Social Justice in Choral Music Education

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Introductory Essay

For my Capstone Project, I chose to write a topical literature review entitled “Social Justice in Choral Music Education”. The purpose of this review is to examine current literature concerning the teaching and learning of choral music through the lens of social justice. The main areas of this topic I chose to focus on are the relationship between choral music education and social justice, the possible benefits of incorporating issues of social justice into the choral curriculum for students and educators alike, and an examination of current efforts towards socially just choral music education.

My decision to pursue this topic is a result of what I have seen and experienced in my current teaching position. This coming August will mark the beginning of my seventh year teaching general and choral music in an urban public charter school. In my time at this position, I have seen my students encounter significant barriers to their musical success, including personal circumstances at home, the policies put in place by the school, and the music education curricula to which much of the American music education system subscribes. My students are often prohibited from participating in ensembles, especially instrumental, because of the cost of renting or owning instruments. The scheduling of ensemble rehearsals in my district also conflicts with in- and after-school study halls, pull out services for Individual Education Plans, and extra-help hours, forcing many students to choose between excelling in their other academic courses and participating in the ensemble program. Additionally, students often find it difficult to attend and perform in concerts because they lack reliable transportation. This is often caused by unstable home lives, disinterested parents, or caretakers that work multiple jobs. Lastly, my students have expressed that they do not feel their cultural or personal musical practices are represented in music classes or in choir, due to the heavy emphasis in our district on reading
music notation and performing music in the Western classical canon. Engaging my students can often be difficult as I have been educated in a specific musical tradition, and my teaching naturally gravitates in that direction. Because of these experiences, I have come to realize that I am teaching a school full of children whose background and culture are vastly different from my own. I feel that examining what others in my field say on matters of social justice, equity and cultural relevance, and seeking out my own path towards socially just music education, are the first steps in my becoming a more informed and ultimately better teacher for my students.

Although there are many topics that I could have chosen to study to become a better teacher for my students, I believe that incorporating issues of social justice into choral music education could assist my students in understanding their world in a new context. I have experimented in the past with having choral students identify current events or social issues that are important to them, and discussing how those events or issues can be expressed and understood through music. I feel that this could be particularly effective when considering the unique circumstances and issues often facing students living and being educated in racially and culturally diverse urban communities. Connecting music education to a student’s living reality is an important step in preparing them to become informed, reflective, and action-oriented members of society. While I share the sentiment with many of my colleagues that music can stand alone as an academic discipline, and can and should be appreciated and practiced for the purposes of beauty and human expression, we live in a world which seeks to qualify the value of such things. To quantify beauty and human expression is nearly impossible, but when something that is as uniquely beautiful and human as music relates to other human experiences or events, it provides additional context for people to view their world. This connection and context strengthens the “value” of the experience or topic – in this case music – therefore increasing our
desire to continue the pursuit of the experience or topic.

My decision to pursue the topic of social justice in choral music education for my Capstone Project began with my interest in the related topic of diversity in music education. My curiosity about this topic started when I noticed the stark contrast between the racial and socio-economic diversity of students within my school, and the diversity of those students selected to participate in district and all-state choral festivals. I found that the students selected were overwhelmingly white, and many hailed from school districts with prestigious, well-funded music programs. I was astonished to see less than a dozen students of African, Hispanic, or Asian descent in a regional choir of over 120 students. My concern with the lack racial representation in a choral festival in a culturally and racially diverse state inspired me to pursue the topic of diversity for my Capstone Project.

However, as I began to research my chosen topic, I found the keyword “diversity” to be too broad. My search on this topic returned an overwhelming amount of material, preventing me from settling on specific and focused research questions. To narrow the focus of my project, I began searching for articles and other resources on related keywords, such as “multicultural”, “equity”, and “racism”. It was during this search that the topic of social justice in music education formed in my mind, and from there I began searching for literature specific to this topic.

Throughout the reading, writing and revision phases of this project, I acquired a variety of valuable research tools and strategies. One such strategy that I found to be immensely successful was introduced by my advisor. She suggested the use of post-it notes to help me physically organize my main ideas and sub-topics. This strategy spoke to my nature as a hands-on learner, and with the ability to manipulate and move my ideas around I found the process of
organizing my ideas much easier. Even with this strategy, I struggled initially with the writing phase of my project. I felt overwhelmed with the sheer size of the document I was creating, and experienced a wave of anxiety every time I sat down to write. In response to this problem, I created separate documents for each of my research questions. After I had completed each document to my satisfaction, I inserted them into the main document and from there worked to on writing clear topic sentences, and transitioning between sections. With feedback from my advisor, and colleagues willing to review and critique my work, I was able to create a substantial piece of work that I am proud to submit.

Despite the challenges I encountered during this project, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to grow and learn as a professional. I feel that the process of completing this paper was as important as the outcome, and I learned a great deal about my capabilities as a researcher and writer. I am pleased with the work I have completed, and I look forward to applying what I have learned in my practice as a classroom music teacher and choral director.
Abstract

Recent concerns regarding social, political and cultural barriers that impact access to music education have prompted many music educators to examine music education through the lens of social justice. The purpose of this literature review is to investigate the specific relationship between choral music education and social justice. This relationship will be explored in the context of social justice issues existing within the greater scope of music education, and the impact of said issues on choral music education. Additionally, the possible benefits of incorporating social justice issues into the choral rehearsal, and examples of current efforts to incorporate social justice into the choral rehearsal are examined.

