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# “If it fits into their culture, then they will have a connection”: Experiences of two Latina students in a select high school choir

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## Abstract

In the United States, Latino/a students are underrepresented in secondary school music programs (Elpus & Abril, 2011). By understanding the needs of Latino/a students, music educators can create programs that will better serve this student population. This intrinsic case study chronicles the experiences of Cassandra and Elena, two students enrolled in a high school choir in a mid-sized Midwestern community. The main research questions were: (a) Which lived experiences of these Latino/a students play a role in school choral music, and (b) Which elements of culturally relevant pedagogy have played a role in choral music education of these two students? Emergent themes related to these students' experience include that: (1) family and community were vital in their musical education, (2) bilingual status and power structures were sometimes difficult to navigate in a majority Latino/a school, (3) culturally relevant repertoire was a priority, and (4) their family members sometimes had difficulty connecting to the choral program. Cassandra and Elena's Latina heritage and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy serves as a lenses for this case study.

## Introduction

*It was my first semester of teaching in a large urban middle school in California, and I knew right away that we would not sing a note that particular day. The air was heavy with emotion. Many students had walked out of class to attend a rally at city hall with their families as Congress was considering immigration legislation that included a provision about deportation of people without legal status. Many of my students were the first in their family born in the United States and therefore, the only legal residents in their families. That day, they shared their experiences and feelings, and they tried to reassure each other. I asked questions. I listened. A sixth-grade student came to me in tears after school, terrified her family would be sent away and that she would be left in this country alone. That day, I realized how much I needed to learn about my students and this community. That day it became exceedingly clear to me that my upbringing in the rural Midwest set me apart from my students.*

Latino/a<sup>1</sup> students remain a vulnerable and, too often, underserved population in American schools (e.g., Godinez, 2011; Noguera, 2006, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999; Valverde, 2006). It has been predicted that by 2060, one in three Americans will be of Hispanic or Latino/a descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), with Latino/a youth representing the fastest growing subset of the United States population (Motel & Patten, n.d.). The public schools that Latino/a students

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<sup>1</sup> In the cited literature, "Hispanic" and "Latino/a" are often used interchangeably. According to Passel & Taylor (2013): "One approach defines *Hispanic* or *Latino* as a member of an ethnic group that traces its roots to 20 Spanish-speaking nations from Latin America and Spain itself (but not Portugal or Portuguese-speaking Brazil). The other approach is much simpler. Who's Hispanic? Anyone who says they are. And nobody who says they aren't." In the findings section, I will use both "Mexican" and "Latina," two of the terms used by the participants in this study.

attend may devalue their culture and language (Darder, 1993; Valenzuela, 1999). In addition, many Latino/a students attend large, under-funded schools that do not adequately serve students (Norrid-Lacey & Spencer, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999; Valverde, 2006). Even though they represent a larger percentage of American schools overall, Latino/a students remain underrepresented in school music programs (Elpus & Abril, 2011)—programs that may not be doing enough to serve this rapidly expanding population (Lind, 1999). To remedy this, culturally relevant approaches that attempt to bridge cultural gaps in meaningful and non-stereotypical ways in the music classroom may facilitate connection with Latino/a students and families. Research on this topic may help choral music educators and teacher educators understand how some Latino/a students experience secondary choral music education. Therefore, with the goal of improved instruction, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of two Latina students in a high school choral program.

## Review of Selected Literature

There are many lenses through which students and teachers view the world around them, and their experiences vary based on demographic features including language of origin, ethnicity, race, geographical location, and gender. Students' cultural backgrounds can enliven and enrich the classroom environment and curriculum, but they also may create challenges for teachers who do not understand the cultural differences of their students. For example, educators sometimes fail to understand and adjust to cultural differences specific to Latino/a students (Canning, 1995; Hill-Jackson, 2007; McHatton, Shaunessy, Hughes, Brice, and Ratliff, 2007). These differences include lack of parental support and involvement (Ramirez, 2003) and a disconnect between home and school (Darder, 1993), and these circumstances can create difficulties for Latino/a students. Ibañez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, and Perilla (2004) suggested that levels of achievement, motivation, and parental involvement among Latino/a students vary based on acculturation, meaning that U.S.-born students and/or English speaking Latino/a students may have different experiences in school than students born abroad. These studies and articles, in combination with my personal experiences teaching in a school with a majority Latino/a population led me to wonder how choral music educators might consider the lived experiences of Latino/a students in order to improve instruction for this rapidly growing population.

