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). One of Helen’s students shared a similar perspective:

> I mean, I really feel like we're just all comfortable with each other because we all just go through the same thing. We're all nervous to do concerts and we're all pushing ourselves to get the wind through our esophagus and to sing. So I mean that's why it feels like home or we feel safe because we all just do the same thing. You know what I mean? We just kind of come to each other because we just went through it all. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

This statement from a WFHS student aligned with a story shared by Helen about an incident before the start of this study when a male student’s voice cracked as he was trying out for a solo in class, prompting him to run out of the classroom due to embarrassment. Helen explained that she encouraged the student to return to the classroom, and after he did, it was peer support that gave the student the courage to attempt the solo again:

> When he came back in, everybody in the class was like, ‘Man, you sounded really good. It was just one crack. Everybody's voice cracks. It sounded really, really good.’ And then he did it again, maybe on a different day. But he tried it again. (Helen, Interview 2)

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie also pointed to the importance of peer support and trust when guiding their students through facets of ensemble singing. Again demonstrating the interrelated nature of relational work and choral singing, both Bryan and Stephanie believed that opportunities for collective relationship- and community-building (discussed earlier when addressing relational trust between students), directly enhanced students’ voice-related self-efficacy and willingness to be vulnerable with peers within the choral ensemble. Bryan believed that all group bonding activities functioned as “small moments that build on each other” and influenced group choral music-making in the classroom (Bryan, Interview 2). Stephanie similarly shared that social activities are often important precursors to musical activities for her students. Ultimately, she asserted that helping her students form relationships as people would

impact their capacity to sing together as choristers: “I think they're more vulnerable for me as singers if they're vulnerable for me as people” (Stephanie, Interview 1).

For Helen, she believed that her propensity to move throughout the classroom energized her students and led to a collective sense of validation and support. “They get encouragement from me and from each other,” Helen explained. “We all realize it’s not going to do anybody good to say ‘Hey, you sounded bad.’ We don’t do that…it just means you need support right now” (Helen, Interview 2). This mirrored Stephanie’s approach to fostering an environment of support and encouragement through informal group singing and activities at the beginning of the school year (such as the ‘low-risk singing’ activities described above, i.e. Music Fest, singing the *Cup Song*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, folk songs, and rounds). Stephanie believed that opportunities for students to “experiment and practice performing in front of each other” not only elicited joy, but develop shared vulnerability amongst the ensemble, an aura that Helen similarly described as ‘vibing.’ “You can see it on their faces when they're singing and it sounds good—when we're all vibing,” Helen noted. “It's a beautiful thing. I think they all feel that” (Helen, Interview 2). As I viewed during observations, both Helen and Stephanie displayed this active and vocally supportive approach when moving amongst their students during instruction. Similarly, Bryan was quick to move from the piano to support his Alto section or join the Baritone section to provide support through vocal modeling.

Bryan, Helen, Stephanie and their students believed that the multifaceted vulnerabilities associated with the singing voice impacted the experience of choral music teaching and learning in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS classrooms. Student and teacher participants recognized that the nature of the human voice—as being intertwined with social, emotional, psychological, and physical aspects of the body—fosters a unique host of vulnerabilities in the choral classroom.

Findings emphasized that vulnerabilities existed not only related to the individual singing voice but when students sing with others—and that Bryan, Helen and Stephanie attempt to address issues related to both elements in their classrooms.

Rehearsing Choral Repertoire

Though vulnerabilities related to the singing voice and making mistakes were discussed most prominently throughout interviews and focus groups by teacher and student participants, participants also talked about vulnerabilities that arose when learning new pieces of music for the first time. Below, I present findings related to how issues of vulnerability impacted the process of learning music and the process of selecting repertoire at each of the three research sites.

Learning Music

When it came to discussing vulnerabilities related to learning music, student participant perspectives across research sites were varied. One GLHS student participant expressed that he often felt nervous when learning a piece of music for the first time because he is "pretty bad at finding [his] note out of nowhere and keeping it" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). One of his GLHS classmates shared that they "struggle a lot with…my ability to hit a correct pitch…it's especially hard on the first note…and it makes me really self-conscious (GLHS Student Focus Group 2). During observations, I observed all three teacher participants compassionately guide their students through the music-learning process. For example, while at GLHS, I noticed that Bryan facilitated music-learning portions of the rehearsal through a variety of pedagogical approaches that included positive reinforcement. Such approaches typically involved a combination of playing students' individual vocal line on the piano as they listened, playing along with students as they sang, vocal modeling, or singing along with students. At WFHS, Helen explained that she attempted to support her students' cognitive and musical needs by

displaying repertoire in the form of videos on a projector screen at the front of the classroom—often shifting from visual examples that displayed repertoire in notation, stanzas of text, or a mix of both. Helen explained that this approach was her attempt to make the music-learning process supportive and conducive to her students' musical and academic needs. She also recognized that this approach was particularly important since many of her students are "five years below reading level [and] they're not going to be able to keep up with a 16-page document…so the projection is a time saver…and everybody's always on the same page and they learn much quicker that way" (Helen, Interview 3). Further, Helen felt that displaying repertoire in this way kept her students motivated and reduced the chance that they might get frustrated and stop singing all together.

At MRHS, during my third observation, I witnessed Stephanie guide her students through the music-learning process in a way that was emblematic of kindness. She beckoned students to gather in a circle around the piano and, like Bryan, she scaffolded the learning process and provided advanced-organizers: "We will go through the piece first to give an overview and then will come back to look at parts," she shared (MRHS Observation 3). As the rehearsal continued, Stephanie consistently checked-in with students, posing questions like "How are you all feeling so far?" and asking students to give a thumbs up/down/in the middle to convey how they were feeling about their comprehension (MRHS Observation 3). Every question and directive seemed to be interlaced with facets of care and compassion.

Reflective of a mistake-positive mindset at all three research sites, at least once—and often multiple times—during observations at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS, I heard Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie encourage their students to make mistakes and sing incorrect notes when learning new sections of repertoire. For example, at GLHS, I noted that Bryan's rehearsal process was

immensely mistake-positive and was infused with deep levels of patience and encouragement. In an interview, Bryan explained that what I observed reflected his attempts to instill the mindset of "it's not going to be perfect" while continuously reminding students that he is "very proud of them that they're willing to try" (Bryan, Interview 2). Further, as the school year progresses, Bryan explained that he is intentional about identifying points of student growth related to learning repertoire: "I've told them many times [after a mistake later in the school year]… 'At the beginning of the year you would've stopped. You would have said 'I don't know this. I'm going to stop'" (Bryan, Interview 2). GLHS students explained that despite their insecurities when learning music, because of the environment Bryan has created surrounding mistakes, they felt empowered/comfortable asking Bryan for additional support during the music-learning process. One student noted that he did not feel this same sense of comfort asking for help in classes like math or science: "Here [GLHS choir], if I don't know something, I'm almost always going to ask 'How does this work? Can you play it on the piano?'" (GLHS Student Focus Group 2).

For the most part, MRHS student participants only brought up concerns related to learning music when referencing experiences in community choirs outside of Stephanie's classroom at MRHS. In the community choir experiences, MRHS student participants shared that their community choir director had an "attitude toward messing up as a really big thing" and students were "made to feel bad" if they sang incorrect pitches (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). One student brought up their community choir experience only to describe it as the antithesis to how they felt in Stephanie's classroom. In fact, many MRHS students shared that Stephanie encouraged them to sing loud and confidently when learning music so that Stephanie could hear/identify errors and subsequently make adjustments: "Ms. Johnson is like, 'Sing wrong

notes, please, so we can fix them,'" one student shared, noting that this has helped him to consciously not be as timid or quiet when first approaching unfamiliar repertoire in class (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). Other MRHS students similarly expressed feeling supported in music-learning endeavors while in Stephanie's classroom. "Ms. Johnson has created an environment where we can feel free to ask questions," one MRHS student shared. "Like, we can say 'Can you repeat this part?' or 'Can you sing this part for us?' and it just makes it easier to learn the piece when we're actually allowed to make mistakes and ask questions" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). When asked to describe the foundations to her approach to teaching repertoire in a calm, supportive, and mistake-positive manner, Stephanie said that her approach is in many ways a direct response to experiences with choir directors in her own past that often made choral music-learning a process filled with "tension and fear" (Stephanie, Interview 2).

At WFHS, Helen was also intentional about verbally supporting her students as they learned music during class. Based on my observations, this approach seemed to often involve Helen physically moving throughout vocal sections in the ensemble, cheerfully placing her hand on students' backs when providing a corrective statement, or singing the correct pitch in their ear. "I usually do that because that's the group that's low in numbers. I'll sing with the section that I can't hear. That means you need support," Helen explained. "Doesn't mean you suck as an individual, it means you need support right now. And they'll even ask me, 'Come sing with us 'cause we need help'" (Helen, Interview 2). This point of data reflects Helen's students' awareness that Helen's support of them during the learning process is based in a dual sense of empowerment and compassion.

Selecting Music

All three teacher participants also asserted that conveying care and sustaining trust with students involved choosing choral repertoire that reflected aspects of students' learning needs, identities, and life experiences. "I try and pick music that [students] can connect with," Stephanie said. "That is a big part of what I think is building relationships with kids" (Stephanie, Interview 2). For example, at MRHS, Stephanie was particularly intentional about selecting repertoire that reflected her students' diverse religious beliefs: "During our concerts we try to represent the faiths that are in our district as well as the appropriate weight of the holiday" (Stephanie, Interview 2). According to Stephanie, this meant acknowledging the large subsets of Jewish and Christian students in her classroom by including sacred and secular choral repertoire stemming from Judaism and Christianity. Additionally, she explained she was also intentional about holding conversations in class about the religious, cultural, and musical contexts of both faith traditions when rehearsing religious repertoire. Stephanie also spoke about her efforts to program African American Spirituals and pieces like *Lift Every Voice and Sing* to reflect the cultural and musical legacies of her Black and African American students. As discussed earlier in this chapter's section on relational trust, Stephanie attempted to develop trust with her Black and African American students through both the selection (and in at least one case, the removal) of repertoire based on racial implications.

Like Stephanie, Helen sought to program repertoire that reflected her student body. Helen believed that because "we're predominantly Black…we have to sing the songs of our culture…we have to sing the songs of our heritage" (Helen, Interview 2). Helen was also clear that she sought to select repertoire that resonated with her students' life experiences: "I try to only give them songs that they can engage in," she explained. "Everything has a meaning.

Everything has a purpose… Everything they sing has relevance to their life" (Helen, Interview 1). During data collection for this study, Helen told me that she felt the repertoire she and her students were currently rehearsing particularly resonated with their life experiences. These song selections included music reflective of Black culture (such as *Yes, My Lord* and *People Get Ready*) and music rooted in themes of activism, civic pride, and gentrification (such as *Returning to Woodland, Stay*, and *What About Me?*) One of Helen's students expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to perform songs that reflected aspects of her life experience: "If we would just do songs that are already made for choirs, I feel like that would be boring," they expressed. "[*Stay* and *Returning to Woodland*] feel like *our* voices" [emphasis from student participant] (WFHS Student Focus Group). As mentioned in this student reflection, Helen not only centered repertoire that reflected her students' racial and cultural backgrounds, but was intentional about including students in the co-arranging and co-composition processes as well. Helen also explained that when teaching repertoire, she engages her students in critical conversations about themes in each song—such as gentrification, standing up for one's rights, and demanding change.

Mirroring components of Helen's and Stephanie's repertoire selection processes, Bryan also recognized that repertoire selection was a way to let his students know that he sees and celebrates who they are. For example, Bryan mentioned that he is conscious about selecting music by female-identifying, queer-identifying, and Black-identifying composers/arrangers. He told me he made this commitment because he hopes that centering these musical voices in his classroom validates his students' identities: "Choosing repertoire like that is important because it's not just me affirming who they are, it's showing them that here is someone who is like you that also made music that we are now singing," he explained (Bryan, Interview 3). Bryan also

shared that when rehearsing songs about love, he is intentional not to reinforce heteronormative paradigms. Instead, he said that he talks with his students about love in choral texts in a manner that recognizes all forms and expressions of love. Further, as Bryan elaborated upon during his interviews, the GLHS end of year concert entitled ‘Home,’ was entirely structured on music that celebrated notions of embracing one’s full self and valuing community—a mission he hoped reflected the sense of home and community his students felt in the GLHS choir (the theme of this end-of-year concert at Bryan’s school is discussed more in the context of student belonging outlined in Theme IV of this chapter). Speaking about one of those end-of-year repertoire selections, *Be Who You Are*, one of Bryan’s students shared: “I think a lot of it is the power behind when we come together and sing what [*Be Who You Are*] represents” (GLHS Student Focus Group 1). And, a different GLHS student acknowledged the palpable influence of singing a song like *Be Who You Are* with a positive and empowering message, stating: “If you're singing a song about feeling better, I think it's bound to at some point to affect you in your root a little bit” (GLHS Student Focus Group 1).

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie noted that aspects related to selecting and learning repertoire were informed and enhanced by aspects of their relational pedagogy. All three teacher participants displayed and talked about ways that they guide their students through music-learning processes that reflect the needs of students and their teaching contexts—whether in carefully scaffolded and compassionate learning moments, rehearsals surrounding the piano, or through specially projected slideshows designed to support student motivation and learning needs. Further, each teacher participant acknowledged their commitment to supporting students through the selection of repertoire that reflected, affirmed, and celebrated student identities and life experiences.

Supporting Vulnerability: A Summary

Student participants in this study broadly expressed experiencing vulnerability in the choral classroom when feeling concerned about making mistakes, using their singing voices alone and with others, and when learning choral repertoire. Similarly, teacher participants largely recognized these areas of vulnerability as particular points of concern for their students. Thus, teacher participants suggested that much of their relational practice was devoted to guiding students through these specifically vulnerable learning moments in the choral classroom. As part of continued efforts to support students in choral music ventures, teacher participants also described the importance of choosing choral repertoire that reflected aspects of students' identities and life experiences.

Theme IV: Sense of Belonging

Findings from this study suggested that the choral communities at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS fostered a sense of belonging amongst students due in large part to the building blocks of care, trust, and support of vulnerability. Thus, in this section, I present findings from participants that reflect elements of individual and collective experiences of belonging in the high school choral classroom. In particular, the student participant reflections related to belonging in this section are intricately tied to their caring and trust-based relational foundations with peers in the choir classroom. Findings are organized based on the following subthemes that emerged from data: (a) belonging in the choral family (sense of family based in comfort/safety/validation, belonging in shared experiences and memories, the teacher's role in cultivating belonging); (b) belonging in student agency and collaboration; and (c) belonging in shared legacy (traditions at MRHS, civic pride and activism at WFHS, and creating a 'Home' at GLHS).

Belonging in the Choral Family

Teacher and student participants spoke at length about notions of belonging when describing their relational experiences in the choral programs at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. Below, I organize participant reflections related to a sense of belonging in their school's respective choral family in the following sections: (a) belonging in safety, comfort, and validation; (b) belonging in shared experiences and memories; and (c) the teacher's role in cultivating belonging.

Sense of Family Based in Comfort, Safety, and Validation

Student and teacher participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS articulated dimensions of belonging when identifying their choral communities as spaces where students felt known, safe, supported, and empowered at school. Student participants at each research site described their school choral community using the term "family" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1; MRHS Student Focus Group 1; WFHS Student Focus Group). Student participants spoke about the notion of 'family' by evoking concepts and terms that included (a) *"safe," "safety,"* and *"safe space"* (GLHS Student Focus Group 1; MRHS Student Focus Group 1; WFHS Student Focus Group); (b) "supportive" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1; MRHS Student Focus Group 1; WFHS Student Focus Group); (c) *"comfort," and "comfortable"* (GLHS Student Focus Group 1;WFHS Student Focus Group); and (d) *lack of "judgement"* (GLHS Student Focus Group 1;WFHS Student Focus Group).

One of Helen's students touched on aspects of belonging when linking notions of family and safety to the WFHS choral program, describing the WFHS choir room as "a safe place because people can be their selves when they're here and they don't have to be changed for anybody. Here, nobody judges each other. We can all be who we want" (WFHS Student Focus

Group). A different student of Helen's echoed their peer, stating: "I think that this feels like a family because we all believe in each other" (WFHS Student Focus Group). Similarly, one of Stephanie's students described their MRHS choral ensemble as "a family that enjoys singing together (MRHS Student Focus Group 1), while a student from GLHS noted that the sense of camaraderie in their choral "family" makes the space "different than anywhere else in school" (GLHS Student Focus Group 1). The sense that elements of family, support, and belonging set the choir room apart from other spaces in school was also expressed by this student participant in Helen's choir:

> When I come in here there's just good energy. Though sometimes you may have a bad day outside of choir, [but] when you come in here all you feel is that good sense. And everybody's nice to each other. We may have our laughs and jokes but it's all lovable and we're all caring for each other. I think that we believe in each other. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

As displayed above, student participants at each research site experienced a sense of belonging in their school choral program through feelings of 'safety' and validation with a group of choral peers and choral teacher. In many instances, this emerging sense of collective safety and empowerment was characterized as being similar to that of a supportive family.

Belonging in Shared Experiences and Memories

Building upon notions of validation, support, and family, student participants in Stephanie's and Helen's programs referenced dimensions of belonging when talking about the potent meaning behind sharing a set of experiences and memories with their choir classmates. Students at both MRHS and WFHS noted that unique forms of collective identity evolved during shared experiences, ranging from recalling memories associated with certain pieces of repertoire, performances, or funny moments in the classroom. Speaking about the impact of sharing a collection of memories with choir peers, one WFHS student reflected:

> They [shared memories] make me feel like I'm more connected to others. You can have a conversation with each other in the future and be like, 'Remember this?' and it's like, 'Yeah,' and then it's an evermore growing friendship and communication with each other. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

Similarly, students at MRHS explained that "there's certain memories that you share…so then you form these little inside jokes and you can always look back and be like, 'Oh remember when this happened?'" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). At WFHS, students identified performance opportunities, creating songs together in class, and forging a collective identity as musical activists as components contributing to their sense of belonging in the WFHS choir. At GLHS, Bryan's students bonded over memories of running outside to "scream at the sky" during stressful class periods (GLHS Student Focus Group 2), enacting student-led pre-concert rituals, and coming together to support each other after a nearby school shooting (GLHS Student Focus Group 1). Stephanie's students at MRHS noted that their reservoir of shared experiences was particularly extensive, given that many of them shared bonds and memories stemming back to middle school:

> I know the people here [MRHS choir] more than I would know other people because this class is very collaborative. You have to work together with other people and so you get to know them better than a class where you would do most of the work yourself. In here you have to reach out to other people and have them help you. So, we connect. (MRHS Student Focus Group 2)

The Teacher's Role in Cultivating Belonging

Though a sense of belonging within the choral family certainly evolved through the instances of peer interactions described above, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie shared that they did their best to mindfully create an environment where a sense of belongingness in their classroom grew. Helen expressed that "there's just this spirit, this vibe, that everything is okay in choir," before adding that, "I really do foster that" (Helen, Interview 3). Helen explained that she strives to foster that "spirit" and "vibe' by creating a learning space in the school where students feel

listened to and valued. Helen specifically pointed to her daily affirmations ritual when identifying aspects of her approach that may contribute to her students' sense of belongingness. One of Helen's students shared that hearing affirmations in Helen's class accentuated the special, empowering, and communal nature of the WFHS choir room: "Ms. Curtis really makes this feel like a safe place because when we do affirmations, she constantly tells us how great we are. And other people think it too. And it just makes it feel even more safe," the student explained (WFHS Student Focus Group).

Bryan also spoke at length about the ways he attempted to help students foster a sense of belonging: "I try to help [students] through, and make, those connections," he explained (Bryan, Interview 1). I witnessed one of these facilitated moments of connection during an observation at GLHS, when at the start of class, just before the vocal warm-up, Bryan announced: "Turn to the person next to you and tell them something you like about them." He then asked students to "Turn to the other person next to you and say, 'Hey, I'm glad you're here.'" Bryan also acknowledged that a sense of belonging amongst GLHS students tended to form over time, pointing to the importance of (a) community/relationship-building activities at the beginning of the year; (b) his Passion Presentations (where students create an entire project based on a topic they love); and (c) facilitating the Circle of Affirmations (where students sit in a circle and specifically acknowledge peers based on prompts like 'Tap someone who is a leader' or 'Tap someone who is important to you' or 'Tap a new friend you made in choir this year') (Bryan, Interview 1).