*Keywords:* social justice, choral music education, diversity, culturally responsive, multicultural
Social Justice in Choral Music Education

Statement of the Topic

Social justice has been defined as many things: a movement, a process, an idea, and even a “natural duty owed by one person to another” (Zajda, Majhanovich & Rust, 2006, p. 9). The general consensus, regarding social justice in education, is that social justice is the fair and equitable treatment and education of all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socio-economic status, or any of the numerous factors that tend to separate humans in the groupings of “advantaged” and “disadvantaged” (Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2007; Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007; Riley, 2009/2010; Sands, 2007; Younker & Hickey, 2007; Zajda, Majhanovich & Rust, 2006). In recent years, social justice in education has become a “hot topic,” one that has ignited debates about the impact of incorporating social and political issues into formal school curriculum (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009). In the past, social justice within music education has been considered a “topic du jour,” one that is viewed uncritically and fades into obscurity over time (Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2007). Recent interest in the topic has been spurred by such events as the 2006 International Conference on Music Education, Equity, and Social Justice, as well personal interest from music education experts including Estelle Jorgensen, David J. Elliott, Deborah Bradley, Bennet Reimer, and Julia T. Shaw.

Specific social justice concerns within music education reflect issues present in our global society, as well as the profession of music education itself. Issues involving equity and access to music education based on race, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and religion have emerged as leading concerns and mobilizing forces within music education (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2006; Butler, Lind & McKoy, 2007; Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007; Miksza, 2013; Reimer, 2007; Richardson, 2007;
Sands, 2007; Younker & Hickey, 2007). The purpose of this review is to examine these issues as they affect the current relationship between music education and social justice, in a broad sense, as well as issues of social justice within the specific realm of choral music. Additionally, this review will examine the possible benefits of incorporating social justice issues into the choral rehearsal, as well as current efforts within the discipline of choral music education that seek to successfully merge social justice and choral music education in a practical and educational manner.

**Rationale for Investigation**

Social justice in relation to choral music education is worthy of investigation due to the highly interconnected social and cultural nature of music education, and the impact of such programs on the lives of the educators, students, and other music education stakeholders. Jorgensen (2007) argued that it is impossible to separate music, and by extension music education, from issues of justice and injustice, and cited the link between music and cultural activities such as “ritual, myth, rite, painting, dance, drama, and religion” (p. 173) as examples. Regelski (2006) called to attention the disconnect between music education and society, and offered his insights on the growing gap between the relevancy of school-based music education to the lives of students, and how music education might work towards a remedy for the problem. Shaw (2016) advocated for a culturally responsive pedagogical approach to the matter, calling upon music educators to utilize their knowledge of various cultures and social identities to create a meaningful connection between students’ in and out of school music experiences, practices, and preferences.

**Specific Questions to Answer Through Research**

The research questions that will be explored in this literature review are as follows:
1. What is the relationship between music education and social justice?
2. How is choral music education impacted by issues of social justice?
3. What are the possible benefits of incorporating social justice into the choral rehearsal?
4. How are educators moving towards socially just choral music education?

Review of Scholarly Sources

The Relationship Between Music Education and Social Justice

The relationship between and subsequent effect of social justice on music education, and vice versa, falls into two categories. Social justice is present in the “who, when, and where”, as well as the “what, why, and how” of music education (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2007; Butler, Lind & McKoy, 2007; Elliot, 2012; Freer, 2011; Hansen, 1994; Regelski, 2012; Sands, 2007; Shaw, 2012; Wright, 2013). Collecting information on the first category – who, when and where – requires an examination of who is teaching or being taught music (age, race, gender, ethnicity, social class, economic status, etc.), when music education is occurring (this includes frequency and duration of instruction), and where it is occurring (in what geographic or demographic areas, as well as within what communities and institutions). The second category requires an examination of what is being taught (the scope of content being taught), why it is being taught (philosophies of teaching, response to students, parents, administrators, and other program stakeholders) and how it is being taught (specific pedagogies and methods used to convey the material).

Social justice in music education. The growing interest in social justice issues as they relate to music education is the result of several emerging concerns in the music education profession (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bowman, 2007; Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007; Sands, 2007; Wright, 2013; Younker & Hickey, 2007). Allsup and Shieh (2012) discussed the
powerlessness felt by music educators attempting to reconcile their aspirations for their music programs against issues such as wage inequality, poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, unemployment, and the ever-present threat of funding to school budgets. In discussing the inequity and injustice in music education, Reimer (2007) spoke about the primitive human impulses of fear and aggression that have manifested themselves into such issues as racism and discrimination. He asserted that this could be one of the many reasons why humans naturally reject what is unfamiliar, noting that “many of the behaviors developed to be adaptive to the Stone Age world are...dangerously maladaptive to the world in which we live now” (Reimer, 2007, p. 197). Amongst those educators examined, the most frequent topics of concern raised were racism and equal access to music education for all children.

Racism in music education is largely attributed to North America’s foundation of colonialism, and the value placed upon Eurocentric music practices as a result (Bradley, 2006; Bradley, 2007; Goetze, 2000; Vaugeois, 2007). Educators have expressed concerns about the role of music teachers and educational institutions in the continued adherence to music education practices that promote racist ideologies. This is most visibly manifested in the types of musical practices included in the school’s music curriculum (Bradley, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007). North American music curricula is heavily dependent upon the Western classical tradition for much of its classroom and ensemble material, while lessons on other non-European musical cultures are periodically added in as feature lessons, or omitted from the curriculum completely (Bradley, 2007). Additionally, educators continue to argue about the inclusion of vernacular music into formal music education curricula, such as rap and hip-hop - an argument that continues to marginalize and exclude musical practices of predominately African-American and Hispanic communities (Kruse, 2016). Institutional complacency with racist music practices has been
pointed out in the avoidance of the actual word “racism”, with professionals adopting terms such as “ethnic”, “cultural,” and “multicultural” as synonyms to describe music outside of the Western classical tradition (Bradley, 2006; Bradley, 2007). Additionally, the labeling of non-Western musical practices as “other” or “world” music calls into question the dominant beliefs held by music education, and the ideals to which the “other” is compared – in essence, what constitutes music that is of primary value, and that of secondary value (Bradley, 2006, 2007; Vaugeois, 2007). Referred to as “othering”, the use of these terms protects the user from the discomfort of discussing race, but it does not cease the practice of racialized music-making (Bradley, 2007).