### Learning From the Experiences of Latino/a students

More research chronicling the experiences of Latino/a youth in American schools can help educators better understand this student population, and these stories can give perspective on day-to-day experiences that Latino/a students face in American schools. Studies exploring these experiences are vital because the perspectives of Latino/a students and non-Latino/a teachers may be glaringly dissimilar (Arreola, 2012; Avilés, Guerrero, Howarth & Thomas, 1999; Katz, 1999). The present study was done in an effort to address these issues.

By exploring the lived experiences of Latino/a students, music educators can more fully understand the myriad of issues involved with navigating cultural identity in K – 12 schools.

Lum and Campbell's (2009) exploration of a young Mexican-American student named Mirella encapsulates why this type of research is important in music education discourse:

By listening to Mirella and through my [Chee-Hoo Lum] interactions with her family and friends, it was possible to enter into a musical and social reality, alive and well beyond the cultural mainstream. Mirella's voice was heard loud and clear, and her commentary conveyed something of her own values and that of her community. (p. 123)

By listening to students like Mirella, music teachers may be able to adapt teaching strategies, repertoire selection, and parent outreach strategies to better serve Latino/a students and families.

### How Well is Music Education Serving Latino/a Students?

In light of the rapid increase in the percentage of Latino/a students in the school-aged population, the music education community must grapple with the inclusion of Latino/a students, who are consistently underrepresented nationally in secondary band, choir, and orchestra courses. Elpus and Abril (2011) attribute this disconnect to access issues and/or a sense that music courses might seem irrelevant to the Latino/a student population. Based on these results, it is logical to conclude that school music programs may better serve Latino/a youth by developing cultural fluency and by honoring differences in this student population—an issue that I sought to investigate in the present study.

Latino/a students bring unique perspectives to the classroom—perspectives that Anglo-centric teachers may not comprehend (Canning, 1995; Darder, 1993). Thus, an approach to teaching that takes students' cultures into consideration may improve the educational experiences of students living in an increasingly diverse world. Culturally relevant pedagogy is an educational process that honors the lived experiences of students and their families (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2011). Whenever possible, it is helpful for teachers to connect the experiences of Latino/a youth with the curriculum being taught (Gay, 2002; Huerta, 2011; Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2011). Culturally relevant pedagogy may be especially crucial in music education, where Latino/a students remain an underserved student population.

### Multicultural Music Education

The increased globalization of American society that began in the 1970s inspired increasing emphasis on "multicultural" issues in American music education (Regelski & Gates, 2009; Volk, 1993), although MENC became involved in the multicultural movement as early as 1929 (Mark, 1996). Multicultural music education is defined by Anderson and Campbell (2010) as a: "music education [that] reflects the cultural diversity of the world in general and of the United States in particular by promoting a music curriculum that includes songs, choral works...and listening experiences representative of a wide variety of ethnic-cultures" (p. 1). Mark (1996) recounted MENC's evolving stance on multicultural or "world musics," highlighting the contribution of scholars such as Anderson and Campbell, who published the first edition of *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education* in 1989. Mark (1996) noted that teacher training for multicultural music instruction has been disparate and non-uniform; he mused that, "a more realistic goal is to have students develop sensitivity and respect for cultures

other than their own” (p. 194). Mark’s comment represents the broader pluralism multicultural music education inspired—a step toward the work of scholars and pedagogues working on issues of social justice in music education.

While teaching world musics in American schools may bring a wealth of interesting musical styles into the classroom, the teaching of these musics can also become act of tokenizing and colonization. While multicultural music education seems positive on a philosophical level, it is easy for music educators to fall into what Kruse (2013) termed the “trap of superficial multiculturalism” (p. 38); similarly, Hess (2013) argued against “musical tourism” (p. 67) while teaching world musics in the classroom. Bradley (2006) wrote that multicultural music education can become “hegemonic curriculum,” stating that, “teachers and conductors sometimes operate from an ethic that encourages including ‘something different’ on the program in order to fulfill school boards’ or parents’ expectations for multicultural content” (p. 12). Teachers employing culturally relevant pedagogy in music education seek to get beyond colonizing, tokenizing practices and look into the community—both within and surrounding the school music program—to draw upon resources and musical traditions that speak more directly to the specific student population of that school.