Stephanie attributed multiple reasons for the development of community and a sense of belonging in the choral program at MRHS. Specifically, she identified her broader attempts to create a holistic learning environment that encapsulated the worth of all students: "They are

valued by their classmates, they're valued by their teacher," she shared. "But even more so, they're cheered on for the things that they like. They're cheered on for the things that they are" (Stephanie, Interview 1). Stephanie also emphasized the importance of starting relational work with her students when teaching them in middle school. For example, she told me that she facilitates an annual activity with her middle school students wherein students are presented with specific choir-related scenarios and asked to consider how they might respond. Examples of scenarios Stephanie provided during this activity included: 'Someone sitting right next to you is singing all the wrong notes—what do you do?' or 'What is something you can say/do to make someone in choir feel good today?' She felt that, especially in activities like the one identified above, students might learn relational and interpersonal pillars that will ground their experience in the Maplebrook choirs for (potentially) the next seven years. Also, like Bryan, Stephanie attributed an evolving sense of belonging amongst her students to beginning of the year relationship-building and community-building activities like Circle Time and Music Fests (both of which were discussed in further detail earlier in this chapter).

Belonging in Student Agency and Collaboration

Within the choral communities at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS, a sense of belonging was also cultivated through the development of student agency and collaboration in the choral community. Helen believed that students "want to tell you how they feel" and that it is crucial to "give them a voice" in both solo and group activities (Helen, Interview 2). Stephanie similarly emphasized the importance of centering student perspectives in the choral community at MRHS. "I think giving the students a choice and a voice is important," she shared. "We're a team…it's their choir" (Stephanie, Interview 1).

Data suggested that Helen is especially consistent and intentional in her efforts to empower the agentic and collective voices of her students as part of their shared identity within the WFHS choral classroom. For example, Helen spoke at length about her efforts to fully reflect WFHS students in all aspects of repertoire selection and performances. Throughout data collection, WFHS student participants affirmed the special sense of community emergent in the process of discussing, co-creating, and performing repertoire like *Yes, My Lord, Stay*, *Returning to Woodland*, and *What About Me?* Further, Helen felt it was important to give her students the opportunity to gather together and collectively communicate musical and social messages that "are specific about their lives" and speak to their perspectives regarding "what needs to change" and "how they feel" (Helen, Interview 2). Students at WFHS explained that songs like those listed above "feel like our voices," with one WFHS student specifically describing the special meaning behind having a voice when creating and arranging music with peers in choir: "It's more personal when we get our input into it—its us" (WFHS Student Focus Group).

Similar to certain aspects of Helen's practice, Stephanie explained that fostering leadership, agency, and collaboration as part of wider efforts to create a sense of community and belonging at MRHS meant ensuring that students felt that they were full members of the MRHS choral team. Interview and observation data suggested that in the MRHS choir community, such approaches involved the inclusion of student section leaders who facilitated sectionals, asking students to provide formative assessment and feedback throughout the rehearsal process, finding ways to incorporate students' personal strengths during instruction, and involving students in small- and large-scale decision-making throughout the year (related to repertoire, the number of songs performed at a concert, and what types of uniforms would be worn by students). One MRHS student stated that they appreciated having opportunities to contribute to the overall

scope of the choral program, sharing that the environment of their ensemble "feels like more of a team effort and less of a director-choir thing" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2). Relatedly, an MRHS student spoke about the sense of responsibility that she and many of her fellow peers feel as members of a choir where they have leadership opportunities: "Ms. Johnson definitely establishes the judgment free zone and controls some of the controllable aspects…but I think that the overall tone of the classroom is ultimately kind of up to us [students]" (MRHS Student Focus Group 2).

At GLHS, themes of belonging related to student agency and collaboration were evident in Bryan's end of year concert, 'Home,' as well as in student participant reflections on pre-concert rituals. For example, in preparation for the GLHS end-of-year concert, Bryan sought to provide a sense of agency to three international exchange students. He hoped to validate and empower these three international exchange students by providing them with leadership opportunities wherein they taught their other GLHS choral peers the language for a piece of repertoire from their home country. In addition to this example, GLHS student focus group participants also spoke about certain pre-concert rituals in ways that reflected notions of belonging. For example, student participants acknowledged that pre-concert, peer-led part reviews huddled around the piano, peer-led vocal circles in the middle of the choir room, and even peer-led singing parties in GLHS restrooms represented special pre-concert traditions that were emblematic of what it meant to be a part of the GLHS choir family.

Belonging in Shared Legacy

The final dimension of belonging that emerged from this study's findings was the importance of legacy in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral programs. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus defines 'legacy' as "something that is

a part of your history or that remains from an earlier time" and "something that is a result of events in the past" (Cambridge University Press, 2023). During our final interview, Stephanie used the term 'legacy' when describing how various moments in and out of class over multiple years contributed to what the MRHS choral program often represents for her and her students. When I asked Stephanie to define what 'legacy' meant to her, she said that ultimately legacy means to be "part of something bigger than you," adding that the notion of legacy in terms of the MRHS choral program ultimately encompassed the greater themes behind these questions: (a) "What does it 'mean' to be a part of this program?; (b) How does this last forever?; and (c) How are [students] making an imprint that's going to leave a mark?" (Stephanie, Interview 3).

Below, I discuss how a sense of legacy manifested in different ways within the choral communities at each of the research sites examined throughout this study. Specifically, I contextualize legacy in the forms of (a) traditions at MRHS; (b) civic pride and activism at WFHS; and (c) creating a 'home' at GLHS.

Traditions at MRHS

For Stephanie, a greater sense of shared identity and belonging manifested through the shared legacy of being "part of something bigger than you" (Stephanie, Interview 3). As noted earlier in this chapter, Stephanie believed that relationships were "the most important" facet of her teaching practice as well as the MRHS choral legacy. That said, in addition to the importance of multi-year relationships, Stephanie believed that legacy in the MRHS choral program is also tied to traditions. Traditions at MRHS included singing the MRHS Alma Mater at the end of every concert and inviting alumni to join current ensembles on stage, having every middle school student sing the song *Rattling Bog* (a memory identified by student participants in the MRHS

focus group), embarking on international choir trips, facilitating the annual Ugly Sweater Holiday Music Tour to Maplebrook elementary schools, calling recently graduated choir seniors to sing *Happy Birthday*, and hosting the annual MRHS Choir Banquet where every year students perform the song *Maybe Someday.* Stephanie felt that each of these events contribute to a greater notion of legacy for her and her students, which based on her meaning-making, reflects dimensions of belonging: “We all want to matter. I think we all want to have been looked at as someone good and significant,” Stephanie expressed before adding: “So when we have those traditions, when we all know the same song, when we've all been together in a foreign country and we've experienced the same thing, those things, I think, fundamentally change us” (Stephanie, Interview 3).

Civic Pride and Activism at WFHS

Though she did not explicitly use the term ‘legacy,’ my observations at WFHS and interviews with Helen suggested that the notions of legacy, community, and belonging were very much intertwined in the choral program at WFHS—especially within the dimensions of civic pride and activism Helen so passionately cultivated amongst her students. This premise was reinforced by Helen’s reflections on the greater mission of the WFHS choral program: “Choir is all about serving the community. That's it” (Helen, Interview 2). Data suggested that Helen extends the notion of community into the sense of community fostered in her choir classroom as well as the choir’s presence in the broader communities of WFHS and the city of Woodland at large. For example, Helen explained that due to their involvement in the WFHS choral program, her students not only develop closer relationships with peers within the ensemble, but often come to realize “that it means something” when receiving collective praise after performances

throughout the Woodland community: “They feel like rock stars. They feel like success” (Helen, Interview 2).

Helen’s students also confirmed the power of these experiences when identifying the potential impact of their shared choral and activist work together. When speaking about their collective potential to enact change through their musical work together, one WFHS student participant stated:

> Honestly, I think what we communicate is that, if you have a voice you can use it at any time. You just have to not be the only one to use it. Your words can mean a lot. Even if it's something small, it can mean a lot to the entire school and could change how it works. (WFHS Student Focus Group)

More of Helen’s students also expressed feeling that the activist nature of their performance pieces not only informed their collective identity in the classroom, but how they were perceived as a united front in the greater WFHS school community. One student noted that their performance of *What About Me?* at a school assembly (where choir students held handmade protest signs reflecting wider WFHS student body concerns about school conditions and a lack of resources) had a far-reaching impact that potentially initiated a response from school administration: “…After we did that performance a lot of things may change around the school,” the student shared. “We were more connected with the school and with everyone in the class as a whole because we all connect to that experience [of dealing with the conditions and resources of the school]” (WFHS Student Focus Group). Helen also believed that songs with roots in activism and advocacy—especially those that were tied to the local community like *Returning to Woodland* or were co-created by Helen and her students like *What About Us?* and *Stay*—contributed to students’ perspectives of her program as a place that reflects and amplifies their life experiences…and therefore is a place where students feel they matter.

Though Helen spoke about the intersections between her racial identity as an African American individual and most of her students' identities as African American or Black, no student participant explicitly addressed race when discussing their perceptions of safety, family, or sense of belonging in the WFHS choir room during our singular focus group together. That said, as displayed throughout the discussion of this theme, and throughout Chapter 6 of this study, WFHS student participants spoke at length about their acknowledgement of a nuanced sense of validation and support in Helen's classroom. Further, WFHS students emphasized the deep meaning of being a part of a choral learning space that reflected and amplified their perspectives, especially their perspectives as students at WFHS and members in the wider Woodland community.

Creating a 'Home' at GLHS

At GLHS, Bryan and his students seemed to, like Stephanie and her students at MRHS, cultivate a sense of legacy through certain traditions. For example, traditions shared during data collection included GLHS Seniors annually—and tearfully—performing the song *Homeward Bound* at graduation, enjoying certain pre-concert rituals, and even running outside to scream at the sky on days of stress. That said, for Bryan, the "greater meaning" of the GLHS choral program seemed to be the genesis for their final concert entitled 'Home' (Bryan, Interview 3). Throughout my observations at GLHS, I observed Bryan and his students preparing for this concert which included a variety of pieces with messages of inspiration and affirmation (such as *Be Who You Are*), as well as folk songs from three countries that were home to the three international-exchange students acknowledged above. During many of my observations at GLHS, Bryan and his students were working on the piece of repertoire aptly entitled *Home,* which he identified as the concert's "focal point"—and ultimately representative of the sense of

community, family, and sense of belonging he hoped his students experience in the GLHS choir (Bryan, Interview 3):

> [*Home*]…embodies everything that I talk about constantly in our choir classroom, which is that this is a place that should feel like home. And home is something that you make it. I tell [students] 'Your personal home might not be great, and that's okay. If you feel better in this space, hopefully this is what you can use as your definition of home until you get to make your own. (Bryan, Interview 3)

GLHS students also expressed understanding that the thematic messaging of their final concert intersected with what it means to be a part of the GLHS choir—a sense of home and belonging. Speaking to this meaningful intersection, one GLHS student participant shared the following:

> I feel like the theme of all of our songs this semester really drives the point that this does feel home in the sense that I think most, if not everybody here, feels safe, feels heard, and feels loved, and seems to love everybody around them. And I think it just, well, encapsulates what it means to be in choir. At least in this choir. (GLHS Student Focus Group 1)

Sense of Belonging: A Summary

Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students cultivated a sense of belonging through a nuanced trajectory of caring relationships, shared musical experiences, and the development of community. While the specific term 'belonging' or 'belongingness' may not have been used frequently by participants, themes in this section reflect the alignment of this study's data with scholars' discussion of the pillars of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 2007; Maslow, 1958; Parker, 2020). Further, many student participant reflections included in this section were shared in response to the focus group question: "What does it mean to belong in this choral class/program?" Thus, student participants across research sites spoke about aspects of belonging when associating a sense of 'family' with their choral peers and teachers, often specifically evoking notions of safety, comfort, and validation. Belonging was also cultivated through providing students' sustained and varied opportunities to be active agents in their own learning

processes, whether through leadership during the rehearsal process, chances to contribute perspectives during classroom decision-making, or when co-creating repertoire. Belonging was also found to be sustained through each program's legacy and mission—'what it meant' to be a part of choral programs at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. Legacies of belonging emerged through traditions, shared investment in expressing one's perspectives through community pride and activism, and broader mindsets of the high school choral space as a place for acceptance, validation, and empowerment. Finally, student participant reflections emphasized throughout this section point to the potential power of caring and trust-based relationships between choral peers as especially meaningful factors when cultivating a sense of belonging in high school choral programs.

Theme V: Navigating Relational Challenges

The final theme presented in this cross-case analysis focuses on challenges that participants faced when navigating aspects of relationships in their practice. Though each teacher participant's challenges were unique in nature, the emergent theme asserted here is that each participant did, in fact, acknowledge that relational challenges were a part of attempting to initiate and maintain connections with students. Below, I describe Stephanie's, Bryan's, and Helen's discussions surrounding their navigation of relational challenges in the choral classroom.

Stephanie

Stephanie spoke the most about challenges in her relational practice, particularly focusing on challenges related to confronting her racial and economic privilege, committing to critical learning and humility, and establishing relational boundaries and self-care routines. First, Stephanie acknowledged that racial and cultural biases negatively impacted certain relationships

with students and families early in her teaching career. “I had no understanding of my privilege when I taught at [first school in her career], which is a Title I school. No understanding,” Stephanie shared. She added that in her early years as an educator, “music was more important to me than the kids” and that she was only “looking for compliance and rule followers” (Stephanie, Interview 3). That said, Stephanie suggested that a combination of having multi-year relationships with students and committing to continued critical learning/humility—particularly with regard to her identity as a white woman from a privileged background who teaches Black students—have improved her approach to student relationships. She also shared that she has “a work journal and a home journal” within which she processes interpersonal moments with students in an attempt to “reflect…and just try and get better every time” (Stephanie, Interview 1). This devotion to reflection has specifically led Stephanie to increase her commitment to humility and apologizing to students after challenging interpersonal interactions.

Finally, Stephanie explained that her investment in fostering relationships and community at MRHS has led to the merger of personal and professional crises, prompting her to turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism and ultimately taking a brief leave of absence. Since that time, Stephanie explained said that developing self-care practices and establishing relational boundaries with students has enhanced her capacity to take of her own wellbeing—as well as her students’ wellbeing. Stephanie explained that she now limits the amount—and time of day—of communication with students, is enrolled in therapy, and is finding ways to improve her mental health. While Stephanie explained that she is grateful to have earned her students’ trust through open lines of communication, she also acknowledged that maintaining teacher-student relationships also requires her to uphold certain ethical lines. She specifically mentioned the

importance of reporting instances related to student safety to school administration and guidance counselors when students confide in her.

Bryan

Bryan expressed relational challenges related to trust, supporting introverted students, and supporting students amidst the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bryan noted that developing trust with his students at GLHS was initially difficult because his predecessor was beloved by students. He recognized that he was "a new face…asking [students] to sing, which is a little scary…that makes it hard to connect" (Bryan, Interview 3). He also acknowledged that attempting to develop trust with students as a new teacher, and in the wake of his predecessor, resulted in about a third of the GLHS choir population leaving after his first year at the school, an outcome Bryan described as "tough" (Bryan, Interview 3). Bryan shared that his evolving efforts to gain trust with students have involved being himself and slowly bridging instructional routines from his predecessor into his own routines. Bryan also noted that he sometimes struggles to form bonds with introverted students because they may not be as prone to speak with him or share openly during class. That said, given that Bryan is "an introvert by nature," he explained that he still seeks to support introverted students, acknowledging that they may only wish to sing as part of the ensemble and not share personal details during class or community-building activities (which he explained he supports) (Bryan, Interview 3).

Finally, Bryan indicated that school/district scheduling issues during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how he interacts now with students who were freshman or sophomores at the time of this study—though were his middle school students during the height of the pandemic. Mainly, because of district-mandated small class sizes during the pandemic, Bryan felt that he was not able to effectively support students (musically, socially, and emotionally) as he normally

would like to during their middle school years. He believed that some of these students left choir after middle school because they “easily got burnt out” during the pandemic-era, though many have since returned and he is attempting rebuild those relationships now (Bryan, Interview 3).

Helen

During our interviews, Helen did not discuss relational challenges as much as Bryan or Stephanie. That said, the challenges Helen did discuss primarily centered on maintaining rapport with students who she perceived as not interested in choir or aligned with her mission for the WFHS choral program: “Some students will gravitate toward you and others won’t,” she acknowledged (Helen, Interview 3). She also explained that she tends to form stronger relationships with students who participate in extra-curricular choir activities and performances: “It's just different because you've been through more” (Helen, Interview 2).

While Helen indicated that she is “not mad” at students when they are not interested in extra-curricular performance opportunities, she will not support students who are disrespectful toward her, her students, or her choral mission at WFHS (Helen, Interview 3). Further, Helen described being quick to address these dynamics if they arise: “If they [students] don't get it and they've been in here for months, then they're hurting the choir. They're disrupting rehearsals. That I won't tolerate” (Helen, Interview 3). Still, Helen believed that responding in this way to isolated incidents of disruptive students is ultimately her way of advocating for the learning of the remainder of the students in her class:

> Students are so happy that I act on behalf of the choir and put people out who aren’t helping us. I am a hero to students on those days. That says a lot because these kids, they lose a lot of education because of the behavior of other students and that's not fair. I get that. (Helen, Interview 3)

That said, Helen shared that she still believes her direct approach to students has earned her a certain level of respect as an adult in students' lives that cares about them and their future: "I wouldn't reprimand a kid just to show I'm a boss. I wouldn't reprimand a kid just because they're getting on my nerves," she explained. "I would reprimand a kid because I don't want them to grow up to be a jerk," (Helen, Interview 3).

Navigating Relational Challenges: A Summary

Though vastly different, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each shared that interpersonal challenges were realities in their efforts to foster trust and care with students. Stephanie's challenges were described as primarily centered on interpersonal implications related to her confronting her racial and economic privilege; committing to critical learning, reflection, and humility; and establishing relational boundaries and self-care routines. Bryan's challenges were described as primarily related to trust, supporting introverted students, and supporting students amidst the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Helen's challenges were mostly described as being centered on maintaining rapport with students who she perceived as not interested in choir or aligned with her mission for the WFHS choir.

Cross-Case Summary

The purpose of this multiple case study (Yin, 2018) was to understand how human connection was experienced in the high school choral music classroom. Three individual cases were examined: (a) Bryan Dempsey and the Grove Lake High School choral program; (b) Stephanie Johnson and the Meadow River High School choral program; and (c) Helen Curtis and the Woodland Falls High School choral program. Based on data and cross-case analysis, the five emergent themes reflective of teacher and student participants' experiences of connection in the

high school choral classroom were: (a) the importance of care; (b) the importance of trust; (c) supporting vulnerability; (d) sense of belonging; and (e) navigating relational challenges.

Participants described care as a crucial component when fostering relationships in their respective high school choral classrooms. Teacher and student participants acknowledged that conveying care (teachers) and receiving care (students) was often linked to teacher participants' efforts to know their students as people and employ that knowledge when responding to students' relational and musical needs. Teacher participants shared that a combination of daily interactions with students (such as daily greetings at the door and group check-ins) and 'reading the room' helped inform their knowledge of students, enact care-based responses, and make decisions related to future interpersonal connections and instruction. Also prominent across research sites was the finding that the choral music teacher was often perceived as a caring figure in students' lives akin to a mentor or family member who facilitated meaningful acts of care in and outside of the choral classroom.