The concern regarding equal access to music education for all children illuminates the presence of institutional and individual barriers that impede student and educator success (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elphus & Abril, 2011; Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Richardson, 2007; Shaw, 2015; Younker & Hickey, 2007). Among these impediments are instruction time, curriculum, and student socio-economic status. The frequency, duration, and quality of music instruction has long been a contested topic in music education, and many have raised questions regarding the equity of music programs that offer few elective choices within the school day, especially at the middle and high school levels where large ensembles dominate the curriculum (Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Younker & Hickey, 2007).

The focus of modern music curricula and the methods used to deliver the material also remains a primary topic of interest and concern amongst educators (Richardson, 2007; Wiggins, 2015; Younker & Hickey, 2007). Richardson (2007) labeled elitism, identity politics, and aversion to change as three main factors that affect music curriculum. These factors are largely concerned with who music students and teachers are (racially, culturally, ethnically, etc.),
whether there is an equal representation of the population and their musical traditions within a
given music program (Bradley, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007). Educators have also addressed the
hierarchy of power present in most music education programs – namely those that do not
typically include students as decision-makers or stakeholders – as a potential factor affecting
music curriculum and pedagogies (Richardson, 2007; Wiggins, 2015). Despite language within
the original MENC music standards that calls for students to “define and solve artistic problems”
(MENC, 1994, cited by Richardson, 2007, p. 205), issues of power in the ensemble and music
classroom raise questions about whether the music curriculum is student-centered, content-
centered, or teacher-centered (Richardson, 2007; Wiggins, 2015; Younker & Hickey, 2007).

Numerous educators have also identified student socio-economic status as a significant
barrier to musical education (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elphus & Abril, 2011; Jorgensen, 2007;
Shaw, 2015). This concern is seen in the disparity amongst students who can or cannot access
and afford instruments, student access to reliable transportation for concerts and other events,
and the presence or absence of supportive adults or family at home (Jorgensen, 2007; Younker &
Hickey, 2007). Beyond the economic status of a student’s home life, the affluence of the school
and community can have an impact on access to music education. Public and private funding for
urban, suburban and rural schools can vary significantly, as can the amount of funding expended
on music education programs (Jorgensen, 2007).

The arguments for and against social justice in music education. Throughout history,
music education pedagogies have reflected social, political and educational trends, embracing
those that serve to promote or give rise to the value of music education (Bradley, 2007; Bowman,
2007). While the incorporation of social justice into music education has surfaced periodically as
one such trend, the topic has in recent years evolved into a more serious concern as educators are
faced with increasingly diverse student populations, and as multiculturalism emerges as a new norm in education (Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2006; Butler, Lind & McKoy, 2007; Campbell, 1994). Many point to the *International Conference on Music Education, Equity, and Social Justice* at Colombia University’s Teacher’s College in October of 2006 as the most recent revival of academic interest in social justice within music education (Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2007; Richardson, 2007; Sands, 2007; Shieh, 2009). The conference was the first of its kind and covered a wide array of concerns on social justice and equity presented by leading music educators and researchers (Shieh, 2009). Many educators felt that this conference was timely as “issues of social justice have lurked in the academic margins of music education for quite some time” (Bradley, 2007, p. 132). These issues included equity and access within music education (Butler, Lind & McKoy, 2007; Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Reimer, 2007; Richardson, 2007; Sands, 2007; Younker & Hickey, 2007), racism and sexism (Bradley, 2006; Bradley, 2007), and music education traditions that intentionally and unintentionally exclude certain cultural beliefs and practices (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bowman, 2007; Bradley 2006; Bradley, 2007). Jorgensen (2007) asserted that knowledge and recognition of these social and cultural barriers are a practical necessity for those choosing to teach music in school settings. Without this knowledge, and the motivation to recognize and remedy negative implications, individuals and institutions dedicated to music education miss the opportunity to reconnect music education with society, society with students, and students with music education (Elliott, 2012; Regelski, 2006).

While many may agree that the incorporation of social justice issues into music education is a necessary and positive change, others argue that music educators need not concern themselves with issues outside of the discipline of music (Hansen, 1994; Miksza, 2013). The argument against widespread incorporation of social justice into music education has centered
around several common themes. Some music educators assert that music is a discipline unlike any other, and that its value will be diluted or diminished if educators look outside of the discipline to justify music education’s validity (Hansen, 1994; Miksza, 2013). Others believe that music educators lack the education, authority and drive to affect the changes needed to tackle the “big ideas” of social justice in music education, including the ability to talk about or identify issues of injustice and inequity in their programs and school districts, as well as state and national organizations (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bradley, 2007; Lamb, 2010; Jorgensen, 1997). Some argue that since social justice can be interpreted differently by any given person or group, it is too difficult a topic to grasp on a larger scale - issues of social justice are simply too big for music education to explore, and to do so would require an immense re-imagining of the profession (Bowman, 2007; Hess, 2014; Jorgensen, 1997).

Now firmly grounded in the twenty-first century, it seems in many ways music education has reached a crossroads where in order to move forward, we must re-envision all music education is and has been. As Elliott and Veben (2006) note, against a backdrop of violence, poverty and disease, music education as it currently stands “seem[s] quaint, if not largely irrelevant” (Hess, 2014, p. 229).

