

FROM BELONGING TO BECOMING: NAVIGATING THE ECOSYSTEM OF
COMMUNITY, MOTIVATION, AND AGENCY IN SECONDARY MUSIC
CLASSROOMS

by

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To my wife, Jenna, whose unwavering support and unconditional love have sustained me throughout this journey.

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Thomas Anthony Torrento

ABSTRACT

FROM BELONGING TO BECOMING: NAVIGATING THE ECOSYSTEM OF COMMUNITY, MOTIVATION, AND AGENCY IN SECONDARY MUSIC CLASSROOMS

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This study explores how participation in secondary music classrooms functions as a dynamic, relational process through which students develop within interconnected experiences of community, motivation, and agency. Drawing upon sociocultural theory, ecological systems theory, and constructivist perspectives, the study introduces the Music Classroom Ecosystem, a conceptual framework that understands participation as recursive, interconnected, and continually evolving rather than linear or sequential.

Using qualitative methodology informed by narrative inquiry and arts-based inquiry, data were collected from twenty students representing grades nine through twelve across two contrasting secondary school music programs. Data sources included individual interviews, focus groups, post-rehearsal observations, researcher reflexive journaling, and metaphor-elicitation activities. Analysis emphasized narrative interpretation, comparative reading, vignette construction, and metaphor interpretation, allowing patterns to emerge across students' lived experiences.

Findings indicate that community, motivation, and agency operate as interdependent dimensions of participation rather than sequential stages. Community

provides the relational foundation for participation, motivation sustains engagement through meaningful musical experiences, and agency emerges as students assume increasing ownership and influence within the ensemble. Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions continually shape one another as students revisit them throughout their participation. Participation was therefore best understood as recursive rather than linear, with each return to the community shaped by prior experiences of belonging, meaning, and contribution. The study further suggests that agency is redistributed through relational processes aligned with learned helpfulness, as students who benefit from supportive musical communities increasingly become mentors, leaders, and contributors who sustain those communities over time.

This study contributes to music education scholarship by introducing the Music Classroom Ecosystem as a conceptual framework for understanding participation as a dynamic, relational, and recursive developmental process. The framework offers an interpretive lens for understanding how participation develops and is sustained over time, while providing practical implications for designing music learning environments that intentionally cultivate belonging, meaningful participation, agency, and long-term community sustainability.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Prologue

A music classroom is not just a rehearsal space; it is an ecosystem of relationships, motivations, and emerging identities. Students enter at different stages—some seeking belonging, others driven by personal curiosity, and others striving to develop independent musical voices. Like organisms in a natural ecosystem, their growth depends not only on social conditions but also on the shared musical activity: the repertoire that shapes collective meaning, the sonic interactions that demand listening and response, and the aesthetic decisions that require judgment and interpretation. Music is the medium through which relationships are negotiated, identities are formed, and agency becomes audible (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938; Small, 1998).

Historically, however, these ecosystems have often been constrained by performance-driven, top-down rehearsal models. Ensembles have long reflected industrial-era priorities of efficiency and discipline, which, while producing polished performances, have not always created equitable or sustaining environments for all students (Humphreys, 1989; Mark & Gary, 2007). Today still, these legacies persist in schools, where retention challenges, opportunity gaps between districts, and limited space for student agency reveal how the historical structures of ensemble pedagogy continue to shape the present (Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Hess, 2017).

In this ecological system of musical relationships, students do not remain static. They experience participation in varied ways—at times locating themselves within a

community, at other moments deepening motivation through collaboration, and in different contexts exercising agency as increasingly independent musicians. These movements are rarely linear; rather, they resemble a dynamic system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Small, 1998). A student may experience safety in the roots of the ensemble community while simultaneously engaging in small-ensemble work that sharpens responsibility and interpretive awareness. Solo or highly exposed performance contexts may further expand agency, yet such independence does not represent departure from the ecosystem. Instead, students move among large ensemble, small ensemble, and solo experiences—often overlapping—re-entering communal spaces with expanded understanding and, at times, serving as more knowledgeable others for those earlier in the journey (Biesta, 2015; Burnard, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

To describe this journey as an ecosystem is not to suggest that such balance routinely manifests within performance-based classes, but rather to articulate a pedagogical orientation toward cultivating environments in which movement among community, motivation, and agency can occur with coherence and flow. Within this conceptualization, no single element functions in isolation; instead, each shapes the others over time (Dewey, 1938; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017). Teaching is not peripheral to the ecosystem but constitutive of it. The teacher functions as an ecological steward—intentionally designing structures, sequencing experiences, and sustaining relational continuity so that participation can circulate across large ensemble, small ensemble, and solo contexts without fragmentation. When deliberately cultivated through such pedagogical judgment, the ensemble breathes, adapts, and evolves as students negotiate the dynamic tension between belonging and becoming. This study begins from that

ecological understanding, seeking to illuminate how community, motivation, and agency intersect in the lived realities of performance-based secondary music classrooms and the students who inhabit them.

Within this framework, community refers to conditions of belonging and shared musical purpose that anchor students' participation; motivation describes the emergent energy that sustains engagement through autonomy, responsibility, and collaboration; and agency denotes students' developing capacity for intentional action and musical self-authorship within and beyond ensemble contexts.

Within this ecosystem, progression toward agency does not signal an endpoint, but a renewal of the cycle: as musicians develop independence, they reenter the community as models and mentors for others. In this capacity, they function as more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978) and as central participants within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), inviting peers to step forward as learners within the shared work of the ensemble.

Technical proficiency and ensemble precision are essential to musicianship. When situated within an ecology that cultivates responsibility, interpretation, and relational awareness, they support not only performance accuracy but the development of agency, where skill, judgment, and participation converge. In this sense, agency reflects not a departure from musicianship but its maturation. Performance-based music education thus contributes to the formation of independent musicians who are capable of both technical excellence and thoughtful, self-authored engagement within and beyond musical contexts (Biesta, 2015; Elliott & Silverman, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Throughout much of the twentieth century, American school music programs were shaped by performance-driven models whose organizational structures and evaluative norms were influenced by pedagogical traditions associated with Western classical music. Although school bands have historically performed a wide range of repertoire—including marches, patriotic works, contemporary wind literature, and popular adaptations—their instructional formats often reflect classical paradigms: large ensembles, conductor-centered rehearsal, notation-based learning, and hierarchical sectional organization (Mark & Gary, 2007). Within this framework, ensembles became the primary vehicles for instruction, with success frequently measured by performance quality at concerts, festivals, and adjudicated events. Rehearsals were commonly organized around efficiency, discipline, and technical precision (Humphreys, 1989), reflecting broader industrial-era values of standardization and productivity that shaped schooling (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Westerlund & Väkevä et al., 2017).

While these models cultivated technical skill and introduced students to valued repertoire, they often operated within a conductor-centered paradigm in which authority, interpretation, and decision-making were centralized in the director (Mark & Gary, 2007). Shively (2004) questioned this tradition, observing that in ensemble classrooms “the conductor’s podium [is] the focal point of the room and the ensemble members’ chairs and stands radiating from this focal point” (p. 179). Although such arrangements may originate from logistical necessity, Shively argues that they reflect more than spatial organization; they reinforce a teacher-centered structure that “does not serve to support the musical development of the individual students in that ensemble” (p. 180). In this

configuration, learning risks becoming “teacher- rather than learner-centered” (p. 179), with musical decision-making concentrated at the podium rather than distributed among participants. Shively therefore calls for movement “away from the podium as the source of musical decision-making” (p. 180), reframing this shift as a reconsideration of the “intended goals of these ensemble experiences” (p. 179). These concerns resonate with the distinction between qualification and subjectification: when ensemble goals emphasize technical accuracy and performance outcomes alone, qualification may flourish while opportunities for students to emerge as musical subjects capable of initiating, interpreting, and authoring meaning may be narrowed.

Within this hierarchical rehearsal logic, student voice and creative authorship may be constrained even as musical standards are upheld. Kennedy (2014) documented how ensemble participation could function as both affirming and constraining, with identity shaped as much by institutional expectations as by personal expression. Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz (2003) found that students described their ensembles as “families,” signaling that belonging—rather than performance outcomes alone—was central to participation. Pellegrino (2009) showed that peer connection and affirmation were as important to persistence as musical achievement, while Karlsen (2011) emphasized that agency is relational, dependent on how students perceive their contributions are valued by others.

These historical patterns now intersect with pressing contemporary challenges. Many districts face declining enrollment in music programs, raising urgent questions of retention and relevance (Elpus & Miller, 2024El; Fitzpatrick, 2018). Equity concerns persist, particularly between affluent and poverty-impacted schools, where resources and

opportunities for agency are unequally distributed (Abril & Gault, 2008; Allsup & Shieh, 2012; Hess, 2017). Moreover, today's students navigate a cultural landscape where music learning increasingly occurs outside of traditional ensembles—through digital platforms, informal groups, or personal projects (Ruthmann, 2007; Tobias, 2013)—highlighting the need for school-based music to reconsider how authority, participation, and authorship are structured within ensemble spaces. Despite these realities, many ensemble classrooms continue to operate through top-down rehearsal models, creating a persistent gap between what research demonstrates about student experience and how music education is commonly enacted.

Taken together, these tensions reveal a disconnect between the lived experiences of students and the traditional ensemble structures that shape them. This study seeks to illuminate how community, motivation, and agency interact within the ecology of secondary music classrooms, offering an alternative vision of ensemble learning that is responsive, relational, and sustaining.

Purpose for this Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how students experience community, motivation, and agency within secondary performance-based ensemble classrooms, conceptualized as a self-sustaining ecosystem. Using qualitative methods informed by narrative inquiry and arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Clandinin, 2013), the study will investigate how students describe their sense of belonging in large ensembles, their growth of autonomy and responsibility in small ensembles, and their development of agency through solo performance. By examining these interrelated dimensions across both suburban and urban contexts, the study seeks to reveal how ensemble classrooms

might function as ecological systems of learning—cultivating not only musical achievement but also persistence, equity, and the independent becoming of young musicians (Biesta, 2015; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017).

Research Questions

The questions guiding this study emerge from the conceptualization of the music classroom as an ecosystem. Because this framework emphasizes the interrelated dimensions of community, motivation, and agency, the research questions examine each dimension individually while also exploring how they interact and develop over time. They follow the developmental trajectory represented by the ecosystem metaphors—roots, greenhouse, and canopy—that structure the findings chapters (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938).

Accordingly, my research will be guided by the following questions:

1. **Roots – Community:** How do students describe their experiences of community within large ensemble settings, and in what ways does this sense of belonging anchor their persistence in music?
2. **Greenhouse – Motivation:** How does motivation emerge through participation in small ensembles or collaborative contexts, where autonomy and responsibility develop?
3. **Canopy – Agency:** How do students describe their experiences of agency in solo or independent musical work, and how do these moments of authorship reflect increasing independence?
4. **Interconnections:** How do these three dimensions—community, motivation, and agency—interrelate within the secondary music classroom?

5. **Ecosystem Pathways:** How do students move through this ecosystem from community, to motivation, to agency?

Together, these questions provide a coherent framework for examining the Music Classroom Ecosystem. By aligning with the metaphors of roots, greenhouse, and canopy, they also anticipate the organization of the findings chapters and underscore how musical growth—understood through narrative and artistic expression—is both developmental and ecological (Small, 1998; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017).

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for music education, the broader educational community, and the students whose lives are shaped by ensemble participation. By framing secondary music classrooms as ecosystems, it offers a conceptual model that highlights the interdependence of community, motivation, and agency in shaping student experiences. This ecological perspective challenges traditional performance-driven paradigms, reframing ensemble learning not only as the cultivation of musical excellence but also as the development of human capacities for belonging, persistence, and independence (Biesta, 2015; Dewey, 1938; Elliott & Silverman, 2015).

Ultimately, the significance of this work also lies in its attention to contemporary challenges that directly affect schools and music programs. Even as ensemble participation remains among the most meaningful parts of many students' school lives, declining enrollment and retention rates threaten their stability (Elpus & Abril, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2018). At the same time, inequities between affluent and poverty-impacted districts raise pressing questions about access to resources and equitable opportunities for developing agency and persistence in music education (Abril & Gault, 2008; Allsup &

Shieh, 2012; Hess, 2017). This study situates these challenges within an ecological framework, asking how classrooms can be designed to cultivate resilience, equity, and persistence, and how students' experiences of community, motivation, and agency might sustain their long-term engagement (Burnard, 2012; Westerlund, 2020).

For scholars, the study contributes a theoretically integrated account of music learning that bridges philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy. It connects ecological metaphors with empirical investigation, advancing discourse on how students develop agency as full members of the ensemble rather than apart from it. By reframing agency as emerging through participation, responsibility, and relational recognition, the study extends existing research on motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), community (Garrison et al., 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991), and agency (Allsup, 2016; Biesta, 2015; Burnard, 2012; Karlsen, 2011) into a holistic framework for understanding classroom practice.

For practitioners, the study provides insights into how ensemble learning environments can be designed to cultivate student belonging, foster intrinsic motivation, and support the development of independent musicianship. These insights have direct implications for student retention, curricular design, and the creation of equitable opportunities for diverse learners across suburban and urban contexts (Abril & Gault, 2008; Tobias, 2013).

Beyond music education, the broader significance of this study lies in its attention to the formation of independent, agentic learners and in why such formation matters educationally. By examining how students move from belonging to becoming, the research foregrounds the ways classroom ecosystems may support capacities that democratic societies require but cannot presume—namely, the ability to collaborate

across difference, adapt within changing social contexts, and act meaningfully and responsibly within communities (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Noddings, 1984). These capacities are not incidental outcomes of schooling, but deliberate educational aims tied to ethical participation, shared responsibility, and human interdependence.

The music classroom is a particularly rich environment for this development because musical participation is inherently relational, embodied, and interdependent. Ensemble performance requires real-time listening, negotiated timing, distributed leadership, and shared accountability for a collective outcome. Unlike many academic tasks that can be completed individually, musical meaning emerges only through coordinated action among participants. Students must continuously calibrate their individual expression in relation to others, balancing autonomy with responsiveness. In this way, music classrooms provide lived experiences of democratic practice—not as abstract ideals, but as enacted, audible relationships.

In this way, the study contributes to broader conversations about education as the cultivation of agency, equity, and human flourishing, positioning music education not as ancillary to this mission, but as a uniquely embodied and relational context in which such civic dispositions may be meaningfully developed (Biesta, 2015; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017).

The Music Classroom Ecosystem Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is the Music Classroom Ecosystem, a metaphor that positions music learning as a dynamic system. Like natural ecosystems, music classrooms thrive through balance, diversity, and adaptation; they are sustained not by linear cause-and-effect relationships, but by ongoing interactions among students,

teachers, repertoire, traditions, and institutional structures that both constrain and enable growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938). Within this ecological view, learning is neither static nor predictable. Instead, it is shaped through recursive processes in which participation, identity, and meaning are continually negotiated.

This ecosystemic framing also invites an alchemic understanding of schooling—one that emphasizes transformation rather than transmission. Historically, alchemy encompassed not only the transmutation of base metals into gold, but also broader processes of becoming in which matter, meaning, and identity were reshaped through sustained engagement and uncertainty (Jung, 1968). Contemporary educational theorists have reclaimed alchemy as a metaphor for learning, emphasizing how growth emerges through relational conditions, productive risk, and the integration of intellect, emotion, and experience (Eisner, 2002; Palmer, 1998).

Popkewitz (2008) extends this metaphor by describing “alchemy” through which disciplinary knowledge is transformed when brought into school settings—reshaped to fit institutional logics, norms, and expectations. As such, music education is not simply the transfer of musical practice into classrooms, but its reconfiguration within the structures of schooling. Agency, therefore, is not a byproduct of musical activity alone, but emerges through how musical practices are organized, valued, and enacted within institutional space.

Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, alchemy names this dual transformation: the reshaping of musical knowledge within school structures and the development of students through sustained participation in those structures. Ordinary classroom experiences—rehearsals, performances, collaborations—become sites where identity,

responsibility, and authorship are gradually developed. The ecosystem does not merely transmit music; it reshapes both music and musicians through participation.

At the center of this ecosystem are three dimensions—community, motivation, and agency—that function not as discrete stages, but as mutually constitutive processes (Biesta, 2015; Small, 1998; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017). Together, they describe how students enter, move through, and ultimately reshape the musical worlds they inhabit.

Community

Community represents the ecological ground of the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Large ensembles provide students with a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and collective identity, situating music-making as a fundamentally social act. Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz (2003) described school ensembles as “families,” while Kennedy (2014) demonstrated how ensemble identity can be both affirming and constraining, shaping who students feel permitted to become as musicians. What distinguishes music classrooms from many other academic settings is the immediacy of interdependence: students do not merely sit alongside one another, but must listen, adjust, breathe, and respond in real time to produce a shared sonic outcome. Sound itself is collective and ephemeral; no individual can complete the musical act alone within an ensemble. This intensifies relational accountability and makes belonging not simply social, but audible. These findings align with Wenger’s (1998) conception of communities of practice, in which learning occurs through participation, shared repertoire, and identity formation.

Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, community functions as the condition that makes transformation possible. It is the space in which trust is cultivated, risk is normalized, and students first take root musically and socially. Drawing on sociocultural

perspectives, community is understood as the relational context in which novices gain access to practice and meaning through legitimate participation (Garrison et al., 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this regard, community provides the conditions that sustain engagement, allowing students to persist even when challenge or vulnerability might otherwise lead to withdrawal.

Motivation

Motivation emerges as this intensification takes structural form within smaller ensemble contexts, where autonomy, responsibility, and collaboration become more pronounced. In these spaces, the ecosystem generates productive tension—an awareness of interdependence in which individual preparation and collective outcome are immediately linked. With fewer musicians present, each voice carries greater weight; entrances are exposed, interpretive choices are negotiated, and accountability becomes visible. This heightened visibility creates conditions akin to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, as students operate at the edge of current competence while supported by peers engaged in the same task.

At the same time, the alignment of challenge and relational support reflects what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as optimal conditions for flow, where increased responsibility sharpens attention and deepens engagement. Self-determination theory further suggests that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for intrinsic motivation to flourish (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and small-group music-making offers strong conditions for these needs to be met. As students negotiate roles, co-construct interpretations, and assume ownership of musical decisions, motivation is not externally imposed but internally energized through participation (Evans & Liu, 2019).

Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, motivation functions as a transitional and alchemic process, bridging belonging with becoming. As students experience themselves as capable contributors rather than passive participants, motivation transforms participation into purpose. This process aligns with Westerlund's (2020) view of music education as a space for ethical and relational engagement, and with Tobias's (2013) emphasis on meaningful musical agency emerging through collaborative practice. Motivation thus represents not merely engagement, but the intensification of identity-in-motion within the ecosystem.

Agency

Agency foregrounds students' capacity to act meaningfully and intentionally as musicians, particularly in solo or independent contexts. Karlsen (2011) emphasized that musical agency is relational, grounded in how students perceive the value and legitimacy of their contributions within musical communities. In the Music Classroom Ecosystem, agency represents both a culmination of prior transformations and a point of renewal. Students who develop agency do not exit the ecosystem; rather, they re-enter it as more knowledgeable others, reshaping communal norms and expectations through their actions (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).

Alchemically, agency marks a moment of transmutation—when sound becomes voice and participation becomes authorship. This process reflects what Biesta (2015) described as the “beautiful risk of education,” wherein learners emerge as subjects capable of acting in and on the world, rather than merely adapting to it. In music classrooms, agency is audible in students' interpretive choices, leadership, and willingness to assume artistic responsibility, even in the face of uncertainty.

Interrelated and Recursive Processes

Community, motivation, and agency are not linear stages but overlapping, recursive processes that students navigate fluidly over time. Learners may return to community for affirmation, lean into motivation through collaboration, or step forward into agency as circumstances invite independence. The ecosystem metaphor, informed by an alchemical lens, allows for both progression and regression, recognizing that musical growth is non-linear, contextual, and deeply human (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938; Small, 1998). Transformation occurs not through efficiency, but through sustained participation, reflection, and relational engagement.

Theoretical Foundations

The Music Classroom Ecosystem framework draws upon multiple theoretical traditions. From psychology, it is informed by self-determination theory and research emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Evans & Liu, 2019). From philosophy, it aligns with democratic, participatory visions of music education that foreground experience, risk, and becoming (Allsup, 2016; Biesta, 2015; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017), echoing Dewey's (1938) conception of learning as an experiential and social process. From sociocultural theory, it resonates with communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and the community of inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000). Finally, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory situates the music classroom within broader institutional and environmental layers that shape access, opportunity, and participation.

By integrating ecological and alchemic metaphors, the Music Classroom Ecosystem offers a holistic framework for examining how community, motivation, and

agency intersect in the lived realities of ensemble classrooms. Together, these perspectives position music education not as the production of predetermined outcomes, but as a dynamic process of transformation through which students emerge as musicians, collaborators, and agents within their musical worlds (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Westerlund, 2020).

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters that collectively explore the Music Classroom Ecosystem as a framework for understanding community, motivation, and agency in secondary performance-based music classrooms. The opening chapters introduce the study, establish the problem, purpose, research questions, and framework, and situate the work within historical, philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical literature. Chapter Three then outlines the qualitative, narrative, and arts-based approaches guiding the research, setting the stage for the central findings (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Clandinin, 2013).

The structure of this dissertation reflects the ecological framework introduced in this chapter, moving from theoretical grounding to empirical findings, synthesis, and reflection. Following the conceptual and literature-based foundations established in Chapters One through Three, the analytic work of the study unfolds across four chapters.

Chapter Four, *Findings—The Music Classroom Ecosystem*, presents the findings through the lens of the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework. Drawing on students' narratives and artistic representations, this chapter examines how community, motivation, and agency are experienced across large ensemble, small ensemble, and solo performance contexts, emphasizing their relational and contextual nature.

Chapter Five, *Synthesis—The Ecosystem in Motion*, brings these findings into dialogue, tracing how students move across musical contexts over time. This chapter highlights the recursive and mutually reinforcing relationships among community, motivation, and agency, positioning the ecosystem as a dynamic system of learning rather than a set of isolated conditions.

Chapter Six, *Discussion and Implications*, situates the findings within the broader philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural literature. This chapter addresses the theoretical contributions of the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework and considers implications for music education practice, teacher preparation, and policy.

Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation by summarizing the study's central insights, acknowledging limitations, and identifying directions for future research. The conclusion reflects on the classroom as an educational ecology shaped by participation, responsibility, and growth, foregrounding how students' musical development unfolds through interconnected experiences of community, motivation, and agency.

The present study is guided by the research questions introduced earlier in this chapter, which emerge from the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework. These questions shape the focus of the literature review that follows. Chapter 2 situates the study within relevant philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural research traditions, building the theoretical foundation necessary to explore these questions in depth.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Building upon the ecological framework introduced in Chapter 1, this review examines the theoretical and historical foundations that inform the Music Classroom Ecosystem model. Education is a human endeavor—a dynamic process of growth and transformation (Biesta, 2015). Educators design learning environments in which students actively construct knowledge through interaction with others and the world around them (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Effective teaching fosters intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and a growth mindset (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dweck, 2006). It must also honor students’ diverse backgrounds, experiences, and developmental needs (CASEL, 2020; Gay, 2010). Translating theory into practice often requires educators to navigate overlapping philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural perspectives that shape pedagogical decision-making. This review moves from philosophical foundations to sociocultural practice in order to situate the Music Classroom Ecosystem as an integrative framework for understanding music learning.

Ertmer and Newby (2013) pose a foundational question within the discourse of learning theory: “Do we select from each learning theory those principles and strategies that best match our goals and the needs of our learners, or do we consistently rely on one theory?” (p. 60). This question foregrounds an ongoing theoretical tension between pluralism and coherence, challenging educators to consider whether learning is best

understood through a single dominant paradigm or through the integration of multiple perspectives. At stake in this debate is not merely instructional strategy, but the conceptualization of how learning itself occurs—whether it is framed primarily as cognitive processing, behavioral conditioning, social participation, or experiential reconstruction. These frameworks shape how educators understand the very nature of learning, agency, and growth.

Constructivism reframes the learner as an active agent in the construction of meaning rather than as a passive recipient of transmitted knowledge. As Fosnot and Perry (2005) assert, “Constructivism is not a theory about teaching; it is a theory about learning” (p. 8). The implication of this distinction is significant within performance-based music classrooms, where teaching is often associated with demonstration, correction, and rehearsal direction. From a constructivist perspective, the director does not simply transmit musical understanding through gesture and instruction; rather, the teacher introduces repertoire, technical challenges, and interpretive problems that invite students into active meaning-making. Repertoire selection, score study, and rehearsal design become forms of curricular curation through which musical content enters the ecosystem. The teacher models musicianship, frames listening, shapes rehearsal conditions, and determines when to intervene or withhold intervention. With this in mind, the teacher is neither a mere technician nor a passive facilitator, but a responsive architect of musical experience—structuring conditions in which students encounter, interpret, and ultimately transform musical material through participation.

In the field of music education, these theoretical perspectives acquire distinctive resonance. Music learning is inherently embodied, social, and interpretive in nature.

Students not only learn about music but learn through music—through participation, reflection, and shared expression. This orientation aligns closely with Elliott’s (1995) praxial philosophy of music education, which positions music as a form of human action (musicing) through which understanding emerges in and through doing. From this perspective, musical knowledge is not merely conceptual but procedural, relational, and situated within practice. The cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of music are therefore inseparable, making music classrooms uniquely generative spaces for examining how community, motivation, and agency co-construct learning. Dewey (1934/2005) argued that art—and by extension, music—represents the consummation of experience, where perception, emotion, and action converge into meaning. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996) emphasized that learning is mediated through cultural tools and social interaction; music, as both symbol and practice, functions as one of the richest mediators of human experience.

At the same time, the philosophical lineage of music education has continually evolved in response to changing understandings of learning. From Reimer’s (1970/1989/2003) aesthetic philosophy, which framed music as an intrinsically valuable art form, to praxial and pluralistic perspectives that position music as socially situated, culturally responsive, and democratically enacted practice (Allsup, 2016; Elliott, 1995; Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Regelski, 2016; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017), scholars have debated whether the purpose of music education lies in cultivating artistic sensitivity or engaging with music as lived human practice. These evolving perspectives collectively suggest that music classrooms are not neutral instructional spaces but ecological systems

in which human relationships, cultural contexts, and artistic practices continually shape one another.

In this chapter, the Music Classroom Ecosystem—a framework connecting community, motivation, and agency—is situated within an interdisciplinary context, drawing on philosophical, psychological, sociological, and music education scholarship.

To establish these theoretical foundations, the chapter proceeds through five major movements. First, it traces the historical evolution of ensemble pedagogy, examining shifts from aesthetic to praxial and emerging ecological paradigms in music education. Second, it explores learning theory, drawing on constructivism, schema theory, and metaphor theory to explain how students construct musical meaning. Third, it situates music learning within sociocultural and ecological perspectives, including Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Wenger's communities of practice, Garrison et al.'s (2000) community of inquiry, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems theory, to illuminate how participation and context shape cognition. Fourth, the Music Classroom Ecosystem Framework is articulated as an integrative model of community, motivation, and agency. Finally, the chapter returns to broader historical paradigms of learning to demonstrate how an ecological perspective reframes enduring tensions between individual and collective growth, structure and experience, and transmission and participation.

Through this synthesis, the chapter highlights how intersecting theoretical traditions inform contemporary understandings of music education. Classrooms are understood not merely as sites of instruction, but as relational environments in which ideas, identities, and practices develop through interaction. As Bronfenbrenner (1979)

observed, “a person’s development is profoundly affected by events occurring in the environment in which that person is growing up” (p. 3). In music classrooms, these environments encompass social, cultural, and artistic dimensions that shape how students come to know themselves as musicians and collaborators.

Ultimately, this chapter provides the conceptual grounding necessary for examining learning in music as relational and contextually situated. It positions the Music Classroom Ecosystem as a unifying framework through which the psychological, philosophical, and sociocultural dimensions of music education can be understood and later explored empirically. The literature reviewed here establishes the theoretical foundation for investigating how community, motivation, and agency interact within the lived ecology of secondary music classrooms.

Early Industrial-Era Efficiency and Standardization

The origins of ensemble pedagogy in the United States are deeply entangled with the broader social and industrial developments of the early twentieth century, particularly the rise of social efficiency as a dominant curriculum ideology. Curriculum historians such as Bobbitt (1918) advanced social efficiency as an organizing principle for schooling, arguing that education should be structured to prepare students for differentiated roles within an industrialized society. Later scholars, including Callahan (1962), Tyack (1974), and Kliebard (2004), have documented how this efficiency-oriented framework shaped the organization of American public schools through standardization, hierarchical control, and measurable outcomes. Within this context, schooling was understood less as a site for individual exploration and more as a system designed to produce predictable and manageable results. Social efficiency promised order

amid rapid urbanization and mass schooling, leaving a lasting imprint on curricular priorities and instructional practices.

Music education, particularly ensemble-based instruction, developed within this same ideological landscape. Large ensembles such as bands and orchestras became the dominant vehicles for music learning, organized through clearly delineated hierarchies in which conductors assumed centralized authority and students occupied specialized, role-bound positions. Rehearsal practices emphasized efficiency, discipline, and technical precision, with students engaging in repetitive, task-specific work oriented toward a collective musical product—the public performance (Humphreys, 1989). Success was frequently evaluated through concerts, adjudicated festivals, and standardized rating systems, reinforcing an externalized conception of musical achievement and aligning ensemble instruction with broader industrial-era values of productivity and control (Mark & Gary, 2007).

The resulting musicianship was often marked by technical accuracy, ensemble cohesion, and fidelity to notated repertoire. Students developed disciplined performance habits, refined listening skills within sectional roles, and the capacity to execute complex works with precision. At the same time, this model sometimes privileged compliance and uniformity over interpretive risk, improvisation, or student-generated musical decision-making. Musicianship, in this context, was frequently defined by the quality of the collective product rather than by individual authorship or expressive autonomy.

The educational implications of this orientation can be further illuminated through Biesta's (2015) framework of educational purpose, which distinguishes among qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Within ensemble traditions shaped by

social efficiency, qualification was foregrounded through the systematic cultivation of technical skills and performance competencies necessary for participation in established musical practices. Ensembles simultaneously functioned as sites of socialization, inducting students into shared norms of discipline, punctuality, hierarchy, and collective responsibility. As Biesta (2015) notes, socialization involves “the many ways in which, through education, we become part of existing traditions and ways of doing and being” (p. 20). Ensemble participation served not only musical ends but also broader socializing functions consistent with the aims of social efficiency.

By contrast, subjectification—the educational purpose concerned with the emergence of the individual as an autonomous and responsible agent—was less explicitly supported within these models. Biesta (2015) describes subjectification as education’s role in enabling individuals to come into presence “as a subject of action and responsibility” (p. 21), a process that resists standardization and cannot be fully engineered through predetermined outcomes. While ensemble contexts occasionally afforded opportunities for interpretive choice, leadership, or creative agency, such experiences were often constrained by the demands of efficiency, uniformity, and performance excellence (Humphreys, 1989; Mark & Gary, 2007). Consequently, subjectification was not absent from ensemble pedagogy, but it was frequently subordinated to the priorities of qualification and socialization embedded within social efficiency-oriented structures.

This historical configuration should not be understood as pedagogically deficient, but rather as situated within a particular educational moment. The emphasis on order, discipline, and collective coordination contributed to ensemble cohesion, technical

mastery, and a strong sense of communal belonging—features that remain central to ensemble success. Within the evolving ecology of music education, this early focus on efficiency and standardization can be understood as a foundational layer of the ecosystem, providing stability while constraining flexibility and agency. Recognizing this legacy creates conceptual space for reimagining ensemble pedagogy in ways that retain its strengths in qualification and socialization while more intentionally attending to subjectification as an essential dimension of music education.