### Culturally Relevant Music Education

Several scholars have encouraged music educators to help Latino/a youth feel welcome in the music classroom. In her study comparing the classroom environment of choral music programs with low vs. proportionate Hispanic enrollments, Lind (1999) found that many Hispanic students felt a sense of disconnection within choral programs. The larger point here is that Latino/a students may feel disenfranchised in American educational settings, including school music programs. For example, Abril (2012) explored the political nature of a Spanish-language adaptation of the Star Spangled Banner—a choice met with great resistance, and a defining moment for many Latino/a Americans pursuant to their musical identity development. Fitzpatrick (2012) cautioned teachers to be wary of “deficit models,” prejudgments that a certain student population (e.g., Latino/a students) is inherently incapable (Valencia, 1997). Fitzpatrick (2012) suggested that teachers explore their own background and biases in order to find common ground with students rather than seeing students as a problem that must be solved. Similarly, in his study on the experiences of a Chicana preservice music educator at a predominantly white university, Kruse (2013) urged music educators to challenge assumptions about their students that may be biased.

The increasing body of writing on culturally relevant teaching in music education is part of a larger focus on music and social justice (e.g., Abril, 2006; Hoffman, 2012; Mixon, 2009). One music education study profiled an instrumental teacher’s quest to adapt repertoire and curriculum to the cultures represented in her class (Abril, 2009). Studies on culturally relevant pedagogy focused on students have explored perceptions of adolescent students in a community youth choral program about culturally relevant teaching (Shaw, 2014) and the experiences of three students (including two Hispanic students) reflecting on their high school band experiences in a city on the U.S./Mexico border (Brewer, 2010). Brewer’s (2010) study conveyed the words

of a Mexican student named Lucia, who described one of her teachers in a way that illustrates the need for an exploration of culturally relevant pedagogy: "She was just unapproachable to students, especially Mexican students. She didn't speak Spanish or seem to really embrace the culture. She would make assumptions about the Mexican culture... and that just pushes students away" (p. 53). These studies and articles give valuable information about the tenets of culturally relevant teaching; this information combined with my previous teaching experience led me to wonder whether this pedagogy is beneficial for Latino/a students in the choral classroom.

Bond (2014) and Shaw (2012) both provided suggestions to practitioners regarding implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in choral settings. However, virtually no empirical studies have focused on the experiences of Latino/a students in secondary choral programs. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of two Latina students in a high school choral program. The research questions were:

- Which lived experiences of these Latino/a students play a role in school choral music?
- Which elements of culturally relevant pedagogy have played a role in choral music education of these two students? Specifically:
  - Which types of choral literature speak to the experiences of these Latina students?
  - Which instructional approaches, choral repertoire, and concert characteristics help these Latina students and their families interact with choral music in a positive way?

### Researcher Lens/Theoretical Framework

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that qualitative researchers should be forthright in explaining elements of their background that could influence their study. As exemplified in the vignette at the beginning of this article, with my limited Anglo-centric worldview and school experiences in tow, I accepted my first teaching job in California at two schools in which Latino/a students made up approximately 80 percent of the student body. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I took many missteps. As a young teacher, rather than learning about and building upon the strengths of the community, I imposed elements of a Caucasian, Midwestern choral experience on my students rather than honoring their culture. While I wish that this had not been the case, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to learn, and to work at correcting my deficiencies.

With the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy in mind (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2011), I explored whether these techniques were helpful in improving instruction for Latino/a choral students. Much of the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on teachers, but the desired result of this pedagogy is a meaningful, student-centered interface between teachers and students. For example, there seems to be a link between a teacher's beliefs about cultural differences and their day-to-day interactions in the classroom; teachers employing culturally relevant pedagogy maintain an appreciation for the cultural traditions and ideas that students bring to the classroom (Huerta, 2011). Gay (2002) listed critical elements of culturally relevant pedagogy, including community building, clear communication, diverse ethnic and cultural diversity within school curricula, and the building of nurturing classrooms for students. I

designed the present study to investigate which of these rudiments of culturally relevant pedagogy play a role in the music education experience of two Latina students enrolled in a high school choral program.

## Method

### Data Collection and Analysis

This is an intrinsic multiple case study because my interest is in presenting the stories of these two students who constitute rich cases, not in generalizing about the experiences of all Latino/a students (Grandy, 2010; Stake, 1995). This is an intrinsic case study because the goal was to explore these students' experiences and not in building theory. As Grandy (2010) wrote: "The intrinsic case study offers an opportunity to understand particularities. The researcher is interested in context and is seeking both depth and breadth in his or her exploration" (pp. 499-500). The institutional review board at my institution deemed this study exempt, and I obtained consent from the participants' parents and assent from the two students. These two participants were chosen with the assistance of the choral music teacher at the data collection site using criterion sampling, meaning that only participants fitting certain criteria are considered (Palys, 2008; Patton, 2002). In this case, all Latino/a students enrolled in a choral music class at Kennedy High School<sup>2</sup> were eligible to serve as participants. I worked with the teacher to recruit students who would represent varied cases that would illuminate the various facets of the research problems (Creswell, 2007). For example, one participant was born in the U.S. and the other in Mexico; they also had disparate experiences learning English. I provided consent forms to the teacher who announced the study to her middle and high school choral classes. Two students who fit the criteria returned consent forms after being encouraged by their teacher to do so. Although these were the only two students who returned consent forms, I believe that their dissimilarities and unique stories make them diverse cases.