The importance of trust in high school choral music settings also emerged as a prominent finding in this study. Teacher participants noted the symbiotic nature between care and trust in teacher-student and student-student relationships. Teacher participants sought to develop trust in the teacher-student relationship by establishing themselves as trustworthy adults, as well as through honoring aspects of their and their students' identities. Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each stated that facets of their identity informed how they developed trust and relationships with students. For example, Bryan said that his experience navigating his own introverted personality and experiences with mental health informed how he identified and supported students experiencing elements of introversion or struggles with their wellbeing. Stephanie believed that her own experience with trauma helped her recognize and respond to potential implications of

trauma in her students' lives. Helen felt that her experience as an African American individual informed her capacity to form a nuanced sense of trust with her predominately Black and African American student population. Each of these examples highlight the unique threads of empathy, relational understanding, and trust possible when teacher and student share facets of identity and life experience. Teacher participants also discussed efforts to develop trust with students who hold identities different than their own, efforts which they described as broadly based in forms of critical reflexivity and responsiveness. Findings also suggested that trust between students in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choir rooms was cultivated through a combination of individual and long-term investments, such as relationship-building activities, community-building activities, and opportunities for 'low-risk singing,' especially at the beginning of the school year.

Teacher and student participants at each of the three research sites acknowledged the intersections between aspects of care, trust, and vulnerability in the high school choral music classroom. Student participant reflections from each research site specifically pointed to the prevalence of vulnerability related to making mistakes in high school choral music settings, particularly when singing alone, singing with others, and when learning choral repertoire. Analysis of teacher participant interview data and research site observations largely reflected that teacher participants recognized implications of their students' self-efficacy and vulnerability in relation to making mistakes in choir, the singing voice, and learning repertoire. Further, interview data and observations demonstrated that much of each teacher participant's relational practice was devoted to supporting students through these specifically vulnerable learning moments in the choral classroom. Teacher participants also described the importance of choosing choral repertoire that reflected aspects of students' identities and life experiences. Ultimately, teacher participants believed that modifying choral uniforms and/or selecting repertoire reflective

of students' race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and/or sexual orientation, not only acted as ways to validate student life experience and heighten student self-worth, but functioned as expressions of empathy and empowerment within the cultivation of relational foundations in the choral classroom.

Emergent findings also framed the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral classrooms as settings reflective of a deep-rooted sense of community and sense of belonging. Referencing the amalgamation of care, trust, and the support of vulnerability, student participants across research sites perceived their respective choral communities as a 'family' wherein they felt safe, comfortable, and accepted. This finding points to the nuanced intersection between aspects of collective trust, care, validation, and comfort when creating relationships and communal spaces where connection thrives. Data reflected that a combination of shared experiences, memories, and opportunities for students to become active agents in their learning process instilled a sense of belonging for many student participants. Data also suggested that the intersection between caring and trust-based relationships between peers may enhance students' experience of belonging in the high school choral classroom. Further, student and teacher participants conveyed nuanced perceptions of community and belonging based on the unique shared legacy of each research site, including traditions at MRHS, civic pride and activism at WFHS, and the choir classroom as a 'home' at GLHS. The amalgamation of these reflections emphasize how a collective sense of empowerment and empathy in high school choral music classrooms can foster a shared sense of community and belonging.

Finally, teacher participants acknowledged navigating relational challenges amidst their efforts to create high school choral communities rooted in care, trust, the support of vulnerability, and a sense of belonging. For example, Stephanie described her relational

challenges as rooted in critical reflection and attempts to acknowledge how implications of power and systemic injustice impacted her classroom and teaching. Stephanie described a commitment to confronting elements of her racial and economic privilege and maintaining an investment in critical learning and humility. Stephanie also spoke about her ongoing efforts to maintain relational boundaries with students and establish self-care practices. Bryan described relational challenges related to fostering trust with students as a new teacher, supporting introverted students, and maintaining interpersonal bonds with students he experienced relational disconnections with as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bryan's reflections regarding these potential barriers to connection reflected his acknowledgement of varied vulnerabilities and relational dynamics present in his classroom. Helen stated that relational challenges in her practice had been primarily related to maintaining rapport with students who she perceived as displaying disrespect and/or were not aligned with her mission for the WFHS choral program. However, Helen believed that her response to students she perceived as disruptive to instruction or her mission for the WFHS choral program was ultimately a way to honor her remaining students for whom she wanted to maintain a meaningful and productive choral learning environment.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will discuss these emergent research findings in relation to Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020), the RCT-based notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019), and prominent research and scholarship from the fields of education and music education. I will then offer implications for the profession pertaining to music teacher education, in-service music teaching and learning, and music education policy. I will conclude by acknowledging this study's limitations and offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter VIII
Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Chapter Overview

In the first section of this concluding chapter, I will review this study's purpose, central research question, theoretical framework, and methodology. I will then review and discuss the emergent themes from this study's findings as presented in within-case and cross-case analyses. Next, I will discuss implications for the field of music education, focusing primarily on implications related to preservice music teacher education, in-service music education, and music education policy. Finally, I will identify limitations of this study, offer suggestions for future research, and provide concluding reflections.

Review of Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand how human connection is experienced in the high school choral music classroom. The central research question guiding the study was:

> How is human connection experienced in the classrooms of three high school choral music educators?

Review of Findings

In the sections below, I will explore intersections between this study's findings and extant literature from the fields of general education and music education scholarship. I will similarly contextualize findings pulled from the choral classrooms at Grove Lake High School (GLHS),

Meadow River High School (MRHS), and Woodland Falls High School (WFHS) with this study's theoretical framework, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2017b, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) and the RCT-based notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019).

Prominent scholars in the field of music education have asserted the importance of dimensions of human connection in music teaching and learning (Abril & Battiste, 2022; Conkling, 2019; Hendricks, 2018, 2023; Hendricks et al., 2023; Jorgensen, 1995, 2020; McCarthy, 2000; Morrison, 2001; O'Neil, 2017; Parker, 2020; Small, 1998). Findings from this dissertation align with that scholarship, as well as findings from past empirical research devoted to the examination of relational pedagogy in music education broadly (Adderley et al., 2003; Bailey, 2022; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Hendricks et al., 2023b; Hibbard, 2017; Powell & Parker, 2017; Wiggins, 2011), as well as in the realms of (a) *choral* (Bartolome, 2013; Bennett, 2021; Cohen et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2021; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Freer, 2009, 2015; Gurgel, 2013; Hogle, 2021; Horne, 2007; Howard, 2022; Kennedy, 2002; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Parker, 2010, 2016; Sweet, 2008, 2010, 2015); (b) *elementary general* (Doyle, 2012; Jones, 2022; Price, 2023; Rabinowitch et al., 2013); (c) *instrumental* (Abril, 2013; Cho, 2021; Dagaz, 2012; Edgar, 2014a, 2016; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019; Graves, 2019; Lalama, 2016; Matthews, 2017; Rawlings & Stoddard, 2017; Rawlings & Young, 2021); and (d) *secondary general* (Blair, 2009; Burnard, 2008; Ryals, 2022) music education. Further, the specific stories of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students reflect themes prominent in research and scholarship specifically examining the importance of relational facets in choral music teaching and learning (Bartolome, 2013; Bennett, 2021; Camlin, 2019; Cohen, 2012; Ellis et al. 2021; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Freer, 2009, 2015; Howard, 2022; Kennedy, 2002; Maunu, 2019; Paparo, 2022; Parker, 2010, 2016; Phelan, 2017; Powell, 2017; Ramsey, 2016; Ryan & Andrews, 2009; Shaw, 2015,

2019; Sweet, 2008, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2020). Thus, based on emergent findings from this study, the stories of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students should be situated within the lineage of relational inquiries cited above.

In the sections below, I present salient themes related to human connection pulled from the stories of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students. Data from this study broadly reflected that teacher and student participants' experience of human connection in their respective high school choral music settings centered on the following: (a) the importance of care; (b) the importance of trust; (c) supporting vulnerability; (d) sense of belonging; and (d) navigating relational challenges. Throughout this discussion, I will employ the terms 'connected teaching,' 'relational pedagogy,' and 'relational practice' interchangeably. Further, as stated throughout this dissertation, I will employ the term 'human connection' as broadly encompassing facets of relationships, care, trust, vulnerability, community, and belonging. Throughout this discussion I will contextualize findings through the lens of critical interpretations of Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2004, 2008, 2020) and the Relational Cultural Theory-based notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019).

Scholarly Intersections with Theme I—The Importance of Relational Care

Noddings (2003) affirmed that the human need for care is illuminated in learning settings: "Students will do things for teachers whose care is regularly demonstrated, and caring involves responding to the expressed needs of the cared for" (p. 242). Hendricks (2023) conceived "care as a catalyst toward connection and empowerment" in music teaching and learning (p. 14). In this study, dimensions of care—whether through Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's care-based actions or in student participants' experience of care—were deeply rooted in the high school choral music environments of GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS. The

centrality of care in this study's findings reflect prior research and scholarship that attest to the significance of care-based practice in music education spaces (Bailey, 2022; Blair, 2009; Cho, 2021; Dansereau, 2023; Edgar, 2014a, 2016; Ellis et al., 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2015; Graves, 2019; Hibbard, 2017; Howard, 2022; Lalama, 2016; Parker, 2016; Price, 2023b; Ryals, 2022; Silverman, 2023; Steele Royston, 2017; Sweet, 2015; Vũ, 2023; Wiggins, 2011). Further, as discussed below, the care-based interpersonal bonds described by Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students, encapsulate the sense of relational vitality, empathy, and empowerment found in previous studies employing RCT when examining teacher-student relationships in the classroom (Bensinger, 2020; Thompson, 2018; Womack, 2019). Echoing themes from the studies above, care emerged in this dissertation study within two broad subthemes: (a) foundations of care; and (b) expressions of care. Below, I discuss the emergence of care in this study within those two subthemes as related to past research and scholarship in the field of general education and music education.

Foundations of Care—Actively Knowing and Responding to Students

Powell and Parker (2017) notably found that 134 preservice music educators named the demonstration of care as a central component of a 'successful' music teacher and a lack of care as the most prominent characteristic of an 'unsuccessful' music teacher. Mirroring the 'successful' care-based foundations identified by Powell's and Parker's (2017) participants, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie created an infrastructure of care in their classrooms. In her notion of connected teaching rooted in the principles of RCT, Schwartz (2019) asserted that connected teachers most meaningfully care for students if they "have some sense of their life experience" (p. 96). Aligning with Schwartz's (2019) assertation, the foundations of Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's care-based pedagogical infrastructure were rooted in a depth of knowledge of their

students as people and an investment in their students' lives and wellbeing outside of the music classroom. Specifically, Schwartz calls for teachers to "connect with students in their complexity rather than assuming a universal experience or overlooking the nuance of their lives" (p. 93). Reflecting Freire's (2005) charge, these teacher participants committed to relationships with students that were based in knowing "the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them," including facets of students' life experiences and identities related to implications of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, emotional/mental/cognitive health, (dis)ability, and experience with trauma (p. 102).

This finding also echoes themes prominent in past music education inquiries that similarly pointed to the intersection between knowing students and conveying care (Edgar, 2016; Graves, 2019; Horne, 2007; Sweet, 2008). Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie developed a care-based understanding of their students through varied interpersonal interactions identified in past research that included daily greetings at the classroom door, in-class check-ins (individually and as a group), and "reading the room" to assess student wellbeing (Edgar, 2014a; Jones, 2022; Parker, 2010; Sweet, 2008). Sweet (2016) suggested that music teachers can use moments such as these not only to learn about their students, but to initiate "small acts of kindness"—such as complimenting a students' haircut, outfit, or performance in class the day prior (p. 51). During observations at each of this study's research sites, I observed teacher participants carry out various "small acts of kindness'' of their own.

Corroborating other findings from past research (Bailey, 2022; Blair, 2009; Edgar, 2014a; Ryals, 2022), this study's teacher participants extended knowledge they gained during greetings, reading the room, and check-ins toward subsequent interpersonal interactions and instructional decision-making. As similarly evident in studies by Edgar (2014a) and Parker (2016), Bryan's,

Helen's, and Stephanie's intentional expressions of care were not only noticed by students, but actively contributed to the expansion of growth-fostering teacher-student relationships (Jordan, 2018). Mirroring RCT conceptualizations of growth-fostering relationships between teacher and student (Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020), student participants expressed heightened relational vitality, enhanced feelings of self-worth, and desire for increased amounts of connection due to their interactions with Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie rooted in care and a knowledge of them as people. Thus, a care-based commitment to actively knowing and responding to students—whether during daily greetings, check-ins, or elsewhere during class time—was a particularly prominent finding in this study.

Expressions of Care—Caring Figures (Teacher as Family Member and Mentor) and Acts of Care

Deep expressions of care led this study's student and teacher participants to mutually perceive the teacher-student relationship as akin to that of a family member, mentor, or role model. In outlining her notion of connected teaching rooted in the pillars of RCT, Schwartz (2019) suggested that teachers who are committed to relational practice often embody the qualities of a mentor in their students' lives. Certain MRHS student participant perspectives of Stephanie in a mentorship capacity closely align with Schwartz's (2019) assertion, as well as other scholarship affirming teachers' capacity to function as mentors in their students' lives (Brookfield, 2017; Daloz, 1983; 2012). Similarly reflecting Schwartz's (2019) notion of connected teacher as mentor, as well as findings from other studies in music education (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Horne, 2007; Sweet, 2008), student participants at WFHS and MRHS also looked to Helen and Stephanie as family figures. For example, WFHS students perceived Helen as "the mother of choir," signifying her position as a mother, aunt, and grandmother

figure. Helen gladly embodied this role and during interviews referred to WFHS students as "her babies." This finding from Helen's story also aligns with past research on 'other-mothering' which suggests that African American female teachers often assume heightened relational responsibilities with their Black and African American students (McArthur & Lane, 2019; Stovall, 2022). At MRHS, students similarly considered their multi-year relationship with Stephanie as reflective of a family dynamic, and Stephanie referred to her students as "nieces and nephews." The family-based relational dynamics described by Helen, Stephanie, and their students are in many ways emblematic of the "love" between teacher and student espoused by hooks (2003, p. 136), who upheld the importance of love between the caring teacher figure and their student.

The meaningful reciprocity displayed in this study's teacher-student relationships further reflect nuanced forms of RCT concepts like relational mutuality and empowerment, which Schwartz (2019) and Walker (2020) suggested are roots of compassionate learning spaces. A sense of compassion led teacher participants to initiate acts of care that go 'above and beyond' what might often be considered common relational practice (Sweet, 2016). For example, reflecting Sweet's (2016) notion of music teachers as "resourceful providers," Helen provided food and water to her students every day in class because she recognized doing so fulfilled a basic need (p. 54). Further, reflective of RCT notions of empathy, Helen described feeling particularly committed to supporting and caring for her students because she could identify with many of their experiences due to shared cultural and racial understandings (Thompson, 2018; Walker, 2020). Other examples of this study's teacher participants going 'above and beyond' in their acts of care included Helen and Stephanie attending the funerals of students' family members, visiting students in the hospital, organizing student transportation to off-campus

events, paying for student learning experiences, and providing additional resources (including bandages, tampons, lotion) to support student needs. Further, echoing Edgar (2014a), Lalama (2016), Matthews, (2017), and Parker (2016), Bryan, Helen, Stephanie and their students recognized that the acts of care mentioned above—paired with a caring teacher-student relational dynamic—was especially meaningful in the high school choral setting given (a) the possibility of multiple shared years together; (b) the prevalence of extra-curricular rehearsals, performances, and traditions; and (c) the nuanced and interpersonal nature of choral music instruction.

Scholarly Intersections with Theme II—Relational Trust

Closely aligned with relational care is the notion of relational trust (Hendricks, 2023; Hendricks et al., 2023a). In her conceptualization of RCT, Walker (2020) suggested that humans often filter perceptions of self-worth, validation, acceptance, and relational safety by first confirming the presence of trust in a relationship. Within educational contexts, Bryk & Schneider (2003) asserted that "relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students" (p. 44). Similarly, Hendricks et al. (2023a) posited that "trust in music learning may be present in one-on-one relationships, as well as collectively" (p. 14). Reflecting themes in the scholarship of Hendricks et al. (2023a) and Tschannen-Moran (2014), the experiences of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students suggest that trust and care coalesce in intricate and complimentary ways within the teacher-student relationship. Tschannen-Moran (2014) prominently centered this interwoven dimension between care and trust when suggesting that "the most essential ingredient and commonly recognized facet of trust is a sense of the care or benevolence of another" (p. 42).

Scholars have suggested that trust is not only critical between teacher and student (Curzon-Hobson, 2002; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Hung, 2013; Platz, 2021; Tschannen-Moran,

2014), but between students as well (Adams, 2013; Romero, 2015). Reflective of the increased attention to aspects of relational trust in the field of music education (Hendricks et al., 2023a; Lapidaki, 2020; Soderman, 2018), the findings of this study also point to the intersection of care and trust in teacher-student and student-student relationships in the choral music classroom (Noddings, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2005; Schwartz, 2019). Facets of relational trust were also the 'connective tissue' (Bryk & Schneider, 2003) binding the meaning-making of this study's teacher and student participants in the high school choral music classroom. Reflective of findings from past research examining relationships in music classrooms (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Horne, 2007; Palkki, 2020; Powell & Parker, 2017; Shaw, 2015), participants in this study spoke about trust in terms of (a) trust in teacher-student relational endeavors; and (b) trust in student-student relational endeavors. The discussion below is organized according to these two themes.

Trust in Teacher-Student Relational Endeavors

For Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, trust was not implied or unconsciously embedded in their teaching practice—it was explicitly acknowledged as the basis of their relational choral music learning spaces. These teacher participants were aware that the development of trust with their students was reliant on their capacity to prove themselves as a trustworthy adult in their students' lives. For example, reflective of findings in past research (Ellis et al., 2021; Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; McKoy, 2013; Shaw, 2015), Helen believed that she developed trust with students through her advocacy for their success and wellbeing in the broader school community—and because she was a consistent presence in her students' lives. Here, reflecting Shalaby's (2020) attention to the intersections between care and aspects of justice, Helen's

attempts to develop trust were also linked with her efforts to advocate for and protect her students.

Student participants across research sites also expressed an awareness that trust in their teachers often developed through demonstrations of care. Reflecting past research (Boucher and Ryan, 2011; Edgar, 2016; Robertson & Eisensmith, 2010; Ryan, 2004), students at GLHS and MRHS specifically identified Bryan's and Stephanie's consistent acknowledgement of—and compassionate responses to—student mental health and wellbeing as factors that solidified relational trust. Bryan's and Stephanie's approach to noticing and honoring student wellbeing also reflect Dirk's (2023) call for music educators to support student mental health by increasing their awareness of student psychological/emotional/social/and behavioral tendencies, sensitively and appropriately inquiring about student wellbeing when changes to student temperament is observed, and enacting a concerted response (pp. 322-324). Furthermore, reflecting dimensions of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker 2020) and connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019), teacher participants were aware that every opportunity to convey care and increase trust with students (whether in daily greetings, during class discussions about repertoire, or in a moment when they approached a student who seemed stressed), contributed to their shared relational reservoir. In turn, such efforts meaningfully impacted how teachers guided students through aspects of the choral music learning process.

Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's paths toward fostering trust with students were sometimes informed by aspects of their own personal identities and life experiences. This finding mirrors prior research in music education suggesting that relational trust between music teachers and their students may be heightened as the result of mutually-understood implications of (a) race and culture (DeLorenzo & Silverman, 2016; Ellis et al., 2021; Escalante, 2018; Fitzpatrick,

2008; Gurgel, 2013; Horne, 2007; Lozada et al., 2022; McCall et al., 2023; Shaw, 2015); (b) trauma (Bradley & Hess, 20222; Hibbard, 2022; Price, 2023; Smith, 2022); and (c) mental health and wellbeing (Diaz, 2018; Payne et al., 2020). For instance, reflective of recent scholarship (Dirks, 2023), students at GLHS shared that their trust in Bryan developed due to his sensitivity toward their struggles with mental health, a sensitivity Bryan acknowledged stemmed from his own experiences navigating aspects of his mental and emotional wellbeing. Stephanie explained that aspects of trauma within her own life history helped her to notice and support students who may be dealing with implications of trauma in their own lives. Stephanie's attempts to acknowledge and respond to potential trauma in her students' lives, whether manifesting in forms of disconnection (Bailey, 2022; Kress et al., 2016) or shifts in behavior (Price, 2023b; Shalaby, 2017; Ryals, 2022), aligns with Hibbard's and Price's (2023) call for a trauma-informed music practice based in "recognizing and ending harm in classrooms" (p. 389) and increasing "student feelings of safety and belongingness" (p. 385). Helen attributed a shared racial, cultural, and community-based understanding with her students as a significant factor when fostering trust with students, a topic also centered in past music education inquiries (Doyle, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Hamann & Walker, 1993; McCall, 2017; Shaw, 2015). For Helen, aspects of her identity as an African American individual and a lifelong resident of the community of Woodland meaningfully impacted her capacity to develop trust with students—most of whom were also Black or African American and residents of Woodland. Reflective of critical conceptualizations of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020) and the RCT-based notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019), each teacher participant fostered trust with students based on facets of shared identities, and thus, developed a particularly nuanced relational dimension of mutual understanding, empathy, and sense of empowerment.

Additionally, in alignment with research and scholarship devoted to culturally responsive and sustaining music teaching pedagogies (Bennett, 2021; Burnard, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Good-Perkins, 2021; Howard, 2022; McKoy & Lind, 2023; Shaw, 2012), all three teacher participants also spoke about their efforts to foster trust with students whose varied identities and life experiences were different than their own. Related to this important effort, Lewis (2023) suggested that through an "understanding of how race and racism operate in the classroom, music educators can expand the way they embrace and provide care" (p. 468). As white educators, Stephanie and Bryan considered how race and racism impacted their teaching practice within the selection/rehearsal of repertoire as well as in interpersonal connections—critical considerations centered in Schwartz's (2019) and Walker's (2020) discussions of RCT in the context of learning spaces. Specifically, in an instance in which Stephanie responded to a Black student's concern regarding the selection of an African American Spiritual in class, Stephanie demonstrated how a critically-reflexive response to a student's perspective can convey a level of care that in turn deepens a student's trust (Doyle, 2012; Kruse, 2020; Shaw, 2019). Stephanie's enactment of critical awareness, humility, and reflection in this specific scenario is also an example of what Walker (2020), through the lens of RCT, defined as "disruptive empathy" (p. 66). From Walker's (2020) premise, Stephanie was 'disrupted' to move "toward a level of open-heartedness and open-mindedness" with the student and their expressed concern in a way that ultimately allowed Stephanie to "loosen [her] attachment to the narratives about self and other" (p. 66). Similarly, though Helen identified as African American, and most of her students were African American or Black, Helen acknowledged that she strives to consider her white and Latinx students' needs when selecting repertoire, developing performance opportunities, and creating a learning space reflective of their perspectives.

Stephanie's careful and critical approach to religious repertoire selection, specifically in ways that validated the sizeable population of Jewish students in her ensembles, also aligned with prior research examining choral directors' efforts to program religiously diverse music in their ensembles (Clark, 2021, 2023; Lerew, 2016). Also reflecting past research (Gould, 2012; McBride, 2016; McBride & Palkki, 2020; Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018), LGBTQ+ students at GLHS and MRHS celebrated Bryan's and Stephanie's efforts to acknowledge the experience of LGBTQ+ students through the selection of non-heteronormative repertoire and the elimination of choral uniforms reflecting the gender-binary. At both GLHS and MRHS, this uniform shift involved moving from mandated tuxedos and gowns to uniform attire representing student choice, as long as student selections adhered to 'concert black' expectations. Reflective of Freire's (2005) dialectic conceptualization of "speaking to and with learners" (p. 115), Bryan and Stephanie (and Stephanie's students) conveyed that the decision to modify each school's choral uniforms emerged from shared dialogue between teacher and students. This reflects Walker's (2020) definition of "dynamic mutuality [as] a relational stance and process that invites engagement by all participants in a relationship," (p. 98) and assertion that "an effective teacher holds dynamic mutuality as an attitudinal stance throughout the relationship with the student" (p. 93). Later in this chapter, I consider how future studies might take a more direct approach when examining how choral music educators foster connections with students of diverse sociocultural identities. As woven throughout each of the above-described examples, macro and micro facets of systemic sociocultural implications impacted how Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie developed trust with students. Specifically, consideration of broader structures of race, culture, gender, and sexuality informed how teacher participants developed trust with students who shared facets of

their own identities, as well as with students whose identities and life experiences were different than their own.

Trust in Student-Student Relational Endeavors

In their work examining adolescent learning in the secondary choral classroom, Sweet (2010, 2015, 2016, 2019) and Parker (2010, 2016, 2020) assert the importance of mutual trust amongst choral peers. Sweet (2019) suggests that due to the conglomeration of social pressures faced by adolescents, perceptions of choral peers' trust can dictate the level of musical, vocal, and emotional risks students take in the choir classroom. Efforts to cultivate the student-student trust avowed by Sweet (2019) was a prominent component of musical and relational work in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choir classrooms. For example, echoing past research (Freer, 2009; Kennedy, 2002; Matthews, 2017; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008), teacher and student participants in this study identified relationship-building activities—at the beginning of the school year, as well as throughout—as important foundational work when developing trust amongst students. This finding mirrors studies in music education wherein interpersonal trust amongst peers emerged as a crucial component within large-group music learning settings (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Dagaz, 2012; Rabinowitch et al. 2012; Rawlings & Stoddard, 2019; Rawlings & Young, 2021). Further, as found in past studies, teacher and student participants also identified (a) the group 'check-ins' facilitated at all research sites, (b) activities like Stephanie's communal concept of *Circle Time* and Bryan's *Circle of Affirmations;* or (c) the informal bonding moments between students before, during, and after extra-curricular performances embraced by Helen's students, as meaningful opportunities for students to connect with each other in social, and sometimes, emotionally vulnerable ways (Burnard, 2008; Edgar, 2016; Graves, 2019; Matthews, 2017; Parker, 2016). MacGregor (2023) specifically found that activities such as *Circle Time* and

the *Circle of Affirmations* can function as spaces that encourage students to connect with each other in dialogue surrounding "weighty social issues" pertinent in their lives (p. 13). Relatedly, and in reflecting the mutuality embedded within the notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019), Allsup (2003) similarly affirmed the importance of "building communities where participants are concerned about others' feelings" (p. 33), suggesting that positive relational possibilities are present in moments when student-student trust has the chance to gel through empathic forms of understanding.

Finally, findings from this study suggest that the emotional potency often required for—and cultivated within—*social and relational* opportunities for students to develop trust in each other often leads to *music-making* experiences similarly laced in peer-to-peer trust, support, and understanding (Edgar, 2014a, 2016; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008). Hence, this study's teacher participants' efforts to foster 'low-risk' and informal singing experiences for their students led to increased relational comfort between students and aligns with research examining student self-efficacy in ensemble-based choral music settings (Dilworth, 2012; Freer, 2006; Kennedy, 2002; Sweet, 2010, 2019).

Scholarly Intersections with Theme III—Supporting Vulnerability

Scholars suggest that facets of care and trust influence an individual's willingness to be vulnerable when developing interpersonal connections with others (Hendricks; 2023; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). RCT suggests that a coalescence of vulnerabilities may inform how individuals approach and navigate relationships (Hartling et al., 2004; Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2004). In their examinations of RCT, Hartling et al. (2004) suggested that vulnerability exists at "the growing edge" of connection, requiring a semblance of "joining together [and] hearing each other into voice" that can feel unclear, unsafe, and difficult to trust (p. 127). In her

RCT-based understanding of connected teaching, Schwartz (2019) suggested that mutual vulnerability in a teacher-student or student-student relationship is a particularly meaningful form of shared relational power in the classroom. As presented earlier in this dissertation, Brown (2012) framed vulnerability as involving "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34) and asserted that a willingness to be vulnerable required mutuality and trust. MacGregor (2023) characterized musical vulnerability as an "individual's inherent and situation openness to being affected by the semantic and somatic properties of music-making" (p. 3).

Within choral music contexts, Hogle (2021) suggested that vulnerability is often connected to individuals' memory—or fear—of "wounding experiences" in past music learning settings (p. 182). These choral-based "wounding experiences" described by Hogle reflect Eisenberger's and Lieberman's (2004) assertion that psychological and emotional pain is often physiologically experienced the same as physical pain. Such "wounding experiences" in choral music settings can also be conceived in terms of the RCT notion of relational images in that, due to their deep impact, the wounding experience/relational image ultimately influences an individual's subsequent experiences, engagement, and relationships with teachers and peers in choral environments (Jordan, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Walker, 2004). Further, the residual impact of "wounding experiences" in high school choral settings may reflect dimensions of the RCT-based notion of the central relational paradox—which asserts that even within the core human need for connection some individuals (in this study, students) enact strategies of disconnection due to past relational challenges (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020). The paradox manifests through disconnection amidst the fear of rejection, invalidation, humiliation, and shame (Hammer et al., 2016; Purgason et al., 2016). Thus, in the context of this study, student participants' current capacity to engage in varied vulnerabilities in the high school choral

classroom may be tied to invalidating or shamed-based past experiences in choral music settings (Hogle, 2021; Palkki, 2022). Acknowledging the presence of these multifaceted vulnerabilities in music classrooms, Hendricks et al. (2023a) suggested that relational pedagogies based in trust are necessary if students are to feel "safe and willing to take necessary risks in the company of their teacher and peers" (p. 1).

The prominence of vulnerability in this study's findings parallels dimensions of vulnerability as outlined in RCT (Bensinger, 2020; Edwards & Richards, 2002; Jordan, 2023; Randell et al., 2015; Spencer & Liang, 2009). Specifically, student participants' perspectives regarding nerves associated with the act of singing and choral music-making reflected how perceptions of self-worth and self-efficacy—as well as related fears of making mistakes and risk-taking—can coalesce into the experience of vulnerability in high school choral settings (Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015). Whether associated with relational images (Jordan, 2023; Walker, 2020), navigation of the central relational paradox (Jordan, 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1997), self-efficacy (Abril, 2007; Hogle, 2021), or a blend of both, the amalgamation of vulnerabilities in the choral classroom reflects what RCT posits as an overall human aversion to shame and humiliation—and associated feelings of relational disconnection and disempowerment (Brown et al., 2018; Hartling et al., 2004; Jordan, 2008; Storlie et al., 2017).

The emergent theme of vulnerability in this study also reflects growing attention to the impact of vulnerability in music teaching and learning scholarship (Bradley & Hess, 2022; Culp & Jones, 2020; Goodrich, 2023; Hallam, 2015; Hogle, 2021; Huovinen, 2021; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; MacGregor, 2022, 2023; Orejudo et al., 2017; Palkki, 2022; Pendergast et al., 2018; Richerme, 2016; Ruddock, 2010; Ruddock & Leon, 2005; Welch, 2017; Wiggins, 2011). Like themes presented by the scholars above, findings from this study suggest that Bryan, Helen,

and Stephanie were conscious about potential musical/social/emotional vulnerabilities and intersecting relational disconnections in their classrooms. This manifested in their deeper awareness of how students may experience vulnerability when singing alone/with others and when learning choral music—and subsequent efforts to implement relational and instructional practices designed to mitigate disconnection in favor of connection. Therefore, below I discuss teacher and student participants' reflections regarding the notion of vulnerability as related to (a) the singing voice (alone and with others); (b) making mistakes; and (c) learning repertoire.

The Singing Voice

Many of the subthemes discussed in this section underscore student and teacher participants' efforts to navigate the uniquely embodied nature of singing (Phelan, 2017; Shusterman, 2010; Sutela et., al 2020). Student participants' concerns (and teacher participants' responses) reflect prior scholarship that similarly centered the complex convergence of the human voice, the bodily apparatus in which the human voice is housed, and the human mind facilitating use of both the body and voice toward the act of singing—specifically in choral music spaces (Bowman, 2004; Camlin, 2019; Engelhardt et al., 2022). Further, these findings parallel what music education scholars have described as a nuanced composite of vulnerabilities often associated with the embodied nature of student learning in secondary choral music settings (Bartolome, 2013; Maunu, 2019; Palkki, 2020; Paparo, 2016; Parker, 2020; Sweet, 2016, 2019).

In their conceptualization of "singing-caring," Parker and Hutton (2023) affirmed that "the voice reflects self-identity and the amalgam of one's experiences" (p. 276) and therefore can frame singing in school music as a markedly vulnerable endeavor for adolescents. Student participant experiences related to feelings of uncertainty, nervousness, and fear reflect findings in past research that points to the coalesced musical, vocal, social, emotional, psychological, and

physical vulnerabilities present when students approach singing alone and with others (Abril, 2007; Bartolome, 2013; Engelhardt et al., 2022; Freer, 2009, 2015; Hogle, 2021; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Paparo, 2016; Powell, 2017; Sweet, 2015). Findings in this study similarly demonstrated GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS student participants' concerns related to vocal range and perceived inability to hit certain pitches (Freer, 2009; Sweet, 2015), feelings of exposure in vocal sections (Abril, 2007; Freer, 2015; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012), discomfort with their individual voice/vocal tone (Hogle, 2021; Palkki, 2022), and social-emotional vulnerability attached to their vocal instruments being a part of their bodies, and thus, representative of them as people (Abril, 2007; Hogle, 2021; Numminen et al., 2015; Paparo, 2016; Sweet, 2015).

Reflecting recommendations from past research, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie acknowledged that the "first step to singing-caring relations is to affirm each person's voice" (Parker & Hutton, 2023, p. 272), and thus made concerted attempts to support their students' vocal vulnerabilities during instruction. For example, all three teachers focused on low-stakes, informal music-making experiences at the beginning of the school year to elicit student comfort (Dilworth, 2012; Sweet, 2015, 2019) as well as varied forms of praise and verbal affirmations during instruction (Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022). Bryan and Stephanie also modified the pace, tone, and specificity of their voice-related instruction (Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Palkki, 2022). Further, Bryan relied heavily on vocal modeling (Freer, 2009; Hogle, 2021) and permitted students to complete vocal assessments with "emotional support friends," practices that are similar to recommendations by scholars in past studies (Bartolome, 2013; Freer, 2015; Kennedy, 2002; Hogle, 2021).

Making Mistakes

In alignment with past research, enmeshed with vulnerabilities associated with the singing voice were student participants' fear of making mistakes during instruction (Coşkun-Şentürk & Çırakoğlu, 2019; Orejudo et al., 2017; Robson & Kenny, 2017; Ruddock, 2010; Ruddock & Leon, 2005; Ryan & Andrews, 2009). Similar to themes presented in previous studies, students at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS expressed self-efficacy concerns primarily related to making mistakes when singing alone and with others (Abril, 2007; Chen & Drummond, 2008; Freer, 2009; Hogle, 2021; Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Palkki, 2022; Ruddock, 2010; Sweet, 2015); and during the process of learning music (Demorest & May,1995; Elam et al., 2019; Killian & Henry, 2005; MacGregor, 2023; Nichols, 2012). Student participants' awareness of—and concerns about—the use of their singing voice acutely represented the physiological realities of singing and choral music described by Maunu (2019), who asserted that "there is something very personal about sharing our voices…the sounds we make are closely connected with who we are as human beings" (p. 64). Despite acknowledging these inherent vulnerabilities in their experience of the choral classroom, student participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS affirmed that Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie were intentional in creating supportive learning spaces conducive to student comfort as well as musical and social risk-taking (Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015).

Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's efforts to address and support students through social and musical vulnerabilities were in many ways contrary to historical approaches to music teaching and learning that traditionally reduce the importance of relationship—and that elicit shame, embarrassment, and fear (Benedict, 2009; Hogle, 2021; McGregor & Elliott, 2005; Palkki, 2022). Rather, Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's relational pedagogy reflected

Bowman's (2009) assertion that musical outcomes in music education depend on relationships (p. 120), which parallels MacGregor's (2023) empirical finding that "encounters with musical vulnerability were intimately connected with interpersonal relationships" (p. 14). Consistent with Bowman's (2009) and MacGregor's (2023) assertions, as well as past research (Edgar, 2014a; Freer, 2015; Hibbard, 2017; Ryals, 2022), student participants in this study recognized that their willingness to take concerted risks in the choral classroom (musical, vocal, social, emotional, physical) was tied to the presence and awareness of support from their music teacher and peers.

Further, as emphasized in past studies (Bailey, 2022; Barret & Bond, 2015; Edgar, 2016; Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023), each of this study's teacher participants noted that they consciously modeled vulnerability (musical, vocal, social, emotional, physical) in the classroom by making, acknowledging, and moving forward from their own mistakes. Bryan spoke about navigating conducting, vocal, and part-playing mistakes on the piano in front of his students. Stephanie similarly acknowledged the importance of identifying her own vulnerabilities during instruction and her willingness to express deep emotion to students when talking about choral text. Helen talked about being upfront with students regarding her emotions and making mistakes when teaching repertoire.

These teacher participants' willingness to model their own vulnerability in the choral classroom echoes assertions made by hooks (1994) who suggested that a teacher's willingness to enact their own vulnerability is not only meaningful to students navigating their own vulnerable ventures, but necessary in educational settings destined for mutuality: "the empowerment [in learning] cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 20). Looking to choral settings, Parker and Hutton (2023) similarly acknowledged the importance of choral teachers modeling vulnerability amidst the formation of singing-caring

relationships in the choral classroom: “Sharing our vulnerability as persons builds interdependence and fosters a sense of collective trust as students come to know teachers as people” (p. 277). Student participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS each acknowledged an appreciation for ‘coming to know their choral teachers as people.’ Specifically, student participants conveyed an appreciaton for their teachers’ willingness to make mistakes and model vulnerability, in turn recognizing that this willingness on behalf of their teachers impacted their own perspectives of mistakes and capacities to be vulnerable in the choral classroom.

Learning Repertoire

Teacher participants also spoke about the importance of selecting and teaching repertoire when supporting vulnerability and building empowerment across their choral ensembles. Reflective of the lineage of scholarship devoted to culturally responsive (Abril, 2013; Bond, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2012; McEvoy & Salvador, 2020; McKoy & Lind, 2023) and culturally sustaining (Good-Perkins, 2021) teaching in music education, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie attempted to choose repertoire that resonated with their students’ identities and life experiences. For example, Helen was passionate about programming (and creating) repertoire rooted in activism (Good-Perkins, 2023; Hess, 2019a, 2019b) as well as music that reflected her predominately Black student ensembles (Robinson & Hendricks, 2017; Shaw, 2012, 2015). Stephanie and Bryan also spoke about their commitment to selecting repertoire that reflected the diversity of their students, including efforts to program music that reflected facets of their students’ race (Bennett, 2023; Bond, 2014; Shaw, 2016), gender (Barber, 2017; Gould, 2004; Palkki, 2019; Sauerland, 2022) sexual orientation (Gould 2012, 2013; McBride, 2016; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018), and religion (Campbell, 2017; Mercado, 2021).

Critical Intersections with Facets of Vulnerability

While most of Bryan's, Helen's, Stephanie's, and their students' discussion of vulnerability focused on musical and vocal elements, additional vulnerability-based factors are important to consider. Though Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students identified implications of identity, power, and context when discussing elements of connection in the choral classroom, they did not prominently center these implications in their reflections on vulnerability. That said, contemporary conceptualizations of RCT foreground the intersections between vulnerability, an individual's identity, implications of context, and power structures (Hartling et al., 2004; Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020). For example, Jordan (2018) asserted that "the dominant culture distorts images of self, images of others, and images of relational possibilities" in ways that influence one's overall conceptualization of what it means to be vulnerable, perceptions of 'safety' in vulnerable situations, and manifestations of humiliation and/or shame (p. 9). Similarly, Walker (2004, 2020) contended that RCT concepts such as mutuality (whether in empathy, empowerment, and trust) are often monumentally more complex for individuals from historically marginalized communities. Thus, it is important to again assert that vulnerability—and acts of being vulnerable—are always prevalent in learning environments, always enmeshed with implications of power and oppression, and are not universal (Cole, 2016; Eccelstone, 2011; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2008). Systemic and situational implications of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, sex, tribe, language, religion, disability, cognition, physicality, experience of trauma, and neurodiversity all impact students' capacity to be vulnerable in the choral music setting (Hess, 2019; Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2022). When discussing connected teaching through the lens of RCT, Schwartz (2019) reasserted that these contextual realities impact vulnerabilities in the classroom because they "shape the life experiences and related daily

boosts, obstacles, or threats faced by people as they move through the world" (p. 89). The absence of student-participants' explicit discussion of identity- and power-based implications of vulnerability in the study's research sites does not mean they are not present in how student participants—and their teachers—navigate social, emotional, psychological, physical, musical, and vocal vulnerabilities in the high school choral classroom. It is possible that systemic sociocultural and sociopolitical factors may be enmeshed within how vulnerability—as well as relational images, experience of the central relational paradox, and student self-efficacy—is experienced and perceived at each research site. Future inquiries might take a more direct approach to examining these implications.