**Concerns in Choral Music Education**

The social justice concerns in choral music education both reflect and differ from those present in the broader scope of music education. Issues of possible elitism, for example, present in some choral ensembles and organizations where auditions favor students who take private lessons outside of school (Jorgensen, 2007; Richardson, 2007). Concerns regarding choral ensemble elitism are closely related to those regarding issues of equity and access, centering around the ability of certain student populations to access and participate school choral
ensembles (Jorgensen, 2007). Issues of identity abound throughout choral music education, ranging from the connection between curriculum and the culturally responsive classroom movement, to the unique interactions and relationships between teachers and students (Dee, 2005; Freer, 2011; Shaw, 2012; Shaw, 2016). Aversion to change is evidenced in the continued adherence to “traditional” choral practices, such as the autocratic, conductor-centered teaching model to which many choral programs adhere (Kratus, 2007). Younker and Hickey (2007) stated that this adherence to traditional teaching practices is often the refusal, either intentional or unintentional, to update to more relevant pedagogy, and cited the need for educator reflection and critical evaluation to combat this problem. Amongst these many concerns, issues of student and teacher diversity and content and pedagogical relevance take center stage as the most prominent issues of social justice in choral music education (Bradley, 2002; Bradley, 2007; Shaw, 2012; Shaw, 2015; Shaw, 2016).

Diversity of students and educators. The contrast between student and teacher diversity has become a point of interest and concern in public education as well as music education (Bradley, 2002; Dee, 2005). Shaw (2012) noted that this concern has developed rapidly amongst choral teachers who have suddenly found themselves teaching students whose culture and background are different from their own. While common identifiers of human identity – including ethnicity, religion, and socio-political beliefs – have been studied, racial identity and cultural identity, between and amongst students and choral educators have carried the most weight and significance.

In the last two decades, educators have become increasingly aware and concerned with the demographic and racial/cultural composition of student participating in public school music programs, and have either conducted or sought out research that illustrates this concern (Bradley,
A survey from the *National Center for Education Statistics* reported that the percentage of white students enrolled in American public schools from 2000-2001 to 2007-2008 dropped from 61 to 56 percent, and that in 2008, approximately 83 percent of public school educators were white (Shaw, 2012). Bradley (2007) cited similar estimates from the early 2000s that more than 40 percent of students were “colored” – meaning African, Asian, Hispanic, or other “minority” groups – but that only about ten percent of teachers were “colored.” These disparities exist in similar ways in music education. Elphus and Abril (2011) utilized information from the *Educational Longitudinal Study* of 2002 and follow-up information from 2004 to examine the demographics of high school students participating in band, choir and orchestra. The results of their examination concluded that the majority of high school music ensemble students (65.7%) were Caucasian, with the other top three percentiles being African-American students (15.2%), Hispanic students (10.2%), and multiracial students (4.3%) (Elphus & Abril, 2011). Although choral versus instrumental participation was not used as a distinguishing factor in this examination, Elphus and Abril (2011) noted that current trends in gender disparity within choral music programs supports the notion that racial disparity amongst students also exists within choral music education.

Given these statistics, many music educators have raised concerns about whether teachers are appropriately equipped to teach music to students whose background differs from theirs. Shaw (2012) noted that choral music education is especially vulnerable to ethnocentrism due to its strong roots in the European classical tradition, and recognized that this focus is biased in such a way that it inhibits students from taking full advantage of educational opportunities.
Even as classrooms become increasingly racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, a “profound and inescapable cultural fabric of the schooling process” remains comprised of certain beliefs, formats, and perspectives that are so deeply engrained in educational institutions…In music education, this fabric has historically been woven from Eurocentric paradigms, which have privileged the Western classical canon and its associated ideologies…[these] practices based on these frameworks may be incongruent with students’ prior knowledge and experiences, presenting barriers to learning (Shaw, 2016, p. 46).

Several music educators have asserted that the disparities between teacher and student race is, at its core, an issue of systemic racism imbedded deep within the American music education system (Bradley, 2003; Bradley, 2006; Bradley, 2007; Hess, 2014; Vaugeois, 2007). Bradley (2003, 2006, 2007) called for an open and honest dialogue on the issue of race and racism in music education, but noted that these discussions are noticeably uncomfortable for most educators. This discomfort is manifested in professional conversations by “derailing the conversation, evading questions, dismissing counter arguments, withdrawing from the discussion, remaining silent, interrupting speakers and topics, and colluding with each other in creating a culture of ‘niceness’” (Bradley, 2007, p. 6). These behaviors and associated terms, such as “ethnic” and “multicultural”, have been labeled as examples of coded language used to discuss race in educational environments (Bradley, 2007). Bradley (2003) illustrated the use of this coded language in choral music education in the labeling of certain musical repertoire as “multicultural”, a process she referred to as “othering”.

Relevance of choral material and experience to students. Many music educators recognize that there is a disconnect between music being learned or performed in school, and
music that students choose to learn, perform and otherwise engage with outside of school (Davis, 2009; Griffin, 2011; Kratus, 2007; Regelski, 2006). Kratus (2007) believed that the reasons for the school-to-world musical gap, what he called the “tipping point”, were substantial changes in how music is experienced, and the way that it is taught in educational settings. In the latter instance, the practice of teaching music has become unmoored from societal norms and practices (Kratus, 2007). Comparing several characteristics of out-of-school music making with those of in-school music making, Kratus (2007) articulated that out of school music was primarily used to meet the emotional and needs of the individual, while in-school music was aimed at teacher-centered academic goals. Additional characteristics that separated in- and out-of-school musical engagement involved the focus on group versus individual work, use of technology to connect music-makers, and the variety of musical styles and genres valued by in-school music programs versus individual music choices outside of school (Kratus, 2007). Regelski (2006) also examined this disconnect, focusing on the exclusion of society in music education. He stated that while students may enjoy the traditional music education as young children, as they mature to adolescence they find that the music they are learning within school has no bearing on their musical engagements outside of school, with those musical practices then becoming “irrelevant and childish” (p. 5). Both Regelski (2006) and Kratus (2007) discussed the implications of this disconnect at the high school and collegiate level. They argued that the educational models used at these levels were outdated, and the content being taught was largely irrelevant and detached from actual musical practices – for example, using solfege to learn choral music (Kratus, 2007). The ultimate result of this type of education was a system populated by music educators that lack the ability to enact “transformation versus reproduction” (Regelski, 2011, p. 8). Regelski continued,
Thus, there is a perilous sense in which the status quo regard for the music in “music education” risks becoming a ‘museum’ praxis rather than a ‘living’ praxis. As a result, there is also the danger that students become ‘deadened’ not ‘enlivened’ by their musical studies. (Regelski, 2011, p. 9)