Data forms include field notes and classroom observations (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), transcripts from semi-structured interviews, and e-mail correspondence with participants. I observed multiple choir classes at Kennedy on each of my five visits. After the initial interviews, I sent each participant follow-up questions within a week of the interview, and they responded in writing, which allowed me to explore emerging ideas from the data both within and across cases. To that end, I completed two individual interviews with each participant as well as two focus group interviews with both participants, and e-mail follow-ups (Morgan, 1997). Interviews and focus groups lasted 20 – 40 minutes each.

I coded transcripts and field notes using a combination of Structural and In Vivo coding, the latter of which utilizes direct quotations from participants. While coding, I searched for emergent themes by grouping small units of data, then sorting them into larger themes (Saldaña, 2013). During structural coding, I grouped many segments of data under the research questions

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the names of all people and schools appearing in this document.

and sub-questions. During the data analysis phase, I realized that giving context to the broader educational experiences of the two participants helped situate their stories.

Trustworthiness efforts guided data collection, analysis, and writing. Participants had the opportunity to member check interview transcripts and the final paper to ensure I had not taken their words out of context (Patton, 2002). Fearing that she sounded too negative, one participant added two additional statements to clarify a quote from interview #1. In addition, two colleagues with extensive qualitative research experience assisted with analysis triangulation by peer checking my initial set of codes and the final write-up (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several sub-theme changes were made based on this peer review process.

Though the experiences of the two participants in the present study are not generalizable to all Latino/a students, Tracy (2010) suggests that via thorough data collection, thick description, and clearly written manuscripts, qualitative researchers might inspire some element of transferability. Similarly, Ellis (1995) suggested that "evocative storytelling" plays a role in a qualitative study, stirring strong emotions that can be experienced and processed by a wider audience. Thus, perhaps the results of the present study as evidenced in the rich stories of the two participants within their unique contexts will likewise provide meaning for some kind of expanded community or culture. The findings section includes both within-case and cross-case analyses.

## Participant Profiles

Data were collected in the winter and spring of 2014 at Kennedy Middle/High School, the lone secondary school in a small school district in a medium-sized, Midwestern city that serves 1,050 students in grades six through twelve. Seventy percent of students are Latino/a with the remaining 30% split between African American and Caucasian. In 2013-14, 95% of all Kennedy students were eligible for the National School Lunch Program. The principal identified "transiency and poverty" as significant challenges at the school.

Cassandra. Outgoing, confident, light-hearted, and well-spoken, Cassandra was born in the state of Nuevo León, Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. as a baby. At the time of data collection, she was a tenth-grade student at Kennedy High School who recalled that she had always loved singing. Living with her siblings and parents, Cassandra had been surrounded by vocal music especially—with both of her parents having been involved in church music in Mexico and with her mother occasionally singing *mariachi* music before moving to the U.S. In addition to school choir, Cassandra participated in Spanish Club (an extracurricular club, which Cassandra said, "builds people to bring them more together"), a college and career readiness program, school musicals, and competitive cheerleading. She began elementary school in a different school district but transferred because her mother "didn't like the area as much there." Her love of singing, fostered in an arts program in which she was involved as a young student, influenced her hope to continue singing throughout her life.

Elena. Elena is unpredictable, gregarious, and kind. She was born in the same Midwestern city in which she attends high school, and where she resided at the time of the



present study with her parents and two younger sisters. Describing the responsibility of being the oldest child, Elena said, “I’m the one that gets straight A’s... and the role model of the family.” In reference to her musical interests, Elena indicated that along with her mother and sisters, she is active in multiple music groups at their church. Also involved with the school musical and choir, Elena acknowledged that music: “...kind of...helps you in your life. ‘cause if you’re stressed and stuff like that, and too much stuff, you just sing or hear music and you’re cool.” She also indicated that she hopes to have time to sing in a choral ensemble in college and that she and Cassandra were friends in the advanced choir at Kennedy.