Further, how these factors interact with the hierarchical structures of the authoritarian-based teacher-student relationship (Freire, 2018; hooks, 2004) and the institution of schooling at large (Dixson et al., 2016; Elliott & Silverman, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016) ultimately impact students' approach to vulnerability in choral music teaching and learning. Thus, as discussed further in the implications portion of this chapter, choral music educators must support students' social, emotional, psychological, physical, vocal, and musical vulnerabilities in ways that are critically reflexive, validating of student experience, and responsive to student needs and comfort.

Scholarly Intersections with Theme IV: Sense of Belonging

Teacher and student participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS spoke at length about a deepened sense of interpersonal connection fostered through shared relational care, trust, and the support of vulnerability in the choral community. Identified by Maslow (1958) as a psychological need, scholars have suggested that this nuanced form of connection is the feeling of belonging or belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Parker, 2010, 2020). Parker (2020)

suggested that belonging fostered through musical engagement involves: (a) experiencing relational bonding and attachment to individuals who support one's musicking efforts; (b) feeling responsible to others for one's role(s) in shared musicking; and (c) participating in musicking in ways that elevate a shared experience with others (p. 108). Like the relationship between notions of care and trust, teacher and student participant reflections in this study suggested a symbiotic nature between notions of belonging and community in the high school choral classroom. Broadly, participants conceived a link between a sense of belonging in the high school choral classroom as largely cultivated through participation and acceptance in a validating choral community. Noddings (2003) identified this unique association when conceiving the deeper meaning tied to membership in a community, suggesting desire for community membership may reflect one's social and psychological need to belong: "One need satisfied by community is identity or recognition. One is recognized—has an identity—in an extended family" (p. 221). Schwartz (2019) suggested that classrooms based in the RCT notion of connected teaching may similarly elicit these collective feelings of mutuality in empathy, empowerment, and vulnerability.

In music spaces, Hendricks (2018) pointed to the intersection between community and a sense of belonging when suggesting that musical settings are often "alive with meaning" based in the shared musical and social understandings of gathered members (p. 125). Similarly, Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students described the choral music communities at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS as a uniquely musical, social, cultural, cognitive, and emotional assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994; Fenwick, 2015) representative of individual and shared illuminations of *what it means to be a member of the choral community* (Engelhardt et al., 2022; Phelan, 2017). These considerations reflect findings emergent in past music education research affirming the

intersection between community (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Dagaz, 2012; Matthews, 2017; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008) and belonging (Blair, 2009; Ellis et al., 2021; Freer, 2015; Graves, 2019; Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2010, 2016; Powell, 2017) in music education learning environments.

Belonging in the Choral Family

Like participants in previous studies by Adderley et al. (2003), Graves (2019), Lalama (2016), Parker (2010, 2016), and Sweet (2008), student participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS perceived their enrollment in choir as akin to membership in a family. Student participant reflections regarding this sense of family in their choral program reflected the deeper meaning of 'family' framed by Noddings (2003), as well as Graves' (2019) definition of belonging in music learning settings as a "sense of acceptance, value, inclusion, and encouragement felt when supported by teachers and peers" (pp. 4-5). In this study, students similarly identified peer and teacher support, affirmation, care, and validation as contributing to their sense of security and "safety" in the choral community. This intersection was especially prominent in student participant reflections that conveyed a particular awareness of belonging when enmeshed within caring and trust-based relationships formed with choral peers.

At this juncture it is important to clarify that student and teacher participants at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS specifically used the terms "safe" and "safety" when describing how they felt in relation to their school choral families. Thus, to honor the language and perspectives of my participants, I included the terms 'safe' and 'safety' in this discussion. That said, the notion of safety has been increasingly reconsidered in educational contexts due to the acknowledgement that certain forms of emotional, social, physical (and in this study, musical) risk-taking are in many ways incongruous with how certain individuals—especially those from historically

marginalized communities—conceptualize forms of 'safety' in their own lives (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Rather, Arao and Clemens (2013) advocate for the critically-based notion of 'brave space,' which centers the presence of power, privilege, and oppression in the consideration of learning spaces that strive to support courage, respect, the navigation of conflict, and agency. In envisioning the path forward, music education teachers and scholars might consider Hendricks' (2023) framing of 'brave spaces' in music education, which if applied through a critical lens, may also reflect notions of 'brave space' as defined by Arao and Clemens (2013). Hendricks (2023) suggested that within 'brave' music-learning spaces, "students might feel encouraged to take risks musically and in dialogue with others" (p. 17). Hendricks (2023) further stated that in 'brave' music spaces, music educators can strive to help their students become: "(a) attuned to their individual needs, interests, and values; (b) learn how to assert and express those needs; (c) listen to and respect the expressions of others; and (d) forge authentic connections with others and with the music they make" (p. 17).

Data from this study related to the consideration of 'safe' and 'brave' spaces resonates with Walker's (2008) discussion of the importance of acknowledging how power exists, manifests, and should be shared in relational spaces: "To embrace power from a relational perspective is to enlarge the terms of engagement. Most often, it means creating a new choice out of the dichotomized options" (p. 137). Student participants' reflections in this study suggest that they perceived the choral classrooms at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS as 'brave' learning spaces, in that students felt empowered to acknowledge and advocate for their individual needs, were provided experiences to develop authentic listening practices with their peers, and shared multiple and varied opportunities to develop meaningful relational and musical connections with peers and their teacher. Further, again emphasizing the intersections between implications of

trust, care, vulnerability, and belonging, certain sociocultural factors were identified by students as contributing to their general sense of 'safety' and belonging in this study's research sites. For example, students at both GLHS and MRHS expressed feelings of safety and belongingness due to Bryan's and Stephanie's specific attempts to convey individual and broad support for students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Further, both Bryan and Stephanie stated that they hoped they created classrooms validating and accepting of students who identify as African American or Black. These efforts were specifically acknowledged by African American and Black student participants from Stephanie's school (MRHS) who expressed feeling validated by Stephanie's decision to select class repertoire like the Black National anthem *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and various African American Spirituals. This commitment was also highlighted in Stephanie's story about her decision to remove an African American Spiritual from class repertoire in response to the request of an African American student in her ensemble.

As noted in Chapters 6, 7, and earlier in this chapter, Helen felt that her identity as an African American individual informed aspects of care and trust with her predominately African American and Black student population. However, during the singular WFHS student focus group, no WFHS student participant explicitly brought up elements of race when discussing their perceptions of safety, validation, family, or sense of belonging in the WFHS choral classroom (as identified in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, all WFHS student focus group participants in the WFHS focus group were African American, Black, Indigenous, or Hispanic/Latinx). That said, as discussed earlier in this chapter, WFHS student participants did consistently identify the importance of being in Helen's classroom, wherein they felt that they were seen, empowered, and supported. Further, WFHS student participants spoke at length about the power of engaging

in musical experiences that reflected aspects of their life experience—both at WFHS and throughout the community of Woodland.

Belonging in Shared Legacy

Echoing past research and scholarship, a sense of belonging at all three research sites was tied to broader notions of shared identity, experience, and purpose (Abril, 2013; Edgar, 2017; Legutki et al., 2023; Parker, 2020; Sweet, 2016). In this way, each site sustained its own 'legacy of belonging.' At WFHS, a legacy of belonging manifested through a collective identity and sense of purpose formed through the creation and performance of music rooted in activism and civic pride (Ellis et al., 2021; Hess, 2019a, 2019b). At GLHS, a legacy of belonging emerged in students' description of the GLHS choir community as a 'home,' a theme that was embedded throughout their repertoire as well as how Bryan and students expressed care for each other (Adderley et al., 2003; Gamboa-Kroesen, 2019; Parker, 2010; Sweet, 2008). And at MRHS, a legacy of belonging was described as largely tied to multiple years of shared experiences, traditions, and memories with Stephanie and choral peers. This specific finding aligns with past research and scholarship indicating the impact of multiple years with a common teacher and group of peers upon collective student identity, connectedness, and sense of care in the secondary music classroom (Adderley et al., 2003; Blair, 2009; Dagaz, 2012; Edgar, 2016; Lalama, 2016; Matthews, 2017; Morrison, 2001; Parker, 2016). Further, mirroring prior inquiries (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Hess, 2021; Good-Perkins, 2021; Shaw, 2015), each teacher participant described efforts to employ diverse repertoire choices as an acknowledgement that all students' identities and life experiences were musically, culturally, and socially valued in their respective choral classrooms.

Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's roles as teacher-catalysts fostering a sense of community and belonging in their choral classrooms also reflected findings in previous studies (Graves, 2019; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008). This was particularly reflected in teacher participants' devotion of instructional time to community-building activities (such as Stephanie's *Circle Time* and Bryan's *Passion Presentations*) or during informal bonding experiences (like moments associated with extra-curricular activities that were a foundation in Helen's classroom at WFHS). Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie also perceived concert repertoire, activities, and traditions (like Seniors singing *Homeward Bound* at the GLHS graduation every year or the annual MRHS Choir Banquet) as contributing toward their efforts to establish a mission or "legacy" for their choral program (Ellis et al., 2021; Parker, 2010, 2016).

Regardless of the research site, the examples described above each contributed to the overall conceptualization that being a part of the choral classroom 'family' at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS meant 'being a part of something.' These teacher and student perspectives reflect what Noddings (2003) described as a "community of kinship," in which members "exhibit mutuality," have "a history, and common memories," and experience a "sense of security in belonging to [the] kinship community" (p. 221).

Belonging in Student Agency and Collaboration

Finally, Allsup (2003)'s considerations of democratic music-learning spaces parallel certain findings in this study related to student agency and collaboration. Allsup (2003) states: "the links between freedom, democracy, community, caring, and even friendship are strong ones—they disavow teaching methods that oppress rather than liberate, that separate more than join" (p. 35). Allsup's (2003) assertion reflects the notion of a power-with teaching dynamic (as opposed to power-over) grounded in Walker's (2020) and Schwartz's (2019) vision for how the

principles of RCT might reshape the balance of power and agency in learning spaces. For example, Walker (2020) posits that in the classroom, and within the teacher-student relationship specifically, "power must be shared in order for the relationship to be most effective" (pp. 92-93). If power is shared between teacher and student, then Walker suggests that a "dynamic mutuality" may form in "the relational space" between teacher and student in ways that can lead to increasingly equitable and collaborative learning spaces (p. 98).

This study's teacher participants demonstrated varied approaches to instilling a sense of belonging in their classrooms through a power-with teaching approach (Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020). Specifically, teacher participants shared facets of power and decision-making with their students as part of collaborative democratic music learning practices (Allsup, 2003; Bonneville-Roussey et al., 2020; Cremata, 2017; Green, 2008; Gould, 2007; Sutela et al, 2020; Wiggins, 2016; Woodford, 2005). For instance, in alignment with past scholarship (Clauhs, 2021; Kratus, 2016; Powell et al., 2015; Westerlund, 2006), students at WFHS were deeply involved in many aspects of their music education. Helen and her students maintained a two-way system of open and trust-based communication (Freire, 2005). Further, Helen expanded the learning space so that students became full-fledged agents of their own learning. For example, WFHS students had direct input in the pedagogical process through their shared roles in the co-creation of song arrangements and conceptual plans for performances. Helen also imparted upon her students the importance of speaking up against injustice, advocating for themselves, and enacting change—whether in musical or interpersonal endeavors. In this sense, Helen—and the function of the WFHS choral learning community—reflects Shalaby's (2020) vision for justice- and care-based learning communities that model the possibilities of 'democratic participation:'

> …by modeling democratic participation, we can anticipate and welcome the discussion and debate that arise from conflict. We can intentionally create routines and structures

> that make space for these tough conversations about how to advocate for our own needs and wants, while also taking care of others and our planet. (Shalaby, 2020)

Echoing Shalaby's call, and mirroring aspects of Helen's practice, Stephanie was also committed to heightening student sense of investment in the choral community by involving them in important conversations and decision-making related to instruction, repertoire, performances, uniforms, and interpersonal foundations of the classroom (Allsup, 2003; Clauhs, 2021; Green, 2008; Kratus, 2016; Palkki, 2020; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Parker, 2016).

Finally, when considering the impacts of community and belonging, Small (1998) reminds music educators that any music or music-learning community should reflect both collective and individual identities:

> 'Who we are' is at the same time composed of any number of individual 'who I am's" and as we have already noticed, everyone belongs to a number of social groups simultaneously and has a degree of choice concerning which or whose values they espouse, which relationships they regard as ideal. (p. 134)

Small's (1998) passage reflects the challenges that can be associated with fostering community in connected choral teaching settings (Bradley, 2009; Engelhardt et al., 2022). Despite best efforts to create inclusive communities 'for all,' communal dispositions can also trend toward entities that are perceived (and function) as restrictive, marginalizing, and based in uniformity (Derrida, 2020). The parameters of a music community can sometimes convey problematic levels of boundedness—a mindset of 'us' and 'them' (Bradley, 2009). Engelhardt et al. (2022) emphasized this notion when describing choral communities as both "collective" (gathered by shared values or goals) and "collected" (shaped by and enforcing of ideological principles) (p. 78). Parker and Hutton (2023) similarly called for choir teachers' concerted attention to balancing the needs of their greater choral community with the needs of individual students. Parker and Hutton acknowledged that traditional, large-ensemble-based learning environments

tend to "emphasize collective identity more than expression of individuality," in turn losing "sight of the individual…as the cared for" (p. 274).

That said, many of the experiences described by Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students reflect what Parker and Hutton (2023) and other scholars (Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Matthews, 2017; Jorgensen, 1995; Parker, 2016; McCarthy, 2000; Sweet, 2008) posit as potential paths toward reconciling both group and individual needs in the choral ensemble. For example, Bryan spoke about his own efforts to ensure that the GLHS choral community was a place that met the interests of every individual within the community:

> It [the classroom community] will mean different things...For some people it's 'Do I feel comfortable standing as a part of this group and singing as quietly as I can?' For some people, that's a win. For others, it's 'Do I feel like I'm making friendships in here?' It's not just friends that I came into the class with, but it's my Alto section people who I can have a side conversation with in between pieces. And, for others, it's 'Is this my safe space? Is this my reprieve from the rest of school? (Interview 1)

Other examples across research sites related to teacher participants' efforts to balance the collective and individual needs of students in the choral ensemble included: committing to listening to individual student perspectives (such as during daily greetings and in-class check-ins); devoting time toward opportunities for students to learn about each other's individual personhood (such as during activities like relationship/team-building activities and during activities like *Circle Time* at MRHS or the *Circle of Affirmations* and *Passion Presentations* at GLHS); creating opportunities for students to work with and learn from each other (such as during composition and arranging endeavors at WFHS or when leading sectionals and small group rehearsals at MRHS); and involving students in programmatic decision-making (such as decisions related to performance opportunities and repertoire at WFHS or decisions related to uniforms, curriculum, and performances at MRHS and GLHS). The varied points of data presented throughout this section emphasize how a collective sense of mutual empathy, mutual

empowerment, and mutual validation in high school choral music classrooms might cultivate a collective sense of community and belonging among all stakeholders in the learning environment (Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020).

Scholarly Intersections with Theme V: Navigating Relational Challenges

A central tenet of RCT rests in the presumption that all human relationships have the capacity to include points of connection and disconnection (Jordan, 2018). Walker (2020) suggests that disconnections often occur amidst the severance of trust, empathy, empowerment and understanding. Despite a commitment to fostering caring and trusting relationships in their choral classrooms, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each acknowledged that their commitment to relational pedagogy also involved relational challenges and disconnections. The presence of relational challenges in this study's teacher participants' experiences align with the experiences of teacher participants in past studies who identified interpersonal challenges (Edgar, 2016; Hibbard, 2017; Sweet, 2008) and administrative hurdles (Graves, 2019; Parker, 2016) as factors impacting their ability to sustain long-term relationships in the music classroom.

For example, reflecting research findings in past inquiries examining enrollment in school music programs (Abril & Bannerman, 2015; Elpus, 2014; Kinney, 2019), both Bryan and Helen noted that school-wide scheduling issues sometimes restricted students' ability to enroll/remain in their choral classes, which they felt subsequently impacted their potential for sustained relational bonds. Further, Bryan recognized that bonds with students were impacted as the result of abrupt scheduling changes and necessary instructional modifications because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding parallels a growing amount of research in music education examining the immediate and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on music educators, their students, and music teaching and learning (Beirnes & Randles, 2022; Calderón-Garrido &

Gustems-Carnicer, 2021; Daubney & Fautley, 2021; Grier, 2021; Joseph & Lennox, 2021; Koner et al., 2022; Miksza et al., 2022).

Though the intersection between student behavior, classroom management, and relational factors has been examined in music education inquiries (Bauman-Field, 2023; Edgar, 2016; Hibbard, 2017; Milner, 2014; Potter, 2021; Price, 2023a, 2023b), only Helen and Stephanie explicitly identified distinct interpersonal conflicts with students as a relational challenge in their classrooms (Shalaby, 2017, 2020). For Helen, she believed that such conflicts tended to only arise when specific students were not in alignment with her vision for the program. In some instances, if Helen perceived a student as particularly disruptive, she asked WFHS guidance counselors to disenroll the student from her class. This finding reflects implications of the greater power dynamics often present in the teacher-student relationship as identified by critical educational scholars (Brookfield, 2017; Freire, 2005, 2018; hooks, 1994, 2003; Shalaby, 2017). This specific instance also reflects aspects of an authoritative power-over teaching dynamic (Schwartz, 2019). That said, while Helen recognized the relational disconnections in these isolated incidents with individual students (as well as her authority), she believed that ardently upholding her vision for the WFHS choral program was ultimately a way to honor the greater collective of her students who were fully committed to the WFHS choirs. In turn, Helen felt that most of her students broadly appreciated her commitment to their learning as well as her direct and parent-like relational approach to maintaining the classroom environment (Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Milner, 2006). This second finding also draws parallels with literature on other-mothering that examines how Black and African American teachers form unique relational bonds with their Black and African American students (Case, 1997; Guffrida, 2005; McArthur & Lane, 2019; Stovall, 2022).

Reflective of critically-based RCT considerations posed by Schwartz (2019) and Walker (2020), Bryan and Stephanie each discussed reflexively grappling with how implications of power, privilege, and stratification impacted their interpersonal and instructional approaches in the choral classroom. For example, Bryan and Stephanie each told me that they attempt to consciously consider how their identities as white teachers impact the ways they teach and interact with their Black and African American students. This aligns with past research examining the impact of white teachers working with Black and African American students (Douglas et al., 2008; Love, 2019a, 2019b; Sleeter, 2008). For both Bryan and Stephanie, these reflections were primarily described in relation to one-on-one interpersonal interactions with students and the selection/rehearsal/performance of repertoire with foundations in the Black or African American musical and cultural experience (Hess, 2021; McKoy, 2013; Shaw, 2015).