Shifting Paradigms: From Aesthetic Experience to Praxial Engagement

By the mid-twentieth century, growing dissatisfaction with mechanistic and efficiency-driven models of teaching prompted a philosophical reevaluation of music's purpose in education. Within this broader context, aesthetic education emerged as an influential orientation in music education discourse, drawing upon wider humanistic and aesthetic traditions in philosophy and arts education. Although not originating the movement, Bennett Reimer's work played a central role in articulating a philosophy of music education grounded in aesthetic experience. Across multiple editions of *A Philosophy of Music Education* (1970, 1989, 2003), Reimer repositioned music as a means of cultivating sensitivity, imagination, and emotional awareness, arguing that music education derives its educational legitimacy from the intrinsic value of musical experience itself. Reimer (1970/1989/2003) described music as “an art of feeling, an expressive form through which human beings create meaning” (p. 45). This articulation marked a significant philosophical shift: music education was no longer justified primarily by its contribution to discipline, efficiency, or social order, but by its capacity to foster human expression and aesthetic understanding. Accordingly, the aesthetic

orientation emphasized listening, contemplation, and the individual's subjective encounter with musical works as central aims of instruction.

Despite its influence, aesthetic education was later critiqued for the limits of its inward-looking emphasis. Scholars such as Elliott (1995) and Elliott and Silverman (2015) argued that aesthetic theory tended to abstract music from its social, cultural, and practical contexts, privileging internal experience at the expense of lived musical action. In response, Elliott's (1995) praxial philosophy reframed music not as an object of contemplation but as "a diverse human practice, each with its own traditions, values, and standards of excellence" (p. 39). From this perspective, musical knowing is inseparable from musical doing; learning occurs through active participation in culturally situated practices of performance, creation, and reflection. This praxial turn aligned closely with constructivist perspectives and Deweyan pragmatism, emphasizing learning as a process of engagement, inquiry, and transformation rather than passive reception (Dewey, 1934/2005). As such, praxial philosophy reconnected music education to lived experience, community participation, and ethical action, inviting educators to understand ensemble work not merely as the production of sound but as a fundamentally social process of meaning-making.

This aesthetic–praxial dialogue marked a transition from an industrial to an experiential paradigm, carrying important implications for the kinds of musics valued and employed in classroom instruction. Although large ensemble classes have long included a range of repertoires—marches, transcriptions, popular arrangements, folk materials, and newly composed works—the organizational and evaluative logics guiding instruction were often shaped by Western art music traditions. Within aesthetic education, musical

works were approached as objects for attentive listening, interpretation, and expressive understanding. Classroom musics were frequently selected for their perceived aesthetic depth, formal coherence, and capacity to cultivate refined emotional and perceptual responses. As Reimer (1970/1989/2003) argued, music education should center on musical works that enable students to engage in “the artistic perception of musical expressiveness” (p. 45), reinforcing an emphasis on repertoire as vehicles for aesthetic experience rather than solely for functional or performative purposes.

In contrast, praxial philosophy foregrounded collective musicianship and contextual understanding, offering a reframing of practices long present in ensemble settings. Although popular, folk, vernacular, and non-Western musics had appeared in band and choral classrooms well before Elliott’s work, praxial philosophy provided a coherent rationale for valuing such repertoires as central rather than peripheral. Elliott (1995) rejected the notion of music as a detached aesthetic object, asserting instead that “music is a diverse human practice” situated within particular cultural, social, and historical contexts (p. 39). From this perspective, classroom musics are valued not solely for their aesthetic properties, but for the ways they invite participation in practices such as performance, improvisation, composition, and reflective inquiry. Praxial philosophy thus did not introduce diversity into the classroom so much as legitimize and theorize it, grounding repertoire decisions in the idea that musical meaning arises through participation and community membership (Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Aesthetic theory deepened interpretive and expressive engagement with musical works, while praxial philosophy clarified the social and participatory logics already present within many ensemble traditions.

Democratic and Collaborative Ensemble Movements

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, scholars increasingly recognized that large ensembles could function not only as artistic collectives, but as sites of democracy and collaboration. Responding to the limitations of hierarchical rehearsal models, scholars such as Allsup and Benedict (2008), Allsup (2016), and Westerlund and Väkevä (2017) called for ensemble classrooms that value shared authority and reflective inquiry. Allsup (2016) argued that “when students are invited to share authority in the ensemble, they begin to see themselves not merely as performers, but as co-creators of culture” (p. 92). This reorientation transformed ensemble pedagogy from a model of control into a model of community.

Democratic ensemble practices encouraged students to engage in dialogue, make interpretive decisions, and assume leadership roles within musical communities. Such environments closely mirror Dewey’s (1916/2004) conception of education as social participation, in which growth emerges through interaction, cooperation, and shared inquiry. This collaborative shift also intersected with multicultural and culturally responsive pedagogies, which challenged the privileging of singular musical canons and affirmed that musical excellence and cultural diversity are not opposing aims but mutually sustaining educational commitments (Lind & McKoy, 2016; Shaw, 2020). As a result, ensemble classrooms increasingly incorporated non-Western and culturally situated repertoires, improvisational practices, and student-led musical projects, thereby expanding the boundaries of what counted as legitimate musical learning (Campbell, 2004; Elliott, 1995; Robinson, 2011). As Elliott (1995) argued, music education must engage learners in “diverse musical practices as they are actually lived and enacted by

people in particular places and times” (p. 39), a stance that repositions repertoire, process, and participation as inseparable dimensions of musical knowing.

This movement redefined the ensemble as a *community of practice* (Wenger, 1998), where knowledge develops through participation and negotiation of meaning. The conductor’s role evolved from authoritarian to facilitator—guiding rather than dictating, curating rather than controlling. As a result, the ensemble became a microcosm of democratic life, a place where students learned to listen, compromise, and collaborate. These developments laid the foundation for viewing the classroom not merely as a social structure but as an interdependent ecosystem—a living system in which relationships, motivations, and identities evolve symbiotically.

Transition into Need for Ecological Framing

As the field of music education matured, scholars increasingly recognized that neither aesthetic nor praxial frameworks fully accounted for the complexity of learning within ensemble settings. Both perspectives illuminated essential dimensions of musical experience, yet each tended to foreground particular aspects—inner expression within aesthetic theory and social participation within praxial philosophy—without fully theorizing their interdependence. Ensemble learning, however, unfolds across multiple layers of interaction, shaped simultaneously by individual experience, collective practice, institutional structures, and broader cultural forces. In response to this complexity, recent scholarship has increasingly turned toward ecological models of learning that conceptualize education not as a linear process, but as a dynamic system of relationships that evolve over time.

Drawing on Dewey's (1938) experiential philosophy, music education scholars have emphasized learning as a process of participation, reflection, and continuity of experience across contexts, in which meaning emerges through action rather than transmission (Allsup, 2016; Westerlund & Väkevä, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems theory has further informed research examining how students' musical development is shaped by interactions among classroom practices, peer cultures, family support, institutional expectations, and sociocultural conditions beyond the rehearsal room (McPherson et al., 2016). Similarly, perspectives informed by Senge's (1990) systems thinking have framed music classrooms as adaptive learning organizations, drawing attention to feedback loops, shared purpose, and the ways instructional practices respond to student agency and contextual change (Burnard, 2012; Shaw, 2020). Collectively, these approaches shift analytic attention away from isolated pedagogical strategies and toward the relational conditions that sustain musical growth.

Within this ecological orientation, the music classroom is understood as a living system—a dynamic network of relationships, motivations, and cultural meanings that continually interact and adapt. Learning is not located solely within individuals, nor even within ensembles as social units, but emerges through the interplay of people, practices, environments, and shared purposes. The *Music Classroom Ecosystem* proposed in this dissertation builds upon this lineage by identifying community, motivation, and agency as the essential conditions for educational vitality. Rather than positioning these elements as competing priorities, the framework conceptualizes them as mutually sustaining forces that shape how students experience belonging, engagement, and growth within ensemble contexts.

This ecological reframing integrates the technical precision of industrial-era models with the expressive depth of aesthetic philosophy, the participatory orientation of praxial practice, and the collaborative commitments of democratic ensembles. Just as a living ecosystem depends upon balance, diversity, and responsiveness, music education flourishes through the interplay of structure and freedom, tradition and innovation, individuality and interdependence. The shift from efficiency to ecology, therefore, represents not a rejection of prior traditions, but their transformation—a maturation of music education into a living field capable of sustaining both human and artistic flourishing.

Philosophical and Sociological Foundations of Music Education

The philosophical and sociological traditions of education provide the bedrock of any conceptual framework for teaching and learning. These perspectives invite consideration not only of what knowledge is most worth pursuing, but also of how it is cultivated, shared, and lived. For music educators, these questions are inherently aesthetic and relational—concerned with meaning, expression, and community. This section examines the philosophical orientations that have shaped educational thought and the sociological theories that situate learning within communities and institutions. Together, these foundations establish the moral and conceptual grounding for the Music Classroom Ecosystem, preparing the way for the psychological perspectives explored in the following section.

Perennialism and Essentialism: Education as Transmission of Truth

Early educational philosophies such as perennialism and essentialism framed learning as the transmission of established truths and universal principles (Guttek, 2011).

Rooted in classical and theological traditions, perennialism held that education should cultivate reason and virtue by engaging students with the enduring works of human thought (Adler, 1982). Essentialism, influenced by similar assumptions, emphasized mastery of core knowledge and cultural literacy through disciplined study and teacher authority (Bagley, 1934; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). Both philosophies positioned the teacher as the custodian of truth and the student as the recipient of wisdom.

In music education, traces of these philosophies persist in traditions emphasizing technical skill, standard repertoire, and fidelity to the score—approaches that reflect the aesthetic orientation Reimer (2003) associated with the cultivation of musical understanding through the works themselves. Such frameworks value precision, discipline, and respect for musical heritage. Yet, Elliott (1995) argued in his praxial critique, when musical knowledge is confined to the transmission of preexisting works, it risks neglecting the lived, participatory nature of musicianship. Within an ecological perspective, perennialism and essentialism represent the root system of tradition—providing stability and depth while requiring the continual renewal of meaning through interaction with contemporary contexts.

Progressivism and Reconstructionism: Education as Growth and Renewal

As industrial and social change reshaped the twentieth century, progressivist and reconstructionist philosophies emerged in response to the rigidity and instrumentalism of traditional education. Central among these was John Dewey's vision of schooling as a lived, democratic process grounded in experience and inquiry (Dewey, 1916/2004, 1938/1997). Dewey rejected conceptions of education oriented primarily toward future utility, insisting instead that education must be understood as “a process of living and not

a preparation for future living” (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 239). This claim carries particular significance for performance-based music education: the educational value of ensemble participation does not depend on whether students continue musical activity beyond school, but on the quality, meaning, and ethical dimensions of the experiences they inhabit in the present.

Within Dewey’s framework, knowledge emerges through the continuous interplay of action and reflection, of individual experience situated within collective activity. Learning is not deferred until later application, nor justified by hypothetical future outcomes, but realized through participation in meaningful practices as they unfold. Applied to band and ensemble contexts, this perspective reframes rehearsals, performances, and collaborative music-making as intrinsically educational experiences rather than preparatory exercises for future musicianship. Ensemble participation thus becomes a site where students learn how to listen attentively, respond to others, negotiate difference, and act responsibly within a shared endeavor—capacities whose educational worth resides in their enactment rather than their long-term utility.

Progressivism emphasized active learning, problem-solving, and the development of the whole child, while reconstructionism extended these commitments toward social transformation, asserting that education must address injustice and cultivate civic responsibility. Together, these orientations inform contemporary music education practices that prioritize participation, inquiry, and collaboration as central pedagogical aims. As Bowman (2004) and Elliott and Silverman (2015) observe, Deweyan progressivism undergirds praxial conceptions of music learning as lived and relational practice—one in which students engage with sound, culture, and identity through

meaningful action in community. Therefore, ensemble music education is not justified by what it prepares students to become later, but by what it enables them to experience, enact, and understand as participants in the present.

Deweyan Pragmatism and Experiential Learning

Dewey's pragmatism offers one of the most enduring philosophical foundations for both education in general and music education, specifically. Central to his thought is the notion of *experience* as the medium through which learning, reflection, and transformation take shape. As Dewey (1938) explained, "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). Each experience, therefore, "does something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality" (p. 36). Education, therefore, is not the mere accumulation of information but "a process of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, and transforming of experience" (p. 87)—a cultivation of inquiry and intelligent action that sustains growth across time.

Within musical contexts, Deweyan pragmatism reframes rehearsal and performance as laboratories of lived experience. Students learn not only about music but through active participation in what Small (1998) termed *musicking*. Small deliberately recast music from noun to verb, arguing that music is not primarily an object—a work, a score, or a product—but an activity through which relationships are enacted and meanings are constructed. He writes that "to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance" (p. 9), whether by performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, or dancing. Through musicking, participants engage in experimentation, negotiation, and the communal pursuit of expressive meaning.

Small's concept emphasizes music as relational action, foregrounding the social bonds and meanings enacted whenever people participate in musical events. Elliott's (1995) and Elliott and Silverman's (2015) notion of *musicing* shares this action-oriented orientation but places greater emphasis on musicianship as praxis—situated, reflective, and ethically informed doing within specific cultural practices. Together, these perspectives reject the treatment of music as object and instead frame it as participatory, embodied activity. As Elliott and Silverman (2015) describe, this experiential orientation positions music as praxis: a dynamic form of knowing that merges doing, feeling, and reflecting within a social and ethical framework. Bowman (2004) likewise interprets Dewey's philosophy as a call to unify artistry and humanity, suggesting that “artistic activity is fundamentally a moral undertaking, for it engages the whole person—mind, body, and feeling—in acts of meaning-making that are at once individual and communal” (p. 30). In this way, Bowman positions musicianship as a mode of lived inquiry, where “technical mastery and expressive insight are not separate pursuits but mutually informing dimensions of the same experiential process” (p. 32).

Aesthetic and Praxial Philosophy in Music Education

The second half of the twentieth century brought significant philosophical refinement to music education through the emergence of the aesthetic–praxial debate. Bennett Reimer's *A Philosophy of Music Education* (2003) articulated a vision in which music's primary value lies in its capacity for aesthetic experience—an encounter with expressive meaning that is internally realized through engagement with sound. Within this framework, music education is tasked with cultivating students' sensitivity,

perception, and emotional understanding, positioning aesthetic response as the central site of musical knowing.

David Elliott (1995), in contrast, challenged this orientation through a praxial philosophy that rejected the universality of aesthetic experience as music's primary justification. Drawing on Aristotelian praxis and sociocultural perspectives, Elliott argued that musical meaning arises through participation in culturally situated acts of musicking. From this perspective, understanding is inseparable from doing, and music education becomes fundamentally concerned with action, context, and participation rather than contemplation alone.

These positions are often presented as complementary strands within contemporary music education discourse. However, such a reading risks obscuring the philosophical tension that originally defined their emergence. Reimer's emphasis on intrinsic, internally realized meaning stands in contrast to Elliott's insistence that meaning is socially constructed and enacted through practice. As such, the aesthetic–praxial relationship cannot be fully resolved through simple synthesis without addressing the differing assumptions each makes about the nature and location of musical meaning.

Rather than attempting to collapse these differences into a unified philosophical stance, I approach the aesthetic–praxial relationship as a productive tension within an ecological framework. The Classroom Ecosystem does not seek to reconcile these perspectives into a single theory; instead, it situates them across interrelated contexts of musical experience, where their respective insights become visible in different ways.

Within large ensemble settings, praxial engagement predominates. Students participate in coordinated, socially mediated acts of music-making in which meaning is

constructed through interaction, rehearsal, and performance. Here, Elliott's emphasis on participation and context provides a critical lens for understanding how musical knowledge develops. Yet even in these settings, aesthetic experience is not absent; it emerges as students attend to tone, balance, and expressive nuance within the ensemble.

In small ensemble contexts, the relationship between aesthetic and praxial dimensions becomes more fluid. Collaborative decision-making requires students to negotiate interpretation, blending action with reflection as they shape musical outcomes together. These settings reveal that aesthetic sensitivity and praxial engagement are not mutually exclusive, but are intertwined within the act of making music.

Solo performance, however, foregrounds a different configuration. Here, students engage most directly with questions of interpretation, expression, and personal meaning, bringing Reimer's emphasis on aesthetic experience into sharper focus. Yet even in this context, such experience is not isolated from praxis; it is informed by prior participation, cultural tradition, and the social conditions that shape musical understanding.

In this way, the Classroom Ecosystem reframes the aesthetic–praxial debate not as a binary to be resolved, but as a dynamic interplay distributed across contexts of participation. Praxial engagement provides the conditions through which students enter and navigate musical communities, while aesthetic experience emerges through and within those acts of participation rather than existing independently of them.

This perspective aligns with Deweyan notions of experience as transactional and situated (Dewey, 1934), while also resonating with Small's (1998) conception of musicking as relational activity. Importantly, it does not claim to fully synthesize competing philosophies. Instead, it acknowledges that the tension between aesthetic and

praxial perspectives reflects deeper questions about the nature of musical meaning—questions that remain unresolved, but productively so, within the lived realities of music education.

Critical Pedagogy and the Pursuit of Justice

Emerging from mid-twentieth-century liberation movements, critical pedagogy reframed education as a means of empowerment and social transformation. Freire (1970/2000) argued that education must be “the practice of freedom—the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (p. 34). According to Freire, authentic learning occurs through dialogue, reflection, and action—what he termed *praxis*—in which “men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (p. 83). Although Elliott (1995) also employs the term *praxis* to describe reflective musical action within culturally situated practices, Freire’s conception extends explicitly toward critical consciousness and sociopolitical transformation. Elliott’s use of *praxis* emphasizes musicianship as ethical, embodied participation in musical practices, whereas Freire’s *praxis* foregrounds emancipation and structural critique. Both reject passive transmission models of education, but they operate at different analytic scales. Extending this framework into the relational and feminist dimensions of classroom life, bell hooks (1994) envisioned teaching as an act of love and resistance, where “to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn” (p. 13). For hooks, such spaces are “places of promise,” where mutual care, dialogue, and critical engagement allow both teachers and

students to “transgress” the boundaries of domination and reclaim education as a site of liberation (p. 207).

In music education, critical approaches challenge Eurocentric hierarchies and amplify marginalized voices. Scholars such as Benedict and Schmidt (2014), Hess (2017), and Regelski (2016) have applied Freirean principles to curriculum design and ensemble pedagogy, promoting inclusion, student agency, and reflective praxis. Within this view, music learning becomes both artistic and political—an act of identity formation and cultural negotiation that resists the passivity of the traditional model.

Critical pedagogy contributes to the ecological metaphor by emphasizing renewal and adaptation—continual processes of rebalancing that sustain justice, agency, and vitality within the educational ecosystem.

The Ethic of Care and Relational Pedagogy

Alongside calls for justice, relational theorists such as Nel Noddings emphasized the moral dimension of teaching as rooted in care. Genuine education, she argued, depends upon reciprocal recognition: “The cared-for must recognize the caring in order for it to be completed” (Noddings, 2013, p. 81). Care thus becomes not sentiment but enacted attentiveness—a disciplined commitment to empathy, responsiveness, and mutual regard.

In music classrooms, this ethic does not arise automatically from ensemble participation; it is cultivated through the teacher’s relational presence. The ensemble rehearsal, built on listening, adjustment, and shared responsibility, offers fertile conditions for care, but those conditions must be intentionally shaped. When teachers model attentive listening, respond to student contributions with seriousness, and create

space for vulnerability without humiliation, they enact what Noddings (2003) described as the human mode of being in relation: “We are dependent upon one another not merely for survival but for the very formation of our identities” (p. 45). Scholarship in music education has likewise framed teaching as a moral and relational practice rather than a purely technical endeavor (Jorgensen, 2003; Regelski, 2016; Shively, 2015). Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, care functions as connective tissue—not a passive atmosphere, but an active practice that sustains community and nourishes the circulation of motivation throughout the system.

Democratic Education and Shared Authority

Democratic education weaves together the philosophical commitments of Dewey, Freire, and Noddings through a shared emphasis on participation, relationality, and collective authorship. In music education, this orientation is reflected in the work of Allsup (2016), Burnard (2012), and Green (2008), each of whom advocates for participatory learning environments that value improvisation, peer learning, and creative autonomy. Allsup (2016), in particular, conceptualizes the ensemble as an “open system” in which authority is not fixed but shared, shifting from the teacher to students as responsibility is distributed. Within such settings, dialogue occupies a central pedagogical role, and the teacher’s position moves from director toward facilitator.

Yet democratic aspirations in music education must be understood alongside the enduring structural realities of ensemble pedagogy. Large ensemble settings, by their very nature, are organized around coordination, efficiency, and unified musical outcomes—conditions that often necessitate centralized leadership. The teacher remains responsible for repertoire selection, rehearsal pacing, ensemble cohesion, and the

cultivation of norms that make collective music-making possible. As such, the authority of the teacher is not merely a residual feature of tradition, but a functional and, at times, necessary component of the ensemble environment.

This presents a fundamental tension: democratic pedagogies call for shared authority and student voice, while ensemble structures require forms of leadership that can appear hierarchical and directive. Rather than resolving this tension by privileging one orientation over the other, I conceptualize it as a constitutive feature of music education practice—one that must be negotiated rather than eliminated.

From this perspective, democratic practice does not entail the absence of authority, but rather its intentional and contextually responsive enactment. The teacher's role is not relinquished, but reframed. Authority becomes pedagogical rather than positional: it is exercised in the service of creating conditions under which students can participate meaningfully, contribute to musical decision-making, and develop a sense of ownership within the ensemble. This aligns with Biesta's (2009) assertion that teaching involves a responsibility to introduce students to forms of knowledge and practice they could not encounter independently, positioning authority as an ethical obligation rather than an impediment to democracy.

At the same time, the distribution of authority is not uniform across musical contexts. Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, authority is differentiated across layers of participation. In large ensembles, teacher authority remains more centralized, though not absolute; opportunities for student voice emerge through sectional leadership, peer mentoring, and reflective dialogue. In small ensemble settings, authority becomes more fluid, as students engage directly in interpretive decision-making and collaborative

problem-solving. Here, the teacher's role shifts toward facilitation, supporting students as they negotiate both musical and interpersonal dynamics. Solo performance extends this trajectory further, foregrounding student agency as the primary site of musical authorship, while the teacher assumes a consultative role.

This ecological distribution of authority reframes the relationship between democracy and power. Rather than viewing authority and democratic practice as oppositional, the Music Classroom Ecosystem positions them as interdependent and dynamically enacted across contexts. Authority is neither fully relinquished nor uniformly applied; instead, it is modulated in response to the pedagogical demands of the setting and the developmental needs of students.

Importantly, this perspective also acknowledges that authority is always experienced, not merely exercised. Students encounter authority through rehearsal structures, repertoire choices, and patterns of interaction, shaping their sense of belonging, motivation, and agency. Democratic practice, therefore, requires ongoing attention not only to how authority is distributed, but to how it is perceived and lived within the ensemble.

In this way, the question is not whether ensemble classrooms can become fully democratic in the absence of hierarchy, but how authority can be enacted in ways that expand, rather than constrain, student participation. The work of the teacher, then, is not to resolve the tension between authority and democracy, but to navigate it deliberately—balancing guidance with openness, structure with flexibility, and expertise with responsiveness. It is within this ongoing negotiation that democratic possibilities in music education are both limited and made possible.

Philosophical Integration and Transition to the Ecological Model

Collectively, these philosophical and sociological traditions provide the ethical and conceptual grounding for understanding learning as a relational, participatory process. Perennialism—grounded in the belief that education should transmit enduring intellectual and moral truths through engagement with canonical knowledge (Hutchins, 1953)—and essentialism, which emphasizes disciplined study of core academic content necessary for cultural continuity (Bagley, 1938; Null, 2011), stress continuity and the preservation of foundational knowledge across generations. In contrast, progressivism and reconstructionism foreground inquiry, experience, and social renewal (Counts, 1932; Dewey, 1938); pragmatism and critical pedagogy attend to reflection, justice, and lived experience (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970/2000); and care ethics and democratic education highlight the moral and relational dimensions of teaching and learning (Noddings, 2013; Allsup, 2016). Together, these perspectives frame education as a process shaped by interaction, context, and shared responsibility.

While these traditions clarify why education matters and how learning ought to be oriented ethically and socially, psychological theory addresses how learning unfolds within individuals and groups. The following section therefore turns to psychological foundations, examining constructivist and cognitive theories—including schema, metaphor, and image theory—to explain the mechanisms through which learners construct meaning, engage motivation, and develop agency within music classrooms.

Psychological Foundations of Learning in Music Education

If philosophy asks why we educate, psychology explores how learning unfolds within individuals and communities. While philosophical traditions position education as

an ethical and relational act, psychology illuminates the mechanisms through which meaning, motivation, and agency emerge in practice. Understanding how people learn thus provides the connective tissue between the moral purposes of education and the lived experiences of the classroom. In music education, where cognition, emotion, and embodiment converge, psychological theory offers essential insight into how learning becomes both a personal and collective transformation.

Psychology has long sought to explain the processes by which humans perceive, think, and act, tracing developments from early functionalist accounts of mind and behavior to contemporary cognitive and sociocultural perspectives (James, 1890/1950; Neisser, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978). In educational contexts, these inquiries gave rise to distinct learning theories—constructivism, behaviorism, cognitivism, developmentalism, and humanism—each foregrounding different assumptions about knowledge, motivation, and learning. As Ertmer and Newby (2013) noted, “learning theories provide instructional designers with verified instructional strategies and techniques, but no one theory can address all types of learning or all learners” (p. 43). The challenge for educators, therefore, lies not simply in selecting among theories, but in navigating when and how particular frameworks may be brought into productive relation—and when their underlying assumptions stand in tension.

In some cases, these theoretical tensions meaningfully constrain pedagogical integration. While it may be tempting to assume that effective teaching simply blends the strongest elements of each learning theory, such integration is not always seamless—or even philosophically coherent. Theories of learning are not interchangeable tools; they carry embedded assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the locus of authority, the

role of the learner, and the purposes of education itself. Approaches grounded in external control, efficiency, or reinforcement operate from different epistemological commitments than those rooted in constructivist or humanistic traditions that privilege agency, internal meaning-making, and self-direction. Likewise, instructional models that prioritize uniform outcomes may sit uneasily beside pedagogies that depend upon ambiguity, exploration, and student-initiated decision-making.

For music educators, this distinction is consequential. Musical learning unfolds through embodied action, relational exchange, and aesthetic judgment—processes that resist reduction to transmission or standardization. Navigating learning theories therefore requires alignment between pedagogical practice and one’s underlying vision of musicianship and human development.

These tensions do not require rigid allegiance to a single theory, but they do demand philosophical clarity. Because learning theories carry embedded assumptions about knowledge, authority, motivation, and purpose, moving among them is not a technical adjustment but a philosophical act requiring attentiveness to its consequences in practice.

Integration is not the goal if it implies seamless theoretical synthesis. Rather, the task is discernment. Just as musical practice involves ongoing negotiation between structure and freedom, interpretation and fidelity, individuality and ensemble coherence, pedagogical practice involves navigating tensions among competing views of learning. The educator’s responsibility is not to collapse these differences, but to recognize when theoretical commitments can be held in productive relation and when they demand deliberate choice. Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, such discernment becomes an

essential feature of stewardship: aligning philosophical orientation, instructional design, and the lived experiences of students in ways that remain responsive, coherent, and ethically grounded.

For music educators, this theoretical terrain is particularly consequential. Musical learning is not confined to the intellect; it is embodied, affective, and social. Students construct understanding through experience—through hearing, feeling, and participating in sound. Motivation often arises from belonging, and agency grows through creative participation and shared responsibility. These dynamics reveal learning as a fundamentally ecological process—an interdependence of mind, body, and environment. As Piaget (1972) and Vygotsky (1978) each demonstrated, cognition develops through interaction: with materials, with others, and within cultural systems that give meaning to experience.

Contemporary psychological scholarship extends these foundational ideas through theories of schema, metaphor, and image—frameworks that explain how learners organize knowledge, translate perception into concept, and internalize understanding through imagination. Together, these perspectives offer a nuanced account of how students think musically, integrating perception, cognition, and affect. They also align closely with sociocultural and ecological models that situate learning within relationships and environments rather than within isolated minds.

The psychological foundations that undergird the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework are presented in this section. It begins with constructivism, which conceptualizes learning as an active process of meaning-making. It then explores schema, metaphor, and image theories as models for understanding how learners connect

perception, cognition, and imagination in musical contexts. Finally, it turns outward to sociocultural and ecological perspectives that frame cognition within community and environment. Through this progression, psychology serves as a bridge between philosophy and practice—linking inner processes of thought with the relational conditions of community, motivation, and agency that sustain human growth.

Constructivism and Learning as Meaning-Making

As we move through the world, we come to understand it—and make meaning—through sensory experience, social interaction, and engagement with the physical environment. This process of meaning-making lies at the core of constructivist theory, which holds that knowledge is actively constructed through experience rather than passively received (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). In music education, this orientation has been particularly resonant, given the embodied, temporal, and socially situated nature of musical learning. Musical understanding emerges through listening, performing, moving, and responding in interaction with others, rather than through abstract conceptualization alone (Barrett, 2006; O'Neill, 2012). Although constructivism is often discussed historically as a reaction to behaviorist paradigms, it is addressed here as a psychological foundation because this study draws upon constructivist theory primarily to explain how learners make meaning within musical contexts.

Theories of embodied cognition further reinforce this view by emphasizing the role of sensory and physical experience in shaping thought and understanding (Johnson, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Music education scholars have extended these ideas by demonstrating how musical meaning is grounded in bodily engagement with sound, gesture, and action (Bowman, 2004; Juntunen & Westerlund, 2001). Similarly,

experiential learning theory highlights that learning arises from the interaction of direct experience and reflective observation (Kolb, 1984), a process evident in rehearsal, improvisation, and performance contexts where students continually test, revise, and deepen musical understanding through practice. As Brooks and Brooks (1993) noted, learners “construct our own understandings of the way we live” by synthesizing new experiences into prior knowledge (p. 4), a process that is especially pronounced in collaborative musical activity (Fosnot, 2005).

Constructivism, as Fosnot (2005) defined it, is a “theory of knowledge and learning; it describes both what knowing is and how one comes to know” (p. ix). In music education, this perspective suggests teaching approaches that prioritize contextually meaningful musical experiences through which learners can explore patterns, pose questions, and test interpretive ideas. Research in music classrooms has shown that constructivist-oriented practices—such as improvisation, composition, peer-led rehearsal, and reflective dialogue—support deeper musical understanding and student ownership of learning (Burnard, 2012; Wiggins, 2015). These approaches position learners as active participants in the creation of musical meaning, a view consistent with Dewey’s (1938) conception of experience as continuous growth and Bruner’s (1960) advocacy for discovery learning.

Social constructivist perspectives further emphasize that musical understanding is co-constructed through interaction. Drawing on Vygotsky’s (1978) assertion that “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice” (p. 57), music education scholars have highlighted how musical thinking develops first through shared activity and later through internalization (Barrett, 2005; Tobias, 2013). Language, gesture, notation,

and sound function as cultural tools through which students organize musical experience and negotiate meaning within ensemble and classroom communities (Bruner, 1996; Silverman, 2020). From this standpoint, musical knowledge is not discovered in isolation but emerges within culturally and socially situated practices.

Social constructivism thus foregrounds the role of culture and context in shaping musical learning. Meaning is not inherent in musical materials themselves but is generated through interaction with repertoire, peers, teachers, and traditions (Derry, 1999; Elliott & Silverman, 2015). Despite the growing presence of these ideas in music education scholarship, classroom practice has not always reflected this understanding. Large-ensemble traditions, institutional constraints, and assessment practices can limit opportunities for students to engage in active meaning-making, even when constructivist principles are espoused.