## Findings

Several themes emerged pertaining to the research question of how the participants’ lived experiences influence their choral music experience and, more broadly, their educational experience at Kennedy. These themes include (1) *family and community*, (2) *bilingual status and power structures*, (3) *repertoire*, and (4) *experiences of family members*.

### Family and Community

Family. The musical experiences of Cassandra and Elena’s family members played a significant role in their musical lives, including participation in school music. Cassandra said:

My mom and dad used to sing... back in Mexico they would be in church groups or something like that and they would sing... My dad, supposedly, for every Mother’s Day the men from the church group would go to sing to every house for the women, for the moms. Then my mom would sing— not in clubs, but in cafés and everything. She would sing those *mariachi* ones.

Elena also spoke enthusiastically of her family’s musical activities: “My mom likes to sing, and my dad just sings in the shower... We listen a lot to music. My little sister, she loves singing, so I’m like her teacher.” Unlike Cassandra, Elena’s identity seemed very much tied to that of her family, including the close, mentoring relationship with her younger sister referenced here.

Elena, along with her mother and sisters, were active in the music program at their church. Elena sang in an adult group and helped with the children’s group in which her sister sang. She described applying the knowledge and skills obtained in her school choir experience, saying, “[my sister] sings in church [and] she asks me how to sing the song. What I do is teach her what I learn in choir class so that she can sing good.” Though she did not mention being part of a church choir, Cassandra spoke about music as part of her *quinceañera missa*, a large family and religious celebration of a young woman’s fifteenth birthday signifying passage into adulthood (Davalos, 1996). The influence of family was ever-present as a thread throughout our conversations, and is consistent with the writings of Darder (1993), Godinez (2011), and Ibañez et al. (2004).

Choir as community. At the time of data collection, both participants were members of

the Kennedy honors choir, a select ensemble that meets independently of the larger, non-auditioned high school choir. Cassandra wrote about the supportive environment in the choir:

We're all nice to each other.... Since the class is so small, we are able to talk to everyone and get to know each other. Also since we sing in this class, we sometimes sing random songs together (not songs we work on)... It's like we share a little moment of all of us getting along and being friends and its a very nice moment.

Gay (2002) posited that a strong sense of community in the classroom is an "essential element of culturally relevant teaching," (p. 110) which is indicative in the present study by the positive feelings Cassandra and Elena had toward the camaraderie in honors choir—juxtaposed with their experiences in other classes of students who defied authority and exhibited rude behavior toward teachers and fellow students. Both Cassandra and Elena felt needed and accepted by this smaller subset of the school population with which they felt a connection. Echoing the themes of Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz (2003), Cassandra and Elena saw choir as a "home away from home"—a refuge in an environment that sometimes was challenging.

### Bilingual Status and Power Structures

Since choir was a part of Cassandra and Elena's overall education, one cannot ignore the larger context of their education writ large when discussing their experience in the choral setting. Both participants had honed their English skills at school, and Elena participated in the ESL (English as a Second Language) program. Cassandra and Elena also navigated situations in which power imbalances caused disconnection between adults and students, such as instances in which they felt they should not speak Spanish. More broadly, this phenomenon calls into question the individual agency these students feel in the context of the choral program.

**Bilingual Status.** English language fluency was a major part of Cassandra and Elena's schooling experience. Both participants spoke some English before their formal schooling began. I wondered about the process of learning a second language at school and the implications of that process. In discussing being a bilingual student being taught by non-bilingual teachers, Cassandra explained the complicated imbalance in power this can create, and the suspicion it can foster:

You're not supposed to speak [a] different language. If you would just speak in Spanish and speak to [teachers] in Spanish they'd be like, "You can't speak in Spanish," I mean to *them* I'm guessing you can't speak in Spanish, 'cause I'm guessing some of them don't understand it and they'll think you're talking about them.

Conversely, Elena spoke positively about a bilingual teacher who made an effort to speak in Spanish to students at Kennedy: "Ms. Alberti, she's from Italy but she talks in Spanish and stuff. When I was in the play, she was like, 'Hi, *muchacha*' and this and that, and we talk in Spanish." Elena appreciated this relationship, in which she felt her language and experiences were valued.

I wondered how the process of learning English in the U.S. influenced the educational experiences of these students. Elena began learning English in preschool and struggled during her elementary years to learn English and Spanish simultaneously: "It was kind of difficult and

in third grade I totally forgot English. I don't know why, just totally forgot. I went to ESL." As described by McHatton et al. (2007), Cassandra expressed frustration over being stereotyped simply for being a Spanish speaker. "I feel like people take people who speak Spanish, and they think 'Oh, they're from here, and they do this and that.' It's like, 'No, I'm from somewhere *different*... and I don't *do* that'." Here Cassandra patently rejected oversimplified labels placed on her because of her bilingual status.