Furthermore, Stephanie's discussion of interpersonal conflicts also included reflections of her authoritative, power-over (Schwartz, 2019) classroom management approaches early in her teaching career which she believed prevented her from forming strong bonds with students—and in some instances was impacted by her unconscious racial bias (Shalaby, 2017). Stephanie stated that confronting how her varied privileges and biases impact her teaching—through sustained humility and reflection—has remained an ongoing challenge in her practice. Stephanie's contemplative commitment mirrors what Berg (2023) designates as the link between a propensity toward "core reflection" and care in music education (p. 433). This also parallels Ehrlich's (2023) call for critical humility in music teacher practice, suggesting that "humility that incorporates validation, emanates care" (p. 578). Mirroring Ehrlich's pronouncement—as well as previous studies examining the importance of music educators' cultural competence (Emmanuel, 2003; McKoy, 2013; Shaw, 2015; VanDeusen 2019, 2021) and cultural humility (Coppola, 2019;

Ehrlich, 2023; Hess, 2021; Yoo, 2022)—Stephanie acknowledged that remaining critically reflexive with regards to issues that include race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation, is both a difficult but necessary component of her work forming relationships with her students.

Within a different realm of relational challenges in the music classroom, Hendricks (2023) provides the important reminder that if music educators are to effectively care for their students, they must first practice self-care and establish various professional and personal boundaries:

> As teachers nurturing caring relationships, it is possible…to become so caught up in the experiences, feelings, and/or needs of others that one can lose one's own sense of self and become unable to help someone else in effective or appropriate ways. (p. 16)

The topic of self-care is reflected in additional past literature (Ballantyne & Canham, 2023; Kang & Yoo, 2020; Kelley et al., 2022; Pellegrino, 2015), with Sweet (2023) stating that music educators' personal efforts toward self-care may "lead to increased understanding of self, stronger ground in work as music educators, healthier people and relationships, increased empathy, [and] strong connections with students" (p. 347). Though Stephanie was the only participant in this study who specifically talked about the importance of personal self-care and interpersonal boundaries with students within her practice, this finding regarding teacher wellbeing is a crucial factor to center when considering the foundations of all music teachers' relational pedagogy.

Finally, only Stephanie explicitly acknowledged the tension music educators may experience when perceived as a trustworthy adult in the eyes of students—in that a deepened sense of trust may lead students to share personal information with their teachers related to broader issues of safety, self-harm, and overall wellbeing. Edgar (2014a) and Sweet (2016, 2019) both emphasize that music educators are not trained as licensed mental health professionals.

Sweet (2016) suggested that music educators should frame their relational role with students as a "cautious counselor," while Schwartz (2019) describes this stance through an RCT lens as 'relational clarity' within connected teaching. Sweet (2019) contextualized this form of relational clarity in music learning spaces when suggesting that truly conveying care in teacher-student relationships involves taking the appropriate steps to connect students with necessary professionals in times of need:

> If a student seems to be in crisis, stay with them, support them, be with them, hold their hand as you walk them down to the school counselor or administration office…Help your student by requesting help from the people in your building who have both training and access to resources to best help adolescents in crisis. (p. 33)

Sweet's (2019) point aligns with reflections from Stephanie, who acknowledged many past instances in her own practice when students shared deeply personal information that in turn required her to refer the students to proper school personnel. Though Stephanie acknowledged that she was aware that making such referrals might breach trust with certain students, she knew it was her ethical duty as a teacher to do so. That said, except for a small number of instances, Stephanie said that most of her relationships with students remained intact after making referrals to school personnel.

Summary

In the passages above, I discussed how themes emergent in this study intersected with past research and scholarship across the fields of education and music education as well as the principles of RCT (Jordan, 2018; Walker, 2020) and the RCT-based notion of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019). I synthesized and supported central findings related to Bryan's, Helen's, Stephanie's and their students' perspectives of (a) the importance of care; (b) the importance of trust; (c) supporting vulnerability; (d) sense of belonging; and (e) navigating relational challenges. The discussion was conceived through the critical lens of RCT (Jordan,

2018; Walker, 2020) and connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019). Below, I will provide implications for the music education profession, organized according to implications for preservice music teacher education, in-service music education, and music education policy. I will conclude by presenting the limitations of this current study and suggestions for future research.

Implications

Woven throughout the stories and experiences of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie and their students is the impact of human connection in the high school choral music classroom. This study's findings suggest that threads of care, trust, vulnerability, and belonging enhanced—and in many instances were prerequisites to—choral music teaching and learning in the GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS choral classrooms. Below, I will discuss considerations for teachers, scholars, and administrators related to the possibilities of human connection across dimensions of music education. I organize this section according to implications for preservice music teacher education, in-service music education, and music education policy.

Before presenting these implications, it is important to again assert that though patterns emerged across this study's research settings at the intersections of care, trust, vulnerability, and belonging, these findings are situated in the specific contexts in which they were experienced. The meaning-making of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie, and their students reflected experiences of human connection that were unique to each participants' identities and to the broader contexts of each research site. Further, those intersections remain enmeshed within implications of identity, power, and context. That said, a range of conceptual approaches and specific interventions gleaned from the emergent patterns across findings may be meaningful when adapted to meet the needs and contexts of individual teachers and their students. Finally, due to the research sites

examined in this study, the implications presented below primarily reflect possibilities for human connection in choral settings. That said, many implications can—and should—be applied to all music teaching and learning settings. I hope to illuminate a few of those possibilities below.

Implications for Music Teacher Education

If choral music teacher educators hope to prepare preservice teachers to enact human connection in their future P-12 choral music contexts, then they must simultaneously center connection within preservice music teacher coursework at the collegiate level. Music teacher educators might approach the implementation of connected teaching into their program's degree coursework by initially surveying the current presence of connection in their practice. To do so, choral music teacher educators might first ask themselves the following questions:

Is connection present in their own relationships with preservice teachers? Do preservice teachers look to them as trustworthy and caring figures? What expressions of care does the music teacher educator enact in the undergraduate music classroom? Is vulnerability in interactions and instruction supported or thwarted? Do preservice music educators feel a sense of belonging in class? Looking more broadly to the larger arch of the degree program, is there a sense of relational continuity between the music teacher educator and their students? Do music teacher educators sustain relationships with their preservice music teachers beyond specific semesters or coursework? Is there a communal sense of belonging within the music education department as a whole?

Each of these questions point to potential paths where upon music teacher educators might initiate commitments to connection and connected teaching in preservice music education programs. If music teacher educators are preparing the next generation of choral music educators to go out into the world, it is important that they prepare preservice teachers to enact relational

practices of their own. Below I offer a few specific paths that music teacher educators might consider amidst efforts to bring dimensions of connection into preservice teacher learning, including: (a) modeling dimensions of connection in their own practice; (b) embedding aspects of human connection in course materials; (c) weaving human connection into class discussions; (d) basing course assignments in facets of human connection; and (e) merging dimensions of human connection in fieldwork and student teaching experiences.

Modeling. Music teacher educators may consider modeling connection in the collegiate classroom as a primary way to display meaningful instruction for preservice teachers. For example, choral music educators might enact connection with their preservice students by (a) greeting them by name as they file into the classroom; (b) devoting instructional time to interpersonal check-ins with preservice teachers collectively (perhaps in a gathering circle or seated outside) or individually during in-person or virtual office hours; (c) providing preservice teachers time to build relationships with each other through team-building activities or social outings; (d) sensitively acknowledging and discussing current events in the classroom that may be impacting student wellbeing; (f) actively talking about the importance of mental health and wellbeing—for music teacher educators, for preservice teachers, and when looking ahead to preservice teachers' lives as in-service teachers; (g) addressing the importance of self-care routines and establishing relational boundaries; (h) naming the presence of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination in traditional teaching and learning paradigms; and (i) engaging in (and encouraging) personal critical reflexivity by acknowledging the limits that one's life experiences place on the capacity to understand student experiences.

Finally, music teacher educators may help their preservice teachers consider how to approach connection as an introvert or as an individual who might be innately uncomfortable with certain forms of interpersonal interactions. In doing so, music teacher educators might acknowledge that not every preservice teacher may be comfortable enacting certain forms of connection in the classroom—and that this is OK. For example, not every preservice teacher will feel comfortable leading an activity like *Circle Time* or the *Circle of Affirmations*. That said, music teacher educators might help guide preservice music teachers toward identifying forms of connection that the preservice teacher *does* feel comfortable enacting and encouraging them to start there. Such examples might include daily greetings at the door, asking students about their weekends, complimenting a student, or celebrating a student based on a recent success outside of class.

Course Materials. Course books, readings, and resources like videos and websites play a prominent role in conveying choral music teacher educators' values and the objectives they hope to instill throughout university instruction. Thus, in addition to modeling connection in the collegiate classroom, music teacher educators might reimagine ways to center connection in their course materials. Specifically, music teacher educators might select course texts that discuss the importance of relationships, community, belonging, trust, and care in the secondary choral music classroom. There is a growing number of full texts (Edgar, 2017; Hendricks, 2018, 2023; McKoy & Lind, 2023; Parker, 2020; Sauerland, 2022; Sweet, 2016, 2019) that address facets of caring relationships, community, and belonging in music teaching and learning. Music teacher educators might also look to books, videos, and instructional materials by vulnerability researcher Brené Brown (2012, 2021) when seeking resources to share and experience with their preservice teachers. Use of such course texts and materials in preservice classrooms may prove

to be essential learning tools for preservice teachers on the cusp of creating choral music learning environments of their own.

Class Discussions. Choral music teacher educators may also build upon the foundations of relational course texts to further weave aspects of connection into class discussions and activities. In addition to distilling the broader themes of connection in academic discussions, music teacher educators might be intentional about consistently prompting preservice teachers to consider how aspects of care, trust, vulnerability, and belonging will impact their future students based on the potential contexts of their future classrooms. For example, relationship-building activities will likely be different in a seventh-grade choir class than in an advanced-level high school choral ensemble. Acknowledging and discussing these differences may be especially relevant when encouraging preservice teachers to consider how aspects of context impact middle and high school students' self-efficacy and vulnerabilities related to singing alone and with others in school choir. Further, just as connection was experienced differently at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS, music teacher educators might center course discussions around how connection may be experienced in different schools and communities based on sociocultural issues of identity and context.

Relatedly, music teacher educators should help preservice teachers acknowledge the ways that they (the preservice teacher) have (or will) experience and enact aspects of connection based on their own identities that include—but are not limited to—race, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, neurodiversity, response to trauma, mental health, and/or (dis)ability. These conversations may serve as a starting point to guide preservice teachers through discussions about how their own identities/experiences and the potential identities/experiences of their future students' will inform connection in the music

classroom. Empowering preservice teachers to center these identity-based intersections with their own experiences of connection may be meaningful not only to the preservice music teacher, but to their future cohort of students.

Additional discussions in the preservice curriculum might also guide preservice music teachers through considerations of ethical and appropriate relational, emotional, and physical boundaries with P-12 students. For example, such discussions might center the importance of asking for P-12 student consent to connect emotionally (i.e., asking P-12 students whether they feel comfortable sharing about their lives) and physically (i.e., asking P-12 students whether they feel comfortable engaging in appropriate physical interactions such as high-fives or fist-bumps).

Course Assignments. As an extension of course texts and class discussions, preservice music teacher course assignments also offer opportunities to address connection in music teacher education programs. For example, when developing lesson plans for a peer-teaching exercise or field experience, preservice teachers might be asked to include an intentional point of connection with their real or hypothetical students. Maybe that point of connection involves noticing and commenting on the efforts of a specific peer/student, increasing eye contact with the ensemble, modifying speaking tone during instruction, or including certain phrases or directives that convey patience and understanding. A point of connection might also involve acknowledging student vulnerability and unease as they use their bodies during a physical warm-up routine, and subsequently providing alternative stretches to honor student comfort; or acknowledging students' fear of voice cracks; or talking about love in a piece of repertoire that breaks down heteronormative paradigms by reminding students that they can sing about any conception of love that resonates with their personal experience. In turn, preservice teachers acting as

‘students’ during in-class teaching simulations might describe how the presence (or absence) of these points of connection impacted their learning experience.

Field Experiences and Student Teaching. Experiences in the field, whether during methods courses or student teaching, also offer immense opportunities to engage preservice teachers in considerations of how to actively foster connection in practice. Choral music educators might begin by reconsidering how they prepare preservice teachers for field experiences. Perhaps preservice teachers are prompted to look for specific aspects of teacher-student and student-student connections in the classrooms they visit, or maybe field work observation forms have sections specifically devoted to connection. Perhaps post-observation reflections (written or discussed in class) might center considerations of how a teacher in the field conveyed care for individual students, fostered community and belonging within the class, or built upon a relationship to guide a student(s) through a specific choral/vocal learning moment. Finally, music teacher educators might redesign fieldwork and student teacher assessment forms so that they directly address preservice teachers’ efforts to convey care, foster trust, support vulnerability, and build relationships with and among the students they are working with.

Implications for In-service Music Education

Bryan’s, Helen’s, and Stephanie’s stories may remind in-service choral music educators how important—and varied—forms of human connection are in the secondary choral classroom. Similar to themes discussed in the section on preservice teaching above, human connection in the P-12 choral music classroom will also be dependent on each individual teacher’s identities, their students’ identities, and their teaching contexts. How in-service choral music teachers enact forms of care, trust, belonging, and support vulnerability will be based on who they are.

Therefore, each in-service choral music teacher must develop modes of connection that reflect their own personhood and level of comfort.

In this section, I will discuss implications for the field of in-service choral music education. I will primarily focus on the importance of knowing and responding to students, fostering a sense of community and belonging in the choral music classroom, merging interpersonal student knowing with the support of student vulnerability, and establishing self-care practices. As noted at the beginning of this section, while the implications below are primarily centered in choral music settings, music educators across music teaching and learning contexts can consider these approaches in their own classroom settings.

Knowing and Responding to Students

Below, I offer recommendations for in-service choral music educators seeking to increase dimensions of connection in their practice. Recommendations are organized related to the importance of: (a) knowing students; (b) daily greetings; (c) devoting instructional time to connection; and (d) centering student identity and life experience.

Knowing Students. As evident in this study's findings, student participants attributed feeling cared-for by their teachers in relation to teacher participants' efforts to know more about them as human beings. Students at GLHS, MRHS, and WFHS were grateful that Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie took an interest in their lives and were invested in them as people. Like this study's teacher participants, in-service choral music educators might be increasingly conscious about their efforts to know their own students as people. For example, when building a deeper knowledge of any individual student, choral music educators might consider learning the answers to questions that include: What are the student's pronouns? What is the student's preferred name or nick name? When is their birthday? What is their favorite TV show? Who is

their favorite musical artist? What is their favorite TikTok account? What is their favorite food? Do they have a job and if so, where is it? What does the student enjoy doing when they are not in the choral classroom? What is their home life like? What is important to the student? Further, as demonstrated by Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, choral music teachers might take the information learned in the answers to such questions, and/or during daily interactions with students, to inform their efforts to intentionally follow-up with students at a later time (whether in class the next day, the following week, after a holiday break, etc.). As evident in the findings of this study, the link between actively learning details about students' lives—and then consciously following-up with students about those specific details—may be an essential continuum in conveying care for students. Daily greetings, devoting instructional time to connection, and centering student identity and life experience in all interactions, are just three examples of broader ways for choral music teachers to get to know (and validate) their students.

Daily Greetings. In-service choral music educators might (re)commit to initiating connection with their students at the start of every class day. Daily greetings may come in the form of a brief verbal salutation, an appropriate physical interaction (like a high-five, fist-bump, or handshake), or a smile accompanied by intentional eye contact. Beyond initiating a point of connection, these interactions may also aid in-service choral music teachers' efforts to "read the room" as part of their process of gauging students' mindsets and wellbeing on a given day of instruction.

Devoting Instructional Time to Connection. Once students are in the classroom, choral music educators might also consider ways to devote instructional time to connecting with their students. Like participants in this study, perhaps in-service choral music teachers will establish a collective connection routine by starting every class period with affirmations, or devoting time at

the end of class every Friday to moments for students to share weekend plans, or a parallel reflection session at the start of class every Monday. Perhaps teachers will carve out five minutes for students to socialize with each other before the vocal warm-up begins. Maybe teachers will develop opportunities for written reflection where students write freely or respond to specific prompts and provide opportunities to share their personal reflection with a partner, in a small group, or with the full class (if they feel comfortable doing so).

Centering Student Identity and Life Experience. Knowing and responding to students also involves acknowledging that local and world events may impact student wellbeing, and thus, connection in the classroom. For example, in-service choral music teachers might recognize that national attention upon the murder of an unarmed Black individual might be impacting their Black and African American students' capacity to focus during class. Or perhaps a choral music educator realizes that recent legislation aimed to dismantle certain human rights may be weighing on the souls of students in the LGBTQ+ community or female-identifying students. Or perhaps choral music educators remember that some of their students may be especially stressed on a Monday morning after having spent two consecutive days in a home environment that is psychologically, emotionally, or physically unsafe.

Finally, as stated at the onset of this section, 'knowing' and 'responding' should be conceived as a critical continuum. Potential examples of this continuum range from broad to specific interpersonal possibilities, and include the following: Example 1: (a) knowing all students' names, gender identities and pronouns; and (b) responding by using students' preferred names and pronouns during all interactions—and requiring that peers do the same. Example 2: (a) knowing that some students in the classroom may identify as Black, while others may identify as African American, Dominican, or Puerto Rican or additional terms based on their

heritage and national origin; and (b) responding by using terms that align with how specific students identify, as opposed to using solely blanket terminology. Example 3: (a) knowing that an individual student or group of students may be experiencing emotional or mental distress related to academic stressors or a recent event; and (b) responding through increased patience, care, and compassion during instruction.

Fostering Community and Belonging

In addition to the importance of interpersonal knowing and responding—and subsequent intersections with choral music teaching and learning—choral music educators might increasingly consider ways to cultivate legacies of community and belonging in individual ensembles and across their programs. In this study, fostering a sense of belonging emerged as a central theme. Stephanie used the term "legacy" when describing the threads that make-up the physical, emotional, and philosophical assemblage of belonging within the MRHS choral community. Whether steeped in facets of legacy, tradition, support, or activism, teacher and student participants at all three research sites identified their choir classrooms as places of collective experience, community, and belonging. Participants across cases also evoked the term "family" to frame a shared identity and sense of belonging. In-service choral music educators might do the same. Like the settings illuminated in this study, cultivating a culture of community and belonging is the result of the collective amalgamation of many initiatives. Aligning with findings from this study, choral music educators might seek to enhance a sense of community and belonging (or 'legacies of belonging') in their own choral programs by (a) considering what the 'legacy' of their choral program may be; (b) increasing student relationship- and community-building; and (c) empowering student agency and leadership.

Choral Program 'Legacy.' Choral music educators committed to promoting community and belonging might first ask themselves—and their students—what it means to be a part of their specific choral program. What is the vision, mission, or 'legacy' that choral music educators hope to sustain throughout their classes and programs? As with every facet of this study's implications, 'legacy' will be different for each teacher, set of students, and choral program. Perhaps a legacy of belonging manifests through ensemble or program traditions like having the freshman choir sing a specific song at the Fall concert every year, hosting annual choir-related social events, eating with students at the same local diner after State Choral Festival, singing at a local organization's holiday luncheon, or gathering seniors together to record their Senior Memories videos. Perhaps a legacy of belonging informs equity-focused repertoire choices that emphasize racial justice, convey empowering messages related to embracing one's full self as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, or includes cultural/musical/linguistic/religious perspectives of students and communities involved in the choral program. And, perhaps a legacy of belonging manifests through visual badges of belonging such as choral spirit gear (t-shirts, sweatshirts, stickers, water bottles, etc.), the placement of pictures featuring current and past choral program students on classroom walls, or an affirming presence on social media.

Choral music educators reading this chapter may find that similar or vastly different legacies of belonging already ground their own choral communities. Whatever those legacies are, weaving them together within a clear mission may convey to students *what it means to belong* in that choral ensemble or program. And such meaning may provide students' a deeper sense of purpose and sense of belonging in the choral classroom community. Closely embedded within legacies of belonging are student-student relationships and community-building activities.