Within constructivist classrooms, the roles of teacher and student are reconfigured. Teachers function not as dispensers of knowledge but as designers of experiences that invite inquiry and interpretation. As Brooks and Brooks (1993) observed, “the teacher’s role is not to dispense knowledge but to provide students with opportunities to construct it” (p. 17). Music education research supports this shift, showing that when students are given space to make musical decisions, reflect on outcomes, and collaborate with peers, learning becomes more durable and personally meaningful (Kennedy, 2014; Wiggins, 2015). Such environments position knowledge as emergent and responsive to context rather than fixed or absolute.

Importantly, constructivism values learners’ existing beliefs and understandings, recognizing that multiple interpretations may coexist within shared musical experiences.

This aligns closely with Wenger's (1998) conception of learning as participation in a community of practice, where identity, meaning, and competence develop through engagement. Allsup (2016) extends this idea in music education, arguing that constructivist classrooms must remain dialogic, improvisatory, and open—structures that invite students to shape learning in response to socially relevant and personally meaningful musical experiences. From this perspective, music education does not merely transmit musical knowledge but cultivates learners as co-authors of musical and cultural meaning.

At the same time, scholars caution against treating constructivism as a singular method or universal solution. Shively (2015) emphasizes that constructivism should function as a lens for examining practice rather than a prescriptive approach, echoing Regelski's (2002) warning against "methodolatry," or the uncritical adoption of any one paradigm. In ensemble settings, constructivist ideals must be balanced with the teacher's responsibility for shaping coherent musical experiences, attending to technical development, and navigating institutional realities.

In summary, constructivist theory provides a critical foundation for understanding the Community dimension of the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Musical knowledge is constructed through shared inquiry, interaction, and participation, positioning the classroom as a social organism in which meaning is co-created rather than transmitted. As students engage collaboratively in musical practice, motivation and agency emerge

from participation itself, reinforcing learning as both personal growth and communal becoming.

Schema Theory

From a constructivist viewpoint, knowledge is constructed both socially—through interactions with others—and culturally—through the beliefs, values, and norms transmitted within one’s cultural context (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). When learners enter the classroom, they bring with them not only individual experiences but also the influence of the social groups they engage with, such as family, peers, and community members. At the same time, they are shaped by cultural backgrounds that influence how they interpret the world, communicate, and assign meaning to experience.

Teachers do not inherently become constructivist; rather, they adopt a constructivist orientation in their pedagogical design. From this stance, the educator acknowledges that learners draw upon both personal and collective schema developed through prior experiences and sociocultural interactions. Teaching, then, becomes less about transmission and more about the orchestration of learning environments that intentionally connect new ideas to students’ existing knowledge frameworks. Crucially, this orchestration is neither neutral nor passive; the teacher remains responsible for selecting experiences, posing problems, scaffolding inquiry, and guiding learners toward disciplinary understanding. The concept of scaffolding—originally articulated by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) and grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development—describes the structured support through which learners accomplish tasks they could not yet complete independently. Because students do not always share common cultural or social reference points, a constructivist approach

necessitates surfacing and validating a multiplicity of perspectives within the classroom. The presence—or absence—of shared experience directly shapes how learners relate to content, peers, and the broader learning process. Constructivist learning, therefore, does not occur in a vacuum, but within carefully designed contexts where structure, guidance, and relational support make meaning-making possible. Thus, educators working from a constructivist paradigm must design inclusive contexts that foster relevance, activate prior knowledge, and intentionally bridge epistemological and experiential gaps. As Wiggins (2015) affirms, “learning is more likely to take place when learners have a context for understanding new ideas” (p. 9), underscoring the imperative of designing for connection and meaning-making.

Human minds have the capacity to analyze, categorize, organize, reorganize, and synthesize sensory information. This cognitive organizational process has been described as schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). According to Bartlett (1932), “schema” refers to “an active organization of past reactions, or past experience” (p. 201). This terminology underscores Bartlett’s view of memory as a constructive process—distinct from the passive retrieval of static representations (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). In understanding how the mind retains and draws on prior information, educators must recognize this process as both a resource and a potential constraint, as learners’ prior experiences may also involve misconceptions or incomplete understandings (Piaget, 1972; Rumelhart, 1980). Consequently, students may engage in the challenging work of reshaping misconceptions or filling gaps in knowledge as they construct revised conceptual understanding (Bransford et al., 2000; Vosniadou, 2007). A schema has also been described as an “abstract knowledge structure...structured in the sense that it

represents the relationships among its component parts” (Anderson & Pearson, 1984, p. 259).

The concept of schema allows learners to draw upon descriptors, experiences, relationships, and connections to construct, affirm, or reconstruct understanding. Through these “interactive networks of ideas” (Wiggins, 2015, p. 3)—formed through multisensory engagement with the world—learners organize experience through layered connections. For example, when a music student learns a new musical scale, they may draw upon prior understanding of intervals and pitch patterns from previously learned scales. This existing knowledge serves as an anchor, enabling recognition of structure and facilitating transfer. Schema theory thus allows learners to attach new phenomena to established conceptual anchors when seeking understanding (Anderson & Pearson, 1984).

Taken together, schema theory clarifies how Motivation functions within the Music Classroom Ecosystem. As students connect new information to existing frameworks, they experience increased confidence and cognitive energy through recognition and pattern-making. As schemas evolve through collaboration, feedback, and reflection, learners develop greater competence and autonomy—hallmarks of agency emerging through cognitive engagement within community.

Metaphor Theory

Like schema theory, metaphor theory emphasizes that understanding develops through interaction with experience rather than through the acquisition of decontextualized rules alone (Wiggins, 2015). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that human thought is fundamentally metaphorical: concepts are structured through embodied

experience, and these structures shape not only how individuals think, but how they perceive, act, and participate in the world. From this perspective, metaphor is not merely a linguistic device, but a cognitive and experiential process through which meaning is organized, interpreted, and enacted.

Although metaphorical structures emerge from embodied cognition, they are expressed and negotiated through language. Language thus provides access to the metaphors that organize understanding and action. Because these metaphorical concepts are systematic, the expressions individuals use can be examined to illuminate the underlying frameworks that guide perception, interaction, and participation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphor, therefore, functions as a lens for understanding how learners make sense of musical phenomena by relating sound to familiar bodily, spatial, and social experiences.

Central to metaphor theory is the recognition that meaning is not transmitted intact from one person to another, but actively constructed through interpretation. Understanding emerges through the interaction of language, prior experience, and context. As Vygotsky (1978) observed, “a word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow” (p. 153), underscoring the reciprocal relationship between expression and understanding. Dewey’s (1938) emphasis on experience further reinforces this position, framing learning as reflection on lived interaction rather than the internalization of abstract knowledge alone. From this

perspective, musical understanding is not solely conceptual, but embodied, relational, and situated.

Embodied experience plays a central role in metaphorical understanding. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe orientational metaphors as those grounded in bodily and spatial experience—such as up/down or forward/backward—which organize systems of meaning. In music education, such metaphors are deeply embedded in both discourse and practice. Concepts such as high and low pitch, rising melodic lines, building intensity, or falling dynamics draw directly on spatial and kinesthetic experience. Students frequently gesture, move, and physically enact these ideas, demonstrating that musical understanding is not only thought, but also felt and coordinated through the body.

Ontological metaphors further enable learners to conceptualize musical phenomena by treating them as entities or processes with perceived boundaries and agency (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In music, personification—such as describing a melody as searching or a phrase as breathing—allows students to attribute intention, motion, and expressive character to sound. These metaphors do not merely describe musical experience; they shape how students interpret, perform, and respond musically. As Wiggins (2015) argues, musical meaning emerges when learners construct understanding through contextualized engagement rather than technical reproduction alone. Metaphorical language thus operates as a bridge between experience and interpretation, linking embodied engagement with conceptual awareness.

Importantly, metaphor in music education does not function only at the level of language. Musical understanding is enacted through sound, gesture, structure, and interaction. Linguistic metaphors provide a means of articulating experience, while

musical metaphors are realized through performance, movement, and ensemble participation. These forms operate as mutually reinforcing processes, supporting meaning-making as both interpretive and embodied (Wiggins, 2015).

Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, metaphor operates not only at the level of musical concept, but at the level of educational experience itself. Community is often understood through metaphors of place and grounding—home, roots, or belonging—framing the ensemble as a space in which learners are supported and sustained. Motivation is frequently conceptualized through metaphors of movement and energy—growth, momentum, or circulation—capturing how engagement develops through shared musical activity. Agency, in turn, is experienced through metaphors of voice, authorship, and expansion—stepping forward, shaping direction, or taking ownership—representing learners’ capacity to act intentionally within and beyond communal structures.

Through these metaphorical framings, musical learning is not reduced to abstract conceptualization, but emerges through the dynamic interplay of perception, action, language, and interaction. The Music Classroom Ecosystem thus positions metaphor as a central mechanism of meaning-making—one that renders musical understanding vivid, embodied, and relational, while supporting both shared interpretation and individual agency.

Image Theory

According to Wiggins (2015), image theory provides one of the most fluid conceptualizations for understanding how ideas are held within the mind. Rather than treating cognition as the storage of fixed representations, image theory describes mental life as dynamic and reconstructive. Wiggins distinguishes between two kinds of images:

perceptual images, which arise directly from sensory experience, and recalled images, which are reactivated, reshaped, and projected forward as individuals plan, anticipate, and imagine (Damasio, 1994).

Perceptual images emerge as learners engage with their environment, internalizing experience through iconic forms of representation (Boardman, 1990; Bruner, 1966). These images may be diagrammed, drawn, gestured, or verbally described, yet they retain a perceptual resemblance to the phenomena they signify. Iconic representation is defined by this structural correspondence. A curved line on a road sign resembles the winding road it announces; its shape communicates meaning prior to symbolic language. In musical contexts, pitch may be represented iconically through spatial height—higher placement suggesting higher sound and lower placement suggesting descent. A melody may be rendered as a continuous contour that rises, falls, or leaps in correspondence with melodic motion, while rhythmic duration may be indicated through proportional length—extended horizontal spans suggesting sustained tones and shorter marks signaling brevity. In these representations, visual configuration mirrors sonic event, allowing learners to apprehend pitch and rhythm as embodied and spatial experiences alongside, or prior to, formal notation. Melodic contour thus functions not merely as analytic terminology but as a perceptual image grounded in movement, tension, and release.

Yet these images are not preserved as exact replicas of experience. Damasio (1994) reminds us that recollection involves reconstruction; images are reconstituted rather than replayed. They evolve as new experiences reshape prior understandings. Wiggins (2015) similarly observes that “the mind is constantly involved in processes of

construction and reconstruction” (p. 6). Each act of recall is therefore also an act of reinterpretation.

Within music learning, perceptual imagery develops through repeated engagement with sound, gesture, phrasing, and expressive intention. Learners may internally visualize the arc of a melodic phrase, anticipate the expansion of a crescendo, or imagine the contour of an entrance before producing sound. These images shift across contexts, influenced by peer interaction, conductor feedback, emotional investment, and accumulated experience. A phrase once imagined as restrained may later be reconceived as expansive; a melodic ascent may acquire expressive urgency through communal shaping. Musical understanding thus unfolds through recursive cycles of perception, imagination, enactment, and reinterpretation.

Image theory further clarifies the interdependence of cognition and affect. Damasio (1999) described emotions as “somatic markers” that guide decision-making, suggesting that feeling is integral to thought. In musical contexts, emotional resonance shapes how images are constructed, remembered, and revised. When students anticipate harmonic motion, imagine expressive nuance, or internally rehearse phrasing, they engage in what Mead (1934) termed “the imaginative rehearsal of action” (p. 78), testing possibilities internally before enacting them externally.

Image theory thus functions as a bridge between cognition and artistry. Imagination is not an abstract faculty detached from experience, but an ecological process sustained by perception, emotion, memory, and shared meaning. Within the

Music Classroom Ecosystem, it illuminates how musical thinking emerges through the recursive interplay of sensory engagement, affective interpretation, and embodied action.

Agency, then, emerges within this imaginative ecology. Musical images—aural, kinesthetic, and affective—mediate between the learner’s internal world and the ensemble’s shared sonic environment. As students translate internal images into expressive sound, perception becomes participation and imagination becomes authorship. Individual agency and communal artistry co-evolve, each sustained through the ongoing reconstruction of musical image.

Sociocultural and Ecological Perspectives

If constructivist and cognitive theories describe how individuals build knowledge, sociocultural and ecological theories explain where and with whom learning takes place. These perspectives emphasize that cognition is not solely located within the individual mind, but is distributed across people, tools, symbols, and environments. While knowledge construction remains fundamentally cognitive, it is not reducible to internal mental processes alone; rather, cognition is enacted through interaction, shaped by participation, and mediated by context. Learning is therefore a fundamentally social phenomenon—situated within a network of interactions that give meaning to experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).

In music education, these frameworks reveal how ensemble settings operate as microcosms of culture and community. Students learn not only by listening and performing but by participating in the relational practices through which musical identities are negotiated and sustained. Small’s (1998) conception of *musicking* underscores this participatory dimension, reminding us that musical meaning is

constructed through action rather than located in objects. Because musicking encompasses performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, and responding, ensemble classrooms become sites where relationships among performers, listeners, repertoire, and context are continuously enacted and reshaped.

This perspective aligns directly with the ecological metaphor of the Music Classroom Ecosystem, in which learning emerges through interdependence among people, tools, histories, and environments. Ensemble participation thus becomes not merely the rehearsal of repertoire but the cultivation of shared meaning within a dynamic relational system.

Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory laid the foundation for understanding learning as a process mediated through social interaction. He argued that higher cognitive functions develop first on an interpersonal plane—through communication and collaboration—before becoming internalized at the intrapersonal level. “Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

Building on this principle, Vygotsky proposed that learning and development are not isolated acts, but dynamic processes shaped through relationships. He viewed growth as occurring in the space between a learner's current ability and their potential when supported by others—what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD defines the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Effective teaching occurs within this zone, where challenges are

scaffolded to extend capability without overwhelming the learner (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Ensemble classrooms vividly exemplify this principle as students learn from peers, section leaders, and conductors, progressing from supported participation to independent musicianship.

Vygotsky's concept of mediation further highlights the role of cultural tools—language, symbols, and artifacts—in shaping thought. Musical notation, conducting gestures, and rehearsal vocabulary serve as mediational means that structure learning. Rogoff (1990) expanded this view through guided participation, where novices and experts collaborate in shared activity. She noted that “individual creativity occurs in the context of a community of thinkers” (p. 198), emphasizing that participation and community are inseparable from learning. Bruner (1996) similarly underscored that cultural tools—language, symbols, and shared practices—shape cognition itself. These insights resonate deeply in music classrooms, where rehearsal, performance, and improvisation unfold through socially mediated processes of modeling, listening, and collective interpretation.

Sociocultural theory provides the foundation for the Community pillar of the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Learning unfolds through guided participation, scaffolding, and dialogue within social contexts. These interactions nurture Motivation through belonging and shared purpose while simultaneously cultivating Agency as students assume increasingly responsible and creative roles within the ensemble.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (1998) defines a community of practice as “a system of relationships among people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other

tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 125). Within such communities, learning occurs through engagement, negotiation, and identity formation. Importantly, participation in music ensembles does not begin from a position of musical absence. Students may enter as novices with respect to particular instruments, notational systems, or school-based musical conventions, yet they rarely arrive as musical novices. Long before formal ensemble participation, learners accumulate musical knowledge through listening, movement, play, and engagement with familial, cultural, and media-based musical practices (Barrett, 2006; Campbell, 2010; Green, 2008).

Within ensemble contexts, students’ developmental trajectories therefore involve the reorganization and expansion of existing musical understandings as they learn to participate within new social and institutional settings. In band and orchestra, this reorganization unfolds through instrumental practice itself, as students translate prior musical concepts into embodied action—coordinating pitch relationships with fingerings, breath support, bow distribution, embouchure formation, tone production, and ensemble timing. Musical understanding is thus reshaped through tactile, kinesthetic, and acoustic engagement, where cognition, technique, and listening converge.

Large ensembles often foster belonging by situating students within shared musical activity; chamber groups cultivate motivation through heightened interdependence and collective responsibility; and solo performance affirms agency as students author increasingly self-directed artistic choices. Across these contexts, learners draw upon prior musical knowledge while assuming new roles, gradually moving toward leadership and mentorship. This developmental process reflects the ecological logic of the Music Classroom Ecosystem, in which belonging, persistence, and authorship emerge

not as linear stages but as reciprocal and reinforcing forces shaped by both what students bring with them and what the environment affords.

Wenger's framework thus illustrates the dynamic equilibrium between Community and Agency. Through mutual engagement and shared repertoire, learners transition from peripheral participation toward more central forms of contribution, not by replacing prior knowledge, but by integrating it into evolving practices. This process mirrors ecological growth: community nurtures agency, and agency, in turn, renews and sustains the community.

Building on these sociocultural commitments, learning can be understood as involving changes not only in what individuals know or can do, but in how they participate within shared practices. From this view, development reflects movement toward fuller participation, marked by increasing responsibility, recognition, and accountability within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning, therefore, is inseparable from relational context: individuals come to understand themselves as members of a practice through sustained engagement with others, shared norms, and collective work. Agency within this framework is not defined by independence from community, but by growing capacity to contribute meaningfully to it.

Within music education research, these perspectives have been extended to describe relational patterns through which responsibility and support circulate among participants. For example, Hogle (2018) uses the term *learned helpfulness* to describe how ensemble members' developing competence becomes a resource for collective practice. While not a formal theoretical construct, learned helpfulness provides language for examining how agency and responsibility emerge relationally through participation.

Community of Inquiry

Complementing Wenger's framework, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) model identifies three interdependent presences: cognitive, social, and teaching. In ensemble learning, cognitive presence emerges as students solve problems of rhythm, tone, and phrasing; social presence develops through dialogue and collective identity; and teaching presence is embodied not only by the conductor but also by section leaders and peers as they share the role of teacher. Garrison et al. (2010) note that "the educational experience is both personal and collaborative, reflective and social" (p. 6)—a dynamic that mirrors the ecological interplay of community, motivation, and agency.

The Community of Inquiry model clarifies how cognitive and social presence sustain Motivation. Reflective discourse, emotional connection, and purposeful facilitation generate intellectual energy that keeps the ecosystem vibrant. Motivation becomes a collective resource rather than an individual trait.

Ecological Systems Theory

While sociocultural perspectives emphasize immediate interactions, ecological systems theory broadens the analytic scope to include the layered contexts that shape learning over time. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory situates development within nested systems: the microsystem of classrooms and peers, the mesosystem of home–school relationships, the exosystem of policies and resources, and the macrosystem of cultural values and ideologies. "The environment of human development is not a static backdrop but a set of nested structures in dynamic interaction, where changes in one system reverberate through the others" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.

22). Bronfenbrenner (2005) later extended this model through the chronosystem, recognizing that both individuals and environments transform across time.

In music education, this framework clarifies how student experience is shaped not only within the rehearsal room but also by family support, institutional priorities, and societal attitudes toward the arts. The ensemble classroom thus functions as a microsystem nested within broader ecologies of policy, access, and cultural valuation. Decisions about funding, scheduling, instrument availability, and assessment—often made far beyond the classroom—profoundly structure students’ opportunities for sustained engagement. A student whose family can provide private lessons, transportation, and instrument maintenance enters the ensemble with different affordances than one who relies solely on school-based resources. Likewise, a district that privileges festival performance and public accolades may cultivate technical precision while narrowing space for exploratory or student-directed musical authorship. As Abril (2013) notes, “access to quality music education is often determined by broader social and economic forces rather than by students’ interests or abilities” (p. 75).

From an ecological perspective, such forces operate as catalysts or inhibitors of transformation. When resources, mentorship, and institutional support align, participation may become alchemical—used here metaphorically to describe processes of transformation within educational experience—so as sound is refined into voice and compliance may give way to authorship. When access is limited or artistic risk is subordinated to performance metrics, the conditions that support such transformation are constrained. Recognizing these multilevel influences calls educators to act as ecological

stewards—attending not only to rehearsal practice but to the structural conditions that shape equity, artistry, and human growth.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological lens thus extends the Music Classroom Ecosystem across all layers of influence, from microsystem to macrosystem and across time.

Community, motivation, and agency do not develop in isolation; they are nested within and continually shaped by environmental affordances, institutional decisions, and cultural narratives. Musical learning, therefore, is never merely individual achievement but a contextually situated process of becoming within interdependent systems.

Systems Thinking and Ecological Metaphor in Music Education

Expanding upon Bronfenbrenner, Senge (1990) describes systems thinking as “a discipline for seeing wholes—for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots” (p. 68). In music classrooms, this mindset invites educators to look beyond isolated outcomes toward the living processes that connect students, repertoire, pedagogy, and culture. Dewey’s (1938) principle of continuity affirms this dynamic: each experience arises from, and contributes to, a broader system of growth.

Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, these systems operate symbiotically: community sustains motivation, motivation fuels agency, and agency in turn enriches the community from which it emerged. As Allsup (2016) writes, “The task of the music

educator is not to control the system but to keep it alive—to maintain the conditions under which creativity, dialogue, and community can thrive” (p. 101).

Synthesis

Taken together, sociocultural and ecological perspectives reframe education from the transmission of knowledge to participation within a living, interdependent system. This shift, however, does not diminish the role of the teacher. Rather, it redefines teaching as an intentional, learning-centered practice grounded in professional judgment, responsiveness, and ethical responsibility. As Biesta (2015) cautions, education cannot be reduced to facilitation alone, arguing that teaching necessarily involves “the exercise of educational judgment about what is educationally desirable” (p. 75). Teaching thus becomes less an act of directing predetermined outcomes and more a disciplined practice of designing, sustaining, and adjusting the conditions under which learning can occur.

Within such an ecology, the teacher is neither absent nor neutral, but actively engaged in shaping environments, mediating interactions, and guiding inquiry in ways that support growth. The classroom is not a factory of outcomes nor a space of unstructured autonomy, but a habitat for human flourishing—carefully cultivated through purposeful instructional decisions. A learning-centered orientation resists the false dichotomy between teacher authority and student agency, recognizing that meaningful learning emerges through their interaction. Learning, like any vibrant ecosystem, depends upon continuous interplay among its elements—community, motivation, and agency—each renewed through intentional pedagogical action. Within this framework, teaching

and learning are understood as mutually constitutive processes in the ongoing work of becoming.

The Music Classroom Ecosystem Framework

The Music Classroom Ecosystem is a conceptual model that understands music learning as an emergent, relational process arising from the interaction of three interdependent elements: community, motivation, and agency. Rather than treating these elements as discrete variables or outcomes, the framework conceptualizes them as reciprocal processes that co-construct learning over time within ensemble contexts.

Grounded in constructivist, sociocultural, and ecological theories of learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938; Wenger, 1998), the model reframes music education as a living system in which meaning, identity, and musical understanding develop through interaction among individuals, practices, and environments. From this perspective, learning is not the accumulation of isolated skills or knowledge, but an emergent property of participation within a structured yet adaptive relational field.

Within this ecosystem, each component serves a distinct but interconnected function:

- **Community** refers to the social and relational conditions that support belonging, trust, and shared purpose. It encompasses the network of relationships, norms, and practices through which learners participate in musical activity, aligning with Wenger's (1998) conception of communities of practice in which learning emerges through participation in shared cultural activity. Community provides the

relational foundation of the ecosystem, shaping how students experience inclusion, responsibility, and collective identity.

- **Motivation** refers to the dynamic processes that sustain engagement, persistence, and investment in musical activity. Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), motivation emerges through the interaction of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Within the ecosystem, motivation functions as circulating energy, generated through meaningful participation and reinforced through feedback, growth, and social connection.
- **Agency** refers to the learner's capacity to act intentionally, make musical decisions, and assume authorship within the learning environment. Drawing on Bandura's (2001) conception of agency as intentional action and sociocultural perspectives that frame agency as relationally constructed, it is expressed through interpretation, creativity, leadership, and self-directed engagement. Agency represents the visible expression of learning, as students translate understanding into action within and beyond the ensemble.

Together, these components define the structural and dynamic conditions through which musical learning is experienced and enacted.

These elements do not operate linearly or hierarchically; rather, they exist in a recursive and mutually reinforcing relationship. Community cultivates the conditions for motivation by establishing belonging and shared purpose. Motivation, in turn, supports the development of agency by sustaining engagement and investment in learning. As agency increases, learners contribute more meaningfully to the ensemble, thereby

strengthening and renewing the community. In this way, each component both depends upon and contributes to the others, forming a continuous feedback loop.

The ecosystem metaphor provides an analytic lens for understanding this interdependence. Just as biological ecosystems rely on balance, diversity, and responsiveness to sustain life, music classrooms depend upon the ongoing interaction of relational, psychological, and participatory conditions to sustain learning. When one element is underdeveloped—for example, when community is fragmented, motivation is externally imposed, or agency is constrained—the vitality of the system is diminished. Conversely, when these elements are aligned, the classroom becomes a site of adaptive growth, where students experience belonging, engagement, and authorship as integrated dimensions of musical learning.

Importantly, the Music Classroom Ecosystem is not a prescriptive model but a heuristic framework for analyzing and designing learning environments. It does not dictate specific pedagogical methods; rather, it provides a structure for understanding how instructional decisions, social dynamics, and institutional contexts interact to shape student experience. Within this framework, teaching is understood as a process of ecological stewardship—the intentional design and maintenance of conditions that support the interplay of community, motivation, and agency.

By conceptualizing music learning as an ecological process, the model integrates technical, expressive, social, and cognitive dimensions into a unified framework. It builds upon prior traditions in music education while offering a lens through which the complexities of contemporary ensemble practice can be understood. In doing so, the Music Classroom Ecosystem provides a foundation for examining how students come to

know, experience, and enact music as participants in a dynamic and evolving learning environment. The sections that follow examine each component in turn, beginning with community as the relational foundation of the ecosystem.

Community: The Social Root System of Learning

Community is the foundational layer of the Music Classroom Ecosystem, representing the social and cultural soil from which motivation and agency grow. Within ensemble contexts, community manifests both as a literal collective of learners and as a symbolic environment of shared meaning. Dewey (1916/2004) regarded community as the essential medium of education, asserting that “education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 239). For Dewey, learning occurs through participation in communal experience; it is through cooperation, dialogue, and shared problem-solving that students develop intellectual and moral growth. As established through sociocultural theory, communities of practice, and care ethics, musical learning is fundamentally relational and shaped through participation within shared cultural activity.

In the ensemble classroom, community is cultivated through the rituals, roles, and relationships that bind participants together—structures that are qualitatively different from those found in many academic classrooms organized around individual work and assessment. Wenger (1998) describes such communities of practice as “systems of relationships among people, activities, and the world” (p. 125), emphasizing that belonging precedes performance. In band and orchestra, students learn not only musical skills but also how to inhabit socially situated roles—how to listen, to lead, and to contribute meaningfully to a shared musical outcome. This enculturation process parallels

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, where learning develops through guided participation within culturally organized activities.

Community also provides the emotional scaffolding that supports risk-taking and creativity. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs identifies belonging as a prerequisite for higher-order growth, while Noddings (1984) extends this into an ethic of care, framing education as a relationship grounded in mutual recognition: "The cared-for must recognize the caring in order for it to be completed" (p. 81). Within the band or orchestra, this ethic of care translates into attentiveness—to the music, to the ensemble, and most importantly to one another.

Research in music education reinforces the centrality of belonging for student engagement. Parker (2016) found that students' sense of community within ensembles strongly correlates with intrinsic motivation and persistence. Likewise, Freer (2010) noted that ensemble members describe their groups in familial terms, identifying social cohesion as a key factor in sustained participation. When students perceive their classroom as a community of mutual respect and shared purpose, they are more likely to invest emotionally and cognitively in their learning.

The Community component of the Music Classroom Ecosystem therefore serves as both a condition and outcome of effective teaching. It establishes the shared ground from which all other dimensions of learning emerge. When the social root system is strong, it anchors motivation and nourishes agency; when it is shallow or fragmented, the entire ecosystem weakens. Building this root system requires teachers to design environments that balance structure with openness, authority with empathy, and tradition

with inclusion. The ways students experience belonging and shared responsibility within ensemble communities are examined empirically in Chapter 4.

Motivation: The Circulatory Energy of Learning

If community represents the roots, motivation functions as the lifeblood of the ecosystem—the circulating energy that sustains engagement, growth, and persistence. Motivation shapes the quality, direction, and persistence of student learning. Within music education, motivation is both an affective and cognitive construct, influenced by self-perception, social context, and task value (Austin & Vispoel, 1998; Schmidt et al., 2006). This conception of motivation draws directly from self-determination theory and expectancy-value models, which situate engagement within social context rather than individual disposition.

Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000, 2012) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a foundational framework for understanding motivation within educational contexts. SDT asserts that human behavior is guided by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, individuals experience intrinsic motivation—the desire to engage in activities for their inherent satisfaction rather than for external reward. Conversely, when these needs are thwarted, motivation becomes extrinsic, compliance-driven, and fragile.

Music classrooms *can* engage these motivational dimensions when intentionally cultivated. Ensemble participation offers opportunities for relatedness through shared musical purpose, but this sense of connection must be actively fostered rather than assumed. Skill development can cultivate competence, and opportunities for creative expression may foster autonomy when students are invited into meaningful decision-

making. As Deci and Ryan (2000) explain, “social contexts that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote the most volitional and high-quality forms of motivation and engagement” (p. 68). Teachers who intentionally nurture these conditions empower students to take ownership of their learning.

Motivation also encompasses cognitive expectancy and value components. Eccles and Wigfield’s (2002) Expectancy-Value Theory suggests that learners’ motivation depends on both their belief in their ability to succeed (expectancy) and the perceived importance or enjoyment of the task (value). In music, students’ motivation rises when they feel capable of mastering repertoire and when the music resonates personally or culturally. Teachers who select diverse, relevant repertoire and provide scaffolded feedback enhance both expectancy and value, leading to sustained engagement.

The emotional dimension of motivation further underscores the interdependence of cognition and affect. Pekrun (2014) identifies emotions as “the energizing forces that sustain learning” (p. 9), influencing attention, persistence, and resilience. In the ensemble context, emotional engagement often stems from collective achievement—the shared joy of musical success. This social-emotional energy circulates through the ensemble like oxygen through the bloodstream, fueling continued effort and commitment.

In the Music Classroom Ecosystem, motivation functions as the intermediary between community and agency. It transforms belonging into action, connecting the social foundation of the classroom to the personal growth of the learner. When motivation is intrinsic and self-sustaining, it enables students to navigate challenges, embrace feedback, and pursue mastery for its own sake. Teachers who design experiences that honor autonomy, competence, and relatedness ensure the ecosystem

remains vital, adaptive, and self-renewing. How motivational energy is sustained, disrupted, or transformed within ensemble settings is explored through student narratives in Chapter 4.

Agency: The Canopy of Growth and Expression

The final component of the Music Classroom Ecosystem—agency—represents the visible expression of learning’s internal processes. Just as a tree’s canopy reveals the health of its roots and circulation, agency reflects the cumulative effects of community and motivation. Agency encompasses the learner’s capacity to act intentionally and influence their environment. In educational terms, it is the synthesis of knowledge, motivation, and identity expressed through purposeful action. Consistent with sociocultural and relational theories of agency, this framework understands agency as an achievement that emerges through participation rather than a trait possessed in isolation.

Bandura (2001) defines human agency as “the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one’s life” (p. 2). This definition underscores autonomy, efficacy, and intentionality as central elements of agency. In the classroom, agency manifests when students set goals, self-assess, and take initiative in their learning. As Biesta and Tedder (2007) elaborate, agency is not a fixed trait but an “achievement that is accomplished in and through particular contextual and relational conditions” (p. 136). It is therefore deeply ecological—emerging from the interplay between individual capacity and environmental opportunity.