"You don't really get far here." I asked Cassandra and Elena to consider the influence of being Latina on their educational experience. In response to this question, Cassandra spoke about perceived financial barriers to the educational system for Latino/a students:

I am Latina. Like, I know some people, they can't— [pause] because being Latino they don't have enough money. Their parents not having enough money and that's why it makes people, a lot of people at young ages, Latinos, to start working at a young age to start gaining money for college. And I feel like it's— You don't really get far here. You're here, then you go to [the local community college]. That's just how I see it, but you have to be super smart... You don't go far in life, college-wise or education-wise.

When I asked her to clarify her statement, Cassandra spoke with more optimism. I also asked her to consider how participation in choir might influence the experience of Latino/a students: "I've seen many Latinos succeed in life and do what they've dreamed to do. In some ways I do believe the students in choir can go pretty far, maybe farther than [non-choir] Kennedy High School students." Later, after reading the original quote a second time, Cassandra wrote, "I honestly don't know why I said that, I most likely didn't mean it, plus it makes me sound very negative" and "I was thinking of my brother, but that's it," exemplifying her mixed feelings about the subject.

In general, Elena spoke with more optimism than Cassandra about her educational journey. She never discussed economic disparity or feelings of inferiority because of her Latina identity. Her commentary was imbued with a sense of optimism about being in the first college-bound generation in her family: "My parents, they didn't finish their high school. I'm the oldest in my family, which requires me to make a stand to [for] my sisters. My parents couldn't graduate from high school, but that's not us." Cassandra and Elena's family members had worked to ensure that they would have a well-rounded educational experience in the U.S.

## Repertoire

As Richmond (1990) indicated, the repertoire choral music educators choose becomes a significant part of the curriculum in secondary school choir. Though Richmond's article focused on the actions of choral teachers, I wondered how these repertoire choices influenced students' experiences in school choir. Cassandra and Elena expressed strong feelings about the types of repertoire they enjoyed and their thoughts on culturally relevant repertoire.

Music with a message. Elena spoke about her desire for choral pieces with substantive texts. In our first interview, she mentioned "normal high school choir songs," which she described as "boring," saying, "sometimes I don't connect with the song." Elaborating on this sentiment, Elena contrasted her experience in high school choir with experiences singing in church, where the meaning of the text was made plain: "[In school] sometimes you even don't

know what the song meant to the composer and why he/she [decided] to put it as a high school choir song: what the composer meant to tell the students and audience (message of the song)." Similar to their desire for a choral experience to enrich their musicianship and singing ability, Cassandra and Elena also sought study of meaningful texts and interactions with a choral music educator who would discuss the text with students.

Culturally relevant repertoire. Cassandra spoke several times about the song "Stand By Me," as performed by Prince Royce, a young Latino pop music artist. The Kennedy choir performed this piece before Cassandra was enrolled in choir: "It was in eighth grade, I think, when I was in choir. They sang... 'Stand by Me' by Ben E. King... the Prince Royce version. It's a *bachata* song." *Bachata* is a type of dance music that originated in the Dominican Republic (Hernandez, 1995).

I asked Cassandra if she had ever inquired about singing more music by Latino/a composers. She said, "Yeah, I was like, 'Maybe we should sing a Spanish song.' She [the choir teacher] said, 'Yes, we should, but there's a variety of music, and we can only do [a] certain [amount] of it. So maybe next year.'" When I asked Elena to elaborate, she wrote, "I would like to sing Spanish songs next year. I would want to because I believe it will... be easy for many of us students in choir, since many of us can speak Spanish or are Hispanic."

I asked Elena if she thought that singing music by Latino/a composers would be a good idea: "Yeah!" she said, "the kids will have a Hispanic background of the music, so they will be more comfortable." Similarly, both participants identified the Prince Royce version of "Stand By Me" as a song they appreciated. Elena said, "the Prince Royce [version]. I like that 'cause it kind of connected with your culture." Both participants also identified pop music as a genre they appreciated exploring in choir—this is music with which they connected and identified. It seemed that both Cassandra and Elena had ideas about what repertoire they considered culturally relevant. It is encouraging that Cassandra felt confident enough to advocate for study of music with Spanish texts at school. As Bond (2014) wrote, "By including a wide variety of musics in selected choral repertoire, one can validate the preferences of many while expanding the soundscape of all" (p. 12). After asking Cassandra and Elena about their own interactions with the repertoire, I wondered how their families received the music being studied.