Relationship and Community-Building Activities. In alignment with this study's findings, choral music educators might also attempt to increase their emphasis on relationship- and community-building events in their classrooms, especially at the beginning of every school year. These events might take shape through getting-to-know-you games or icebreakers at the start of every class period during the first week of school; or leading students through activities like 20 questions in their voice sections; or asking students to co-create ensemble rehearsal guidelines. Maybe choral music educators and their students try to foster a broader sense of belonging and community identity in the first weeks of the school year through the creation of ensemble-based or program-wide social events such as ice cream socials, karaoke open mic nights, movie musical viewing parties, or team-building retreats for certain ensembles or leadership councils. Choral music educators might also find ways to encourage specific connections within their choral communities by establishing mentoring partnerships between upperclassmen and freshmen, or music theory peer tutoring partnerships between a student in an upper-level ensemble and a student new to the program.

Empowering Student Agency and Leadership. Finally, choral music educators might attempt to instill legacies of belonging within their choir communities by ensuring that their students have a sense of agency and leadership. Student participants in this study acknowledged that they felt increasingly invested in their choral program when provided with opportunities for individual agency, leadership, and collaboration. Therefore, in-service choral music educators might increase the ways they involve their students in decision-making elements of the program, including decisions regarding repertoire choices, uniforms, rehearsal practices, and performances. Choral music educators might also consider creating formal leadership opportunities for students in the form of program-wide or ensemble-based leadership councils or

governing boards with direct authority to reflect the wishes and needs of students. Opportunities like this enhance the prevalence of student perspectives in important programmatic issues and may also help students feel 'seen' within the program by their choral music teacher and peers.

Merging Interpersonal Knowing with the Support of Vulnerability

Closely enmeshed with their efforts to foster learning environments rooted in care, trust, and legacies of belonging, in-service choral music educators might increasingly consider ways to support their students' varied vulnerabilities in the choral classroom. Reflective of this study's findings, such efforts may include increased attention to (a) empowering mistakes in a 'mistake-positive' classroom environment; (b) supporting vocal vulnerability; (c) fostering empowering music-learning experiences reflective of students' needs; and (d) selecting repertoire that reflects students' identities and life experiences.

Empowering Mistakes. Reflective of Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's practice, possible approaches to mitigating student fear of mistakes in the choral classroom may include explicitly talking about mistakes early in the school year as well as throughout the choral music-learning process. Choral music educators might establish 'mistake positive' environments in their classrooms by naming the prevalence of mistakes as a common part of music teaching and learning. For example, explicitly stating that mistakes are 'OK' or 'normal' can go a long way to establish adolescent learning mindsets. Choral music educators might also make sure that they and students respond to mistakes with patience, compassion, and possibilities for next steps. As identified in this study's findings, teacher modeling of their own mistakes may also be meaningful to students in the secondary choral classroom. Specifically, teachers making—and acknowledging—their own mistakes in the classroom may be a powerful learning tool for students who themselves are navigating how to best process mistake-making in the choral

classroom. When students view their teachers make/acknowledge a mistake, and then display an acceptance of the mistake before carrying on with instruction, students might begin to reimagine how they make and respond to their own mistakes, as well as the mistakes of their peers.

Finally, choral music educators might continue to consider how issues of identity and positionality intersect with the notion of mistakes in the choral classroom. For example, students who suffer from implications of trauma may be especially sensitive to making mistakes in the presence of an authority figure such as a teacher. Students who are navigating aspects of their mental health or elements of perfectionism may also be prone to higher levels of anxiety related to making mistakes. Further, students from historically marginalized communities may hold increased levels of vulnerability or distrust (toward peers and teachers) that in-service teachers may have to acknowledge when supporting students through mistakes in the choral classroom. Compassionately centering these identity-based realities in the establishment of mistake-positive and supportive learning environments is crucial for student wellbeing in the choral classroom.

Supporting Vocal Vulnerability. Findings suggest that facets of care, trust, and belonging directly impacted how student participants approached singing—and how their teachers' approached instruction. Similar to the notion of making mistakes outlined above, a meaningful relationship with a teacher may be essential when guiding students through varied vulnerabilities associated with the singing voice. Students who perceive their choir teacher as a caring and trustworthy presence may not only be more inclined to take vocal risks in the classroom, but may conceptualize feedback differently than if it were given by an individual not holding a reputation of care and trust. The same goes for their peers. Teachers might go about this approach by ensuring that all instruction and conversation addressing issues of vocal technique, range, and tone is laced with care. For example, choral music teachers might simply

acknowledge that singing and using one's voice is often challenging and unpredictable. Also, like Bryan and Stephanie, choral music teachers might relieve certain aspects of their students' vocal vulnerability by reminding them that many aspects of their voices are beyond their control due to genetics, biology, and even daily health. Directly addressing these issues gives credence to the mixture of social, emotional, psychological, and physical vulnerabilities that students may be experiencing.

In addition to such validation, in-service choral music teachers might consider how every instructional activity and language choice will either support or hinder students' vulnerability. For example, some choral music teachers may increase student validation in the form of verbal affirmations (such as 'You're doing great!' or 'Wow, you're really sounding wonderful today'). Other teachers may choose to be increasingly mindful about how they channel patience during interpersonal interactions or during instruction. Perhaps a heightened commitment to nonverbal actions—like increased eye-contact, shifts in physical proximity to students throughout the classroom, or a nod of acknowledgement after a student success—will be the method employed by a choral music teacher in an attempt to increase student comfort. Some teachers may reflect aspects of Stephanie's pedagogical choices by creating more experiences for the ensemble to engage in "low-risk singing" as a part of vocal games, rounds/cannons, and light-hearted activities that give students opportunities to informally explore their voices. Similar to Bryan, other teachers may choose to invite students to meet with them individually before or after school to engage in voice-related work. Moments like these, and undoubtedly many others, may increase comfort for students. Every choral music teacher must find what works for them and their students.

Further, reflecting comments made by all three teacher participants in this study, in-service choral music educators might also find additional ways to increase student comfort related to facets of student identity. For example, as identified in the experience of a transgender student at MRHS who experienced vocal dysphoria, teachers might actively seek ways to acknowledge and support the vocal/singing needs of students who identify as transgender or non-binary. Relatedly, teachers might dismantle long-held choral paradigms that label the voice parts Soprano/Alto as 'female' and Tenor/Bass as 'male,' while also ensuring that students can sing in the vocal section that best fits their needs and preferences. Teachers might also increase their own knowledge of biological components of the voice and vocal pedagogy in order to effectively guide transgender and nonbinary students in their vocal journeys. Finally, given the embodied nature of singing, choral music educators might increasingly consider ways to support students who may be uncomfortable using their bodies during class. Implications of student body-image, eating disorders, physical capabilities, and physiological responses to trauma may all impact how students approach their breath support, posture, and their singing voice. Allowing students to choose how they engage with physical stretches, breathing exercises, and general vocal exploration is critical in sustaining comfortable choral learning environments.

Music-Learning Experiences. Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie made instructional choices at the intersection of music-learning and relational pedagogy by acknowledging that their students' self-concept, self-confidence, and motivation in choir were likely to suffer if they perceived music-learning experiences as insurmountable. Thus, each teacher participant implemented varied music-learning approaches that reflected an awareness and support of their students' specific learning needs. Similarly, in-service choral music educators might consider whether their music-learning approaches are based in care and reflective of their students' needs.

First, like the teachers in this study, in-service choral music educators might vary the types of music-learning approaches they use during instruction. Approaches that include using solfege, sight-singing with piano or recorded accompaniment, rote singing, learning by ear, or call and response, each reflect a style of learning that will resonate differently with students. Weaving various approaches within a specific ensemble or class will not only introduce students to types of music learning evoked across the globe, but will likely more effectively meet the needs of individual students.

Second, as emphasized in Helen's story, choral music educators might creatively reimagine how the use of certain materials and resources may improve student experience when learning music. In some instances, the use of a traditional choral octavo may be worthwhile, but in other cases, perhaps the use of lyric sheets or large-screen projections may most effectively meet the learning needs of students. Further, as evident in Helen's classroom, music-learning approaches that bring students' eyes out of their music might buoy their individual and collective spirit and lead to increased visual and interpersonal connections between teacher, students, and peers.

Third, regardless of music-learning approach, choral music educators might increasingly consider how aspects of pacing, feedback, and instructional language/tone impact student experience of music-learning. All too often, choral music-learning is transmitted through frenetically-paced and regimented procedures that are void of care and compassion. Instead, choral music educators might think about ways to reimagine how they are centering the *people* in their classrooms during music-learning. Many options are possible.

Perhaps a choral music educator shifts between instructional approaches throughout a given week—maybe certain days they facilitate large-ensemble work with the teacher leading

instruction in front of the students, while other days involve small group and sectional work gathered around the piano (led by teachers or students). Perhaps choral music educators attempt to vary the ways students learn music, including the use of sheet music/choral octavos, text-only lyric sheets, music displayed on screen, rote learning, aural learning, and kinesthetic learning. Perhaps choral music educators will reduce their presence in the music-learning process altogether by increasing opportunities for student-directed learning, ranging from creativity-based small group work to student-led sectionals, student facilitation of vocal warm-up and sight-singing procedures, and the use of student conductors. Finally, perhaps choral music teachers will reflect upon certain words or phrases that are part of their choral teaching vernacular: What are the words and phrases they typically use when students make mistakes? What do they say when an eighth-rest is missed for the fourth time in a row? Is there a concerted balance between the amount of instructional encouragement and constructive feedback in their instructional language? Further, what does their body language, facial expressions, and conducting gesture convey to students?

Not every one of these suggestions may be applicable in any given teacher's classroom. Further, based on a choral music educator's entrenched pedagogical habits, changing full-fledged instructional routines may be difficult. But perhaps there are paths that involve including one of these possibilities—or even a portion—when attempting to reconceive how relational practice intersects with choral music-learning.

Selecting Repertoire That Reflects Students. Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie affirmed that conveying care and sustaining trust with students involved selecting choral repertoire that reflected and honored students' identities and life experiences. In-service choral music educators can similarly seek to weave their knowledge of students within classroom repertoire choices. In-

service music educators might enact an approach like Helen's in which every piece of repertoire they select in some way resonates with aspects of their students' sociocultural identities and/or life experiences. Also mirroring elements of Helen's practice, in-service choral music teachers might involve students in the co-creation of repertoire itself (whether in original compositions or arrangements where students create their own lyrics).

Like Bryan, in-service choral music educators might begin shifts in their approach by raising their consciousness of the identities of composers and arrangers whose repertoire they program. For example, choral music educators might ask themselves the following questions: What is the prevalence of composers/arrangers that identify as and/or write about the experiences of Black, Brown, indigenous, queer, or female-identifying perspectives in my classroom repertoire? What is the prevalence of pieces that are not rooted in dominant ideologies such as Christianity or Eurocentric perspectives in my classroom repertoire? Each conscious choice to select and program a piece that speaks to a student's (or group of students') life experience may convey a level of respect and validation that could in turn increase relational trust. As discussed earlier in this chapter, choral music educators might also reimagine how they discuss themes of love in repertoire in ways that veer from heteronormative ideologies and the gender binary. For example, when rehearsing a song about love in a Tenor-Bass ensemble, a teacher might not use language or scenarios in class that presume a student is singing about love for a cisgender female-identifying individual; or more generally, a teacher might attempt to avoid music that reinforces gender stereotypes.

In-service choral music educators might also consider how they address issues of race embedded in repertoire. As demonstrated in parts of Stephanie's and Bryan's reflections, while choral arrangements of African American Spirituals are widely revered across the profession,

sometimes critical attention to the historical and cultural realities of the genre are often glazed over. Thus, choral music educators might increasingly introduce and facilitate conversations about the many layers of African American Spirituals with care and context. Further, implications of teacher and student identity must be centered in such approaches. For example, similar to Bryan's and Stephanie's experiences, a white choral music educator teacher must critically consider how their Whiteness impacts how they discuss/rehearse/perform African American Spirituals, as well as how their instructional approach validates (or silences) the experiences of Black and African American students in the classroom.

Finally, choral music educators should remain diligent in ensuring that in their efforts to reflect students in their repertoire, they do not in turn tokenize or appropriate certain cultural perspectives. If students feel that an African American Spiritual or song about Hanukkah are included solely as 'extra' additions to the 'normal' choral curriculum, they may feel a reduced sense of belonging in the choral program. Further, if choral repertoire is appropriated and rehearsed in stereotypical (or worse, offensive) fashion, relational disconnection and trauma may be experienced by students.

Self-Care for Choral Music Educators Committed to Connected Teaching

Finally, researchers are increasingly examining the importance of teacher self-care (Ballantyne & Canham, 2023; Kang & Yoo, 2020; Kelley et al., 2022; Pellegrino, 2015; Sweet, 2023). As especially emergent in Stephanie's story, choral music educators who are committed to facets of connected teaching may often find themselves feeling relationally, emotionally, psychologically, and physically depleted. Many music educators' attempts to be relationally available for their students—often in highly emotional capacities—may leave them facing

personal and professional burnout. As Sweet (2023) suggests, if music educators are no longer able to care for themselves, then they will likely not be able to care for their students either.

Therefore, in-service choral music educators must explore ways to pour back into their own cup of wellbeing. Echoing facets of Stephanie's experience, and many of Sweet's (2023) recommendations, pouring back into one's cup in the form of self-care might involve: seeking out a therapist; consulting with a medical doctor about possible medicinal interventions to anxiety; turning to trusted family, friends and colleagues in times of need; leaving school as close to the end of the day as possible; limiting interaction with 'work email' outside of business hours; finding one's preferred, personal balance between time alone and time connecting with others; committing to activities one enjoys such as reading, exercising, or going to the movies; deciding whether or not students should have one's cell phone number—and if the answer is 'yes,' communicating to students the times of day it is/is not appropriate to reach out; and even considering ways to reduce the amount of curricular concerts and events one plans/involves themselves in at their school. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, choral music educators must provide themselves the same care, compassion, and understanding they would extend to students.

Implications—Navigating Policy

In examining the intersections between a care-based music education practice and educational policy, Schmidt (2023) suggested that "caring relations and practices…require environmental conditions for flourishing" and that "such flourishing is impacted by, if not dependent on policy and governance practice" (p. 590). Schmidt noted that ideological policy initiatives at the local, state, and national level of the United States (Salvador et al., 2023) are increasingly positioned to "defund teacher agency" (p. 590). He also suggested that teachers may

continue to face backlash when conveying care to their students in the wake of ideological forces seeking to actively demean the personhood of students from historically marginalized communities—especially BIPOC (Crenshaw, 2023; Morgan, 2022) and LGBTQ+ (Davis, 2023; Oakley, 2023) students.

Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie each consciously connected with their students through relational lenses that acknowledged implications that included race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, trauma, and emotional/mental wellbeing. With divisive concepts laws being implemented across the United States, in-service choral music educators seeking to similarly enact relational practice that honors student (and teacher) identity and life experience may potentially find themselves in professional jeopardy. Concerns that teachers will be reprimanded, publicly ostracized, suspended, and/or terminated as the result of 'going against' these evolving laws/policies is a real and valid concern. That said, how can educators, administrators, and policymakers at all levels continue to consider possible paths toward critically connected music learning spaces amidst the spread of false ideologies and divisive concepts laws? Within these very real concerns about professional livelihood, how might teachers also continue to consider the importance of their students' human livelihood? There is no easy answer, and each music educator must ultimately consider what will be possible in their individual teaching contexts.

However, perhaps looking to the efforts of Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie is a meaningful place to start. Like Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, perhaps in-service choral music educators will embrace implications of identity and context within the relational spaces they share with students by selecting repertoire that reflects diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Like Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, perhaps in-service choral music educators will strive to not shy away from discussions about how issues of race intersect with their/their students'

experiences, relationships, and music education. Like Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, perhaps choral music educators will actively honor their LGBTQ+ students in discussions of repertoire, when further confronting gender paradigms of choral music, when displaying symbols of support in the classroom (like rainbow pride flags, Safe Zone posters, or stickers on a teacher's badge), or when attempting to dismantle status-quo, gender binary-based choral uniform traditions. And, like Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, perhaps in-service choral music educators will continue to connect with students by sharing elements of their own personhood and life experience that may validate and inform students' identities as well.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study reflect how human connection was experienced in the choir classrooms of Bryan, Helen, Stephanie and their students. Thus, a prominent limitation of this study is the fact that the findings may not be directly transferrable nor generalizable to the experiences of other choral music educators, their students, or their specific teaching contexts. Moreover, while some of this study's findings may be reflective of broader issues related to relational dynamics and implications of power, identity, context, and systemic structures, these findings only directly align with the experiences of this study's teacher and student participants.

While a broad examination of human connection in the high school choral classroom was the goal of this study, future researchers might examine dimensions of connection in choral music practice (or throughout the music education profession at large) through a heightened lens of criticality in order to more closely consider how issues of identity, context, and power impact relationships in the music classroom. For example, future researchers might conceive a study explicitly focused on how music educators critically consider connection within the realms of racial relational understanding. Mirroring aspects of Helen's and Stephanie's contexts

respectively, researchers might pose research questions that include the following: How is human connection experienced between music teachers and students who share racial, ethnic, or cultural identities? How is human connection experienced between music teachers and students with differing racial, ethnic, or cultural identities? Researchers might also choose to examine the cultivation of connection in music classrooms specifically through the lens of trauma-informed pedagogy, disability studies, or the gender-identity of the music teacher: Does the gender-identity of the music teacher impact connection with students? How do students with cognitive, physical, or emotional disabilities experience connection with their music teacher or peers? How does trauma, specifically, impact students' (and teachers') relational capacities in the choral classroom? Such research would align not only with Jordan's (2017b, 2018) and Walker's (2004, 2008, 2020) conceptualizations of RCT and Schwartz's (2019) notion of connected teaching, but would with the continued call for criticality in music education research and attention to historically marginalized teachers and students in P-12 and collegiate music classrooms.

Future researchers might also examine relational pedagogy in research sites similar to Stephanie's position at MRHS where music teacher and students have the potential to spend multiple years together across middle and high school. Researchers might explore whether long-term relational bonds between teacher and student, especially those initiated during the formative middle school years, sustain deeper emotional depths if maintained throughout high school. Researchers might also consider how having the same teacher for multiple years of vocal music instruction informs how students approach the vulnerable act of singing and choral music-making. Further, researchers might examine how connections between peers manifest if that same group of peers moves through four to seven years of music education experiences together.

Future researchers might also reimagine this study's research methodology. Some researchers may be interested in veering from the multiple case study design in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of one educator's teaching contexts. Additionally, Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie all acknowledged that the beginning of the school year was a crucial time for relationship- and community-building with students. With that in mind, future researchers might begin data collection at the beginning of a school year in order to examine how teacher participants and students initiate relational connection together. These same future researchers might also consider broadening their inquiry to consider how relationships in the choral classroom evolve over an entire semester or year. Further, researchers might examine how music teachers navigate relational and musical vulnerabilities throughout the arch of teaching specific pieces or concepts, by conducting observations and interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of a concert cycle.

Finally, given the previously discussed increase in divisive concepts laws in districts across the country, future researchers might examine how music educators in states with such laws are navigating relational pedagogy—particularly with regard to supporting students in terms of their racial, ethnic, cultural, gendered, and sexual orientation identities.

Conclusion: Toward Conscious Connection in Choral Music Teaching and Learning

Christopher Small (1998) contended that the act of musicking is a "human encounter" (p. 10). To Small, this 'encounter' is an amalgamation of musical sounds, expressions, and understandings that are reflective of the human beings collectively at the helm of the music-making endeavor. Musicking—and the human interactions involved in the conception, rehearsal, performance, and experience of musicking—does not exist separately from the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal orbits it inhabits in any given time or context. Rather, as Small (1998)

asserted, the human encounter of musicking reflects the macro and micro worlds of the humans involved:

> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. (p.13)

Musicking, then, is an intricate relational constellation of factors that Small affirmed was "of central importance to our very humanness" (p. 8).