In music education, agency involves multiple, increasingly sophisticated dimensions of musical understanding, including interpretive, creative, and stylistic capacities. Interpretive agency arises when students shape phrasing, dynamics,

articulation, and expressive nuance according to their understanding of the music.

Creative agency extends beyond performance into composition, improvisation, arranging, and musical problem-solving. At more advanced levels, agency also encompasses stylistic understanding—the ability to recognize, inhabit, and intentionally manipulate the conventions, practices, and expressive norms of particular musical traditions. Such stylistic agency reflects not merely technical proficiency, but a deeper understanding of how musical meaning is constructed within cultural and historical contexts.

This expanded view of agency aligns closely with Wiggins’s (2015) framework for Teaching for Musical Understanding (TMU), which emphasizes that musical learning involves knowing how music works rather than simply reproducing correct sounds. Within TMU, students demonstrate understanding when they can make informed interpretive and stylistic decisions, explain musical choices, and transfer musical ideas across contexts. From this perspective, agency becomes visible when students perform with stylistic intention, adapt musical ideas to new situations, and justify their interpretive choices as musicians rather than merely following directions.

Allsup and Westerlund (2012) argue that music classrooms should “prepare students not simply to replicate tradition but to transform it” (p. 135). Stylistic agency makes such transformation possible, as students must first understand musical traditions deeply before they can meaningfully question, adapt, or extend them. Encouraging students to engage critically with style, genre, and musical norms thus transforms ensemble participation from passive execution to informed, creative authorship.

Agency also intersects with identity. As students gain confidence in their interpretive, creative, and stylistic capacities, they begin to see themselves as musicians

capable of contribution and leadership. Campbell (2010) notes that “music identity is forged in the crucible of participation” (p. 243). Each rehearsal, performance, and collaborative exchange reinforces students’ sense of belonging and competence, solidifying agency as both individual empowerment and communal contribution.

Importantly, agency within the Music Classroom Ecosystem is not synonymous with independence. It is a relational agency—the capacity to act musically with others while maintaining individual voice. Edwards (2005) describes relational agency as “a capacity to align one’s thoughts and actions with others to interpret problems and to respond to them collaboratively” (p. 169). Within this process, interpretation is not enacted in isolation, but is informed by stylistic frameworks that shape what counts as meaningful musical action. Style provides the cultural and historical context through which interpretive choices become intelligible, while interpretation reflects the musician’s engagement with and enactment of those conventions. In ensemble settings, this alignment extends beyond peer interaction to include the teacher as a participant within the relational field. Teachers shape the conditions under which agency becomes possible by structuring rehearsal discourse, modeling interpretive reasoning, inviting student contributions, and calibrating when to direct and when to defer. Ensemble musicians enact this balance as they adjust intonation, timing, stylistic nuance, and interpretation in response to both their peers and the guiding presence of the teacher, demonstrating agency through responsiveness rather than dominance. The teacher does not diminish agency but helps orchestrate the relational space in which it can emerge.

Agency also extends beyond collective coordination to include solistic and independent musical action. In these contexts, students draw upon their interpretive,

creative, and stylistic understanding to make expressive choices that reflect personal identity and musicianship. In this sense, the ecosystem nurtures both autonomy and interdependence: students learn to contribute meaningfully within community while also developing the confidence to stand alone. Together, these intertwined capacities sustain the vitality of a healthy musical ecosystem.

Teachers play a vital role in cultivating agency by providing authentic choices, encouraging reflection, and distributing authority. Practices such as student-led rehearsals, peer mentorship, composition projects, and stylistic exploration position students as co-constructors of musical knowledge. As Freire (1970/2000) reminds us, education must be “a practice of freedom” (p. 81), empowering learners to question, imagine, and act upon the world. When students experience agency, they move beyond compliance toward authorship; they become musicians not because they are told to perform, but because they understand, choose, and create. Students’ experiences of authorship, leadership, and musical decision-making are taken up empirically in Chapter 4 and interpreted in Chapter 5.

Interconnection and Balance within the Ecosystem

While community, motivation, and agency can be examined individually, their full significance emerges through their interaction. Dewey’s (1938) concept of continuity captures this interdependence: every experience modifies the conditions of future experience, shaping how learning unfolds over time. When one element weakens—when community fractures or motivation wanes—the system’s capacity to sustain growth is diminished.

The following section examines historical paradigms that continue to inform how educators understand knowledge, experience, and development.

Figure 1

The Music Classroom Ecosystem illustrating the interdependence of Community, Motivation, and Agency as cyclical and regenerative processes of learning.

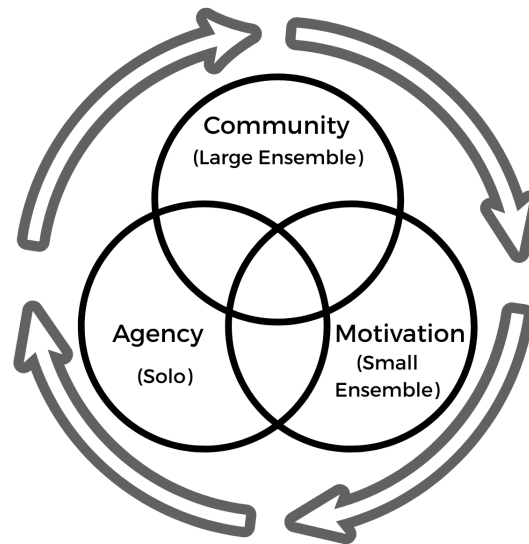


Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic interplay among Community, Motivation, and Agency within the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Each element both supports and depends on the others in a continual process of renewal. Community provides belonging and shared purpose; Motivation transforms that belonging into energy for learning; and Agency enables individual expression that reenters and strengthens the collective. The arrows surrounding the diagram emphasize the system's regenerative nature—learning as an ongoing process of interaction, reflection, and growth.

Understanding the Music Classroom Ecosystem within its present form also requires tracing the intellectual currents that shaped it. The following section examines historical paradigms of learning that continue to inform how educators conceive knowledge, experience, and growth. Together, community, motivation, and agency function as the analytic lens through which student experience is examined in subsequent chapters.

Symbiosis Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem

Ecological systems are sustained not merely through coexistence, but through symbiotic relationships—interactions in which distinct elements mutually influence and sustain one another over time. In biological contexts, symbiosis refers to interdependence among organisms that supports survival and adaptation (Odum & Barrett, 2005). Applied metaphorically to education, symbiosis offers a lens for understanding learning as a relational process shaped by reciprocal influence rather than linear causality.

Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, symbiosis provides language for understanding agency as a form of renewal rather than separation. Students do not become agentive by exiting communal practice, but by developing capacities that re-enter and reshape it through leadership, mentorship, and artistic contribution. In this way, agency reflects what Wenger (1998) described as movement toward fuller participation within a community of practice.

This framing aligns with Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity, in which experience is both shaped by prior conditions and generative of future growth, and with Biesta's (2015) conception of subjectification as an emergent process that occurs within

relational and institutional contexts. Symbiosis thus reframes independence not as isolation, but as relational maturity within a living educational system.

Historical Paradigms of Learning

Understanding historical paradigms of learning provides essential grounding for the conceptual development of contemporary frameworks such as the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Each paradigm reflects not only a theory of instruction, but an epistemological stance shaped by assumptions about knowledge, human development, and the purposes of education. Over time, these paradigms have informed and responded to one another, reflecting broader shifts in how learning, motivation, and agency are understood (Ertmer & Newby, 2013; Schunk, 2012).

Music education has long embodied these paradigmatic tensions. Ensemble rehearsal, for example, can be understood simultaneously as a site of analytical precision, experiential exploration, conditioned response, developmental growth, and cognitive interpretation. Rather than treating these perspectives as competing ideologies, the ecological framework proposed in this study integrates their contributions, recognizing that meaningful musical learning is sustained through the interaction of structure, experience, interpretation, and participation.

Rationalism: Knowledge as Logical Structure

The rationalist tradition, associated with thinkers such as Plato and Descartes, positions knowledge as arising from reason rather than sensory experience. From this view, learning involves accessing universal truths through logical and intellectual

processes (Carr, 2003; Gutek, 2011). In education, rationalism has emphasized abstraction, formal reasoning, and coherence of structure.

In music education, rationalist assumptions appear in analytical traditions that prioritize theory, form, and technical accuracy. Conductors and teachers often function as guides who transmit established standards of musical excellence. While this orientation provides clarity and coherence, its emphasis on abstraction risks distancing learners from the social, emotional, and experiential dimensions of music-making. Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, rationalist structure contributes stability and order but must be balanced with relational and experiential forms of knowing.

Empiricism: Experience as the Source of Understanding

Empiricism emerged as a counterpoint to rationalism, asserting that knowledge develops through sensory experience and interaction with the world. Locke's metaphor of the mind as a blank slate reframed learning as an inductive process shaped by observation, reflection, and experience (Locke, 1975). Dewey (1938) later extended this view by emphasizing learning as a transactional process through which individuals reconstruct experience into meaning.

Music learning exemplifies this empirical foundation. Students refine pitch, rhythm, and expression through repetition, feedback, and reflection, engaging sound, movement, and emotion as sources of understanding. Rehearsals function as experiential laboratories in which musical ideas are tested and reshaped. Within the ecological

metaphor, empiricism provides the experiential ground through which learners engage with sound, peers, and culture.

Behaviorism: Learning as Conditioning

Behaviorism reframed learning as observable change in behavior shaped through reinforcement and conditioning (Pavlov, 1927; Skinner, 1953). By focusing on measurable outcomes, behaviorist approaches emphasized repetition, external motivation, and control, influencing assessment and instructional practices across education (Schunk, 2012).

In music education, behaviorist legacies persist in performance ratings, technical benchmarks, and externally imposed standards of correctness (Humphreys, 1989). While these structures support discipline and precision, they can reduce musical learning to compliance rather than meaning-making. Ecologically, behaviorism contributes useful scaffolds for skill acquisition but lacks the adaptability required to sustain motivation, identity, and agency over time.

Developmentalism: Learning as Growth

Developmental theories reframed learning as an organic process shaped by readiness, maturation, and qualitative shifts in thinking. Piaget's stages of cognitive development and Bruner's spiral curriculum emphasized growth through increasingly complex engagement with ideas (Bruner, 1960; Piaget, 1972). In music education, developmentalist principles inform sequencing, differentiation, and scaffolded instruction.

Approaches such as Suzuki's method and Gordon's Music Learning Theory reflect this emphasis on readiness and progression, supporting learners as they move from

imitation toward independent musical thought (Gordon, 1997; Suzuki, 1969). While developmentalism offers valuable insight into growth processes, its reliance on linear stages can marginalize learners whose trajectories are nonlinear or culturally situated. The Music Classroom Ecosystem retains developmental sensitivity while reframing growth as adaptive and recursive rather than sequential.

Cognitivism: Learning as Interpretation

The cognitive revolution reintroduced attention to internal mental processes, conceptualizing learning as the organization and interpretation of experience through mental structures (Ausubel, 1968; Bruner, 1960). Cognitivist theories emphasized schema, prior knowledge, and metacognition as central to understanding and transfer (Anderson, 1983; Flavell, 1979).

In music education, cognitivism has illuminated how musicians recognize patterns, anticipate structure, and apply knowledge flexibly across contexts. Schema theory explains how performers navigate complex musical situations by drawing on organized mental frameworks, while metacognitive awareness supports self-regulation and interpretive decision-making. At the same time, cognitivist approaches have been critiqued for abstracting cognition from emotion, embodiment, and culture—dimensions central to musical experience.

The ecological paradigm responds to these limitations by situating cognition within relational, embodied, and social contexts. Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, musical thinking emerges not as isolated information processing, but through interaction among individuals, sounds, tools, and communities. Cognition functions as one

interdependent component within a larger system that sustains belonging, motivation, and agency.

Summary and Implications

The review of learning theories and their evolution underscores that education is not a static process but a dynamic interplay between experience, cognition, and social interaction. Constructivism, with its emphasis on active meaning-making, situates learners as co-constructors of knowledge through their engagement with others and the environment (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this framework, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of information but a facilitator who creates the conditions for discovery and reflection. Learning occurs through scaffolding, guided participation, and the use of cultural tools that extend cognition (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

In music education, constructivist principles manifest through the ensemble and rehearsal process, where learners continually reconstruct their understanding of musical concepts through participation, feedback, and reflection (Dewey, 1938; Wiggins, 2015). These social and embodied experiences situate learning in authentic contexts, enabling students to internalize both technical and expressive dimensions of music-making. As they refine their understanding, students engage in a cyclical process of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1972), informed by dialogue and collaboration with peers and teachers. Within ensemble settings, this process is further shaped by the role of the teacher as conductor, who functions as a coordinating and meaning-shaping presence within the learning environment. The conductor organizes musical time, establishes stylistic expectations, and guides interpretive direction, structuring the conditions under

which collective music-making occurs. Consequently, learning is not solely distributed among participants, but is mediated through the conductor's leadership, which balances ensemble cohesion with opportunities for student contribution, interpretation, and stylistically informed decision-making.

This process is inherently social. The classroom functions as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where knowledge is negotiated through shared experiences. Each participant contributes uniquely to collective understanding, and meaning emerges through interaction rather than transmission. Teachers mediate learning by guiding students through their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), providing the scaffolding necessary for students to move from dependence to autonomy (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). This dynamic underscores the teacher's dual role as facilitator and participant in the learning process—a role that requires balancing structure with openness and authority with shared agency.

At the heart of this pedagogy lies motivation and engagement. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2012) emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are foundational to sustained learning. Music classrooms that offer choice, cultivate belonging, and structure achievable challenges support these needs, fostering intrinsic motivation and deep engagement. When learners perceive their work as meaningful and feel connected to their peers and teachers, they develop a stronger sense of personal agency (Bandura, 1989). This agency, in turn, empowers them to take

ownership of their learning, transforming the classroom into a collaborative ecosystem of growth.

The implications of these interconnected theories for music education are profound. First, learning should be designed as a participatory act, where students are not passive recipients but active contributors to collective meaning-making. Second, instruction must be contextualized—embedded in authentic musical experiences that connect to students’ cultural backgrounds and prior knowledge (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Third, teachers must view themselves as reflective practitioners who adaptively scaffold learning, recognizing the diversity of pathways through which understanding emerges.

Ultimately, the synthesis of constructivist, sociocultural, and motivational frameworks calls for a shift toward an ecological model of learning—one that perceives the classroom as an interconnected system of relationships, tools, and experiences. In this Music Classroom Ecosystem, community represents the soil from which participation grows; motivation serves as the water that nourishes engagement; and agency blooms as the flower of self-directed learning. Just as a healthy ecosystem depends on balance, diversity, and interdependence, so too does a thriving classroom depend on reciprocal relationships, shared purpose, and continual renewal through reflection and dialogue.

This ecological metaphor integrates theoretical traditions while aligning with the lived realities of teaching and learning in music. It acknowledges that learning is neither linear nor purely cognitive—it is embodied, social, and cultural. By framing education in this way, we affirm that the ultimate goal of teaching is not the transmission of

knowledge but the cultivation of human growth through community, motivation, and agency.

Taken together, these theoretical traditions converge in the Music Classroom Ecosystem, which serves as the analytic lens guiding the present study.

Transition to Methodology

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides the theoretical soil from which the Music Classroom Ecosystem grows. Rooted in constructivist, sociocultural, and ecological traditions, the framework conceptualizes learning as a living system in which community, motivation, and agency interact as interdependent forces. This synthesis not only offers a lens for understanding but also grounds the methodological choices that follow.

Because the study explores students' experiences of belonging, engagement, and self-authorship—phenomena that are relational and context-dependent—it employs qualitative approaches capable of capturing lived experience in depth and texture. Narrative and arts-based methodologies illuminate how learners conceptualize and express their own experiences within the music classroom. By foregrounding student voice and metaphor as central analytic tools, this inquiry honors the relational, interpretive, and emergent nature of learning that the Music Classroom Ecosystem both describes and embodies.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The theoretical and philosophical foundations explored in the previous chapter establish the conceptual soil from which this methodological design grows.

Constructivist, sociocultural, and ecological perspectives each contribute essential nutrients to this inquiry, emphasizing that knowledge is co-constructed, relational, and situated in context. Just as an ecosystem depends on interdependent exchanges between organisms and environment, qualitative research depends on interaction between participants, researcher, and setting. Grounded in the framework of the Music Classroom Ecosystem, this study seeks to illuminate how secondary students experience the intertwined processes of community, motivation, and agency across the layered environments of large ensembles, small ensembles, and solo performance.

This chapter details the methodological design developed to investigate those relationships. Qualitative inquiry provides the appropriate epistemological greenhouse for this exploration—an approach that nurtures depth, complexity, and participant voice rather than reduction or control. Within this greenhouse, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013) and arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2017) function as complementary growth processes: stories situate lived experience, while artistic and metaphorical expression expands it, revealing layers of meaning that words alone cannot contain. The methodological structure that follows is designed not only to gather data but to mirror the ecological values of the study itself—

connection, reciprocity, and growth. Each section of this chapter traces how philosophical commitments become methodological practice, demonstrating how the research design allows students' experiences to take root, flourish, and reveal the canopy of understanding that frames subsequent analysis.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research offers a fertile environment for investigating lived experience, meaning, and human development within context. As Creswell and Poth (2018) describe, qualitative inquiry is “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) further characterize qualitative research as “an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” that studies phenomena “in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 43). This paradigm privileges the complexity of human experience over generalization and understanding over prediction. Qualitative inquiry does not seek control of variables but seeks to dwell among them—to see, feel, and interpret their relational interdependence. Such an orientation is essential for a study that views the classroom not as a controlled experiment, but as an ecosystem—a dynamic network of relationships, motivations, and identities that are always in motion.

From an epistemological perspective, this study is rooted in constructivist and interpretivist traditions, which hold that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and reflection (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994). Meaning, in this view, is not discovered but co-created; it emerges through dialogue between researcher and participant, shaped by culture, history, and experience. Lincoln and Guba (1985) captured

this orientation succinctly, arguing that reality in qualitative research is “multiple, constructed, and holistic” (p. 39). Such an approach aligns naturally with the philosophical foundations articulated in the preceding chapters—particularly Dewey’s (1938/1997) view of experience as continuous, social, and educative, and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, which situates development within nested layers of environment. Both perspectives challenge reductionist tendencies by emphasizing connection, context, and growth—principles that mirror the ecosystemic logic of this study.

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology. An interpretivist epistemology assumes that knowledge is generated through interpretation rather than discovered as objective fact; understanding emerges through dialogue, reflection, and engagement with participants’ lived experiences. A constructivist ontology, in turn, holds that reality is not singular and fixed but socially and historically constituted—formed through human interaction, language, and cultural practice. Together, these commitments position knowledge as contextual, relational, and emergent.

From this perspective, meaning is not uncovered as an external truth but co-constructed through the relationships and interactions among participants, researchers, and the surrounding cultural and educational contexts. Reality is understood as multiple and intersubjective, shaped by participants’ perspectives and the researcher’s interpretive engagement with their narratives. The aim is not to produce universal generalizations but to illuminate the complexity and texture of experience as it unfolds within the ecology of music classrooms.

Axiological Assumptions

My axiological stance aligns with Noddings's (2013) ethic of care and Dewey's (1938) democratic vision of education. I view research as a moral and relational practice that honors the voices and experiences of participants as co-constructors of knowledge. This perspective demands attentiveness, empathy, and humility—qualities essential to the ecological paradigm guiding this inquiry. The process of listening, interpreting, and representing participants' experiences is therefore both ethical and creative: a form of stewardship within the ecosystem of educational research.

Methodological Orientation and Researcher Role

The Music Classroom Ecosystem framework requires a methodology capable of capturing not only what students do, but how they experience belonging, motivation, and agency as they move through the multi-layered environments of ensemble learning. Large ensembles, small groups, and solo performance each represent distinct yet interconnected habitats within the broader ecosystem of the music classroom. Within and across these spaces, social climate, pedagogical structures, and interpersonal relationships shape students' engagement and identity formation in ways that are dynamic and interdependent. Quantitative measures would struggle to represent these emergent processes, whereas qualitative approaches—particularly those grounded in narrative and metaphor—offer a means of illuminating learning as it is lived from within the system.

Qualitative research also acknowledges the researcher as an interpretive presence whose positioning shapes both data generation and meaning-making. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) describe this dynamic as a “double hermeneutic,” wherein the researcher interprets participants' interpretations of their own experiences. In this study, the

researcher's role extends beyond that of a detached observer and is more accurately characterized as that of a participant situated within the educational environment under investigation. This participation is neither total immersion nor neutrality, but a bounded and reflexively examined engagement shaped by professional responsibility, ethical awareness, and instructional role.

From an ecological perspective, the researcher functions as one organism within a larger system—simultaneously influencing and being influenced by the interactions that unfold. As a teacher-researcher working within the same classroom ecosystem, my participation is integral to the conditions of learning being studied. This positionality does not compromise the inquiry; rather, it requires sustained reflexivity regarding how instructional decisions, relationships, and prior knowledge shape observation and interpretation. As Peshkin (1988) argued, subjectivity is not something to be eliminated but to be systematically identified and monitored, while Pillow (2003) emphasizes reflexivity as an ongoing practice of critical self-awareness rather than a one-time declaration.

Within the context of this study, qualitative inquiry thus functions as both a philosophical stance and a methodological greenhouse. The greenhouse metaphor reflects not only a generative space in which ideas and experiences can flourish, but also an environment defined by permeability and reciprocity. Researcher and participants coexist within this space, each shaping the conditions of growth. Within this greenhouse, the voices of students are cultivated through careful and intentional tending—interviews, focus groups, observations, and creative expressions that allow their experiences to

unfold over time. Each narrative represents a living organism whose development is shaped by relational nourishment, contextual conditions, and interpretive care.

The methodological task, therefore, is not to prune these stories to fit predetermined categories, nor to withdraw from their growth, but to remain attentively present—supporting, documenting, and interpreting how meaning emerges within the ecosystem. In this way, the researcher’s participation can become a source of insight rather than interference, though such participation demands careful reflexivity and methodological transparency. Interpretive engagement requires ongoing attention to positionality, power, and the ways in which the researcher’s presence shapes the field. Through deliberate documentation, analytic memoing, and sustained self-examination, the researcher seeks not to erase influence but to account for it, thereby enabling a richer and more ecologically faithful understanding of ensemble learning as it is experienced by students.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Qualitative research also provides the appropriate standards of rigor for this kind of inquiry. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace positivist notions of validity and reliability, ensuring that trustworthiness is established through transparency, reflexivity, and resonance. As Stake (1995) noted, qualitative inquiry values particularization over generalization—the detailed understanding of specific cases that can illuminate universal human themes. Through this lens, each participant’s narrative and artistic artifact becomes both individual and ecological: a single voice that echoes within the larger canopy of shared musical life.

Finally, qualitative design supports the integration of narrative and arts-based methods that align with the ecological metaphor at the core of this study. If large ensembles represent the roots of community, small ensembles the collaborative greenhouse of motivation, and solo performance the canopy of agency, then qualitative research offers the framework through which these layers can be explored in their lived interconnectedness. The narrative and artistic expressions that emerge from this inquiry serve as organic data—alive, contextual, and evolving. In this sense, the methodology does not merely describe an ecosystem; it enacts one, modeling the very relational processes it seeks to understand.

Narrative Inquiry and Arts-Based Research

Narrative inquiry and arts-based research together form the shared methodological ground of this study—approaches that honor the complexity, creativity, and humanity of lived experience. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, narrative inquiry is both a phenomenon and a method: it studies the storied nature of human experience and uses story as the primary unit of meaning. Experience, in their view, “is the stories people live” (p. 20). Through this lens, the classroom becomes not only a site of instruction but a landscape of story—one in which teachers and students co-construct identities through their interactions, performances, and reflections. Stories are ecological in that they grow from shared experience and are nourished by relationships, memory, and meaning. Narrative inquiry thus provides a means to trace the roots of community, the shoots of motivation, and the flowering of agency within the Music Classroom Ecosystem.

This methodology is particularly apt for studying education, where learning is itself a narrative process—a sequence of experiences that shape who one becomes. Dewey’s (1938/1997) concept of continuity of experience frames each learning moment as connected to the next, forming a living narrative of growth. In music education, these continuities are often audible and embodied: the rehearsed piece that evolves over time, the progression from ensemble participation to solo performance, the stories students tell about their first concert or their moment of breakthrough. Narrative inquiry allows these experiences to be articulated, analyzed, and interpreted as interconnected threads within the broader ecology of musical learning.

The philosophical assumptions of narrative inquiry also align with constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies that undergird this research. Stories are co-constructed between participants and researcher; they are not neutral data but negotiated texts shaped by context, culture, and purpose. Riessman (2008) emphasized that narrative analysis “privileges the teller’s voice and recognizes the interpretive work of both participant and researcher” (p. 23). Participants function not merely as respondents but as participant-researchers—active contributors to the meaning-making process whose reflections, interpretations, and revisions shape the contours of the study itself. This collaborative orientation reflects the ecological interdependence of all elements within a system. Just as organisms adapt and respond to one another, narratives evolve through dialogue, reflection, and shared inquiry.

In this study, participants’ stories of belonging, persistence, and self-authorship will be gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective prompts that invite them to interpret their own experiences within the layered ecosystems of large ensembles,

small ensembles, and solo performance. Where appropriate, participants will be invited to clarify, expand, or respond to emerging interpretations, further positioning them as co-constructors of knowledge rather than objects of analysis.

Narrative inquiry also accommodates temporality—one of its defining features and one that resonates deeply with both music and ecology. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the narrative three-dimensional space of interaction, continuity, and situation, each dimension representing how people’s experiences are connected across time, relationships, and context. Similarly, the Music Classroom Ecosystem operates within temporal cycles of rehearsal, performance, and reflection, as well as developmental cycles of student growth. By attending to temporal unfolding, narrative inquiry captures how community, motivation, and agency evolve through sustained participation. It recognizes that learning, like ecological growth, is not linear but cyclical—marked by recurrence, transformation, and renewal.

Arts-based research serves as a complementary methodology that extends narrative inquiry into the aesthetic and symbolic realms of meaning-making. Barone and Eisner (2012) defined arts-based research as “an approach to inquiry that uses the expressive qualities of the arts as a primary means of understanding and representation” (p. 1). Such methods—whether through visual art, music composition, poetry, or performance—invite participants to express knowledge that is tacit, affective, and embodied. Leavy (2017) further noted that arts-based methods “extend the reach of qualitative research beyond words, capturing the ineffable dimensions of human experience” (p. 4).

In this study, arts-based components function not merely as illustrative artifacts but as forms of inquiry. When students depict their musical journeys metaphorically—through imagery, reflective writing, or artistic representation—they are engaging in analytic reflection, translating lived experience into symbolic form. These representations will be examined alongside interview narratives as co-constructed texts, attending to imagery, metaphor, structure, and thematic resonance. In this way, arts-based artifacts operate as data that reveal dimensions of identity, belonging, and agency that may remain partially inaccessible through verbal narration alone. The integration of artistic expression thus deepens interpretive analysis, aligning with the study’s constructivist commitment to multiple forms of meaning-making.

Integrating arts-based inquiry within narrative research also aligns with the ecological nature of the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework. In nature, diversity sustains vitality; in methodology, multiplicity of expression sustains understanding. Just as ecosystems thrive through biodiversity, the methodological ecosystem of this study thrives through multi-modality—inviting participants to communicate through story, metaphor, and art. The metaphor-elicitation process functions as a bridge between narrative and arts-based approaches, enabling participants to represent their experiences through image and symbol. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued, metaphor is not merely linguistic ornament but foundational to human thought, shaping how people conceptualize abstract experiences. Tobias (2013) extended this insight into music education, demonstrating that metaphors allow students to articulate the emotional and identity-laden dimensions of musical participation. By asking students to describe their

learning through metaphors of growth, movement, or environment, this study mirrors its own theoretical structure, using ecological imagery to reveal ecological experience.

The fusion of narrative and arts-based methods also responds to calls within music education for research that centers student voice and imagination. Burnard (2012) argued for “multiple creativities” that acknowledge diverse forms of musical expression, contending that education must “open up spaces where students can make sense of their musical selves” (p. 8). Similarly, Barrett and Stauffer (2009) highlighted that narrative inquiry “renders visible the relational, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of music teaching and learning” (p. 3). This study embraces those calls by designing a methodology that allows students to represent their experiences in ways that honor their agency and artistry. Through narrative interviews, metaphor creation, and arts-based artifacts, participants will effectively co-compose the data—transforming the research process into a collaborative ensemble performance.

From an ecological standpoint, narrative and arts-based research together reflect the interdependent processes of growth within the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Narrative inquiry draws from lived experience, anchoring understanding in story, memory, and reflection. Arts-based expression extends this inquiry through creative interpretation, translating experience into forms that can be seen, heard, and felt. The researcher’s role is to cultivate the conditions in which these modes of inquiry inform and enrich one another—an ecology of meaning in which understanding is not extracted but nurtured, and data not harvested, but grown.

Ultimately, the combination of narrative and arts-based inquiry supports attention to both the stories students tell and the meanings they ascribe to those stories across

contexts. These methods will illuminate how students inhabit, traverse, and transform the layered ecosystems of their musical lives, revealing the interplay of community, motivation, and agency that sustains their growth as musicians and as human beings.

While arts-based and metaphor-elicitation activities informed the interpretive process, the primary analytic representations in this study are narrative vignettes synthesized from interview and observational data.

Research Context and Participants

This study will take place across two contrasting secondary-level high school settings that together illuminate a range of ecological conditions in which Music Classroom Ecosystems develop. These sites were intentionally selected to reflect both diversity and disparity within public school music education—one located in an affluent suburban district with robust institutional support and established arts traditions, and the other situated in an urban, economically under-resourced community where access to instruments, space, and adequate supplies presents continual challenges. By studying students' experiences across these two contexts, my research will seek to understand how community, motivation, and agency are nurtured, constrained, or transformed within differing educational environments.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described development as occurring through “progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives” (p. 21). Through this lens, schools represent micro-ecosystems nested within larger socioecological systems—districts, communities, and cultural narratives about education and the arts. The suburban school, characterized by abundant resources and high levels of

parent and community involvement, functions much like a well-established canopy in an old-growth forest: mature, structured, and sustained by consistent nourishment. The urban school, by contrast, reflects the adaptive resilience of new growth in challenging terrain—where creativity, perseverance, and community interdependence are often the nutrients that sustain learning. Each environment, with its distinct challenges and strengths, provides an essential vantage point for understanding how the ecology of music education varies across socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

Site Selection

The first research site is a comprehensive suburban high school with a long-standing instrumental music program that includes multiple concert ensembles, a marching band, and chamber groups. The program benefits from extensive parent booster involvement and has access to ample rehearsal facilities, a dedicated budget, and strong administrative support. Many students in this setting have access to private lessons, personal instruments, and enrichment opportunities such as honor bands and community ensembles. This site represents a context in which traditions of participation and musical identity are well established, offering an opportunity to examine how motivation and agency emerge within a stable and resource-rich educational ecosystem.

The second research site is an urban public high school serving a predominantly low-income student population. The instrumental music program operates with limited funding, shared facilities, and fewer extracurricular opportunities, yet it is sustained by a committed faculty and a strong sense of cultural and communal pride. Students in this setting often participate in music programs as part of a broader pursuit of belonging, expression, and resilience within a challenging social environment. This site provides

insight into how students and teachers cultivate musical growth and meaning in conditions marked by material scarcity, emphasizing that ecological strength does not depend solely on resources but also on adaptability, cooperation, and care.

Together, these two sites form the dual landscapes of this study—contrasting educational ecosystems that illuminate how contextual conditions shape students’ experiences of belonging, motivation, and agency. Examining both settings acknowledges that educational ecologies are not monolithic; rather, they are diverse biomes that require different forms of tending, nourishment, and interpretation.