Critics of traditional models of choral music ensemble pedagogy and repertoire have voiced their concerns regarding the overall meaning, diversity, and currency of musical material and the way it is taught (Bradley, 2003; Sands, 2007; Shaw, 2012). Some educators have asserted that choral music is too often chosen based on aesthetics and/or adherence to familiar Eurocentric musical practices rather than cultural context or depth (Bradley, 2003; Sands, 2007). Bradley (2003) noted the 1984 publication of Nyberg’s Freedom is Coming! Songs of Protest and Practice from South Africa as one example of music that utilized European tonalities, and thus became more popular amongst those schooled in the Western classical tradition. Music within this category is celebrated because of its “exotic” and different nature, rather its value within the context of the culture of origin (Bradley, 2003). Even when music is selected based on cultural context, Shaw (2012) asserted that “even the most responsible repertoire choices can be undermined by rehearsal practices that are not congruent with the orientations of ethnically diverse students” (p. 77). The instruction of choral music through notated versus oral traditions is at the center of this debate. Shaw (2012) and Goetze (2000) agreed that while both methods of teaching and learning choral music are valuable, it is the vital that educators identify the appropriate method for instruction based on the music’s cultural context. Goetze (2000) articulated that educators may make mistakes intentionally, for the sake of convenience, or unintentionally, through lack of knowledge. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of the educator to enhance their own knowledge of any piece of music they bring to their students for
performance (Goetze, 2000). Student performance of music based on an understanding of the original culture allows them to express the music in more authentic context, rather than a one based on Western musical traditions (Goetze, 2000; Shaw, 2012).

**Incorporating Social Justice into Choral Music Education**

Music, and by extension music education, can be serve many different purposes, including aesthetics, entertainment, personal expression, enhancing concentration and focus, fostering self-esteem, and reflecting the viewpoints and values of a given culture (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bradley, 2003; Davis, 2009; Regelski, 2006). The possible benefits of merging issues of social justice with the modern choral curriculum can serve several different purposes as well. For both educators and students, these purposes include increased relevancy to students, student empowerment, self-reflection, professional development, and community connection and engagement (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elliot, 2012; Griffin, 2011; Jorgensen, 2007; Regelski, 2006; Reimer, 2007; Richardson, 2007; Shaw, 2012; Shieh, 2009). Although some fear that the incorporation of additional disciplines or subjects into the music curriculum may dilute the importance of the music being taught or learned, others argue that the implications of a merger between social justice and music education would enhance the importance of music’s place in society (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elliot, 2012; Hansen, 1994; Richardson, 2007).

**Implications for students.** Many music educators agree that if the content taught to students is not relevant or does not serve a greater purpose, than students will not become engaged in the classroom materials or tasks, and educators will be unable to create an environment where students are inspired to become lifelong learners and makers of music (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Griffin, 2011; Regelski, 2006; Younker & Hickey, 2007). In a study on the *meaning* of music education to middle school students (Davis, 2009), students felt music
education was relevant to their lives in four main ways. In order of importance, students expressed that music education had vocational (career-oriented) and academic (theory and history) value, and that it also helped create belongingness (social interaction between students) and agency (self-esteem, motivation, emotional development) (Davis, 2009).

**Increased relevancy to students.** One of the greatest benefits of addressing social justice issues in the choral rehearsal is acknowledging the broader relevance of music education in the context of students’ living reality (Griffin, 2011; Wiggins, 2015). The social constructivist theory of music learning supports the acknowledgement of students’ lives as one facet of meaningful music instruction, with “real-life, relevant problem-solving experiences [that are] designed to enable [students] to construct and act on their own understanding” (Wiggins, 2015, p. 54) listed the first characteristic of such a community. Educators can accomplish this objective through mindful selection of repertoire. Shaw’s (2012) case for culturally responsive choral repertoire asserted that educators should place students at the heart of repertoire selection and choral curriculum, rather than placing repertoire selection at the center of the curriculum. Others have also suggested that students be given more input on the types of music being performed (Griffin, 2011; Regelski, 2006; Reimer, 2007). Allowing students to select and perform arrangements of their choosing, especially “pop” music, has drawn both the ire and curiosity of many music educators (Jorgensen, 1997; Miksza, 2013; Regelski, 2006; Reimer, 2007).

The genre of music most richly and immediately saturated with moral/ethical issues as related to the individual, cultural and universal dimensions of experience, is each culture’s popular music, which is represented in music education programs around the world with greatly diverse levels of emphasis. Until all cultures conscientiously include
popular music in all its many aspects, our attention to music’s social justice dimension can only be meager at best, and artificial at worst. (Reimer, 2007, p. 201)

Others have echoed that the inclusion of popular music – specifically that chosen by or relating to the lives of students – is a direct path to increasing the relevancy and meaning of the music for students (Davis, 2009; Griffin, 2011; Shaw, 2012). Both Shaw (2012) and Griffin (2011) approached the issue from the standpoint of student knowledge and experience. By “honoring” the lived experiences of students (in and out of school), and acknowledging that the teacher is not the only musical “expert” in the room, educators bestow a certain level of power or leadership upon the students (Griffin, 2011; Shaw 2012). Based on and supported by a study of the meaning of music education to middle school students, Davis (2009) asserted that “school music that resembles adult music-making opportunities in the real world may be one way of reaching all student with music education” (p. 75).