Within this study, I have examined how human connection was experienced in three high school choral music classrooms. The teacher and students within these classrooms wove powerful stories about how dimensions of care, trust, sense of belonging, and the support of vulnerability coalesced within their experience of the choral music learning environment. At the core of these experiences was the "very humanness" described by Small, a humanness that I posit reflects dimensions of human connection as framed in this study. The roots of connection embedded within Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker, 2020) and notions of connected teaching (Schwartz, 2019) center the importance of, and need for, mutually empathic and mutually empowering growth-fostering relationships, both throughout life and in teaching and learning settings. These relational intersections are also woven within scholarship across the fields of education (Freire, 2005, 2018; hooks, 1994, 2003; Greene, 1993; Noddings, 2003; 2013; Palmer, 2017; Shalaby, 2017, 2020) and music education examining music teaching's intersections with aspects of *belonging* (Ellis et al., 2021; Graves, 2019; Parker, 2010), *care* (Edgar, 2014a, 2016; Hendricks, 2023, Hibbard, 2017; Price, 2023b), *community* (Abril, 2013; Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Parker, 2016; Sweet, 2008),

relationships (Abril & Battiste, 2022; Kennedy, 2002; Parker & Powell, 2017; Sweet, 2010; Rawlings & Young, 2021), and *vulnerability* (Kreutz & Brünger, 2012; Hogle, 2021; MacGregor, 2023; Palkki, 2022; Sweet, 2015). Combined, the breadth of this relational literature across music education, and the foundations of RCT and connected teaching, parallel Small's (1998) conceptualization of relationships as psychological, emotional, social, political, and musical experiences. It is within the spaces of music learning, perhaps most meaningfully in music classrooms, that Small (1998) paints the importance of these relational intersections with deeper musical understanding:

> …all knowledge is a relation between the knower and the known, it is principally through the evocation of emotions, which are the representation in consciousness of computations concerning relationships, that learning takes place. The more powerful the emotional experience, the more powerful the learning will be. (p. 132-133)

With these words and pronouncements as our guide, how then, can we as choral music educators seek to enact this intricately relational approach to musicking and human connection into our practice?

Rooted in Small's (1998) relational conceptualization of musicking, the pillars of Relational Cultural Theory, connected teaching, and foundation of relational scholarship from critical scholars, is a notion that I posit might be conceived as *conscious connection.* I describe my initial vision for conscious connection in choral music education below.

While many relational teaching approaches may be perceived as tied specifically to teacher disposition or personality, the findings of this study suggest that relational practice in choral music settings most fully and meaningfully manifests through a teacher's *intentional* efforts to be *consciously* connected with their students. I posit that *conscious connection* is a state of awareness rooted in consciously basing interpersonal and instructional decision-making in human connection. As a state of awareness that is curricular, pedagogical, and interpersonal, I

conceive conscious connection as a physiological muscle that all choral music educators have the capacity to develop and strengthen over time.

As a critically-conceived state of awareness based in relational mutuality, conscious connection may be perceived as going against traditional notions of schooling (Freire, 2005, 2018; hooks, 1994, 2003; Noddings, 2003, 2013, Palmer, 2017; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020). As evident in the stories of Bryan, Helen, and Stephanie, engaging in conscious forms of connection involves a commitment to modifying how the high school choral classroom is visualized and facilitated. Patterns emergent in this study suggest that committing to conscious connection may entail veering from many of the traditional structures of schooling and music education that have long guided the profession, including authoritative teaching and learning approaches and the notion that pristine musical experiences are more important than the humanity of the people in the music learning space.

The notion of conscious connection in choral music education settings also acknowledges that meaningful choral music experiences in the classroom are rooted in—and thrive because of—care, trust, vulnerability, and belonging. Interpersonal connections and relational compassion are not sidelined in choral music classrooms based in conscious connection—and neither is music content. Conscious connection reflects the fully melded, symbiotic nature of human connection and meaningful music teaching and learning. Given the social, emotional, psychological, and physical facets of vocal and choral music teaching and learning, the notion of conscious connection should not be conceived as ‘solely’ an interpersonal teaching approach—but rather as a curricular and pedagogical foundation. Thus, the catalyzation, experience of, and sustainment of conscious connection in the choral music classroom emerges in the threads in between pedagogical entities: in between teacher and student; in between student and student; in

between teacher, student, and content/repertoire; and in between teacher, student, and content/repertoire amidst a learning moment, choral rehearsal, performance, or community-building event. Conscious connection in choral learning spaces reflects Hendricks' (2018) notion that music spaces are "alive with meaning" (p. 125), as well as Palmer's (2017) conceptualization that a sense of community and belonging in learning spaces represents "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships" (p. 92). This inward and invisible grace, alive with meaning, is the heart of conscious connection in the choral music classroom.

Echoing Small's vision of musicking (1998), a vision for conscious connection, like all human connection (Jordan, 2018; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020), reflects the reality that conscious connection will be situational and context-based. This means that individual, multi-dimensional choral music teachers will foster conscious connection in individualized, multi-dimensional ways. Further, these individual, multi-dimensional teachers will foster conscious connection with individual, multi-dimensional students within individual, multi-dimensional learning contexts. Choral music teachers should therefore envision and enact conscious connection in ways that honor who they are as an individual, in ways that honor who their students are as individuals, and in ways that honor their teaching contexts. For example, some readers may resonate with Helen's impassioned, forthright, and unwaveringly loyal approach to conscious connection in the classroom. Other readers may see themselves in Bryan's earnest, sensitive, and quietly attentive approach to conscious connection. Still, others might find that Stephanie's blend of effervescence, nurturing energy, and humor aligns with their conceptualization of conscious connection. Perhaps readers do not see themselves in any of these participants, which only reasserts the personal nature of what conscious connection should be.

That said, asserting the situatedness and individual aspects of conscious connection does not suggest the validity of refuting the existence and necessity of human connection in school learning spaces—nor does such assertion of situatedness absolve readers of their responsibility to cultivate connection all together. For example, an introverted choral music educator's effort to enact conscious connection in ways that honor their personhood and level of comfort is not the same as a choral music educator who chooses not to foster connection with students at all because they believe that connection is either not needed and/or not appropriate in the music classroom. There remains an all too prevailing dichotomized notion that when it comes to teachers' capacity for connectedness (Palmer, 2017), one either has it *or* they don't; it's all *or* nothing; one either can convey care/foster trust/support vulnerability/cultivate belonging *or* they can't. Yet, Bryan's, Helen's, and Stephanie's stories demonstrate that a teacher's capacity for connectedness is not an 'all *or* nothing' scenario. Their connection was conscious, intentional, layered, reflective, flexible, and evolving. The same is true for a myriad of other middle and high school choral music educators currently enacting personalized forms of conscious connection in their own classrooms today. To cast off relational teaching in a dichotomized 'you either have it *or* you don't' fashion is both a grand assumption and also overlooks the conscious nature of countless choral music educators' efforts to instill care, trust, support of vulnerability, and a sense of belonging into their practice. Yes, the threading of connection is complex. Yes, the threading of connection must remain based in critical reflection regarding a web of sociocultural and interpersonal aspects. Yes, the threading of connection must honor the relational needs of individual teachers, their individual students, and the situational contexts they exist in together. But—refusing to acknowledge and invest in connection ultimately harms students. Thus, the

choice to be consciously connected is a commitment that teachers across the profession can, and must, make.

So, what does conscious connection look like in the choral music classroom? The findings from this dissertation affirm that the importance of care, the importance of trust, the support of vulnerability, and the cultivation of belonging perhaps offer meaningful places to start. Within the context of choral music classrooms, conscious connection might manifest in a variety of ways. Conscious connection might emerge as deliberate responsiveness to students' varied needs. Conscious connection might involve leaning into empathy for a student even on a day when one's own emotional reservoir is dry. Conscious connection might come to fruition in momentary sparks or sustained modes of intentionality. Being consciously connected might mean greeting students at the door every day, noticing a student's haircut, or asking students about their weekend before jumping into sight-singing. Being consciously connected might involve realizing that on a certain Tuesday in February, multiple members of the Tenor-Bass ensemble do not seem like themselves and that a decision to devote class time to an interpersonal check-in (or making an adjustment to instruction) is necessary to convey care. Conscious connection might also be conceived as an awareness that teachers have of their tone of voice during instruction, their word choice throughout a lesson, their body language when interacting with students, how they respond to student behavior, the temperament of their pacing, their level of eye contact with students, and their choice of repertoire. Conscious connection may involve consistent critical reflection of how one's identities and positionalities intersect with students' identities and positionalities in the classroom.

Ultimately, conscious human connection in the choral music classroom is an individualized, situated, and critically-based state of awareness that informs the various 'human

encounters' embedded in choral music-making endeavors (Small, 1998). As a curricular, pedagogical, and interpersonal state of awareness, conscious connection is based in the intentional pursuit towards fostering school choral music settings rooted in care, trust, belonging, and the support of multifaceted emotional, social, and musical vulnerabilities—all of which, as Small (1998) asserts, are "of central importance to our very humanness" (p. 8).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Teacher Participant Interview Protocol

Appendix A

Teacher Participant Interview Protocol

Teacher Participant Interview 1

Pre-Interview Script: Thank you again for making the time to meet with me. As you may remember, my goal for this research study is to better understand how high school choir teachers and their students experience human connection in the high school choir room. As a reminder, I am recording this interview. We can stop the interview and the recording at any time. When it comes to your answers, if you can, try to identify when you are speaking/reflecting about your approach to interactions/relationships with individual students vs. a group/class of students.

1. Tell me about your journey to becoming a teacher (school? certification?)
2. How would your students describe you?
3. How would you describe your approach to building relationships with students in your choral classes/program?
    a. Do you do any specific actions *daily* to foster interactions?
        i. If so, what?
    b. Do you do anything specific *over time* to foster interactions?
        i. If so, what?
    c. Do you see students cultivating relationships and community with each other?
        i. If so, how?
    d. How do you begin/form relationships with students at the beginning of the year? Throughout the year?
        i. With new students/freshmen?
    e. How do you begin to help students form community/relationships with each other at the beginning of the year? Throughout the year?
        i. With new students/freshmen?
4. Tell me about when/why did relationships with students/community became important to you?
    a. Was there a time that you noticed a transformation or shift in your own practice? Or when your students 'got it?'
    b. Is there a relational/community culture within your school at large?
5. Tell me about a specific student, group or students, or class that comes to mind when you think of building relationships, community, and sense of belonging in your classes/program.
6. What does it mean to 'belong' in your choral program?
7. What else do you want to share with me about relationships/community/belonging in your classroom?

Teacher Participant Interview 2

Pre-Interview Script: Thank you again for making the time to meet with me. As you may remember, my goal for this research study is to better understand how high school choir teachers and their students experience human connection in the high school choir room. As a reminder, I am recording this interview. We can stop the interview and the recording at any time. When it comes to your answers, if you can, try to identify when you are speaking/reflecting about your approach to interactions/relationships with individual students vs. a group/class of students. During this interview, I may refer to/ask about aspects of your answers from Interview 1, as well as details related to my observations in your classroom.

1. What do you think students feel when singing in choir? Alone/with others?
    a. [If participant only shares positive answers ask the following]: Are there times when students seem unsure/nervous/scared/anxious? If so, why?
2. I just heard you use the word(s)______. Can you build on that to tell me more about a specific time that you helped guide a student/group of students through:
    a. Elements related to their voice/voice change?
    b. Elements related to the use of their bodies in the act/process of singing?
    c. Elements related to singing with others?
    d. Elements related to emotional, social, cultural, or political implications of repertoire lyrics?
    e. When introducing/rehearsing/performing a piece?
3. Are there certain types of songs/repertoire that enhance the fostering of relationships/community/belonging?
    a. If so, what specific songs/types of songs/genres and how do they impact students and their choral experience in your classroom?
4. Are there specific types of performances or activities that enhance the fostering of relationships/community/belonging in your class/choral program? [Provide examples if that is helpful]
    a. If so, what are they and how do they impact students/the choral experience in your classroom?
    b. When your students interact with each other (vocally/musically, interpersonally) what do you notice about their relationships?
        i. Does this impact their sense of ensemble? Does this impact your teaching?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?

Teacher Participant Interview 3

Pre-Interview Script: Thank you again for making the time to meet with me. Across our two previous interviews, you've shared with me how you and your students experience aspects of human connection in your choir room. Today is our final interview. At the end of the interview you will have the opportunity to share any additional information that may not have come up in previous interviews or during observations. As a reminder, I am recording this interview. We can stop the interview and the recording at any time. When it comes to your answers, if you can, try to identify when you are speaking/reflecting about your approach to interactions/relationships with individual students vs. a group/class of students. During this interview, I may refer to/ask about aspects of your answers from Interview 1 and Interview 2 as well as details related to my observations in your classroom.

1. Has your approach to interacting with students in your classroom changed over time? If so, how?
2. How do you create community in your classroom that both brings students together but still allows for individual differences and agency?
3. We can't separate our identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, tribal affiliation, language, religion, ability/disability, neurodiversity, implications of trauma, mental health, etc.) from how we are and how we teach, nor can we separate our students' identities from who they are and how they experience our classroom/us/each other. In your pre-interview questionnaire, you mentioned the following identities: [Read self-identities submitted by participant in pre-interview questionnaire]
    a. Have you found interactions between you and your students to be informed/impacted by these or other of <u>your</u> identities?
        i. If so, how?
    b. Have you found interactions between you and your students to be informed/impacted by these or other of <u>your students'</u> identities?
        i. If so, how?
    c. Do your/your students' identities inform the choral experience in this classroom (singing, repertoire, text, themes of music, etc.)? If so, how?
4. Every one of us has had times in our careers when forming connections with students has been tough. Tell me a story about a time when you've struggled with fostering/sustaining relationships, community, and sense of belonging with students.
    a. Describe any additional challenges or points of tension you've experienced when attempting to foster/sustain relationships, community, and sense of belonging with students. (This might include elements of identity).
    b. If you had a student teacher/colleague that was struggling to foster/sustain relationships, community, and sense of belonging with students, what would you share with them? How would you guide them?
    c. Where/when/with you do you feel most connected? Least connected?
5. Do you hope to change/modify/deepen your approach to interacting with students in your classroom going forward? If so, how?
    a. Has this process elicited any personal or professional reflection?
6. Anything else you would like to share?

Appendix B

Student Focus Group Protocol

Appendix B

Student Focus Group Protocol

Student Focus Group 1

Pre-Focus Group Script: Thanks again for participating in this focus group. I realize it can sometimes be difficult to share personal thoughts and feelings with others, especially someone you have just met. So, I really appreciate your willingness to do that with me today. As a reminder, I'm here today and have been observing you during class, as part of my dissertation study in which I'm trying to learn more about how high school choir teachers and their students experience relationships and sense of community (I'm calling it connection) with each other in the choir room. There may be times during the focus group that I ask you to follow-up on a comment you've made just to make sure I understand what you're trying to share. I may also refer to elements I've seen during observations if they relate to something you say today. I am using my phone and iPad to record our conversation so that I can go back later and listen to your reflections. No one else will listen to the recording of what you share today. I can stop the recording at any time—just let me know. Also, you can stop participating in the focus group conversation at any point. Again, just let me know. Any questions for me before we get started?

1. What words come to mind when you think of:
    a. This choir class/program
    b. Your teacher
    c. Each other (choir peers, etc.)
2. Tell me about ways you have built relationships with each other in choir.
3. Tell me about ways you have built relationships with your teacher in choir.
4. Looking back at the songs you've sung in choir…are there certain songs you've rehearsed/performed together that make you feel more connected to each other/your teacher?
5. Are there certain types of performances/concerts or activities that make you feel more connected with each other/your teacher?
6. What does it mean to 'belong' in this choral class/program?

Student Focus Group 2

Pre-Focus Group Script: Thanks again for participating in this second focus group. I really enjoyed our conversation last time. I appreciated how willing you were to talk with me and share your perspectives. I'm excited to do the same again today. As a reminder, I'm here today and have been observing you during class, as part of my dissertation study in which I'm trying to learn more about how high school choir teachers and their students experience relationships and sense of community (I'm calling it connection) with each other in the choir room. There may be times during the focus group that I ask you to follow-up on a comment you've made just to make sure I understand what you're trying to share. I may also refer to elements from the first focus group or to something that I've seen during observations if they relate to something you say today. I am using my phone and iPad to record our conversation so that I can go back later and listen to your reflections. No one else will listen to the recording of what you share today. I can stop the recording at any time—just let me know. Also, you can stop participating in the focus group conversation at any point. Again, just let me know. Any questions for me before we get started?

1. Tell me about a time when your choir teacher showed care/was there for you.
2. Describe the aspects of singing/choral music that make you feel nervous, uncomfortable, anxious, or vulnerable.
    a. I just heard folks use some of the following words______ when talking about _______. Thinking about what you just shared:
        i. Does your choir teacher help/support you through any of those concerns? If so, how?
        ii. Do you help/support each other through any of those concerns? If so, how?
3. How does your teacher support differences in identity in choir, such as those based on race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability/disability, issues related to mental health, neurodiversity, etc.?
4. Tell me about a specific time that your teacher made you feel seen/valued/empowered in this classroom (musically, vocally, socially, culturally, emotionally)?
5. Tell me about a time/ways you and your peers support each other in choir.
6. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix C

Observation Field Note Template

Appendix C

Observation Field Note Template

DRAFT OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

OBSERVATION DETAILS
Date of Observation: Location: Time of Observation: Teacher Participant: Choral Class/Ensemble: Number of Students: Main Curricular/Repertoire Objectives of Observation:

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES	REFLECTIVE NOTES

NOTABLE TEACHER OBSERVATIONS/QUOTES	NOTABLE STUDENT OBSERVATIONS/QUOTES

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Appendix D

Definitions

Appendix D

Definitions

Central relational paradox

The central relational paradox suggests that despite the core human need to connect with others (Bowlby, 1979), an intense fear of rejection, invalidation, and shame can ultimately be so intense that it causes an individual to enact "barriers or strategies of disconnection to protect themselves," (Singh et al., 2020, p. 264).

Connection

"an interaction between two or more people that is mutually empathic and mutually empowering" and cultivated through an "emotional and cognitive (feeling-thinking) movement" between individuals (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 26-27). Jordan (2023) suggested that a critical framing of connection may be based in notions of: (a) supported vulnerability; (b) mutual empathic involvement in the relationship; (c) relational confidence that one has relationships they can depend on; (d) empowerment through mutual growth; and (e) the simultaneous development of personal and relational awareness (p. 76).

Culture

"Integrated patterns of human behavior that includes, thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group" (Cross et al., 1989, p. 3).

Disconnection

A disruption in connection caused by a severance of empathy, empowerment, trust and/or the 'five good things' (Jordan, 2010). Disconnection may leave an individual feeling

emotionally (and physically) rejected, detached, or isolated (Cannon et al., 2012; Comstock et al., 2008).

Growth-fostering relationships

A "two-way, bi-directional" interpersonal investment (Hartling, 2008, p. 63)—a form of interpersonal connection wherein both individuals experience emotional, psychological, and social growth (Bruneau & Reilly, 2021; Haskins & Appling, 2017).

Mutual empathy

An emotional, psychological, physiological attunement between individuals (Brown et al., 2002; Jordan & Hartling, 2002) often experienced as the result of the interaction between two individuals' mirror neurons (Siegel, 2012).

Mutual empowerment

Empowerment felt as the result of receiving and providing relational support (Haskins & Appling, 2017) and attained through the realization of what Miller (1988) described as the "five good things" (p. 5): (a) *zest* (relational energy and vitality); (b) *clarity* (about oneself, the other, and the relationship); (c) *self-worth* (related to one's relational competencies); (d) *action* (in the form of heightened relational agency and empowerment); and (e) an increased *desire for more connection* (in the specific relationship and in general).

Relational images

The contextual foundations from which individuals perceive themselves, others, and relationships in general (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 75); described as "expectations that individuals have about their roles in relationships based on past relational experiences" (Hammer et al., 2016, p. 133). Walker (2008) suggests that relational images "function to

explain self, other, the purposes and the possibilities for relationship" (p. 139). Relational images are often formed early in life, sustain long-term impact, and can be related to interactions with important life figures such as parents, caregivers, family, friends, and teachers (Jordan, 2010).

Vulnerability

Broadly, one's willingness "to express authentic feelings" based on perceptions of "safety…directly related to how much mutuality exists in a relationship" (Jordan, 2018, p. 9).