Participants

Participants will include high school music students enrolled in concert band, orchestra, and chamber ensembles at each site. Approximately twenty to thirty students will be purposefully selected across both schools to represent a range of experiences, ensemble roles, and developmental stages. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) allows the researcher to select individuals “information-rich” for the phenomenon of interest (p. 230), ensuring that participants can meaningfully reflect on their experiences of community, motivation, and agency across the layered ensemble settings. Students will include a mix of freshmen through seniors along with a sample of alumni, with attention to diversity in instrument families, leadership positions, and prior musical experience.

In keeping with the relational orientation of qualitative inquiry, participation will be voluntary and grounded in informed consent and assent procedures approved through the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Letters of cooperation from school administration will formalize research access, and parent/guardian consent will be obtained for all minors involved in the study. Participants’ identities will be protected

through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details in transcripts, field notes, and final reports.

The study will also include teacher and staff perspectives to provide contextual grounding. These will not serve as primary data for analysis but as ecological field observations—informing understanding of the institutional structures, cultural norms, and pedagogical practices that influence the student experience. As Yin (2018) notes, contextual data enrich case-based inquiry by situating participant narratives within the systems that shape them; “a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 15).

Researcher Context

My professional role intersects with both research sites through current and prior appointments. I presently serve as the instrumental music director within the suburban research context, while my previous six-year tenure in an urban secondary school setting continues to shape my relationships and understanding of that community. This insider perspective provides intimate access to the rhythms, relationships, and pedagogical practices of ensemble life but also necessitates a high degree of reflexivity to manage potential bias. My longstanding professional relationships within the suburban site, and my collaborative partnerships with educators in the urban context, provide the contextual trust and rapport essential for authentic qualitative inquiry. As Herr and Anderson (2015) noted, insider research provides unique insights into the lived realities of organizations, but such proximity demands continual ethical vigilance. I will maintain professional boundaries, ensure participant anonymity, and engage in ongoing reflexive journaling to document and interrogate my assumptions throughout the study.

This dual role—teacher and researcher—mirrors the ecological positioning at the heart of the study. Just as ecosystems rely on the interdependence of elements rather than the isolation of parts, this inquiry acknowledges that complete detachment from the research context is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, I approach the study as an embedded participant-observer—an organism within the same ecosystem who seeks to understand its patterns, tensions, and possibilities. Reflexivity becomes the method by which I maintain balance within this environment, ensuring that my interpretations remain accountable to both participants and the integrity of the research process.

Ecological Classroom Structure and Rehearsal Design

The organizational rhythm of the classroom operates as an ecological design—an intentional structure through which community, motivation, and agency are cultivated in daily practice. Within the program, the rehearsal schedule reflects a living balance between collective identity and distributed autonomy. Full ensemble rehearsals occur on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, functioning as the central gathering space of the musical community. These rehearsals sustain shared purpose and social cohesion while reinforcing the ensemble's collective artistry. In this setting, the large-group experience mirrors the ecological whole: an interdependent system in which individual contributions merge into a unified musical and social fabric.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the rehearsal environment transitions into smaller, instrument-family subgroups. When woodwinds remain in the main rehearsal space, brass musicians disperse into student-led sectionals, and this configuration alternates later in the week. At times, percussionists remain for focused work while other families rotate into sectional practice. These sectionals are entirely student-led, reflecting a pedagogical

orientation that decentralizes authority and privileges collaborative agency. Leadership is shared rather than hierarchical; each participant contributes to interpretive and procedural decisions, cultivating an environment of dialogic learning and mutual accountability.

This structural rotation—alternating between the collective and the autonomous—renders the classroom as a self-sustaining ecosystem of practice (Wenger, 1998). The large-group rehearsals affirm communal belonging, while the sectionals enact agency through peer leadership and self-directed inquiry. Within this framework, motivation arises through authentic participation and ownership rather than compliance. The rehearsal structure thus embodies the Music Classroom Ecosystem in action: an evolving balance of unity and diversity, individual voice and collective purpose, design and emergence. This ecology of structure not only frames the context of the research but also exemplifies the pedagogical and philosophical commitments that guide it.

Ecological Significance of Context

By selecting two sites that differ dramatically in resources, demographics, and cultural climate, this study mirrors the natural variation found across ecosystems. Just as ecosystems adapt to differences in soil, sunlight, and rainfall, educational environments cultivate community, motivation, and agency in response to their own social and structural conditions. These contextual contrasts will not be treated as comparative measures of success or deficiency but as complementary illustrations of how human and institutional systems adapt to their environments. The suburban site may reveal how structure and tradition sustain growth, while the urban site may illustrate resilience and innovation under constraint. Examined together, these contexts offer a more complete view of the Music Classroom Ecosystem, highlighting both pedagogical practices that

can foster flourishing across settings and those that must be adapted in response to contextual realities.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection plan for this study reflects both the philosophical and ecological commitments of the *Music Classroom Ecosystem* framework. Each method—interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, metaphor-elicitation, and arts-based artifacts—serves as a distinct yet interconnected system through which meaning will be drawn. Together, these methods cultivate a holistic understanding of how students experience community, motivation, and agency across the layered ensemble environments of their musical lives. The goal is not simply to gather information but to nurture relationships and co-create meaning through dialogic, reflective, and creative processes.

Although multiple forms of data were collected, semi-structured interviews served as the primary analytic foundation for vignette construction, with observations, focus groups, and artifacts providing contextual depth and triangulation.

Overview and Rationale

Data collection will occur over the course of a full academic quarter (approximately nine weeks), ensuring sufficient temporal depth to capture both the immediate and evolving dimensions of student experience. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that qualitative data collection must be “prolonged and persistent” (p. 262) in order to establish credibility and contextual understanding. In the present setting, the ensemble performance cycle is intentionally aligned with the academic calendar: students in grades 7–12 participate in one major concert during each of the four card marking

periods. As a result, each nine-week term encompasses a complete instructional arc of repertoire introduction, rehearsal development, performance preparation, public presentation, and post-performance reflection. Situating data collection within one full marking period allows the study to attend closely to how belonging, motivation, and agency emerge and shift across a naturally occurring performance cycle rather than an artificially bounded timeframe.

The ecological metaphor again guides the design of data collection. Just as a healthy ecosystem depends upon the interaction of diverse inputs—light, water, nutrients—this study relies on multiple forms of evidence to illuminate the complexity of ensemble learning. Interviews provide deep-rooted narratives that surface students’ internal meaning-making and evolving identities. Focus groups create a collaborative greenhouse in which shared experiences are examined collectively, allowing perspectives to intersect and develop through interaction. Observations capture the living canopy of the classroom—the sounds, behaviors, and relationships that unfold during rehearsal and performance preparation. Metaphor and arts-based artifacts further enable students to represent their experiences symbolically and creatively, revealing affective and tacit dimensions of understanding that may not be fully accessible through language alone. Together, these layers of data reflect the interdependence that characterizes both ecological systems and educational communities, supporting a holistic examination of learning as it unfolds across time, context, and practice.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews will serve as the primary data collection method, providing participants with opportunities to share their musical stories,

reflections, and interpretations in their own words. Interviews will be conducted with approximately twelve to fifteen students across the two research sites, ensuring representation from large ensemble, small ensemble, and solo contexts. Each interview will last approximately forty-five to sixty minutes and will take place in a private, quiet space within the school environment.

Interview questions will be designed to elicit narrative reflection, following Seidman's (2013) three-stage model of in-depth interviewing, which emphasizes life history, detailed experience, and reflection on meaning. Students will be invited to share stories about their earliest memories of making music, their experiences of belonging within ensemble communities, moments when they felt motivated or discouraged, and times when they experienced agency or constraint in their musical growth. Attending to both supportive and challenging experiences is methodologically intentional, as moments of disconnection, diminished motivation, or reduced control often reveal the conditions under which belonging, persistence, and agency are negotiated rather than assumed.

Questions will remain open-ended to allow for emergent storytelling. Each interview will begin with a broad, invitational prompt designed to center participants' own framing of their experience, such as:

- *Can you tell about your experience in band/orchestra so far?*
- *When you think about your time in ensemble, what moments stand out to you as especially meaningful or significant?*

These opening questions invite participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms before the conversation turns toward specific dimensions of belonging, motivation, and agency. Follow-up prompts may include:

- *Can you describe a moment in your ensemble experience when you felt especially connected to others?*
- *Can you describe a time when it was difficult to feel connected, or when a sense of belonging was disrupted? What do you think contributed to that experience?*
- *What keeps you motivated to participate and practice?*
- *Are there moments when your motivation decreases or feels harder to sustain? What influences those moments?*
- *When do you feel most in control of your own learning or musical expression?*
- *Can you recall a situation in which you felt you had limited control over your learning or musical decisions? How did that shape your experience?*

These questions are designed to access not only events but also emotions, perceptions, and metaphors through which students make sense of their musical lives. Follow-up prompts will probe the sensory and affective dimensions of each account—what students saw, heard, felt, and thought—honoring the embodied and relational nature of musical experience (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009). All interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded using pseudonyms to protect participant identity.

In keeping with the ecological metaphor, interviews function as the root system of this research design—drawing deeply from individual experience and supplying the nutrients of meaning that sustain the broader interpretive canopy. Each narrative represents an underground network of understanding that, when viewed collectively, reveals how students move toward and away from belonging, motivation, and agency within the interconnected habitats of the Music Classroom Ecosystem.

Focus Groups

Focus groups will complement individual interviews by providing a collective dialogic space where students can co-construct meaning through conversation. Each site will host one to two focus groups of five to eight participants each, organized to include a mix of ensemble levels and leadership roles. Focus groups create what Glesne (2016) calls a “circle of shared reflection,” allowing participants to engage one another’s ideas, challenge assumptions, and articulate communal values. These discussions will last forty-five to sixty minutes and will be facilitated in a conversational tone that invites openness and humor while maintaining respect and confidentiality.

Focus group prompts will mirror themes from individual interviews but will emphasize collaborative reflection. Students may be asked to complete sentence stems such as “In our ensemble, we...” or “One thing that helps us keep going is...” to prompt discussion around community and motivation. Toward the end of each session, participants will collectively construct a metaphor for their ensemble community—drawing, writing, or describing an image that captures their shared identity. These artistic representations will become data in their own right, serving as visual and metaphorical articulations of ensemble ecology.

Within the metaphor of this study, focus groups represent the *greenhouse layer*—the social and collaborative environment where shared meanings take shape. The greenhouse is where growth becomes visible: students interact, negotiate, and refine their collective understandings, giving form to the social structures that sustain learning.

Classroom Observations

Direct classroom observations will provide a vital layer of ecological data, allowing the researcher to witness the interplay of community, motivation, and agency as they unfold within the natural environment of teaching and learning. Observations will occur in rehearsals, sectionals, and small-ensemble settings across both research sites, with each ensemble observed two to three times throughout the academic quarter. These observations are intended to capture learning as it is lived in real time, attending to patterns of interaction as they emerge, stabilize, or shift across contexts.

Observation protocols will draw upon Spradley's (1980) ethnographic framework, attending to the physical setting, activities, interactions, language, and artifacts present within the environment. Observational attention will not be limited to moments of cohesion or success, but will also include instances of tension, disengagement, uncertainty, uneven participation, or breakdown in communication, recognizing that such moments are equally informative of ecological relationships. Attention will be given to how students collaborate and respond to feedback, as well as to moments when collaboration falters, feedback is resisted or misunderstood, or initiative is constrained by contextual or structural factors.

Observations will include large ensemble rehearsals in which the researcher serves as teacher, acknowledging the dual role of practitioner and inquirer. In these contexts, analytic reflection will occur immediately following rehearsal through detailed field notes and reflexive memoing, with careful attention to how instructional decisions, language, and gestures may shape ecological dynamics. This dual positioning requires

ongoing reflexivity to distinguish description from interpretation and to account for how the researcher's pedagogical presence influences the field.

Field notes will document sensory details, participant interactions, and researcher reflections immediately following each session, with particular care taken to capture patterns over time rather than isolated events. To preserve student privacy, photographs and video recordings will not be used; instead, detailed narrative field notes will serve as the primary observational record.

Within the methodological ecosystem, observations function as the canopy—the visible manifestation of processes occurring beneath the surface. Just as a canopy reveals the health of an ecosystem through variation in density, movement, and responsiveness to environmental conditions, classroom observations reveal how community, motivation, and agency are sustained, disrupted, and renegotiated in practice. Observing ensembles across both suburban and urban sites allows for comparison of how differing environmental conditions shape pedagogical climate, ensemble culture, and student engagement, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how Music Classroom Ecosystems adapt across contexts.

Metaphor-Elicitation Activities

Metaphor-elicitation serves as a bridge between narrative and arts-based data collection, enabling students to express complex emotions and insights that may be difficult to verbalize directly. Following Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) premise that "the essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5), participants will be invited to represent their musical experiences metaphorically through drawing, writing, or verbal description.

The process will begin with a broad, open prompt such as: “If you had to describe your musical experience this year as something else, what would it be?” This invitational framing allows students to generate imagery that is meaningful to them without presupposing ecological language. As needed, more focused prompts may follow—for example, “If your musical experience were a landscape, what would it look like?” or “If your ensemble were a living organism, what kind of environment would it thrive in?” These graduated prompts support participants in deepening reflection while preserving the openness of the initial metaphorical framing.

These metaphors will be discussed during interviews or focus groups, allowing participants to elaborate on their symbolic choices and connect imagery to their lived experiences. In this dialogic exchange, the metaphors themselves and the participants’ interpretations of them become sites of inquiry rather than illustrative additions. This approach aligns with Tobias’s (2013) assertion that metaphors in music education “act as cognitive bridges between the tangible and the affective” (p. 89). Through metaphor-elicitation and subsequent reflection, students articulate identity, belonging, and agency in creative and personally meaningful ways, further deepening and complicating the narrative data.

Data Integration

Each form of data collection is intentionally designed to overlap, creating an interdependent methodological ecology. Individual interviews provide depth, focus groups provide dialogic resonance, observations provide environmental texture, and metaphor and arts-based methods provide symbolic richness. By integrating these data forms, the study enacts the very ecological principles it investigates—diversity,

reciprocity, and growth. Meaning will emerge not from any single source but from the synthesis of these multiple forms of knowing, much like an ecosystem's stability arises from the interplay of its many elements.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process for this study was designed to mirror the ecological logic of the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework—an iterative, recursive, and relational process through which meaning emerged over time. Rather than proceeding through a linear sequence of discrete analytic steps, analysis unfolded as an ongoing cycle of engagement, reflection, and interpretive return. In keeping with constructivist and narrative traditions, understanding developed not through reduction or categorization, but through sustained attention to how students made sense of their experiences across contexts.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe, narrative inquiry involves “living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (p. 70). Analysis in this study followed that orientation. Interview transcripts, observational field notes, and participant-generated artifacts were read and reread holistically, allowing patterns of meaning to surface through repeated engagement rather than through mechanical segmentation. This process aligns with Dewey's (1938/1997) conception of continuity of experience and with ecological perspectives that emphasize reciprocal interaction between individuals and environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Meaning was understood as emergent—arising through dialogue between participant narratives, contextual conditions, and the researcher's reflexive interpretation.

Analytic Orientation

Analysis was grounded in narrative interpretation, comparative reading, and vignette construction rather than formal coding or theme generation. While the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework informed analytic attention, it functioned as a sensitizing concept rather than a fixed analytic template (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2014). Community, motivation, and agency were not treated as categories to be confirmed, but as relational dimensions whose contours were shaped and refined through sustained engagement with the data.

Analytic memoing, drawn from constructivist qualitative traditions (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016), supported this process throughout. Memos were written during and after transcript readings to document emerging insights, tensions, questions, and resonances across accounts. Consistent with Charmaz's (2014) description of memo-writing as a space for analytic reflection rather than mechanical categorization, these memos did not function as coding instruments, but as reflective records of interpretive thinking—tracking how understanding evolved over time and how particular narratives informed or complicated emerging patterns. In this way, memoing served as a reflexive anchor rather than a classificatory tool.

Narrative Immersion and Comparative Interpretation

The first phase of analysis involved narrative immersion—extended engagement with individual participant accounts in their entirety. Particular attention was given to how students positioned themselves within ensemble contexts, how they described responsibility, visibility, and relational support, and how their experiences shifted across large ensemble, small ensemble, and solo settings. Rather than fragmenting narratives,

stories were preserved as coherent wholes, allowing temporal movement, emotional nuance, and contextual specificity to remain intact.

As immersion deepened, comparative interpretation occurred across narratives. Accounts were read alongside one another to identify recurring patterns of movement, hesitation, growth, and return within the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Attention was given not only to convergence, but also to divergence—moments of tension, delay, withdrawal, or reconfiguration that complicated linear or developmental assumptions. These comparisons were interpretive rather than procedural, grounded in close reading and reflective judgment rather than formal comparison matrices.

Vignette Synthesis

Narrative vignettes emerged as the primary analytic and representational form. Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1995) distinction between analysis *of* narratives and narrative *analysis*, this study employed vignette construction as a way of synthesizing meaning across individual accounts while preserving narrative integrity. Each vignette was developed through careful selection and integration of participant excerpts, observational detail, and contextual framing, allowing patterns of experience to be made visible without reducing them to abstract themes.

Vignettes were refined through multiple analytic passes, with attention to internal coherence, alignment with surrounding analytic text, and fidelity to participant voice. This process allowed the analysis to remain grounded in lived experience while still articulating broader interpretive insights about community, motivation, agency, and movement within the ecosystem. Each vignette remained grounded in participant

language and experience, with composite construction used only to preserve anonymity while maintaining fidelity to the original data.

Interpretive Attention to Metaphor and Symbol

Metaphors and arts-based expressions were treated as integral to analysis rather than as supplemental data. Students' metaphoric language—images of growth, balance, pressure, grounding, or exposure—was examined for how it structured meaning and revealed affective and relational dimensions of experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Tobias, 2013). Visual and written artifacts were interpreted alongside narrative accounts, contributing symbolic texture and deepening understanding of how students conceptualized their musical lives.

These interpretive engagements did not involve formal metaphor coding schemes. Instead, metaphors were analyzed contextually—attending to how imagery functioned within students' broader narratives and how similar symbolic framings recurred across accounts.

Ecological Synthesis

The final phase of analysis involved integrative synthesis across narratives, vignettes, and contexts. Community, motivation, and agency were examined not as isolated constructs but as dynamically interrelated processes that shifted over time and across ensemble settings. Patterns of recursive movement—progression, disruption, consolidation, and re-entry—were traced across the data corpus, revealing how students navigated learning within the Music Classroom Ecosystem.

Throughout all analytic phases, reflexivity remained central. Analytic memos, reflective journaling, and peer dialogue supported ongoing examination of how the

researcher's positionality shaped interpretive attention (Peshkin, 1988; Pillow, 2003).

Rather than bracketing prior experience, reflexivity was used to ensure that interpretations remained accountable to participant narratives and responsive to moments that complicated or resisted the conceptual framework.

In this way, data analysis functioned not as a technical procedure but as a relational and interpretive practice—one that mirrored the ecological values of the study itself. Meaning emerged through sustained engagement, recursive return, and narrative synthesis, allowing the findings to reflect the living complexity of students' musical experiences rather than a static analytic endpoint.

Analytic Process

The following section operationalizes the analytic process, detailing how immersion, comparison, and synthesis were enacted in practice. Analysis unfolded as an iterative and relational progression rather than a linear sequence of discrete coding procedures. It began with sustained immersion in the data, including repeated engagement with interview transcripts, participant-generated artifacts, and observational field notes. This phase emphasized familiarity, attentiveness to language and tone, and sensitivity to the contextual and relational dimensions of participants' experiences.

From this immersion, patterns emerged through sustained comparative attention across participants, contexts, and time. This included identifying key moments in participants' narratives where shifts in responsibility, engagement, or independence were described, and tracing how these moments related across individuals and contexts. Rather than segmenting data into isolated codes, the analysis attended to recurring relational dynamics—particularly how students described movement among community,

motivation, and agency over time. These patterns were identified through cross-case comparison, examining points of convergence, divergence, and tension across narratives, particularly where participants described differing experiences of support, autonomy, or constraint within similar ensemble contexts.

Analysis then moved toward synthesis, in which these patterns were interpreted in dialogue with the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework, allowing the framework to be both informed by and responsive to participants' experiences. This phase involved tracing how identified dynamics functioned together as an interconnected system, allowing for the articulation of recursive relationships and the redistribution of responsibility, understood as the development of agency through contributing to others.

Traditional coding procedures were intentionally not employed, as the analytic aim was not to fragment participants' experiences into discrete categories, but to preserve the continuity, temporality, and relational integrity of narrative meaning. Consistent with narrative and arts-based methodologies, analysis proceeded through cycles of immersion, comparison, and synthesis, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while supporting conceptual development at the ecosystem level. This recursive process supported analytic rigor by ensuring that interpretations were continually tested against the data across multiple participants, contexts, and forms of representation.

Analytic rigor was maintained through systematic cycles of comparative reading, memoing, and iterative return to the data. These processes allowed patterns to be identified, challenged, and refined across participants, contexts, and data forms, ensuring

that interpretations were grounded in recurring evidence and tested against the full data set rather than emerging from isolated instances.

Interpreting Experience Through the Music Classroom Ecosystem

Within this study, interpretation is guided by the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework, which understands musical experience as the dynamic interaction of community, motivation, and agency. These elements are not treated as discrete variables, but as interdependent dimensions of lived experience that shape and are shaped by one another within specific musical contexts.

Accordingly, analysis does not seek to isolate singular causes or outcomes. Instead, it attends to how participants experience and negotiate meaning within this relational system. Interpreting experience through the ecosystem involves asking not only what occurred, but how that experience was situated within community, how motivation was sustained or disrupted, and how agency was expressed, supported, or constrained.

Within this framework, community is understood as the relational ground of experience, shaping belonging, participation, and shared meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Motivation is interpreted as a situated process of meaning-making, emerging through engagement, value, and relational context rather than existing solely within the individual (Vygotsky, 1978; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Agency is examined as the capacity for intentional action within these conditions—expressed through interpretation, decision-making, and participation, and always shaped by the structures in which it is enacted (Bandura, 2001).

Analysis therefore attends to patterns of interaction among these elements, with particular focus on moments where they reinforce one another, diverge, or shift over

time. For example, a student's willingness to take a musical risk may reflect not only individual confidence, but also the perceived safety of the ensemble and the value assigned to the experience. In this way, interpretation centers not on isolated behaviors, but on the relational conditions through which musical meaning is constructed.

In practice, this interpretive approach involved identifying key moments within participant narratives and observational data, examining the presence and interaction of community, motivation, and agency within those moments, and tracing how these relationships evolved across participants and contexts. This process remained iterative and recursive, allowing understanding to emerge through sustained engagement with the data rather than through predetermined categorization.

In applying this framework, interpretation attends to how moments of musical participation reflect the interaction of community, motivation, and agency. For instance, when a participant describes hesitation, contribution, or withdrawal within a musical setting, analysis examines how these actions are shaped by perceived belonging, the value assigned to the activity, and the degree to which the participant experiences the capacity to act within that space. Such moments are not treated as isolated behaviors, but as expressions of relational conditions that both constrain and support musical engagement. Through this lens, interpretation focuses on patterns of interaction across contexts, allowing for the identification of recurring dynamics and shifts over time without reducing experience to discrete or decontextualized categories.

Framework as Sensitizing Concept

The Music Classroom Ecosystem framework functioned as a sensitizing concept within this study, guiding attention without determining analytic outcomes (Blumer,

1954). Sensitizing concepts provide a general orientation to inquiry, offering “a sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7), rather than prescribing fixed categories or variables.

In this study, the constructs of community, motivation, and agency informed initial attention during data collection and analysis, shaping how participants’ experiences were approached and interpreted. However, these constructs did not operate as predetermined analytic codes. Instead, they remained flexible and responsive, allowing patterns, tensions, and relationships to emerge through sustained engagement with the data.

Throughout the analytic process, the framework was not imposed upon participants’ experiences but engaged in a reciprocal relationship with them. Instances that aligned with the framework contributed to its refinement, while moments of divergence or tension prompted reconsideration of its boundaries and assumptions. In this way, the framework evolved in dialogue with the data, functioning as both a guiding structure and an interpretive outcome.

This approach reflects an ecological understanding of theory and data as interdependent rather than hierarchical. Just as ecosystems develop through dynamic interaction among their components, the conceptual framework and empirical findings co-developed through iterative analysis. The framework therefore serves not as a prescriptive model applied to the data, but as an interpretive lens shaped through engagement with participants’ lived experiences.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is not an external observer but an active participant in meaning-making—a presence that shapes, interprets, and is in turn shaped by the research process. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted, narrative inquiry “begins and ends with the researcher’s own experience” (p. 70). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) similarly described qualitative researchers as “bricoleurs,” weaving together theory, experience, and interpretation to construct understanding.

In this study, that participation is intensified through my role as a participant-researcher. My engagement extends beyond interpretive dialogue into the daily practice of teaching itself. As the teacher within the classroom contexts under investigation, I design learning environments, make instructional decisions, respond to student needs, and inhabit sustained relational commitments that directly shape the ecosystems in which students’ stories unfold. My influence is therefore not episodic but structural; it is embedded within the rhythms, norms, and affordances of ensemble life.

My positionality is not a bias to be eliminated but a condition to be critically examined and ethically integrated. I inhabit this research simultaneously as teacher and learner, practitioner and scholar, insider and inquirer. This dual positioning necessitates sustained reflexivity regarding how my pedagogical actions shape the learning ecology under study, as well as how engagement in research reciprocally reshapes my teaching practice. Attending to this mutual influence situates positionality as an analytic resource rather than a methodological liability, strengthening the interpretive coherence of the study. Analytic interpretations were periodically revisited alongside raw transcripts and

field notes to ensure that emerging claims remained grounded in participants' language rather than the researcher's expectations.

Professional and Personal Context

My professional identity as a secondary instrumental music educator forms the immediate context of this work. For more than a decade, I have directed bands across suburban and middle-income communities, witnessing firsthand how music classrooms function as living ecosystems—vibrant, interdependent spaces where human development unfolds through sound, collaboration, and shared purpose. These experiences have deeply informed the conceptual framework of this study and have shaped my understanding of music learning as a social, motivational, and agentic process.

As a teacher-researcher, I am situated within one of the study's research sites, and I maintain collaborative partnerships with colleagues in the other. This insider position grants authentic access to the daily rhythms, cultural dynamics, and pedagogical practices of the ensemble classroom, as well as a relational trust that supports honest dialogue with students. Herr and Anderson (2015) described such practitioner research as both opportunity and responsibility: "The insider must learn to see with both the intimacy of the participant and the critical distance of the observer" (p. 49). This dual vision requires reflexivity—not as an afterthought but as an ongoing stance of inquiry, humility, and accountability.

My musical identity also extends beyond the classroom. As a performing trumpet player and member of a professional horn-based rock band, I engage with music as a creative, improvisatory, and communal act. This multiplicity of roles—performer,

conductor, composer, collaborator—continually reshapes my perspective on what it means to be musically literate and to belong to musical communities. I bring to this research a deep respect for diverse musical identities and a belief that student artistry cannot be separated from their social and emotional development. Green's (2008) exploration of informal learning and Jaffurs' (2004) studies of community-based music making remind us that musical learning extends beyond institutional walls. My approach to research and teaching alike is therefore grounded in the conviction that students' lived experiences inside and outside of school are both pedagogically and epistemologically significant.

Philosophical Commitments

My positionality is also informed by a set of philosophical commitments that have evolved through practice, reflection, and scholarship. I align with Dewey's (1938/1997) vision of education as growth through experience, Freire's (1970/2000) conception of teaching as a practice of liberation, and Noddings's (2005) ethic of care as the moral foundation of pedagogy. These philosophies converge in my belief that learning environments must nurture both autonomy and belonging—that students thrive when they are cared for as whole people, not simply as performers. This ethic carries over into my role as researcher: to engage participants with empathy, respect, and reciprocity, ensuring that their voices are not extracted but cultivated in ways that honor their humanity.

bell hooks (1994) described engaged pedagogy as an act of mutual transformation, writing that “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). With this, research is also teaching; it is an act

of care that demands vulnerability, trust, and reflection. My stance as a teacher-researcher therefore embodies what hooks (2003) later called “a movement of the heart”—a willingness to listen, to be changed, and to approach inquiry as a relational practice rather than a procedural one.

Reflexivity as Ecological Practice

Reflexivity is the mechanism through which I navigate the complexities of my insider role. Peshkin (1988) described the researcher’s identity as a constellation of “subjective I’s” that shape interpretation—teacher, musician, advocate, and scholar—and emphasized the importance of recognizing these identities as dynamic and situated rather than fixed. Pillow (2003) further defined reflexivity as a practice of “accountability, transparency, and self-examination” (p. 178). Within this study, reflexivity functions as an ongoing process of attending to how experience, interpretation, emotion, and ethical responsibility interact in the construction of meaning.

As a music educator deeply engaged in ensemble instruction, I occupy an insider position within the context of this study. This positionality informed both access to participants and interpretive sensitivity to musical experience, while also requiring deliberate attention to the risks of over-identification with participants’ perspectives. Rather than assuming neutrality, this study acknowledges the researcher as an instrument of inquiry and foregrounds the role of reflexive awareness in shaping interpretation.

Reflexivity was enacted through sustained reflective memoing and the maintenance of a reflexive journal documenting analytic decisions, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations. These records function as both data and meta-analytic commentary, providing a transparent account of how understanding developed over time.

Peer debriefing with colleagues and mentors further supported this process by surfacing assumptions and challenging emerging interpretations.

By treating reflexivity as continuous rather than episodic, this study maintains transparency and analytic accountability. Interpretations are not presented as objective representations of reality, but as situated understandings shaped through the interaction of participant experience and researcher interpretation.

While this study is conceptually informed by an ecological perspective, reflexivity is operationalized here through established qualitative practices of documentation, transparency, and critical self-examination. This ensures that the interpretive process remains both grounded in participants' experiences and accountable to methodological standards of qualitative inquiry.

Power, Ethics, and Reciprocity

Acknowledging my positionality also requires confronting the power dynamics inherent in teacher–student relationships and in research itself. Freire (1970/2000) warned that education can easily reproduce domination when authority is unexamined. In the classroom, my dual role as teacher and researcher introduces asymmetries of power that must be navigated with care. To mitigate these dynamics, participation in the study will be entirely voluntary, and I will ensure that no student's academic standing or grade can be affected by their decision to participate or not. During interviews and focus groups, I will take a facilitative rather than evaluative stance, encouraging participants to speak freely and validating their perspectives without judgment.

Reciprocity is a central ethical principle of this research. I view the act of inquiry not as extraction but as collaboration—a process in which participants contribute to

knowledge construction and receive acknowledgment, affirmation, and reflection in return. As Lather (1991) noted, ethical qualitative research requires “a practice of mutuality that values the voices of others as co-creators of meaning” (p. 73). This commitment shapes how data will be gathered, interpreted, and represented: participants’ words and artistic artifacts will be presented not as anonymous data points but as narratives with agency and dignity.

Positionality within the Ecosystem

Within the metaphorical structure of the Music Classroom Ecosystem, my role as researcher can be understood as that of a gardener—cultivating conditions under which stories can grow, relationships can flourish, and meaning can emerge organically. I cannot force growth, nor can I remain entirely outside it; instead, I participate in the ecology by tending, observing, and learning from its rhythms. My insider status provides both nutrient and risk: it allows me to sense subtle patterns within the soil of classroom life but requires vigilance to avoid over-fertilization through personal bias or assumption. Reflexivity, in this sense, functions as the gardener’s ongoing practice of care—turning the soil, observing its balance, and ensuring that every element of the ecosystem contributes to healthy growth.