**Empowering students towards social action.** In addition to making choral music more relevant to students, the incorporation of social justice issues into the choral rehearsal can help students see music as a vehicle for social change. Bradley (2003) commented on the power of choral music to embody both the music and meaning simultaneously, emphasizing the impact that the sung text can have on an audience. To make the most of students’ understanding of this power, many music educators have suggested that teachers construct and facilitate opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking and discussion with peers about social issues as they relate to music, making the rehearsal room a safe space for such activities (Elliot, 2012; Richardson, 2007; Younker & Hickey, 2007). Beyond conversation, students can investigate instances in which choral or vocal music has been used as a form of protest, a means of unifying people in troubled times, or as a commentary on the social and political issues of an era (Elliot,
2012; Shaw, 2015; Shaw, 2016). This awareness of music’s effect on social, cultural and political happenings around the world empowers students towards cultural and sociopolitical competency (Shaw, 2012). Elliot (2012) labeled this competency as *artistic citizenship*, which called for students and educators alike to recognize and become trustees of those musical practices and traditions that elevate music beyond that of an aesthetic activity. Certain educators also emphasized that students should be guided carefully throughout these activities of discussing, identifying, and performing in the name of social justice, and that they, the students, should become able to independently recognize authentic versus superficial pursuits of justice within the choral music education (Bradley, 2007; Hess, 2014, Younker & Hickey, 2007).

**Implications for educators.** Educators are expected to seek out and explore opportunities to develop their personal and professional understanding of their subject and of their students. Viewing the profession through the lens of social justice can provide educators with important information about their own beliefs and teaching practices, the beliefs and values of their students, and could enable educators to identify those methods, beliefs and values absent from professional conversation and events in music education (Jorgensen, 2007; Miksza, 2013; Regelski, 2006; Shaw, 2015; Shieh, 2009).

**Critical self-reflection.** Many music educators believe that developing a healthy habit of self-reflection and critical inquiry of oneself and one’s profession is a valuable tool for music educators (Bradley, 2007; Elliott, 2012; Miksza, 2013; Younker & Hickey, 2007). In their examination of their own journeys in locating instances of social justice in music education, Younker and Hickey (2007) described the need for educators to inquire into their own *agency* and *evaluation*, two characteristics of self that are present in all individuals. The use of these two aspects create a path towards understanding the perceived and actual role the educator has in the
classroom, and whether the role of the educator as a facilitator of social justice is being realized (Younker & Hickey, 2007). In her examination of Younker, Hickey (2007) determined that there wasn’t one single type of social justice, but that there were “alternative conceptions that honor others’ cultures and ways of learning” (p. 221). Younker’s (2007) interpretation of one of Hickey’s music teaching experiences led her to question how individual and institutions deal with differences amongst students, and how issues of inclusion and exclusion are viewed in the setting of public school performing groups. The critical evaluations of the role of individuals and institutions, as well as the presence of agency in those entities, provided a foundation upon which to ask where social justice is and is not present in school music programs (Younker & Hickey, 2007). Allsup and Shieh (2012) similarly addressed this issue, and emphasized heavily that the process of self-reflection is difficult for many to undertake, but that it is a necessary and important endeavor. They named this investment the “moral imperative to care” and called upon educators to use this to identify, publicly name, and work to dismantle instances of injustice experienced by students and themselves as educators (Allsup & Shieh, 2012). With these efforts, social justice issues could be brought to the forefront of the music education profession.

**Professional and personal growth.** Several music educators have conceded that while opportunities do exist for professional and personal growth that challenge the status quo within music education, these opportunities are few and far between, inhibiting educators that seek a path of social justice in their professional and personal lives (Bowman, 2007; Frierson-Campbell, 2007; Kratus, 2007; Miksza, 2013). These limited opportunities for growth include professional development workshops and classes, grade level and team meetings, as well as time for music educators to collaborate with others in their field. Where opportunities may be scarce, music educators seeking to grow as professionals in their understanding of socially just pedagogies can
begin by identifying issues of inequity and injustice that exist in their own classrooms, programs or schools, and researching the work of others with similar concerns. As can be seen with the influx of papers and interest on the topic of social justice after the 2006 International Conference on Music Education, Equity, and Social Justice, the visibility of a topic is crucial in maintaining interest (Bowman, 2007; Bradley, 2007; Richardson, 2007; Sands, 2007; Shieh, 2009). Creating and sustaining professional and personal understanding of social justice in music education would require that educators write and submit articles for publication, and present interest sessions on the topic of social justice at state and national music education conferences and events. Reimer (2007) asserted that it is the responsibility of educators to stand on the front lines of the movement towards socially just music education. To be a music educator requires one to be both a responsible citizen as well as a responsible educator by not only leading by example in the classroom, but in all activities both professional and personal in nature (Reimer, 2007).

**Implications for the community.** Beyond the impact on student and educators, the incorporation of social justice into choral music education can benefit the community by demonstrating a conscious effort to include music and music makers often relegated to the category of “other”, and initiate dialogue surrounding societal, political and cultural concerns relevant to the music program and community. Many educators extol the importance of not only recognizing inequities, biases, and other barriers to music education, butremedying said barriers by including the community – family, friends, other schools, public organizations, and more – in efforts to change the status quo (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elliot, 2012; Shaw, 2016; Younker & Hickey, 2012).