### Experiences of Family Members

The emphasis Cassandra and Elena placed on the importance of family was consistent with findings in the research literature about the role of Latino/a families in education (Ibañez et al., 2004). Specifically, these young women identified several barriers that stood in the way of their families' enjoyment school choral concerts.

"If it fits into their culture, then they will have a connection." I wanted to get a sense of Cassandra and Elena's parents' experience while attending school choir concerts. Cassandra's parents are bilingual, while Elena's parents speak little English. I asked Elena if her parents enjoyed concerts: "Sometimes," she said. "Sometimes they fall asleep. They like Spanish songs. 'Cause in English, they don't understand English, so then they're like 'Ah, you sing good but I can't understand nothing'." When I asked Elena to expound on the previous statement, she

wrote, “They feel sad that they don't understand what I am singing and they get bored during the concert. But if it fits into their culture then they will have a connection to the songs.”

Movement (Choreography). *How* choral pieces are presented in performance also can help concerts become more inviting for Latino/a family members. One thing I had not considered was how the use of movement during choral pieces might enhance the concert experience for one who does not understand the predominant language used in the concert. Elena said,

Well, my dad is always tired all the time. So, [at our recent concert they] had some motions in middle school [choir performance], so it was kind of cool. Yeah, that was cool, but then the high school just singed, and that's it. So he's like, “and then it got boring.”

This apparent disconnect between Cassandra and Elena's family members and the Kennedy choir program may be indicative of a larger point discussed by Ramirez (2003): a lack of common ground between school programs and Latino/a families. Perhaps making choral performances more visually appealing could be part of culturally relevant choral music education. As Gay (2002) wrote, “the communicative styles of most ethnic groups of color in the United States are more active, participatory, dialectic, and multi-modal” (p. 111). Thus, a style of teaching and performing involving movement may suit Latino/a students and parents.

## Discussion and Suggestions

### Being Part of a Musical Community

The stories and experiences of Cassandra and Elena highlight the multifaceted experience of being a Latina choral student in a Midwestern high school. The music education community can learn from the lives of these two students, who constantly navigate factors including musical identity, race, language, and socioeconomic status within the school (music) context. One aspect of culturally relevant teaching for Latino/a students involves creating a sense of community among students, as echoed by Brewer (2010): “The communal space of the band promoted extra effort and academic success” (p. 54). Cassandra and Elena saw choir as an oasis from their more traditional courses (e.g., mathematics). For Elena as a bilingual student, this may have had something to do with the fact that as traditional “academic” classes seemed less participatory and therefore less engaging.

The sense of community in the honors choir class is palpable. In my field notes I wrote, “The atmosphere in the room is lighthearted and exceedingly supportive.” Echoing themes in Adderley et al. (2003), the honors choir class seemed to be a safe space for Cassandra and Elena amidst a school and community in which they attend classes with students who were sometimes disrespectful. Cassandra summed up this sentiment by writing: “it's like we share a little moment of all of us getting along and being friends and its a very nice moment.” It seemed that this sense of community provided by the choir has proved beneficial to Cassandra and Elena's journeys'.

Both participants desired a quality choral experience at school. As they navigated the oft-turbulent terrain of an urban, traditionally under-performing school, Cassandra and Elena

identified their membership in honors choir with great pride. Both students expressed the value of choral music to them by persisting in the Kennedy choral program despite scheduling difficulties, choral teacher turnover, and singing some repertoire with which they did not connect.

## Repertoire

Perhaps in learning stories of Latino/a families and understanding the context in which they approach education, choral music educators can better understand how to plan curriculum and repertoire to suit this population (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). The type of repertoire chosen seemed to be an important issue for both participants and their families. Like many teenagers, Cassandra and Elena connected with the popular music they heard on the radio and on television. They also spoke highly of "multicultural" choral repertoire (e.g., "O Sifuni Mungu") and pieces with foreign language texts. They did not seem to connect with what Elena called "normal high school choir songs." As Shaw (2012) wrote, "culturally responsive teaching, with its student-centered focus, suggests that we begin the repertoire selection process by considering our students rather than by perusing a publisher's catalogue or reading through a stack of octavos" (p. 76). Cassandra advocated for music in Spanish, and that may happen in the future with her assistance. Elena spoke about choral music that "fits into [our] culture" to facilitate "a connection to the songs." While music with Spanish lyrics should not be the only music studied at schools with a large Latino/a population, its inclusion into the repertoire may give validation to the student's cultural heritage. By connecting students' school experiences with their own culture, a solid foundation is formed from which they can then explore other varieties of music more foreign to them.