Through this reflexive engagement, I position myself not as a neutral observer of student experience but as a responsive participant in a shared educational ecosystem. This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that development arises through reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environments. It also reflects Dewey’s (1938/1997) assertion that knowledge emerges through experience and interaction. By embracing these principles, I aim to

ensure that my interpretations honor the relational nature of learning, the agency of participants, and the integrity of the research process itself.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research involves demonstrating that the findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria replace the positivist language of validity and reliability, reflecting the interpretive, relational, and contextual nature of meaning-making. In this study, trustworthiness is understood as the coherence and transparency of the research process and the degree to which interpretations remain grounded in participants' lived experiences. While this study is conceptually grounded in an ecological framework, trustworthiness is demonstrated through the transparency, coherence, and rigor of the research process as outlined above.

Credibility

Credibility parallels the concept of internal validity in quantitative paradigms and is established through immersion, triangulation, and member validation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define credibility as the assurance that “the representations of reality are as faithful as possible to the multiple realities that exist” (p. 296).

Credibility in this study was supported through prolonged engagement and persistent observation, allowing for sustained interaction with participants and deep familiarity with the contexts in which their experiences unfolded. The quarter-long data collection period provided temporal depth, enabling attention to patterns and shifts in community, motivation, and agency over time.

Triangulation further strengthened credibility through the use of multiple data sources and interpretive lenses (Denzin, 1978). Data triangulation included interviews, focus groups, observations, metaphors, and artistic artifacts. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the integration of narrative and arts-based inquiry, while theoretical triangulation drew on ecological, constructivist, and motivational frameworks. As Stake (1995) noted, triangulation serves not to eliminate difference but to deepen understanding by engaging multiple perspectives.

Member validation was incorporated as an iterative process of dialogue between participants and researcher. Narrative summaries and interpretive representations, including vignettes, were shared with participants to verify accuracy and resonance. Participant responses were treated as an extension of the data, consistent with Riessman's (2008) view of meaning as co-constructed through interpretive exchange.

Dependability

Dependability parallels the concept of reliability and is established through methodological transparency and consistency. An audit trail was maintained to document the development of the study, including raw data (transcripts, field notes, artifacts), analytic memos, and reflexive journal entries (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This documentation provides a transparent record of how interpretations were developed over time.

The study also reflects the emergent nature of qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection and analysis remained responsive to contextual conditions while maintaining alignment with the study's conceptual

framework. Adjustments to procedures were documented to ensure coherence and integrity in the overall research process.

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that findings are grounded in participants' experiences rather than researcher bias. This was supported through reflexive documentation, triangulation, and peer debriefing. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study, recording analytic decisions, interpretive reasoning, and the researcher's positional responses to the data.

Peer debriefing provided opportunities to examine interpretations from alternative perspectives, strengthening analytic accountability. Confirmability was further supported through auditability—the ability to trace the progression from raw data to interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By maintaining detailed records of analytic decisions and narrative constructions, the study ensures that interpretations remain transparent and grounded.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings may be meaningfully considered in other contexts. This was supported through thick description, providing detailed accounts of participants, settings, and interactions (Geertz, 1973). These descriptions include sensory, relational, and contextual dimensions of ensemble life, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings within their own settings.

Rather than seeking generalizability, this study offers contextually grounded insights into the relational dynamics of belonging, motivation, and agency in music

classrooms. The aim is to provide sufficient detail for readers to determine the relevance of findings to comparable educational environments.

Resonance and Authenticity

In addition to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, this study attends to resonance and authenticity as indicators of qualitative quality (Tracy, 2010; Riessman, 2008).

Resonance refers to the extent to which findings evoke recognition, insight, or emotional engagement, while authenticity reflects ethical and relational integrity in the research process.

This study seeks to represent participants' experiences with fidelity and care, ensuring that interpretations are both analytically grounded and meaningfully reflective of participants' perspectives. As Richardson (2000) observed, qualitative research aims not only to analyze but also to engage readers intellectually and affectively.

Ecological Synthesis of Trustworthiness

When viewed through an ecological lens, trustworthiness emerges not as a checklist of procedures but as a system of interdependent practices. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability function like sustaining processes within an ecosystem: each reinforces the others, and all are necessary for balance. Reflexivity illuminates the interpretive process, making visible both assumptions and possibilities. Triangulation and prolonged engagement provide depth and stability, supporting a more comprehensive understanding of the research context. Thick description extends this understanding outward, enabling others to enter, interpret, and evaluate the conditions of the study.

Viewed through this ecological lens, trustworthiness in qualitative research is not achieved through control but through care. It depends on sustained attention to the coherence and integrity of the research process—ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in participants’ experiences, that analytic decisions are transparent, and that representations reflect the relational complexity of the phenomenon under study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical research practice in education is grounded in respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, 1979). Within the context of this study, these principles are not only procedural but deeply philosophical, aligning with the moral ecology of the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework. Ethical practice here is understood as an act of stewardship—sustaining a healthy environment for dialogue, creativity, and trust. Just as a flourishing ecosystem depends on balance and mutual care among its inhabitants, ethical qualitative inquiry depends on reciprocal respect between researcher and participant, transparency in communication, and sustained attention to the well-being of all involved.

Institutional Review and Permissions

Prior to the commencement of research activities, full approval will be sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Oakland University. The IRB process ensures that all study procedures—recruitment, consent, data collection, storage, and reporting—comply with federal and institutional standards for research involving human subjects. Because the study involves minors enrolled in public schools, additional layers of review will be completed through the participating school district’s administrative offices. Letters of cooperation will be secured from the district superintendent and from

the principal of each participating high school, acknowledging both understanding and approval of the study's purpose, procedures, and anticipated timelines.

All study documents, including interview and focus group protocols, parent consent and student assent forms, and confidentiality agreements, will be submitted for IRB review. Data collection will begin only after receiving written approval from all relevant authorities. This process reflects the ethical principle of beneficence ensuring that research activities promote the good of participants and avoid harm, and justice ensuring equitable inclusion and fair treatment across both research sites.

Informed Consent and Assent

Informed consent is the foundation of ethical qualitative research, serving both a legal and moral function. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that informed consent involves providing participants with comprehensive information about the study, its potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Because this study involves high school students under the age of eighteen, both parental consent and student assent will be obtained prior to participation. Consent and assent forms will clearly describe the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and the procedures for interviews, focus groups, observations, and creative activities.

The process of obtaining consent and assent will be relational rather than transactional. In keeping with Noddings's (2005) ethic of care, I view consent as an act of trust-building, where participants are invited to engage in mutual understanding rather than simply to sign a form. Meetings will be scheduled to explain the research goals in accessible language, ensuring that students and parents can ask questions and express concerns freely. Students who choose not to participate will not face any academic

consequences or changes to their classroom experience, and their decision will remain confidential.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

Protecting participant identity and data confidentiality is an ethical and legal imperative. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information—such as school names, specific locations, and performance details—will be removed or altered in transcripts and final reports. Digital recordings, transcripts, and artifacts will be stored on password-protected devices and encrypted cloud storage accessible only to the researcher. Physical materials such as student drawings or reflective journals will be stored in a locked cabinet within my office at the school.

Data will be retained for five years following the completion of the study, after which all identifiable materials will be securely destroyed. Participants will be informed of these procedures during the consent process, and permission will be sought to use de-identified quotes or excerpts in presentations and publications. Participants will also have the opportunity to review any creative work such as drawings or written pieces before inclusion in the dissertation or related publications, ensuring both accuracy and agency in representation.

Dual Role and Power Dynamics

Because I serve as the band director in one of the participating schools, the potential for role conflict and perceived coercion must be carefully managed. This dual role introduces an inherent asymmetry of power with respect to band students who are enrolled in my program: they may feel obligated to participate or may shape their responses based on their perception of my evaluative authority. At the same time, the

sustained rapport developed through daily teaching relationships may influence students' willingness to participate, not solely through perceived obligation but through trust and familiarity. Such relational dynamics cannot be eliminated from the research context; they must be acknowledged and ethically navigated.

It is important to note that orchestra and choir students who are also participating in this study are not under my instructional supervision. My relationship to these students is collegial rather than evaluative, which alters the immediate power dynamic. Nevertheless, as a faculty member within the school community, I still occupy a position of institutional authority that may shape students' perceptions of participation. These differing relational contexts require careful and transparent ethical attention.

To mitigate these risks across participant groups, recruitment and consent processes will emphasize the voluntary nature of participation and clarify that refusal or withdrawal will have no effect on grades, performance opportunities, or standing in any ensemble. During data collection, interviews and focus groups will be conducted outside of regular class time, and I will frame my role explicitly as researcher rather than teacher. For example, I may state: "In this conversation, I am not your teacher evaluating your performance; I am a researcher interested in understanding your experiences." This explicit boundary-setting aligns with recommendations by Herr and Anderson (2015), who stress the importance of transparency and reflexivity in insider research.

In addition, all focus group and interview transcripts will be de-identified prior to analysis, reducing the possibility that responses could be connected to specific students. These safeguards are designed not to deny the relational realities of the classroom but to

ensure that participation remains informed and voluntary, and that the ecological balance of the ensemble is not disrupted by the research process.

Reciprocity and Participant Benefit

Ethical research also requires that participants benefit from their involvement in meaningful ways. Lather (1991) argued that qualitative research should be dialogic and transformative rather than extractive in its relationship to participants. In this study, reciprocity will take the form of reflection and recognition. Students who participate will be invited to view and discuss preliminary findings, offering them opportunities to see how their voices contribute to a larger understanding of music learning. This process affirms their role as co-creators of knowledge rather than as subjects of observation.

Moreover, the reflective interviews, focus groups, and arts-based activities are designed to be educationally enriching in themselves. They offer students structured opportunities to articulate their experiences, consider their growth, and recognize their agency. As hooks (1994) observed, “self-actualization cannot occur in isolation” (p. 15). By engaging in dialogic reflection, students participate in an educative process that deepens their understanding of themselves and their communities.

Ecological Ethic of Care

At its heart, the ethical stance of this study is ecological—it reflects a commitment to sustaining harmony and integrity within the research environment. Every interaction, decision, and representation contributes to the health of that ecosystem. Protecting participant dignity is akin to maintaining the biodiversity of a forest: each voice, each story, each creative act enriches the collective balance. My role as researcher

is that of a caretaker, responsible for tending to these relationships with sensitivity and awareness.

Ethics, in this view, extend beyond compliance to become a form of moral ecology. It is not enough to do no harm; ethical research must actively nurture flourishing. In the Music Classroom Ecosystem, this means ensuring that the process of inquiry strengthens rather than disturbs the communal foundations of learning. By approaching every stage of the study with attentiveness, transparency, and reciprocity, I aim to create an ethical environment in which students' stories can grow safely and authentically—an ecosystem of care where knowledge, like music, is shared and sustained.

Conclusion

The methodological framework presented in this chapter reflects a living ecology of inquiry—one rooted in constructivist, sociocultural, and ecological philosophies and nourished through narrative and arts-based practices. Each methodological choice, from data collection to analysis, was made not only for its procedural rigor but also for its congruence with the study's central metaphor: the Music Classroom Ecosystem. This ecosystem thrives on interdependence—between researcher and participant, between context and experience, and between community, motivation, and agency as evolving dimensions of musical life.

The preceding sections outlined how qualitative inquiry, narrative methods, and arts-based expression collectively provide a greenhouse for meaning-making. Through interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, metaphor-elicitation, and creative artifacts, students' voices are invited to grow in diverse and authentic ways. The analytic

process reflects an ecological cycle of immersion, interpretation, and synthesis, through which students' experiences were examined relationally rather than reduced to discrete analytic steps—each phase nurturing a deeper understanding of how students inhabit and transform their musical environments. Ethical care, reflexive attention, and trustworthiness function as the soil, sunlight, and water of this methodological landscape, ensuring that knowledge develops through balance, transparency, and reciprocity.

In conclusion, this chapter situates the research design as both a methodological structure and a moral stance. It acknowledges that inquiry into human experience—particularly within the relational space of the music classroom—must be conducted with attentiveness to context, identity, and community. The framework presented here enables the study to capture the dynamic processes by which students construct meaning and enact agency through their musical participation.

The next chapter extends this ecological approach into interpretation. Chapter Four will present the findings of the study revealing how students describe their journeys through the layered environments of large ensembles, small ensembles, and solo performance. These findings will illuminate how belonging gives rise to motivation, how motivation cultivates agency, and how agency, in turn, reenters the ecosystem to renew community. In this way, Chapter Four will begin to bring into full view the living dynamics of the Music Classroom Ecosystem—the interconnected canopy of voices, relationships, and meanings that define the ecology of musical learning.

INTERLUDE

ENTERING THE ECOSYSTEM

The classroom represents the moment when design becomes lived experience. The structures and routines outlined in the preceding chapter move from concept to enactment, forming a system of relationships in which teaching, learning, and inquiry coexist. This system is not static but continually emerging—defined through the interactions, negotiations, and collaborations that animate and sustain it. The ensemble space thus serves as both setting and method, a medium through which the interdependence of Community, Motivation, and Agency becomes observable and embodied.

Within this ecosystem, rehearsal operates as an iterative process of construction and reflection. Full ensemble rehearsals cultivate collective identity and shared musical purpose, while sectional rehearsals decentralize authority and emphasize peer-directed learning. These structures encourage a dynamic balance between collective coherence and individual agency, reflecting the ecological reciprocity that grounds the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Rehearsal practice and observation inform one another in ongoing and reciprocal ways: rehearsal structures shape what becomes visible—how authority is distributed, how decisions are negotiated, and how agency is enacted—while sustained observation sharpens attention to patterns of interaction that, in turn, inform subsequent pedagogical choices.

Observation in this context is participatory rather than detached; the researcher is situated within, rather than outside, the musical and social system. As a teacher-

researcher, my interpretive attention during rehearsal arises from daily instructional engagement and feeds back into reflective adjustments to rehearsal design, pacing, and facilitation. Data are thus generated through the normal rhythms of rehearsal life—dialogue, decision-making, experimentation, and sound itself—revealing learning as a recursive process in which practice and inquiry continually co-construct one another.

To enter the ecosystem is to acknowledge the permeability of roles and experiences. The classroom does not serve merely as a backdrop for data collection but as the living context in which meaning is co-constructed. The following four chapters present the findings that emerged from this environment—narratives and interpretations that reveal how participants experienced community, sustained motivation, and exercised agency within the evolving ecology of ensemble learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS—THE MUSIC CLASSROOM ECOSYSTEM

“When we finally finished, it didn’t feel like, ‘Oh good, it’s over,’” one student reflected after a large ensemble concert. “It felt like we actually built something together. Like, every section had to do their part or it wouldn’t have worked.” (Maddie, Interview 1)

After a large ensemble concert, this student described leaving the stage not with relief, but with a heightened awareness of having contributed to something larger than themselves. The repertoire had demanded sustained attention to blend, balance, and precision across multiple sections, each carrying distinct timbral and technical responsibilities that shaped the collective sound. Rehearsals had emphasized not only individual preparation, but careful listening across the ensemble—attending to entrances, releases, phrasing, and the shaping of sound in relation to others. What lingered most after the performance was not simply the completion of the task, but pride in the ensemble’s musical cohesion. The student understood that sound as earned through disciplined rehearsal, mutual accountability, and a shared commitment to the musical outcome. In that moment, belonging emerged not as social proximity but as ecological interdependence—each voice necessary, each role distinct, each contribution shaping the integrity of the whole.

Narratives such as this surfaced repeatedly across the interviews conducted for this study. Students described music learning not as a series of discrete or isolated experiences, but as ongoing movement—between large ensembles and small groups,

between collective performance and individual accountability, and between moments of uncertainty and growing confidence. These movements shaped how students understood their place within their programs, what motivated them to persist through challenge, and how they came to see themselves as capable and responsible musicians. Community, motivation, and agency were not presented as separate or sequential domains, but as interconnected processes that developed over time and across musical contexts.

This chapter presents findings from student interviews through the lens of the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework. In keeping with the ecological assumptions articulated in earlier chapters, community, motivation, and agency are examined not as linear outcomes or discrete variables, but as interdependent and recursive dimensions of students' lived experiences in secondary music classrooms. Student narratives suggested that experiences of belonging often supported sustained motivation, which sometimes enabled the risk-taking associated with agency. At the same time, students described instances in which agency emerged through other pathways and subsequently reshaped how they re-entered and contributed to their musical communities. Illustrative excerpts are drawn across all participants, with voices appearing where they most clearly illuminate each analytic dimension.

The findings are organized to reflect this ecological structure. The chapter begins with community in large ensemble contexts, conceptualized as the root system of the ecosystem, where students most frequently articulated belonging, shared purpose, and collective responsibility. It then turns to motivation in small ensemble contexts, examining collaboration, persistence, and the ways students described sustaining effort through musical challenge. The chapter next explores agency in solo and exposed

performance contexts, highlighting independence, authorship, and the development of personal responsibility when musical roles became more visible. Throughout these sections, student-generated metaphors are presented alongside narrative excerpts not as illustrative embellishments, but as analytic windows into how students made meaning of their experiences.

Following these construct-focused sections, the chapter traces narrative interconnections across the ecosystem, attending to how students described movement among community, motivation, and agency over time. These accounts offer early evidence of recursive processes, as students re-entered communal spaces with increased confidence, responsibility, and a growing orientation toward supporting others. The chapter concludes by holding open a space for contextual expression across sites, to be fully developed following completion of data collection and cross-site synthesis.

All participants are identified using pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed to protect confidentiality. The findings presented here do not seek to generalize beyond the contexts studied. Rather, they offer a situated account of how secondary students experience learning, belonging, and becoming within music education. Broader interpretation of these findings, along with their implications for theory, practice, and policy, are taken up in subsequent chapters.

Community in Large Ensembles: The Roots

Across interviews, many students located their earliest and most stable experiences of belonging within large ensemble contexts. Band, orchestra, and choir were described as environments in which individual participation was inseparable from collective outcome. Belonging was not framed as a function of simple membership or

social affiliation; rather, it was articulated as something that emerged through contribution, preparation, and shared responsibility for musical outcomes. Participation carried weight, and students emphasized that belonging was contingent upon doing one's part within the ensemble rather than merely occupying a seat or voice within it.

Several students explicitly distinguished between “being there” and “being part of it.” Ajay described early rehearsals as moments when he realized that simply showing up was insufficient: “You can sit there, but if you’re not actually listening and adjusting, it doesn’t work” (Ajay, Interview 3). Similarly, Amy reflected that belonging meant “actually knowing your part well enough that other people can trust you with it” (Amy, Interview 5). These descriptions suggest that community was not equated with attendance, but with audible contribution.

* * *

[VIGNETTE 1 — Establishing Belonging Through Contribution]

Timothy described coming to understand what it meant to belong to a large ensemble not through social connection alone, but through the demands of rehearsal. During band rehearsals, preparation was immediately audible. When a part was underprepared or an entrance was uncertain, the sound shifted in ways that could not be ignored. Sitting within the ensemble, Timothy became aware that individual readiness mattered not because someone was enforcing it, but because others were listening and relying on it. Over time, listening became as central as playing—attending carefully to balance, entrances, and alignment with surrounding sections as Timothy learned what the ensemble required of him in order to contribute to the ensemble’s overall sound.

This awareness carried into performance. Following concerts, Timothy described feeling a sense of pride that was tied less to individual recognition and more to the ensemble's cohesion. Satisfaction emerged from hearing the music sound the way it was intended to sound—knowing that each section had fulfilled its role and that the outcome reflected shared effort. In these moments, belonging was not experienced as simple inclusion or friendship, but as having earned a place within the group through reliability and musical responsibility. Being part of the ensemble meant being accountable to others, and that accountability transformed participation into a shared commitment rather than an individual pursuit.

Across student narratives, belonging within large ensembles emerged not as an affective state that preceded participation, but as a condition produced through contribution—developing only once students experienced their preparation as consequential to others. Rather than describing belonging as something granted upon entry, students associated it with moments when listening closely, entering reliably, and adjusting musically became forms of shared responsibility rather than rule-following. In this way, belonging took shape through repeated participation in shared musical labor, where individual readiness mattered because it shaped collective outcomes.

* * *

In smaller or more sectionally focused settings—contexts where individual contributions were more exposed—preparation was visible, and peers were attuned to one another's strengths and weaknesses. As Brian explained, "You're held up to more responsibility because... they know where you mess up and to support you" (Brian, Interview 11). Garrett echoed this dynamic, noting that "if one section is off, everybody

feels it” (Garrett, Interview 7), emphasizing that preparation became consequential because it was audible to others. Similarly, Olive described sectional rehearsals as spaces where students had to “figure out everything” before returning to the larger ensemble to “bring it all together” (Olive, Interview 6), framing preparation as visible and collectively significant.

Choir students described a parallel dynamic, though the exposure was often experienced as more personal than technical. Lisa explained that “your voice is just out there and you can’t really hide” (Lisa, Interview 8), suggesting that contribution in choir was not only audible, but embodied. For these students, preparation and participation were inseparable from vulnerability, as individual sound was directly traceable to the self. Exposure, therefore, functioned both musically and emotionally, intensifying the relational stakes of participation.

In these more exposed contexts, individual effort became immediately perceptible. Where musical roles felt less perceptible within the larger texture, belonging was sometimes described as more diffuse or delayed. Marco reflected that in full ensemble settings it could feel “easier to blend in and not really know if you’re contributing enough” (Marco, Interview 4), suggesting that interdependence was not always immediately felt. Rose similarly described early experiences of feeling “kind of lost” before her role felt clear (Rose, Interview 12). Contribution-based belonging, then, was not automatic across ensemble contexts; it emerged most clearly when responsibility was shared, audible, and musically interdependent.

Importantly, students did not frame this exposure as punitive. Rather than framing accountability as external enforcement, participants described it as relational obligation.

Maddie reflected that growth in ensemble settings required her to “do these hard things” and to “belong here” through sustained preparation rather than recognition (Maddie, Interview 1), suggesting that belonging was enacted through reliability. Similarly, TJ described moments when increased skill brought “a bigger responsibility... to help people to become better themselves” (TJ, Interview 9), indicating that competence carried relational expectation.

For accountability to function as belonging rather than pressure, however, students emphasized the importance of trust within the ensemble context. Choir students were especially explicit about this relational dimension. Rose described performances as moments when “you’re surrounded by your peers... and they’re all here supporting you” (Rose, Interview 12), framing trust as the condition that made vocal exposure manageable. In these contexts, accountability did not eliminate vulnerability; it was sustained through collective presence.

Brian noted that he felt comfortable asking questions and exposing uncertainty because “I know that they won’t make fun of me” (Brian, Interview 11). In this sense, accountability did not operate as surveillance or discipline, but as a relational condition that allowed students to engage fully, take risks, and rely on one another.

Students rarely described this understanding of accountability as emerging from explicit instruction or rule enforcement. Rather, it developed through embodied musical experience. Although rehearsal structures were shaped by teacher design, students primarily described accountability as emerging through peer interdependence rather than direct oversight. Several recalled moments in rehearsal when the consequences of preparation—or its absence—became unmistakable through sound itself. In these

instances, accountability was not announced or enforced; it was heard. Marco's experience illustrates how this audible interdependence reshaped his understanding of participation within the ensemble.

* * *

[VIGNETTE 2 — Accountability and Interdependence]

Marco described coming to understand accountability within the ensemble not through instruction or correction, but through sound. In rehearsals, preparation—or the absence of it—was immediately audible. Entrances depended on more than personal readiness; timing, balance, and alignment with surrounding parts required constant attention to others. When a section was underprepared or a player was missing, the shift in the ensemble's sound was unmistakable. Marco explained that these moments did not feel like discipline or reprimand, but like a disruption to something shared.

Over time, this awareness reshaped how Marco approached preparation, as he came to understand rehearsal as a space of obligation rather than evaluation. Practicing was no longer framed as something done solely for personal improvement or evaluation, but as a responsibility owed to others. He described feeling a growing obligation not to be the person who slowed rehearsal or weakened the ensemble's progress, noting that "everyone notices" when someone is not fully present musically. Rehearsals became spaces where accountability emerged relationally—through listening, responsiveness, and mutual dependence—rather than through explicit enforcement.

Performances intensified this sense of interdependence. Standing within the ensemble, Marco described feeling both exposed and supported, aware that the success of the performance depended on each person fulfilling their role. In these moments,

belonging was not articulated as social closeness or shared identity, but as having earned a place through reliability and contribution. The ensemble functioned as a system in which individual effort mattered precisely because it shaped something larger than any one participant, reinforcing Marco's understanding that accountability and belonging were inseparable aspects of ensemble membership.

Across student accounts, accountability within large ensembles emerged not as a system of correction or oversight, but as a consequence of audible interdependence. Students described rehearsal contexts in which individual preparation became meaningful only because it shaped the ensemble's collective sound. Accountability, in this sense, was experienced as attentiveness to timing, balance, and alignment—practices that required continuous adjustment in response to others rather than compliance with external expectations.

* * *

While accountability within large ensembles was frequently described in structural terms, choir students articulated an additional dimension of community grounded in emotional exposure and shared affect. Rather than experiencing belonging solely through obligation or reliability, these students emphasized the vulnerability inherent in singing and the role of collective participation in sustaining that exposure.

Lisa described singing as “really scary sometimes,” explaining that “your voice is just out there and you can't really hide” (Lisa, Interview 8). This vulnerability, however, was mediated through collective presence. As she noted, “you're surrounded by your loved ones and your peers... they're all here supporting me on the stage. It's gonna be

fine” (Lisa, Interview 8). In this way, emotional risk was not eliminated, but held within the ensemble.

Trust emerged as central to this experience. Lisa described drawing confidence from her peers’ belief in her, stating, “my friends believe in me. I can do it” (Lisa, Interview 8). Here, belonging was experienced not as protection from exposure, but as support through it, reinforcing community through shared emotional engagement.

Students’ descriptions suggested that this form of accountability depended on relational conditions within the ensemble. When peers were experienced as supportive and present, exposure—whether musical or emotional—was described as manageable and even affirming. In contrast, when trust was uncertain or when individual contributions felt isolated, students described heightened anxiety and hesitation. These accounts indicate that accountability alone did not produce belonging; rather, it required relational assurance to function generatively.

TJ articulated a similar sense of belonging through attentiveness rather than exposure, describing how participation in large ensembles gradually heightened his awareness of how individual actions affected others. He explained that over time he became more intentional about listening and adjusting in response to the group, suggesting that belonging functioned not only as emotional support, but as an ethical orientation toward shared responsibility (TJ, Interview 9).

Not all students experienced interdependence as immediately supportive. Some described early ensemble experiences as overwhelming, particularly when expectations were unclear or when individual roles felt exposed without sufficient relational grounding.

Taken together, these narratives indicate that community within large ensembles was experienced as an ongoing, relational process rather than a static sense of belonging. Students described coming to feel part of the ensemble through sustained engagement in shared musical work, where listening, preparation, and responsiveness to others were central. Accountability and interdependence functioned as key features of this process, shaping how students understood their roles and responsibilities within the group. In this way, large ensembles functioned as the primary ecological root of community within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, grounding belonging in shared responsibility before motivation or agency were fully articulated.

At the same time, not all experiences of accountability were uniformly affirming. Rose, for example, acknowledged that competition within ensemble settings could be “hard,” particularly when personal aspiration and friendship intersected (Rose, Interview 12). She also described periods of self-comparison that complicated her sense of belonging. Similarly, Brian noted that mistakes carried perceived expectations from family and self, suggesting that visibility could feel like pressure rather than support (Brian, Interview 11). These accounts indicate that accountability operated along a continuum: when grounded in trust and mutual respect, it reinforced belonging; when accompanied by comparison or external expectation, it risked being experienced as exposure or evaluative pressure.

Motivation in Small Ensembles: The Greenhouse

While large ensembles served as primary sites of belonging, many students described small ensemble contexts as spaces in which motivation was cultivated, intensified, and sustained. Chamber groups, sectionals, and reduced ensemble settings

were characterized by heightened visibility and increased responsibility, altering how students understood effort, preparation, and persistence. In these environments, individual contributions could no longer be absorbed within collective sound, making preparation immediately audible and consequential. Students described feeling both supported by peers and relied upon by them, creating conditions in which persistence felt necessary rather than optional.

Students frequently narrated these experiences through moments in which their own preparation—or lack thereof—became unmistakable. In small ensembles, effort was exposed. Marco described chamber rehearsals as spaces where “you really have to know your stuff, or it’s going to be glaringly obvious” (Marco, Interview 4) noting that there was “not as much to blend into” when playing with fewer peers. This increased visibility sharpened students’ awareness of how their work shaped rehearsal outcomes, prompting more intentional engagement with practice and preparation. Motivation, in these accounts, was not driven by evaluation or comparison, but by the immediacy of impact.

* * *

[VIGNETTE 3 — Visibility and Immediate Consequence]

Garrett described the shift from full ensemble rehearsals to small ensemble work as subtle at first, but unmistakable once it settled in. In larger groups, missed entrances or uncertain passages could sometimes blend into the surrounding sound. In chamber rehearsals, that buffer disappeared. When he hesitated, the music stalled. When he was ready, the group moved forward. Garrett explained that it became immediately clear that “if I didn’t have my part, it just wouldn’t be there.”

This visibility changed how he approached preparation. Practicing no longer felt abstract or deferred to a future performance; its effects were audible the moment rehearsal began. Garrett described becoming more intentional about how and when he practiced, not because of evaluation or fear of being called out, but because his peers were directly affected by his readiness. In small ensemble settings, effort translated immediately into progress—or lack of it.

Rather than experiencing this exposure as stressful, Garrett described it as motivating. Knowing that others were relying on him sharpened his focus and clarified the purpose of his work. He noted that preparation felt different when it was tied to collective momentum, explaining that rehearsal felt “better when everyone showed up ready, because we could actually get somewhere.” Motivation, in this context, emerged through immediacy: effort mattered because its consequences were shared.

Over time, Garrett described beginning to take pride not just in his own improvement, but in how his preparation contributed to the group’s sound, signaling a shift from personal effort to shared responsibility. Small ensemble rehearsals became spaces where responsibility felt mutual and progress felt earned. Visibility did not isolate him; it connected his individual work more tightly to the collective outcome. In this way, motivation grew not from external expectation, but from the recognition that his contribution carried real weight within the ensemble.

Across student accounts, motivation within small ensemble contexts emerged through the immediacy of consequence created by heightened visibility. Students described situations in which individual preparation was no longer buffered by the ensemble, making effort—or lack of it—immediately consequential for collective

progress. In these contexts, motivation was sustained not through anticipation of future outcomes, but through the immediate coupling of preparation and rehearsal momentum where individual readiness shaped the group's ability to move forward together.

* * *

Students tended to frame motivation less in terms of external reward or formal evaluation and more as a relational obligation emerging from shared musical work. Rather than describing difficult repertoire as demotivating, many associated increased challenge with deeper commitment—particularly when effort was distributed across peers. In small ensemble contexts, preparation was not deferred to future performance or assessment; it was immediately consequential. Individual readiness directly shaped collective progress, intensifying the connection between effort and outcome.

Several students described persistence as emerging through shared struggle rather than individual determination. Working through technical difficulty alongside peers generated a sense of mutual obligation that sustained engagement even when rehearsal became frustrating or demanding. As Ajay explained, continuing through difficult passages felt necessary because “everyone else is putting in the work too” (Ajay, Interview 3), suggesting that motivation was less about enjoyment and more about honoring shared commitment. In these moments, effort was sustained not by enthusiasm alone, but by relational dependence.

Students' accounts further indicated that visibility functioned as a motivating force only under particular relational conditions. When peers were perceived as supportive and invested in collective improvement, immediacy intensified focus and commitment. However, when visibility was paired with uncertainty about peer response

or fear of judgment, students described hesitation and increased anxiety. Immediacy alone did not generate motivation; it required relational assurance to function as commitment rather than pressure.