**Increased community engagement.** Incorporating social justice into choral music programs presents an opportunity for educators, students, and the community to identify social
justice concerns unique to people in and around the school music program by using song to express what cannot otherwise be articulated. Educators have identified two main paths to achieving such a large objective: inviting the community into the concert hall through collaborative and featured performances, and going out into the community to demonstrate the ensemble’s commitment to social change. Some educators believe that one way of forging a meaningful and inclusive relationship with the community is through identifying individuals or specific groups of people that do not attend school performances, and inviting them into the rehearsal and performance space (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Elliot, 2012; Shaw, 2016; Younker & Hickey, 2012). Shaw (2015, 2016) labeled these individuals or groups as “culture bearers”, whose primary role is to introduce their style of music-making to the students. In a study on culturally relevant pedagogy in the choral rehearsal, several students testified that their work with “culture bearers” enhanced their appreciation of the music as well as their understanding of the music’s emotion and native culture (Shaw, 2016). Other educators and groups approached this task with the students at the center as musical messengers or “culture bearers” themselves, using public performance to cultivate a relationship with the community (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Shaw, 2015; Shaw, 2016; Younker & Hickey, 2012). Allsup and Shieh (2012) specifically emphasized the power of public performance. When music is performed in response to the needs, concerns, or specific events in a community, for that community, the performers create a dialogue with the community through music (Allsup & Shieh, 2012).

Moving Towards Socially Just Choral Music Education

While the interest in combining music education and social justice has been revitalized in recent years, some educators and organizations have been pursuing socially just music education for nearly two decades. Efforts by many educators have been documented and discussed by
experts and researchers in the music education field (Gatzambide-Fernandez, 2011; Hess, 2014; Shaw, 2012; Shaw, 2015; Shaw 2016; Silverman, 2009; Wright, 2013; Younker & Hickey, 2007). These efforts have manifested as small-scale classroom, school or community-specific practices, as well as national education initiatives. Two of the most visible and active efforts that have emerged are the *multicultural music education* movement of the last half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, and the *culturally responsive classroom* movement of the 21st century (Abeles, 2010; Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Bradley, 2003; Bradley, 2006; Campbell, 1992; Campbell, 1994; Elliot, 2012; Gay, 2002; Goetze, 2000; Jorgensen, 2007; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007; Shaw, 2012; Shaw, 2015; Shaw, 2016; Volk, 1993; Wright, 2013).

**Multicultural music education.** Multiculturalism has been an important topic and movement in music education for nearly sixty years, and nearly all music educators believe that music of derived from non-European cultures should be included in the K-12 music curriculum (Abeles, 2010; Goetze, 2000). At the 1967 *Tanglewood Symposium*, German music educator Egon Kraus asserted that “the confrontation of the cultures is the destiny of our times, and the bringing about of this confrontation in a meaningful manner is the great cultural-political task of our century. We, the music educators, can contribute significantly” (Volk, 1993, p. 137).

Although many music educators agreed with Kraus’ call-to-arms, it wasn’t until the 1980s - when the publication of music from non-European cultures became more readily available – that multicultural choral music education moved forward with purpose (Bradley, 2003). Thirty years later, advances in music publishing and technology has made multicultural choral music – both in print and in performance - readily available to educators and students (Abeles, 2010; Bradley, 2003; Goetze, 2000).
Support and criticism for multicultural choral music education exists today, with some extolling the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural educational and social benefits and others pointing out social and political conflicts that arise when performing music from various cultures and traditions (Bradley, 2003; Bradley, 2006; Elliott, 2012; Goetze, 2000; Jorgensen, 2007; Campbell, 1994).

**Support for multicultural choral music education and repertoire.** As travel and technology erase geographic and cultural borders between people, music education has embraced multicultural music as a means of understanding and participating in a changing world (Goetze, 2000; Volk, 1993). In 1994, Campbell asked, “what are we trying to accomplish regarding the musical education of children in this era of cultural diversity” (p. 23)? The answer to this question amongst music educators is summed up by Goetze,

> [T]he true mission of multiculturalism in education [is] to acknowledge and validate the numerous cultures that are now represented in our school population and to foster tolerance and appreciation of those who differ from ourselves (Goetze, 2000, p. 23)

Goetze’s definition is supported by anecdotal evidence from choral music educators Bradley (2006) and Shaw (2016). One choir student, after performing a song rooted in the South African anti-apartheid movement in front of a South African audience, declared “it felt very powerful, because they knew what it was, and we knew what it was…it was like that barrier was just gone” (Bradley, 2006, p. 19). Another student testified that singing with a person who is native to a specific culture is a more authentic and “real” way to learn musical traditions, and that those interactions may inspire people to seek out additional opportunities to learn about a certain culture or musical practice (Shaw, 2016). In each of these instances, students identified a gain of
knowledge or a personal experience that allowed them to better know or understand something outside of their own reality.

In the pursuit of understanding diverse musical stylings, several strategies been suggested and found to be successful (Campbell, 1992; Goetze, 2000). Commonly used methods include consulting the advice community members who are native musicians of a culture, attending or watching live performances, watching or listening to authentic performances in the absence of live performance, and seeking additional background information on a song (Campbell, 1992; Goetze, 2000). Performing music without a conductor, imitating the visual characteristics of the music, or inviting a native performer of a piece to meet the ensemble in person or via satellite, are additional strategies that can and have been used to heighten the authenticity and experience of a choral performance of multicultural music (Goetze, 2000).

**Criticism of multicultural choral music education and repertoire.** Much of the criticism directed at multicultural choral music education and multicultural choral repertoire, and whether it represents a socially just approach to choral music education, is centered around the types of music that are or are not selected for study and performance, and socio-cultural perceptions of what it means to label music as “multicultural”. Some music educators have asserted that while the pursuit of multicultural choral music education is a worthy endeavor, the way it is being conducted is incorrect (Bradley, 2003; Goetze, 2000). The methods by which choral music is learned has changed from a paper-based, notated tradition to one where videos or recordings can grant faster, more cost-effective access to any type of music desired (Goetze, 2000). The issue of access to multicultural music speaks to concerns raised by educators regarding the authenticity of printed multicultural choral arrangements versus videos, recordings, and live performances of native individuals performing the music of their home culture (Bradley,
As examples of these authentic performances have been examined and more frequently utilized, educators have criticized choral music publishers for providing little to no background information on the context and language of multicultural music (Bradley, 2003). Educators have also assigned the task of responsible repertoire selection to their colleagues, and challenged music educators to think critically of the when they choose to program “multicultural” choral music. Bradley (2006) stated that “repertoire choices featuring musical cultures from around the globe often are made in the spirit of ‘spicing up’ concert programs of predominantly western art music” (p. 12). She asserted that the use of non-Western music for the sole purpose of recognizing difference perpetuates the belief that music of the Western classical tradition is the standard of excellence, while music outside of this tradition is of a second-class nature – a practice Bradley referred to as “othering” (Bradley, 2003; Bradley, 2006).