Choral music educators in schools with a Latino/a majority may consult with local community members who may have information on pieces that are truly meaningful to that population specifically (Abril, 2006; Shaw, 2012). Similar to Gay's (2002) notion of designing culturally relevant curricula, Mixon (2009) wrote, "Culturally responsive teachers account for the learning needs of students from diverse cultures and provide varied approaches to instruction and content for study. Ensemble directors can reflect these varied cultures and approaches through the music they choose" (p. 67). Cassandra and Elena's notions about repertoire suggest that choral teachers engage their students and their families in the repertoire selection process. In addition, choral music educators may also make use of "culture bearers" who teach music from their own culture authentically, without the diminution that can result from notating and/or editing non-Western musics (Clements, 2006; Goetze, 2000).

## Engaging Latino/a Families

In addition to culturally relevant pedagogy for students, choral music educators might consider the same outlook when considering interactions with Latino/a parents and family members. A disconnect between parents and school can be frustrating for Latino/a students, as articulated by Ibañez et al. (2004). The experiences of Elena's parents in particular highlight a chasm between the choral program that Elena loved and school choral concerts that did not seem to serve the Spanish-speaking parent population. It is ironic that Elena, who spoke so eloquently

about appreciating “songs that give a good message when we will present to the community and to our society, and songs that *they* could relate to,” had parents who had difficulty enjoying her concerts because they speak Spanish. Choral music is enriched by the many texts students study and perform. In communities with a large population of parents for whom English is not their first language, cultural relevancy may be achieved through things such as concert announcements translated into the language(s) spoken by family members, and concert programs (including song lyrics) can also be translated so that parents can understand the words of the choral texts being sung.

### Resisting Stereotypes and “Otherness”

Throughout the data collection process, I confronted my own fears regarding race. As a white male, I recognize that I approach this topic from a place of privilege. As I was recruiting student participants, I was afraid to say that I was only interested in interviewing Latino/a students for fear of offending the non-Latino/a students in the class. I still question whether I understand the complexities within the Mexican-American community, and the Latino/a community at large.

I am humbled by my tendencies to assume and stereotype, but am becoming aware that such fears may be part of resisting the process of “othering” (Hughes, 2003). Cassandra’s poignant statement, “I’m from somewhere *different*... and I don’t *do that*” highlights the complex intersection of many parts of her life: her language, culture, background/history, and immigration status—all of which contribute to her assumptions about cultural capital and “otherness.” To get beyond stereotypes of “what Latino/a students are like,” music educators need to hear more stories like Cassandra and Elena’s within the context of music education. As music educators explore these stories, they must remain wary of deficit models—seeking to clarify language about race and culture that may be misunderstood or misused (Brewer, 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Kruse, 2013).

### Suggestions for Future Research

More research is needed to understand how music educators can better serve Latino/a students. As Bartolomé (2004) wrote, “prospective teachers are generally left to their own devices when making sense of cross-cultural and cross-socioeconomic class experiences” (p. 117). Future studies could focus on the experiences of immigrant students, particularly those without legal residency status. Longitudinal studies of Latino/a immigrant youth could explore the experience of how music plays a role in these students’ lives from childhood through adulthood. Quantitative methods could help us understand larger trends in Latino/a student choices about participation in school music programs (e.g., Elpus & Abril, 2011). Ethnographic and narrative studies could explore the lives of students like Cassandra and Elena in various kinds of communities (e.g., rural, suburban, urban) to further highlight the diversity within the Latino/a community and the intersectionality of various layers of “otherness.” Studies about

bilingual or non-English speaking students and parents would also lend a different perspective to this ongoing dialogue. Finally, the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy for families of school music students is a topic that warrants further study.

## Conclusion

In a country with an increasing Latino/a population and a teaching force that is increasingly white (Canning, 1995), now is the time to understand the lived experiences of students like Cassandra and Elena. As Valverde (2006) wrote, "By adopting a new educational philosophy toward the utilization of the Latino student's family culture, schools will need to be *transformed* so as to represent and incorporate this new cultural approach to teaching and learning" (p. 19, emphasis in original). The better music educators understand the experiences of Latino/a students and family members, the better our community will be able to serve this population. Though choral music is built upon a European tradition, holding fast to tradition and a Euro-centric viewpoint may make choral music education passé in some communities. The population of many American schools is becoming increasingly diverse, and choral music educators should adapt repertoire and pedagogical choices to welcome this varied population into the choral music education experience.

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