Brian's account illustrates this balance. He described preparation as necessary because others were relying on him, explaining, "I don't want to be the reason things fall apart, but I also know they're not going to turn on me if something goes wrong" (Brian, Interview 11). For Brian, motivation emerged through the interplay of responsibility and trust. Effort mattered precisely because it affected others, yet mistakes were buffered by relational security. Under these conditions, challenge strengthened commitment rather than undermining it.

* * *

[VIGNETTE 4 — Persistence Through Shared Challenge]

Olive described a rehearsal cycle in which the music remained persistently difficult, even after weeks of preparation. Progress was slow, and improvement did not arrive in clear or satisfying increments. Rather than framing the challenge itself as discouraging, she became increasingly aware of how effort was being sustained collectively. Rehearsals were marked by repeated attempts, incremental adjustments, and moments of frustration that were shared rather than experienced in isolation.

What sustained Olive's engagement was not confidence that the repertoire would suddenly become easier, but recognition that others were working through the same difficulty. She described noticing peers remaining after rehearsal to revisit challenging passages, encouraging one another when progress stalled, and continuing to engage even when improvement felt minimal. In this context, persistence did not feel heroic or

individually driven; it felt necessary. Continuing through frustration became an expression of commitment to the group rather than a test of personal resolve.

Olive explained that there were moments when she questioned whether the effort was worth sustaining, particularly when rehearsal felt stagnant or exhausting. However, disengagement did not feel like a viable option, not because of external expectation, but because stepping away would mean withdrawing from a shared struggle. She noted that “everyone else is trying” (Olive, Interview 6), framing disengagement not as rest, but as withdrawal from a shared struggle. Motivation, viewed through this lens, was sustained not through enjoyment, confidence, or external reward, but through relational obligation and collective endurance.

Over time, Olive described how this shared persistence reshaped her relationship to challenge. Difficulty no longer functioned as a signal of inadequacy or failure; instead, it became understood as part of the ensemble’s collective process. Working through demanding repertoire alongside others reframed struggle as communal rather than personal. In this way, persistence emerged as a relational achievement—one sustained through mutual effort, shared vulnerability, and a collective willingness to remain engaged even when progress was slow.

Across student accounts, persistence under sustained challenge emerged not through increasing confidence or diminishing difficulty, but through shared endurance. Students described situations in which effort continued despite fatigue, frustration, or slow progress, sustained by awareness that others were remaining engaged. In these contexts, persistence functioned less as a motivational surge and more as a relational

holding pattern, where continued participation was made possible by collective commitment rather than individual resolve.

* * *

Other students described similar dynamics when motivation was tested through moments of individual exposure within the ensemble. Choir students, in particular, spoke about auditions, solos, and exposed passages as emotionally demanding, especially when individual voices—as both expressive identities and embodied instruments—became distinctly audible within the ensemble texture. These moments were frequently marked by hesitation and self-doubt. Yet students emphasized that such experiences were rarely navigated alone; exposure was collectively held rather than individually endured.

Lisa described exposed singing as requiring action in the presence of fear rather than waiting for confidence to emerge. What sustained her engagement was not certainty in her own ability, but the awareness that others were taking comparable risks alongside her. Hearing peers attempt difficult entrances, volunteer for solos, or persist despite visible hesitation normalized vulnerability. Subtle gestures—eye contact, nods, quiet reassurance—transformed exposure from an evaluative spotlight into a shared undertaking. In this context, motivation was not fueled by confidence, but by collective courage.

Rose articulated a similar process, explaining that she often needed to see someone else attempt a difficult passage before stepping forward herself: “once someone else tried, it felt safer to try too” (Rose, Interview 12). Here, motivation emerged through distributed risk rather than individual readiness. Action followed relational cues.

Persistence became possible not because fear disappeared, but because vulnerability was reciprocated.

Instrumental students described comparable experiences in reduced ensemble settings. Marco reflected that in smaller contexts it could feel as though “all eyes are on you,” particularly when individual entrances or exposed passages could not be masked by surrounding sound (Marco, Interview 4). While this visibility heightened anxiety, it also intensified attentiveness; knowing that one’s part was fully audible sharpened preparation and deepened focus.

Across these accounts, motivation appeared neither stable nor uniformly positive. Students described periods of fatigue, frustration, and emotional strain—particularly when expectations felt misaligned with available support or when ensemble cohesion weakened. Under such conditions, visibility could heighten anxiety rather than strengthen commitment. However, when relational balance was sustained, students described continuing through difficulty despite uncertainty. Motivation, then, functioned less as internal drive and more as a relationally regulated process. Persistence was maintained through mutual visibility, encouragement, and shared commitment, suggesting that small ensemble contexts amplified effort only when visibility was paired with trust and reciprocity.

In this way, small ensembles functioned as the greenhouse of the Music Classroom Ecosystem—intensifying effort through proximity, visibility, and shared consequence, allowing motivation to deepen within intensified conditions of mutual reliance.

Agency Through Exposure and Ownership: The Canopy

While community established belonging and motivation sustained effort, agency represented the visible expression of growth within the Music Classroom Ecosystem. Students described agency not as independence from others, but as the capacity to act meaningfully within shared musical contexts. Agency emerged when students recognized that their preparation, decisions, and musical judgment carried consequence beyond themselves. As Rose reflected when describing an exposed performance, “you kind of realize it’s on you at that point” (Rose, Interview 12), capturing how responsibility became individualized without becoming disconnected from the group. In this sense, agency was neither a personality trait nor a fixed outcome, but a relational achievement—enabled by prior experiences of belonging and sustained through collective engagement.

Across student narratives, experiences of agency were most clearly articulated in contexts where musical responsibility became fully visible. Students described moments—such as solo performances, auditions, or leadership roles—in which the buffering presence of the ensemble was reduced or removed, making individual preparation, decision-making, and self-regulation immediately consequential. In these situations, agency was not described as freedom from structure, but as ownership enacted within it, as students confronted the outcomes of their musical choices without the protective cover of collective sound. Whereas motivation intensified effort through shared consequence, agency involved assuming authorship within that shared consequence, making one’s decisions traceable and personally accountable.

Students frequently framed these experiences as formative precisely because they demanded full presence and accountability in the absence of ensemble buffering. Without

external cues or immediate peer reinforcement, musical decisions carried personal consequence, requiring students to rely on their preparation and judgment. Across ensemble types, students described these moments not as departures from community, but as extensions of it—instances where agency emerged through heightened responsibility rather than independence from others.

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[VIGNETTE 5 — Exposure and Personal Accountability]

Ajay described a solo performance as the first moment he fully understood what it meant to be responsible for musical outcomes without the buffering presence of an ensemble. Standing alone, instrument in hand, he recalled, “It was just me up there,” describing how the absence of surrounding sound sharpened his awareness of each decision (Ajay, Interview 3). In that moment, he became acutely aware that every choice—tempo, tone, articulation—would be audible and attributable to him alone. Unlike ensemble performance, where individual lines could blend into collective sound, this setting offered no concealment. The room felt quieter, more exposed, heightening his awareness of each breath and gesture.

In the moments leading up to the performance, confidence did not arrive in advance. Instead, Ajay described a heightened sense of alertness—a recognition that preparation was no longer something that supported the group, but something that would directly shape his own success or failure. Without external cues or peer reinforcement, he relied on his internal sense of pacing and musical judgment, trusting that the work he had done would hold.

Rather than experiencing this exposure as paralyzing, Ajay described it as clarifying, bringing the relationship between preparation, decision-making, and outcome into sharp focus. The responsibility of standing alone reframed preparation from obligation to ownership. Agency did not emerge as certainty or ease, but as acceptance—the recognition that the outcome, whatever it might be, would be traceable to his own decisions. As Ajay reflected, the experience marked a turning point, not because it eliminated fear, but because it made responsibility visible and unavoidable (Ajay, Interview 3).

* * *

Instrumentalists frequently described learning to trust their preparation in exposed passages or solo contexts. Choir students similarly emphasized discovering confidence in their individual voice when singing alone or carrying lines that could not be masked by surrounding sound. Although these experiences were often accompanied by anxiety, students framed that anxiety as productive—evidence that the work mattered and that growth was occurring.

Amy recalled feeling a familiar hesitation. Such moments of hesitation often preceded interpretive authorship. Being invited to consider musical meaning, phrasing, tone, and expressive intent positioned students as contributors to artistic decisions rather than executors of instruction. Importantly, this form of agency was described as relational rather than oppositional; interpretive choices were made within ensemble norms and shared expectations. In these accounts, agency functioned not as autonomy from the group, but as meaningful participation in shaping collective musical outcomes.

* * *

[VIGNETTE 6 — Interpretive Authorship and Musical Voice]

Amy described a rehearsal moment in which the ensemble was working through a passage that felt technically secure but musically unresolved. The notes were correct, but the phrasing lacked clarity, and repeated run-throughs did little to change the sound. When the director paused and opened space for questions or suggestions, Amy recalled feeling a familiar hesitation, “I didn’t know if I should say it,” she admitted, describing the risk of stepping into interpretive visibility (Amy, Interview 5). She had an idea, but she weighed whether offering it would be helpful or disruptive. Speaking up felt less like asserting confidence and more like stepping into visibility.

After a moment, Amy described voicing her concern that the passage did not yet feel settled and suggesting an adjustment to how the ensemble shaped the line. Rather than shutting the idea down, the director engaged it, asking the ensemble to try the passage again with the proposed change in mind. Hearing the music shift, Amy described a quiet sense of recognition—not that the idea had been “hers,” but that the sound had improved because the ensemble had listened.

Amy explained that moments like this reshaped how she understood her role within rehearsal. Being able to ask questions or push back did not feel oppositional; it felt engaging. She described feeling more invested when she knew she could contribute musically, noting that it made rehearsal feel collaborative rather than directive. As she reflected, interpretive voice was not about control or authority, but about being trusted to participate in shaping the music alongside others (Amy, Interview 5).

* * *

Across student narratives, agency also emerged through opportunities for interpretive authorship within ensemble contexts. Students described moments in which being invited to question, shape, or refine musical ideas positioned them as contributors to artistic decision-making rather than passive recipients of direction. These experiences were described as meaningful not because they disrupted ensemble structure, but because they occurred within it—supported by shared norms, mutual trust, and collective attention to musical outcome.

Students emphasized that interpretive agency did not function as authority over others, but as participation alongside them. At times, however, students described preferring clearer direction when interpretive uncertainty exceeded their sense of readiness. Garrett admitted there were moments he “would rather just be told what to do” when uncertainty felt high (Garrett, Interview 7), indicating that agency required readiness as well as opportunity. Offering musical ideas required visibility and risk, yet such actions were framed as engaging rather than oppositional when received as contributions to the ensemble’s work. In these accounts, agency was experienced as ownership enacted within shared responsibility, reinforcing students’ investment and sense of belonging within the ensemble.

Narrative Interconnections Across the Ecosystem

Although presented separately for analytic clarity, community, motivation, and agency were not experienced by students as discrete or sequential domains. Instead, students described movement among these dimensions over time, often re-entering familiar musical contexts with altered perspectives shaped by prior experiences. Experiences of belonging frequently supported sustained motivation, which in turn

enabled the risk-taking associated with agency. At the same time, students described moments in which agency emerged through other pathways and subsequently reshaped how they participated within community.

Movement through the Music Classroom Ecosystem was recursive rather than linear. As Garrett reflected, “it didn’t all happen at once” (Garrett, Interview 7), underscoring the recursive nature of development. Students described cycles of engagement, hesitation, growth, and return shaped by ensemble context, developmental stage, and individual circumstance. These movements were not framed as failures or departures from learning, but as integral to how musical understanding and identity developed over time. Rather than progressing through fixed stages, students narrated development as recursive, situational, and responsive to changing musical and relational conditions.

* * *

[VIGNETTE 7 — Initial Movement Through the Ecosystem]

Ajay described entering the music program through a strong sense of belonging in large ensemble rehearsals, where participation felt collective and supported. Early rehearsals emphasized learning how to listen across sections, prepare parts reliably, and align individual effort with shared musical goals. Ajay recalled feeling held by the structure of the ensemble—confident that as long as he showed up prepared and attentive, he had a place within the group.

As his familiarity with ensemble expectations grew, Ajay began participating in smaller ensemble settings, where increased visibility altered his relationship to preparation and effort. In chamber rehearsals, individual readiness became immediately

consequential. Missed entrances or uncertain passages could no longer be absorbed by surrounding sound, prompting closer attention to practice and musical decision-making. Ajay described realizing that effort mattered differently in these contexts—not because of evaluation, but because his preparation directly affected others.

Over time, this heightened sense of responsibility culminated in an exposed performance moment in which Ajay recognized the direct relationship between preparation and outcome. Standing alone, he could no longer rely on ensemble cues and instead trusted his own musical judgment. This moment did not feel detached from earlier experiences of belonging; rather, it felt built upon them. As Ajay reflected, the confidence to step forward emerged precisely because community had come first. In this way, his experience reflects one initial pattern of movement through the Music Classroom Ecosystem in which belonging supported motivation, and motivation enabled agency.

* * *

This vignette reflects one early pattern of movement through the Music Classroom Ecosystem in which belonging created the conditions for sustained motivation, and motivation supported emerging agency. Students emphasized, however, that such movement was neither inevitable nor uniform. Progression depended upon ensemble structure, relational support, and opportunities for meaningful responsibility. Initial movement, accordingly, was shaped by a convergence of context and readiness rather than a fixed developmental sequence.

[VIGNETTE 8 — Uneven or Delayed Movement]

Garrett described a period during which musical expectations increased more quickly than his sense of readiness. Although he felt technically capable, he hesitated to take on additional responsibility, explaining that he often questioned whether he was “ready” to step forward in more visible ways. “I just wasn’t sure yet,” he explained, describing a gap between external opportunity and internal preparedness (Garrett, Interview 7). Opportunities to lead or contribute more prominently arose, but Garrett described feeling uncertain about how to align external expectations with his internal sense of preparedness.

During this time, movement within the ecosystem felt indistinct rather than stalled. Garrett continued to participate consistently, attending rehearsals and preparing his parts, yet he described feeling as though progress was happening beneath the surface. While peers offered encouragement, he noted that confidence did not arrive all at once. Instead, it developed gradually as he accumulated experience, exposure, and familiarity with ensemble demands.

Looking back, Garrett described realizing that movement had been occurring even when it felt imperceptible. What initially felt like stagnation later appeared as a period of consolidation, during which his comfort, confidence, and willingness to step forward quietly grew. Rather than marking a failure to progress, this uneven or delayed movement reflected the situational and responsive nature of learning within the Music Classroom Ecosystem (Garrett, Interview 7).

These narratives illustrate that movement through the Music Classroom Ecosystem was not experienced as steady or uniform. Progress unfolded at different rates across students and musical contexts, and periods of hesitation or uncertainty did not signal disengagement or failure. Instead, uneven or delayed movement often reflected moments of consolidation, during which students continued to participate, observe, and prepare without immediate outward markers of growth. Such pauses allowed readiness, confidence, and responsibility to align over time.

Taken together, movement through the ecosystem was experienced as a responsive and relational process shaped by context, opportunity, and individual timing rather than as a linear progression toward increased visibility or responsibility. In these accounts, continued participation without immediate outward markers of growth reflected ongoing engagement and preparation rather than disengagement or failure.

In this way, agency functioned as the emergent canopy of the Music Classroom Ecosystem—visible growth made possible by prior belonging and sustained effort, yet always responsive to relational and contextual conditions.

Recursive Movement and Reconfiguration

Across interviews, students described returning to earlier ensemble contexts with altered perspectives shaped by prior experiences of challenge, exposure, or responsibility. Rather than leaving previous forms of participation behind, students frequently re-entered familiar musical spaces with expanded awareness of themselves, of others, and of the collective work required to sustain musical outcomes. These returns were not repetitions of earlier participation, but re-engagements informed by growth elsewhere in the

ecosystem. Rather than progressing forward into new stages, students described circling back to familiar contexts with altered capacities, perceptions, and responsibilities.

Students most often articulated recursive movement in relation to agency. Experiences of solo performance, auditions, leadership, or interpretive decision-making reshaped how students understood their place within ensembles. Upon returning to large group settings, students reported increased sensitivity to the vulnerability inherent in performance and heightened attentiveness to ensemble balance, pacing, and emotional climate. In this way, agency functioned not as an endpoint beyond community, but as a force that reconfigured how students listened, supported, and assumed responsibility within communal spaces.

Importantly, recursive movement was not experienced as uniformly affirming. Several narratives revealed moments in which increased responsibility destabilized earlier experiences of belonging or motivation. Students described periods of uncertainty, emotional strain, or temporary withdrawal before re-engaging with music in altered ways. These accounts highlight that recursion within the Music Classroom Ecosystem could involve tension, loss, and reconfiguration as well as growth, underscoring the dynamic and non-linear nature of students' musical development. As Rose noted when reflecting on returning to ensemble after an exposed performance, "it felt different going back" (Rose, Interview 12), suggesting that prior visibility reshaped how she re-entered and inhabited collective space.

[VIGNETTE 9 — Disruption or Reconfiguration Within the Cycle]

Kyree described a period in which increased responsibility began to alter how she experienced participation within the ensemble. After stepping into a leadership role, she became more aware of how others relied on her for consistency and confidence. Initially, this responsibility felt affirming. She described wanting to meet expectations and support the group, noting that being looked to by others made her feel trusted and capable.

Over time, however, the weight of that visibility became emotionally taxing. Kyree described becoming increasingly aware that others relied on her steadiness, explaining, “My section was looking at me for guidance... they knew that I was on it every time” (Kyree, Interview 10). What initially felt affirming gradually carried a different weight; the expectation of consistency narrowed the space for visible uncertainty. Rehearsal began to feel less supportive and more pressurized, as the sense of being “on” at all times made it difficult to remain fully present in the music itself. In this way, leadership carried not only musical responsibility, but sustained emotional labor—maintaining confidence, steadiness, and visibility even when personal capacity fluctuated.

In response, Kyree made the decision to step back from her leadership role temporarily. She described this choice as necessary for her well-being, but also painful. Without the identity she had built, she felt uncertain about how to participate and described a period of emotional distance from the ensemble. Over time, however, Kyree began to re-engage in a different capacity—less visible, but more balanced. Rather than signaling disengagement, this moment represented a reconfiguration of participation,

illustrating that movement within the Music Classroom Ecosystem could involve retreat and renegotiation as well as growth (Kyree, Interview 10).

* * *

This vignette illustrates that recursive movement within the Music Classroom Ecosystem was not uniformly affirming or stabilizing. While increased responsibility and agency often deepened engagement, they could also destabilize earlier experiences of belonging or motivation when expectations, support, and emotional capacity became misaligned. In such moments, agency involved not only expansion, but contraction—requiring recalibration when responsibility outpaced emotional capacity.

Brian’s reflection illustrated how agency, once developed, often re-entered ensemble spaces as a form of relational responsibility rather than individual distinction. He explained that increased preparation and experience created an obligation to support others, noting, “It gives me a bigger responsibility because I’ve practiced more, and I could know more stuff than other people in my section... and help people become better themselves” (Brian, Interview 11). In this account, agency did not function as separation from community, but as a recalibration of participation within it. Growth in skill and confidence reshaped how Brian listened, responded, and contributed, positioning agency as a resource that circulated back into the ensemble, reshaping communal dynamics rather than elevating the individual beyond them.

Together, these accounts indicate that recursive movement within the Music Classroom Ecosystem could involve disruption, recalibration, and return, depending on how responsibility, support, and expectation were aligned. In this way, recursion operated as the regulating mechanism of the Music Classroom Ecosystem—ensuring that growth

in one domain altered participation across the whole rather than remaining isolated within individual development.

Contextual Expression Across Sites

Although the Music Classroom Ecosystem emerged across both research sites, students' experiences were shaped by the structural, cultural, and relational conditions of their respective school contexts. These conditions did not determine how community, motivation, and agency were experienced, but they did influence how students entered the ecosystem, how stable participation felt over time, and how responsibility was negotiated within musical spaces. Rather than revealing separate or incompatible ecosystems, the findings suggest a shared set of ecological processes expressed differently in response to local conditions.

Across both sites, students described music classrooms as spaces where learning extended beyond technical skill acquisition to include relational, emotional, and identity-oriented dimensions. Students did not frame their experiences primarily through the language of advantage or disadvantage. Instead, they emphasized ensemble culture, peer relationships, instructional expectations, and opportunities for meaningful contribution as central to how the ecosystem functioned in their lives. In this way, context shaped the expression of the ecosystem rather than its underlying processes.

The sections that follow attend to how the Music Classroom Ecosystem was enacted within each site, highlighting contextual inflections without reducing student experience to socioeconomic explanation. These accounts preserve the complexity of students' narratives while underscoring the adaptability of the ecosystem across diverse educational settings.

Affluent School Expressions

Students from the affluent school site frequently described music participation as embedded within a dense network of opportunities, expectations, and continuity. Access to multiple ensemble configurations, extended rehearsal cycles, and a wide range of performance contexts shaped how students encountered community, motivation, and agency over time. Many students described entering the Music Classroom Ecosystem early in their secondary experience, with belonging established through long-term participation and familiarity with ensemble norms.

Community within this context was often characterized by stability and shared history. Students described rehearsing alongside peers for multiple years, developing a collective identity grounded in continuity and shared musical language. This stability supported strong bonds and a clear sense of belonging, while simultaneously intensifying expectations. Participation carried implicit standards regarding preparation, attendance, and contribution, and belonging was closely tied to reliability and consistency over time. Motivation within the affluent site was frequently described as cumulative and reinforced by ensemble culture. Students emphasized persistence through demanding repertoire and extended rehearsal schedules, framing challenge as an expected and normalized feature of participation. Garrett reflected that difficulty was rarely questioned, explaining, “we just kind of expect it to be hard” (Garrett, Interview 7), indicating that sustained effort functioned as a cultural norm rather than an exceptional demand. Small ensemble experiences, sectionals, and chamber groups were often described as extensions of large ensemble work, reinforcing motivation through heightened visibility and collective

accountability. In this context, motivation was sustained not through external reward, but through shared norms of commitment, excellence, and musical growth.

Agency emerged through both formal structures and informal recognition. Leadership roles, solo opportunities, and interpretive contributions were frequently described as markers of trust and musical maturity. Rose described stepping into more visible roles as a sign that “they believe you can handle it” (Rose, Interview 12), linking opportunity with institutional trust. At the same time, Brian acknowledged that increased visibility could intensify the weight of expectation, noting that mistakes felt more consequential when “everyone kind of knows what you’re capable of” (Brian, Interview 11). These accounts suggest that formal opportunity structures both enabled and emotionally intensified agency.

At the same time, students acknowledged that these opportunities carried emotional weight. High expectations and comparison within performance-driven environments sometimes intensified anxiety, self-doubt, or fear of failure. These narratives indicate that opportunity-rich contexts supported the development of agency while also intensifying the emotional weight associated with responsibility and visibility.

Urban School Expressions

Students from the urban school site described music participation within a context shaped by variability, disruption, and resilience. Ensemble participation was often narrated against a backdrop of shifting enrollment, changing leadership, and broader life circumstances extending beyond the classroom. Despite these conditions, students articulated strong attachments to music as a space of stability, expression, and relational support.

Community within this context was frequently described as intentional and actively maintained. Trust, encouragement, and mutual care emerged as necessary conditions for sustained participation within the ensemble community. Belonging was not assumed; it was cultivated through shared effort, emotional openness, and a collective commitment to showing up for one another. Lisa described choir as a place where “everyone’s kind of there for you” (Lisa, Interview 8). Across interviews, belonging was rarely framed as automatic; rather, students connected it to sustained relational presence and mutual accountability within the ensemble. In this way, community functioned not only as a musical structure, but as a relational anchor within students’ broader lives. Motivation within the urban site was often narrated through meaning rather than expectation. Within the urban site, effort was frequently framed as personally meaningful rather than externally imposed, offering emotional grounding and a sense of identity. Students frequently described rehearsal spaces as environments that provided emotional grounding and directional clarity within otherwise unstable or demanding circumstances. Rather than framing persistence through external reward structures, participants often connected sustained engagement to a sense of personal meaning, relational responsibility, and internal coherence within the ensemble setting.

Persistence through challenge was framed less as compliance with standards and more as an act of self-affirmation and commitment to the group. Small ensemble and exposed performance experiences were described as moments of validation, reinforcing students’ sense that their voices and contributions mattered.

Agency within this context emerged through adaptability and self-determination. Students described making deliberate choices to remain engaged despite obstacles,

renegotiating roles within ensembles, and finding ways to contribute meaningfully within changing circumstances. In some cases, agency involved stepping into leadership informally; in others, it involved setting boundaries or redefining success. These narratives indicate that agency within the urban site emerged through adaptability, responsiveness, and personally meaningful engagement rather than through formal opportunity structures alone. Agency within this context was often enacted through adaptive participation rather than formal leadership structures. Participants described renegotiating their roles within ensembles, stepping back when necessary, and later re-engaging in ways that reflected changing personal needs, responsibilities, and understandings of contribution. Kyree's decision to step back from leadership and later re-engage in a different capacity (Kyree, Interview 10), along with Brian's framing of increased preparation as an obligation to "help people become better themselves" (Brian, Interview 11), illustrate that agency was enacted through renegotiation, boundary-setting, and relational circulation rather than through positional advancement alone.

Chapter Synthesis

Taken together, the findings presented in this chapter offer a descriptive account of how secondary students experienced community, motivation, and agency within their music programs. Rather than functioning as isolated constructs, community, motivation, and agency emerged as interdependent and dynamically related, shaped by ensemble context, responsibility, and students' lived experiences over time. This chapter has focused on making these experiences visible through student narratives, attending to both continuity and disruption.

The patterns that surfaced across interviews raise analytic questions about how community, motivation, and agency interact developmentally and how movement through the Music Classroom Ecosystem unfolds across contexts. Addressing these questions requires analytic synthesis that extends beyond the narrative focus of this chapter. Accordingly, Chapter Five steps back from individual accounts to examine the relationships among community, motivation, and agency, considering how these constructs function together as a dynamic system in motion.

Rather than advancing explanatory claims, this chapter has established an empirically grounded map of how students experienced and navigated community, motivation, and agency across ensemble contexts—providing the descriptive foundation upon which analytic interpretation now builds. In doing so, it illuminates both sustained patterns and moments of reconfiguration within their musical lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

SYNTHESIS—THE ECOSYSTEM IN MOTION

Chapter Four presented community, motivation, and agency as analytically distinct domains. Students' narratives, however, revealed that these domains functioned recursively and relationally rather than sequentially. Learning emerged through movement across ensemble contexts, over time, and through repeated cycles of participation, challenge, recalibration, and return.

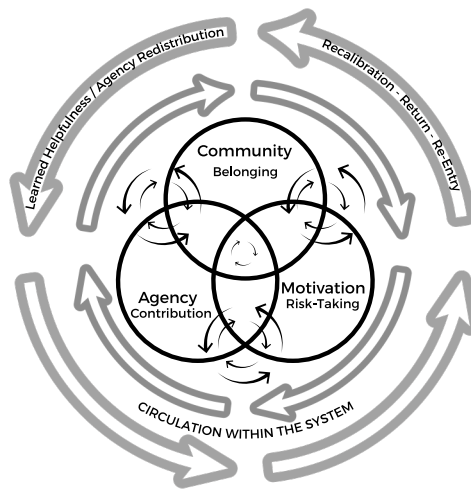
This chapter synthesizes those findings to examine how the Music Classroom Ecosystem operates as a dynamic relational system. Rather than advancing new empirical claims, the chapter interprets patterns of interaction, participation, and responsibility that emerged across interviews, attending to how community, motivation, and agency continually shaped one another within students' lived experiences. In doing so, the discussion shifts from thematic description toward interpretive analysis, tracing how these dimensions evolved through participation, shared responsibility, vulnerability, and collective musical engagement over time.

Illustrative excerpts drawn across all participants appear in the findings chapters where they most clearly illuminate each analytic dimension. The synthesis that follows integrates these voices to articulate how the ecosystem functions in motion, emphasizing the circulation of participation and the ways in which agency is developed, enacted, and redistributed within the collective. The analysis moves across these domains, at times returning to earlier dimensions to illustrate how shifts in one area reverberate across the system. Through this lens, the Music Classroom Ecosystem is understood not as a static

framework, but as a living system sustained through ongoing interaction, recalibration, and return within students' evolving roles and experiences.

Figure 2

The Music Classroom Ecosystem in Action: Recursive Circulation and Agency Redistribution Through Learned Helpfulness



Note. This figure illustrates the recursive circulation of community, motivation, and agency, and the redistribution of agency through learned helpfulness across time within the Music Classroom Ecosystem.

The Ecosystem as a Dynamic System

Taken together, the findings suggest that the Music Classroom Ecosystem operated less as a collection of separate instructional contexts and more as an interconnected relational system. Community, motivation, and agency did not function independently within students' experiences. Instead, shifts within one domain frequently reshaped participation within the others. Students consistently described learning as

emerging through shared responsibility, interpersonal trust, and collective musical engagement rather than isolated skill acquisition. One student described a festival performance as feeling “like family” because “we all had the same goal” (Interview 5), while another reflected that after a successful choir performance, “we were all in it together” (Interview 6). Maddie similarly described her first Wind Ensemble performance at North as the moment she realized, “these are my people, this is where I belong” (Interview 1). Across these accounts, belonging emerged not as passive inclusion, but as active participation within systems of shared responsibility and collective investment.

Across interviews, trust was rarely described as immediate. Instead, students emphasized time, consistency, and repeated experience as necessary conditions for believing that the ecosystem would hold them through risk, failure, or change. Participants consistently described experiencing shifts in responsibility, engagement, and visibility as they moved across large ensemble, small ensemble, and solo contexts. Large ensembles often functioned as stabilizing environments in which students learned expectations, norms, and patterns of mutual reliance. Ajay described Wind Ensemble as a setting where “everyone knows they have a purpose to be there” and where “everyone has their own role that they have to do if you want the band to do well” (Interview 2). Similarly, another participant reflected that orchestra functioned cohesively because “we all have the same goal” (Interview 5). These large ensemble environments provided continuity and shared structure, allowing students to experience themselves as contributors within a broader collective.

Smaller ensemble settings, however, intensified visibility and responsibility in ways that sharpened students' attentiveness and engagement. Students repeatedly described chamber groups, sectionals, and solo experiences as spaces where individual preparation became more exposed and consequential. One participant explained that in chamber settings, "if you don't do the work, it's going to be a lot more obvious" (Interview 3), while another similarly noted that in smaller groups "you really have to know your stuff" because "there's not as much to blend into" (Interview 5). These experiences heightened accountability, not through external punishment, but through increased awareness of how individual preparation directly shaped collective outcomes. As another student reflected, sectionals allowed members to "really come together as one" while focusing more carefully on their responsibilities within the ensemble (Interview 6). In these settings, agency became increasingly visible through preparation, attentiveness, and responsiveness to others.

Solo and exposed performance contexts brought this relational agency further into focus, requiring students to rely more explicitly on their own preparation and judgment while still remaining embedded within communal support structures. Students consistently framed these moments not as isolated demonstrations of individual achievement, but as experiences shaped through relational encouragement and collective investment. One student, reflecting on solo and ensemble participation, explained that having peers, family members, and teachers present made her realize "no matter how I sounded, they were there to support me" (Interview 6). Another participant similarly described overcoming anxiety surrounding difficult repertoire by recognizing that "everyone else is putting in the work too" (Interview 3). These accounts suggest that even

highly individualized performance contexts remained relationally situated within the broader ecosystem.