**Culturally responsive pedagogy in the choral classroom.** Culturally responsive pedagogy is built upon the core belief that educators should recognize, support, and nurture the individual strengths and cultures of all children in a student-centered educational setting (Gay, 2002; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). Shaw (2012) described one of the primary needs for culturally responsive pedagogy in choral music education when she stated that “cultural concerns have become increasingly important to the many teachers changed with the responsibility of teaching students from cultural backgrounds different from their own” (p. 76). Her position advocated for a student-centered approach in which the teacher’s response to the students’ cultural and academic needs, together, determined the course of action in the classroom (Shaw, 2012). Wright (2013) termed this as “thinking globally, acting locally” (p. 33), and discussed inclusive education to achieve this end. Wright asserted that informal learning experiences,
whilst keeping in mind the cultural and education needs of the child, would yield positive results regarding student enjoyment, achievement, and pursuit of music outside of the school setting (Wright, 2013). Bradley (2007) agreed that inclusion was a path to socially just music education, and suggested that to make music education more inclusive, educators should work from the perspective of those deemed to be “advantaged” and disadvantaged. From this perspective, educators could develop programs that work towards the goal of eradicating such hierarchies (Bradley, 2007). Allsup and Shieh (2012) addressed this topic as it related to the engagement of the community, and believed that it was necessary for educators to pursue a public pedagogy, one which sought to identify and act against injustice.

At the heart of teaching others is the moral imperative to care. It is the imperative to perceive and act, and not look away. Calling upon our best selves, we know ethically that we cannot ignore these things. Consider that we are educator precisely because we do not wish to ignore these things. Education, after all, is a public endeavor with an obligation to enter the public space. Consider that we work with the music because the social life, the cultural life of our communities, is something we care deeply about. (Allsup & Shieh, 2012, p. 48)

Elliott (2012) echoed this belief by asking why we teach what we teach, and whether it is in the best educational and ethical interest of our students. Elliott’s discussion of the topic centered around the idea of artistic citizenship, which subscribes to the belief that it is the responsibility of all consumers and creators of music to preserve all musical beliefs, practices, and preferences. He stated that “by integrating music and music education with all aspects of social life and community, we do not forfeit music’s greatness and profundity; we fortify and increase it” (Elliott, 2012, p. 25).
Conclusion and Summary

Social justice concerns have existed within music education since its inception as an academic discipline. Recent interest in such concerns has led many music educators to question the effectiveness and relevancy of traditional music teaching practices, ensemble repertoire, and classroom and rehearsal structures. While some educators prefer to adhere to the teaching practices learned throughout their own schooling and experience, others seek to challenge the dominant paradigms within music education by exploring alternative approaches to teaching. In choral music education, those challenging traditional practices advocate for a student-centered, culturally relevant approach to repertoire selection, rehearsal practices, and choral performance.

Educators, students, and the community all stand to benefit from a student-centered and culturally relevant approach. Many music educators, as well as students, have testified that such an approach can benefit students through increased engagement and sociocultural competency, promoting the relevancy of music education within students’ lives. Educators can benefit from these endeavors through critical self-reflection that questions their own beliefs and biases. Such information can also be used to alter existing teaching practices, construct new pedagogies, and lead to self-motivated and self-constructed professional and personal development activities. All choral program stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and school administrators, can benefit from witnessing “quality” music as it exists across the globe in addition to those practices traditionally and heavily valued in North American school music programs. The benefit of this approach for the community could include the increased participation and engagement of individuals and groups whose musical voice may be stifled due to traditional school models of music education. Music educators and choral programs that seek to cultivate relationships with these musical “culture bearers” can reap the rewards of additional performance opportunities,
exposure to new music, and increased attention to social and political issues affecting the school and community.

As student populations continue to diversify, and inequalities and injustices become more apparent, it will be important for music educators to take the steps necessary to ensure that all students have access to a fair and equitable music education. Many music educators have furthered the conversation on social justice for some time now, proposing concepts and models for action - but some have been slow to act on theories and suggestions (Bowman, 2007; Butler, Lind & McKoy, 2007; Jorgensen, 2007; Riley, 2009/2010; Sands, 2007). It will be crucial that music educators working towards socially justice in music education act on their convictions, document results, and report out through personal and professional channels to encourage other educators to move beyond conversation.

The information I have learned in writing this review has caused me to thoughtfully reflect on my own beliefs and teaching practices as a choral director. In viewing choral music education through the lens of social justice, I have come to see the many biases and assumptions I hold in terms of who should be participating in or hold power in the ensemble, how to teach choral music to a diverse body of students, and what music should or should not be taught. The works I reviewed by Bradley (2003, 2006, 2007) and Shaw (2012, 2015, 2016) had the most profound impact on my views as a choral music educator. Bradley’s research on racism and “othering” in choral music, and Shaw’s studies on culturally relevant pedagogy in the choir have encouraged me to reevaluate the music that I put before my choir students, the justifications I make for selecting said music, and how I teach music from diverse cultures. I intend to ask these crucial questions as I plan for both my school choral program and community youth choir this upcoming fall, and as I construct an interest session on social justice in music education for my
state NAfME conference this upcoming Spring. My research on this topic has left me overwhelmed but determined about the pursuit of socially just choral music education. I hope that in embracing these ideas, I can do my part as an educator to make right what is wrong in the world (Richardson, 2007; Sands, 2007; Wright, 2013).
References