Importantly, these contexts did not operate hierarchically or as developmental stages. Students moved among them repeatedly, revisiting familiar musical spaces with altered perspectives shaped by prior experience. Learning did not culminate in independence from the system, but in heightened awareness of how individual preparation shaped collective outcomes. Marco noted that “everyone notices” when someone is not fully present musically (Interview 4), underscoring how responsibility remained relational even as competence increased. Similarly, participants frequently contrasted earlier uncertainty with later experiences of leadership and confidence. One student reflected that as an underclassman he had been “afraid of all the older kids who were better than me,” but later found himself “actually leading things” within the trumpet section (Interview 3). This shift illustrates not departure from the collective, but deeper integration into it through changing forms of participation and responsibility.

Students’ narratives therefore challenge static conceptions of musical development as a linear progression toward independence. Instead, participants described learning as continual negotiation between individual responsibility and collective reliance, often revisiting familiar ensemble contexts with altered perspectives and responsibilities. Garrett, for example, reflected that he did not initially feel “ready” to step into more visible musical opportunities despite external encouragement (Interview 7), suggesting that development involved ongoing recalibration rather than steady advancement. Similarly, Kyree’s temporary withdrawal from leadership responsibilities (Interview 10) illustrates that stepping back functioned not as disengagement, but as a

necessary renegotiation of participation within the ensemble. These accounts suggest that the Music Classroom Ecosystem remained sustainable not because students advanced toward a fixed endpoint of autonomy, but because the system allowed for return, adjustment, and re-entry over time.

Interdependence, Recursion, and Learned Helpfulness

A defining feature of the Music Classroom Ecosystem was the interdependence of its domains. Experiences of community frequently created the conditions under which motivation could deepen. Shared responsibility, trust, and psychological safety supported students' willingness to persist through challenge. Students repeatedly framed persistence not as isolated determination, but as something sustained through relational belonging and collective investment. One participant described continuing in music because "it's my community... it's my people" (Interview 5), while another similarly reflected that "it's the family... you just keep coming back" (Interview 6). In both cases, motivation emerged not solely from musical achievement, but from participation in relationships that made continued engagement meaningful.

This relational support also shaped students' willingness to take risks. Motivation, in turn, enabled the risk-taking associated with agency, as students became willing to step into more exposed musical roles. Several students described moments in which communal support reduced the emotional cost of vulnerability. One participant, reflecting on solo and ensemble participation, explained that having friends, family members, and teachers present made her realize that "no matter how I sounded, they were there to support me" (Interview 6). Similarly, Maddie reflected that through difficult repertoire and performance preparation she learned, "I can do these hard things, and I do belong

here” (Interview 1). These accounts suggest that agency did not emerge independently from community, but through environments where exposure and uncertainty could be experienced safely.

As agency developed, students often re-entered communal spaces with heightened awareness of collective responsibility, contributing not only to musical outcomes but to the learning and confidence of others. Rose captured this shift when she explained that once someone else attempted a difficult passage, “it felt safer to try too” (Rose, Interview 12), revealing how collective action preceded individual risk. Students frequently described recognizing that their own preparation and participation directly affected the experiences of peers. One participant reflected that “I can’t fail my people” when describing preparation for challenging orchestral repertoire (Interview 5), while another explained that in smaller ensemble settings “you feel like you’re really letting people down more than you otherwise would” if you were unprepared (Interview 3). In these moments, responsibility became increasingly relational rather than individual.

This recursive movement did not reflect progression away from community, but redistribution of responsibility within it. Students rarely described agency as independence from others. Instead, agency frequently returned to the ensemble through what I describe as learned helpfulness—a relational process through which developing competence became a resource for the collective over time. As students gained confidence and experience, their agency increasingly emerged through supporting peers, reinforcing ensemble cohesion, and contributing to shared musical outcomes rather than through individual distinction alone.

Students repeatedly described receiving support from older ensemble members early in their own development and later recognizing similar responsibilities toward younger students. One participant recalled that “the seniors... were really nice about that” and helped younger members feel included within the ensemble (Interview 4). Maddie similarly described how an older student “always made sure I had someone to sit with” during trips and performances (Interview 1). These narratives suggest that helpfulness functioned not as exceptional leadership, but as an expected extension of participation within the ensemble community.

In this sense, agency circulates rather than progresses linearly, moving between individual and collective contexts in ways that sustain both personal growth and communal development. What may visually appear as a “backward” movement is more accurately understood as recursive re-entry, in which prior learning is reintegrated into the system as a resource for others. As reflected in students’ accounts of receiving support early in their development and later offering that same support to peers, this usage draws on Hogle’s (2018) articulation of learned helpfulness as an emergent, socially mediated pattern of mutual support in ensemble settings and echoes sociocultural conceptions of learning as increasing participation and responsibility within shared practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Learned helpfulness emerged as students began to recognize that their preparation, confidence, and musical understanding could support peers. Several students described noticing when others struggled, recalling their own earlier uncertainty, and responding through encouragement, modeling, or quiet guidance. These actions were rarely framed as formal leadership or authority. Instead, they were described as natural

extensions of belonging within an ensemble where individual effort visibly affected collective success. One participant described ensemble feedback as constructive because members “know where to help you” rather than simply criticize mistakes (Interview 11). Another student emphasized that sectionals and chamber settings required members to become attentive not only to their own preparation, but to the needs of the group as a whole because individual weaknesses immediately affected collective performance (Interview 3). In these narratives, support emerged through mutual attentiveness rather than hierarchical control.

Notably, learned helpfulness was often expressed through restraint rather than assertion. Agency did not always take the form of speaking more, leading more, or standing out. In several narratives, agency was articulated as knowing when to step forward and when to hold back—when to offer guidance and when to allow others space to struggle productively. In these moments, agency functioned as responsiveness and judgment rather than control. Students frequently described becoming more attentive listeners and collaborators over time, learning to recognize when intervention was helpful and when patience better supported collective growth.

This relational expression of agency contributed to the sustainability of the ecosystem. As students developed confidence, their willingness to support others reinforced psychological safety, normalized struggle, and reduced the emotional cost of exposure. Agency, therefore, circulated through the ensemble rather than accumulating in individual actors. Students consistently framed this circulation in relational terms. Marco’s observation that “everyone notices” when someone is not fully present musically (Interview 4) and Brian’s framing of preparation as responsibility for others’ growth

(Interview 11) together underscore that agency remained embedded within collective awareness rather than separating from it. Learning became distributive rather than competitive, strengthening the conditions under which belonging and motivation could be sustained.

At the same time, recursive movement was not uniformly affirming. Several narratives revealed moments in which increased responsibility destabilized earlier experiences of belonging or motivation. Leadership roles, solos, or heightened expectations sometimes introduced emotional strain, uncertainty, or fatigue. For some students, particularly those in visible leadership positions, responsibility extended beyond musical preparation to include emotional labor—maintaining composure, steadiness, and attentiveness to others even when personal capacity felt strained. One participant reflected that leadership sometimes created pressure to appear “on it every time” even when internally struggling (Interview 10), illustrating how increased visibility could complicate students’ relationships with belonging and participation.

In these cases, recursion involved renegotiation rather than reinforcement. Students described stepping back temporarily, redefining success, or adjusting participation in order to sustain engagement. Kyree’s temporary withdrawal from leadership (Interview 10) exemplifies this recursive contraction, demonstrating that recalibration functioned as continuation rather than disengagement. These accounts underscore that recursion within the ecosystem could involve disruption and reconfiguration as well as growth, highlighting balance—not constant expansion—as central to long-term participation.

Recursive Development and the Redistribution of Responsibility

Across participants, development was rarely described as a steady progression toward independence. Instead, students depicted growth as uneven, recursive, and relationally negotiated. Early participation was often characterized by uncertainty and reliance upon teachers, section leaders, or more experienced peers. One participant reflected that, as an underclassman, he had been “afraid of all the older kids who were better than me,” yet later found himself “actually leading things” within the section (Interview 3). Another recalled relying heavily on older members who “helped with literally everything to do with the group” and “made us feel heard” (Interview 4). These accounts suggest that belonging emerged gradually through repeated participation within supportive relational structures.

As students gained familiarity with ensemble expectations, responsibility increasingly redistributed both inward and outward: inward through growing self-regulation and confidence, and outward through heightened attentiveness to peers and collective outcomes. Brian’s reflection that preparation carried “a bigger responsibility... to help people become better themselves” (Interview 11) illustrates how competence circulated communally rather than consolidating as personal distinction

Several students explicitly contrasted earlier uncertainty with later experiences of visibility and responsibility. Garrett recalled not feeling “ready” to step forward despite external encouragement (Interview 7), highlighting how redistribution of responsibility required alignment between opportunity and internal preparedness. Maddie similarly described initially questioning whether she belonged in more advanced ensemble settings before eventually recognizing, through sustained participation and successful

performance experiences, “I can do these hard things, and I do belong here” (Interview 1). Across these narratives, development did not emerge as a stable transition from dependence to independence, but as recursive movement through increasingly complex forms of participation, accountability, and relational awareness.

This redistribution did not occur uniformly or predictably. Students described periods of rapid growth alongside moments of hesitation, consolidation, or retreat—pauses in which confidence and readiness recalibrated rather than collapsed. As responsibility shifted, motivation was increasingly framed as relational rather than evaluative. Preparation was described less as compliance with external expectation and more as commitment to shared success. Ajay’s reflection that rehearsal was “the one place where I know what I’m doing and why” (Interview 3) underscores how clarity of purpose emerged through participation rather than reward structures. Similarly, another student explained that motivation to persist often came from recognizing that “everyone else is putting in the work too” (Interview 3), positioning effort within reciprocal systems of accountability and care rather than isolated self-discipline. The ecosystem remained generative because it permitted uneven movement without severing belonging.

At later stages of participation, responsibility frequently expanded beyond musical outcomes to include emotional and relational dimensions. Students occupying visible leadership roles described feeling accountable not only for preparation and performance, but for ensemble morale, stability, and the experiences of younger members. In these moments, agency extended into forms of emotional labor requiring steadiness, responsiveness, and attentiveness to others even when personal capacity felt strained. One participant reflected that leadership sometimes created pressure to appear

consistently composed and capable, even during periods of internal uncertainty (Interview 10), illustrating how expanded visibility complicated students' relationships with both belonging and responsibility.

Crucially, continued engagement depended not on uninterrupted confidence, but on the ability to renegotiate responsibility without abandoning participation altogether. Students described moments of stepping back temporarily, redefining success, or recalibrating their involvement in ways that allowed continued participation without severing relational connection. As illustrated through Kyree's temporary withdrawal from leadership responsibilities (Interview 10), recursive movement within the ecosystem involved contraction and recalibration as much as expansion and growth. Recursion, within this framework, functioned less as linear advancement than as developmental adjustment through which students continually renegotiated how they participated within the collective.

This pattern challenges linear developmental models that position agency as a stable endpoint or individual achievement. Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, agency instead functioned as a dynamic and relational capacity—responsive to context, role, emotional demand, and communal expectation. The ecosystem remained sustainable not through uninterrupted expansion, but through its capacity to absorb strain, redistribute responsibility, and support recalibration without dissolving belonging or motivation.

Development, Responsibility, and Collective Obligation

Across interviews, students described developmental trajectories characterized less by technical mastery alone than by expanding responsibility within relational systems of participation. Growth was frequently narrated not simply as becoming more

skilled, but as learning to become accountable—to the music, to peers, and to the ensemble as a collective entity. Students repeatedly framed preparation and persistence through the language of relational obligation rather than external evaluation or competition. One participant described preparing difficult orchestral repertoire with the recognition that “I can’t fail my people” (Interview 5), while another reflected that persistence in rehearsal settings became necessary because “everyone else is putting in the work too” (Interview 3). In both cases, responsibility emerged less as compliance with institutional expectation than as attentiveness to the visible effort and vulnerability of others within the ensemble.

This sense of collective obligation frequently appeared intertwined with students’ developing understandings of belonging. Participants described musical preparation as meaningful because individual effort visibly affected communal outcomes. Ajay, for instance, reflected that within Wind Ensemble “everyone knows they have a purpose to be there” and that “everyone has their own role that they have to do if you want the band to do well” (Interview 2). Similarly, another participant emphasized that in chamber settings “if you don’t do the work, it’s going to be a lot more obvious” (Interview 3), highlighting how smaller ensemble contexts intensified awareness of mutual dependence and shared accountability. Across these narratives, responsibility functioned not as external pressure imposed upon students, but as a relational condition emerging through participation in environments where effort, preparation, and attentiveness carried visible consequences for others.

Over time, this relational motivation appeared to cultivate forms of confidence grounded less in perfection than in accumulated participation and lived experience.

Students frequently described learning not simply that they could perform difficult repertoire, but that they could persist through uncertainty, recover from mistakes, and contribute meaningfully under pressure. Maddie reflected that through preparing advanced repertoire and performing *Come Sunday*, she ultimately learned “I can do these hard things, and I do belong here” (Interview 1). Similarly, another participant described realizing through solo and ensemble experiences that “if I’m willing to put in enough time, I can learn pretty much anything” (Interview 3). These reflections suggest that confidence developed less through uninterrupted success than through recursive encounters with challenge, recalibration, and eventual contribution.

Importantly, students rarely framed these developmental experiences solely in individualistic terms. Rather, growth frequently became meaningful because it enabled deeper participation within the collective. Several students described returning to ensemble spaces with heightened awareness of how their preparation affected peers and younger ensemble members. Brian’s reflection that preparation increasingly felt like “a bigger responsibility... to help people become better themselves” (Interview 11) illustrates how competence circulated outward relationally rather than consolidating as personal distinction. Similarly, one participant described feeling motivated to continue improving because ensemble participation had become “my community... my people” (Interview 5), positioning growth within reciprocal systems of belonging and obligation rather than isolated self-improvement.

Students also repeatedly described developmental movement as uneven rather than linear. Moments of confidence frequently coexisted with uncertainty, vulnerability, or self-doubt. One participant recalled initially believing advanced repertoire was beyond

her capabilities before eventually recognizing the growth that sustained participation had made possible (Interview 1). Another reflected on persistent anxiety surrounding exposed musical passages despite increasing competence and leadership responsibility (Interview 3). These accounts suggest that development within the Music Classroom Ecosystem did not eliminate uncertainty, but altered students' relationships to it. Confidence emerged not through the absence of struggle, but through repeated experiences of navigating difficulty within supportive relational systems.

As students developed greater confidence and responsibility, many described re-entering ensemble spaces with an increasing sense of obligation to contribute beyond their own performance. Responsibility, by extension, became developmental rather than imposed—emerging organically through participation in systems that rendered effort visible, consequential, and relationally meaningful. Students frequently described supporting younger members, modeling preparation habits, or contributing to rehearsal culture through attentiveness and encouragement rather than formal authority. These recursive movements illustrate how individual growth simultaneously strengthened the ecosystem itself through mentorship, modeling, and relational support, reinforcing the conditions under which future students could themselves experience belonging, motivation, and agency.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that development within the Music Classroom Ecosystem functioned not as movement toward isolated mastery, but as increasing participation within relational systems of shared responsibility and collective obligation. Growth became meaningful not because students transcended dependence

upon others, but because they became increasingly capable of contributing to the sustainability, stability, and flourishing of the collective itself.

Fragility, Context, and Sustainability of the Ecosystem

Although the Music Classroom Ecosystem demonstrated resilience across participants' narratives, students also revealed its fragility, particularly during periods of transition, instability, or relational disruption. Students consistently emphasized the importance of sustained trust, instructional continuity, and predictable systems of support. Disruptions to these conditions were experienced not merely as logistical changes, but as destabilizations of belonging and participation within the ecosystem itself.

Maddie contrasted earlier musical environments in which she “never really felt like [she] belonged there” with her later experience at North, where she realized, “these are my people, this is where I belong” (Interview 1). Another participant described virtual instruction as “the worst point in my career” before relational reconnection with peers restored his desire to remain involved (Interview 4). These accounts suggest that sustainability within ensemble settings depended less upon structural permanence than upon the preservation of relational continuity capable of sustaining trust during periods of uncertainty and change.

This fragility became especially visible during moments of transition, recalibration, or increased responsibility. Students frequently described leadership changes, shifting ensemble expectations, or altered relational dynamics as experiences that reshaped their sense of stability within the ecosystem. Rose reflected that after changes in rehearsal climate and leadership structure, “it felt different going back”

(Interview 12), suggesting that even returning to familiar musical spaces could involve reconstructed understandings of participation and belonging. Similarly, Kyree's temporary withdrawal from leadership responsibilities (Interview 10) demonstrates how strain within the ecosystem did not necessarily produce disengagement, but often required renegotiation of visibility, responsibility, and emotional capacity in order to sustain continued participation.

These narratives suggest that sustainability within the Music Classroom Ecosystem depended not solely upon opportunity structures or instructional quality, but upon the preservation of relational trust during periods of instability and transition. Students repeatedly described ensemble participation as extending beyond musical performance into broader systems of emotional grounding and social continuity. In several accounts, music classrooms functioned as spaces of predictability, affirmation, and identity formation within otherwise unstable or demanding educational and personal environments. One participant described ensemble participation as "the one place where I know what I'm doing and why" (Interview 3), positioning the ensemble not merely as an academic setting, but as a stabilizing relational environment within daily life.

At the same time, students' narratives also revealed the adaptive capacities of these ecosystems. Even during periods of disruption, participants frequently described sustaining engagement through peer relationships, shared traditions, collective memory, and distributed systems of support. Ritualized practices, recurring repertoire traditions, sectional relationships, and informal peer mentorship all appeared to function as stabilizing mechanisms that preserved continuity even when other aspects of the ecosystem shifted. Maddie's description of annually performing *Sarajevo* as a tradition

“everybody takes a lot of pride in” (Interview 1) illustrates how collective memory and ritualized participation contributed to continuity across time and changing ensemble membership. Similarly, marching band traditions described by multiple students—including shared stands music, post-game gatherings, and informal social rituals—reinforced communal identity through repeated participation and shared experience.

Importantly, however, this adaptability was neither automatic nor guaranteed. Students’ accounts suggest that sustainability required ongoing relational maintenance rather than passive continuity. When students felt acknowledged, supported, and included during moments of transition, belonging often remained intact despite instability. Conversely, when changes felt abrupt, emotionally unsupported, or relationally disconnected, students frequently described experiences of alienation, uncertainty, or withdrawal. These findings therefore position sustainability within the Music Classroom Ecosystem not as structural permanence, but as the ongoing cultivation of relational trust capable of absorbing disruption without dissolving participation.

This fragility further underscores the ethical dimensions of music education illuminated throughout this study. If participation within ensemble settings functions not merely as skill acquisition but as involvement within relational ecosystems of belonging, identity, and responsibility, then disruptions to these systems carry consequences extending beyond musical outcomes alone. Students’ narratives suggest that educators and institutions bear ethical responsibility not simply for maintaining programs, but for sustaining the relational conditions through which students experience safety, continuity, visibility, and meaningful participation over time.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the sustainability of the Music Classroom Ecosystem depended less upon uninterrupted stability than upon the system's capacity to absorb strain, redistribute support, and preserve relational continuity during periods of transition and uncertainty. The ecosystem remained viable not because disruption was absent, but because students, peers, traditions, and educators collectively contributed to maintaining conditions under which belonging and participation could continue to endure.

Revisiting Sociocultural and Ecological Theory

The synthesized patterns presented in this chapter invite a return to the sociocultural and ecological theories that grounded this study. Across participants' narratives, learning consistently emerged not as isolated acquisition, but as participation within relational systems structured through responsibility, trust, visibility, and shared musical practice. Students rarely described growth as movement away from community or dependence upon others. Instead, development was repeatedly framed through increasing participation within collective systems of meaning and obligation. One participant reflected that ensemble participation gradually shifted from simply "showing up and playing the music and leaving" toward taking "a more active role" within the ensemble community (Interview 3), while another described eventually recognizing that "everyone has their own role that they have to do if you want the band to do well" (Interview 2). These accounts align closely with sociocultural perspectives positioning learning as increasing participation and responsibility within shared practice rather than the accumulation of isolated competencies.

Students' narratives also reinforce sociocultural understandings of agency as relationally mediated rather than individually possessed. Participation within ensemble settings frequently involved movement from peripheral uncertainty toward more visible and consequential forms of engagement, yet students rarely described this movement as independence from communal structures. Instead, responsibility increasingly deepened students' awareness of interdependence. One participant reflected that preparation eventually became "a bigger responsibility... to help people become better themselves" (Interview 11), illustrating how competence circulated relationally through support, modeling, and attentiveness to peers rather than consolidating as personal distinction. Similarly, Rose's observation that after another student attempted a difficult passage "it felt safer to try too" (Interview 12) underscores how agency frequently emerged through collective participation and socially mediated risk rather than individual assertion alone.

From an ecological perspective, students' accounts further suggest that development unfolded through reciprocal interaction between individuals and the environments in which participation occurred. Changes in ensemble structure, rehearsal climate, leadership continuity, and relational dynamics consistently shaped how students experienced belonging, motivation, and exposure. At the same time, students' own developing participation reshaped the ecosystem itself through mentorship, peer support, distributed responsibility, and learned helpfulness. Maddie's reflection that North became the first place where she felt "these are my people, this is where I belong" (Interview 1) illustrates how relational and environmental conditions fundamentally shaped participation and identity formation within musical contexts. Similarly, another participant described music ensembles as "the one place where I know what I'm doing

and why” (Interview 3), positioning the ensemble as an ecological space of continuity, meaning, and relational stability.

Importantly, these ecological relationships did not operate linearly. Students repeatedly described movement through cycles of engagement, uncertainty, recalibration, and return rather than steady progression toward fixed developmental endpoints. Kyree’s temporary withdrawal from leadership responsibilities (Interview 10), Garrett’s hesitation to step into more visible opportunities despite external encouragement (Interview 7), and students’ repeated descriptions of revisiting familiar ensemble contexts with altered responsibilities all suggest that development within the Music Classroom Ecosystem involved recursive reconstruction rather than uninterrupted advancement. In this sense, students’ experiences strongly resonate with Dewey’s conception of experience as continuous and reconstructive, where growth emerges through the reorganization and reinterpretation of prior experience rather than movement toward static completion.

Students’ descriptions of motivation similarly reinforce ecological and sociocultural understandings of learning as relationally situated rather than internally fixed. Motivation consistently emerged through participation in systems of shared effort, obligation, and communal accountability. Participants repeatedly framed persistence not through external reward structures, but through awareness of collective investment and mutual dependence. One student explained that continuing through difficult rehearsal experiences felt necessary because “everyone else is putting in the work too” (Interview 3), while another described preparation as meaningful because “I can’t fail my people” (Interview 5). Across these accounts, effort emerged less as individual discipline than as relational commitment situated within shared musical practice.

At the same time, students' narratives complicate overly simplified interpretations of sociocultural and ecological learning theories by illustrating the emotional and ethical tensions embedded within participation itself. Increased responsibility frequently carried emotional costs alongside opportunity. Leadership, visibility, and exposure sometimes introduced strain, fatigue, uncertainty, or pressure to sustain stability for others even during periods of personal vulnerability. These tensions suggest that participation within relational ecosystems is not inherently harmonious or uniformly affirming, but requires ongoing negotiation between individual capacity and collective expectation. In this sense, the Music Classroom Ecosystem functioned not as a static model of ideal participation, but as a dynamic system continually reconstructed through relationships, contextual conditions, and evolving forms of responsibility.

Together, these theoretical lenses reinforce the central claim of this study: that community, motivation, and agency function as interdependent and recursive processes cultivated through participation in relational ecosystems. Across students' narratives, learning emerged not as movement away from others, but as increasing capacity to participate meaningfully within collective systems of care, accountability, vulnerability, and shared musical responsibility. Participation deepened into responsibility through relational engagement (Lave & Wenger, 1991), while experience itself remained continuously reconstructed through cycles of challenge, recalibration, and return (Dewey, 1938).

Chapter Synthesis

Together, the findings in this chapter extend the Music Classroom Ecosystem from a descriptive framework toward an interpretive account of how learning, identity,

motivation, and agency develop within secondary performance-based music classrooms. Students consistently described these domains not as isolated outcomes, but as interdependent processes enacted through participation, responsibility, vulnerability, and collective care. Across interviews, community, motivation, and agency continually shaped one another through recurring cycles of participation, challenge, recalibration, and return.

Students repeatedly described development not as movement toward independence from others, but as increasing capacity to participate meaningfully within collective musical life. Garrett's reflection that growth "didn't all happen at once" (Interview 7), Eleanor's realization that "I can do these hard things, and I do belong here" (Interview 1), and Kyree's renegotiation of leadership visibility and participation (Interview 10) collectively illustrate that development unfolded recursively rather than linearly. Agency emerged not through separation from community, but through deeper participation within it.

Students also framed musical growth through responsibility to others rather than purely individual achievement. Preparation, persistence, and leadership were repeatedly connected to collective obligation and attentiveness to peers. One participant described preparing difficult repertoire with the recognition that "I can't fail my people" (Interview 5), while Brian reflected that preparation increasingly became "a bigger responsibility... to help people become better themselves" (Interview 11). Across these accounts, competence functioned not as personal distinction alone, but as contribution to the sustainability and flourishing of the ensemble community.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective music education emerges through relational ecosystems capable of sustaining belonging, shared responsibility, and meaningful participation across time. Learning unfolded not solely through instruction or individual talent, but through systems of participation in which students experienced accountability, affirmation, vulnerability, and collective purpose. At the same time, the findings also reveal the fragility of these systems. Sustainability depended upon ongoing relational maintenance, continuity of trust, and the capacity of the ecosystem to absorb disruption without dissolving participation.

Ultimately, the Music Classroom Ecosystem is best understood not as a prescriptive developmental model, but as a relational framework explaining how community, motivation, and agency recursively shape participation within ensemble life. Within this ecosystem, development emerged not through movement away from community, but through increasingly meaningful participation, responsibility, and belonging within it. Within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, students do not simply learn music; they learn how participation, responsibility, and belonging sustain both individual growth and collective musical life. As students assume greater ownership of that shared musical life, they become contributors to the very conditions that support the growth of others. Students do not simply move from belonging to becoming. They become the reason someone else belongs.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The preceding chapters examined how secondary students experienced learning within the Music Classroom Ecosystem, tracing the interdependent roles of community, motivation, and agency across ensemble contexts and over time. Chapter Five synthesized these findings to illustrate how the ecosystem operates as a dynamic, recursive system—sustained through movement, interaction, and developmental growth. This chapter extends that synthesis by situating the study’s findings within broader theoretical, pedagogical, and structural conversations in music education.

In this discussion, the Music Classroom Ecosystem is understood as a relational system in which community, motivation, and agency operate as recursive processes shaping student learning across time and context.

The purpose of this chapter is not to restate findings, but to interpret their significance. Drawing on the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework, this discussion considers what the observed patterns of student experience contribute to existing theory, how they inform classroom practice, and what they suggest about the institutional conditions necessary to sustain meaningful music learning. In doing so, the chapter moves from what was found to why it matters—for scholars, educators, and decision-makers invested in the design and sustainability of secondary music programs.

This chapter is organized around three interrelated areas of significance. First, the findings are discussed in relation to theoretical perspectives on learning, identity, and

development, with particular attention to ecological, sociocultural, and phenomenological orientations. Second, the chapter examines pedagogical implications suggested by student narratives, focusing on how ensemble structures, rehearsal practices, and leadership opportunities can intentionally cultivate ecosystems that support belonging, persistence, and agency. Finally, the chapter addresses structural and policy considerations, attending to the fragility of music programs—particularly in urban contexts—and the ethical responsibilities associated with leadership transitions, resource allocation, and program continuity. Together, these discussions position the findings of this study as contributions to ongoing efforts to understand how music education functions as a relational, developmental, and contextually situated practice.

Theoretical Contributions: Learning as Ecological, Relational, and Recursive

This study contributes to theoretical conversations in music education by reframing learning not as linear progression or skill accumulation, but as ecological movement sustained through relationships, responsibility, and time. While existing literature has addressed community, motivation, and agency as distinct constructs, student narratives in this study suggest that these dimensions are most meaningfully understood as interdependent processes that develop recursively across musical contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1938; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Central to this contribution is the conceptualization of learning as movement through an ecosystem. Students did not describe development as advancing through discrete stages or toward independence. Instead, they narrated repeated transitions between collective and individual musical spaces, between dependence and responsibility, and between uncertainty and confidence. These movements were shaped

by ensemble context, relational support, and prior experience, underscoring that development unfolded through participation rather than progression alone.

Importantly, trust emerged as a temporal phenomenon rather than an immediate condition. Across interviews, students frequently framed belonging and safety through language of duration and accumulation using phrases and statements such as; “over time,” “eventually,” and “looking back.” Trust was not described as something granted upon entry, but as something earned through consistency, reliability, and repeated experience—what students often named as “showing up,” “sticking with it,” or “knowing people would still be there”—suggesting that belonging functioned as an outcome of time spent together rather than a precondition of participation. This temporal dimension of trust suggests that ecosystem health depends not on isolated moments of affirmation, but on sustained relational continuity. Learning environments, viewed through this lens, were experienced as holding students through risk, failure, and change only after trust had been established through sustained participation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; van Manen, 2014).

The findings also extend sociocultural understandings of agency by positioning it as relational rather than oppositional. Agency did not emerge as independence from structure or authority, but as the capacity to act meaningfully within shared musical systems. Students described agency developing through exposure, responsibility, and interpretive authorship, often enabled by earlier experiences of belonging and sustained motivation. As agency expanded, students frequently re-entered communal spaces with heightened sensitivity to collective need, illustrating that agency fed back into community rather than replacing it (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

This recursive movement aligns with ecological theories of learning that emphasize interaction, responsiveness, and balance. Development was not experienced as steady or inevitable. Instead, students described periods of consolidation, hesitation, and reconfiguration as integral to growth. Such patterns challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of uncertainty or withdrawal, reframing them as moments of alignment in which readiness, confidence, and responsibility quietly converged.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework offers a way of understanding learning as relational development unfolding over time. Community, motivation, and agency functioned not as outcomes to be achieved, but as processes continually reshaped through participation. This ecological orientation foregrounds movement, temporality, and interdependence as defining features of musical learning.

Building on this orientation, the present study contributes a conceptualization of music learning that emphasizes temporal trust, recursive movement, and relational agency—highlighting how students re-enter communal spaces with altered responsibility rather than progressing toward independence alone.

Pedagogical Implications: Designing for Belonging, Persistence, and Agency

Student narratives in this study offer important implications for classroom practice, particularly regarding how ensemble structures and instructional decisions can support ecological learning. Rather than prescribing specific strategies, these implications highlight principles of practice that align with how students experienced belonging, motivation, and agency within music programs.

First, findings underscore the centrality of large ensembles as foundational sites of belonging. Students consistently described these contexts as spaces where community was established through shared responsibility, collective sound, and sustained participation. Belonging was not framed as social affiliation alone, but as accountability to others—showing up prepared, listening attentively, and contributing reliably over time. For educators, this suggests that large ensemble rehearsals function not only as instructional spaces, but as relational environments in which norms of trust and mutual reliance are cultivated (Allsup, 2016; Wenger, 1998).

Small ensemble and sectional contexts emerged as critical sites for sustaining motivation. Heightened visibility and immediate consequence sharpened students' awareness of how effort shaped outcomes, often prompting more intentional engagement with practice. Motivation was rarely described as externally driven; instead, students emphasized relational obligation—persisting through challenge to honor commitments to peers. These findings suggest that differentiated ensemble experiences play a vital role in sustaining effort, particularly when responsibility is shared and preparation matters immediately.

Agency was most clearly articulated in exposed performance and interpretive contexts, where students confronted responsibility without the buffering presence of collective sound. Importantly, agency was not always expressed through assertion or leadership. In several narratives, agency emerged through restraint, timing, and attentiveness—knowing when not to act, when to listen, and when to support others rather than step forward. This nuanced conception of agency challenges simplistic notions of leadership and highlights the importance of cultivating judgment alongside

confidence (van Manen, 1990). This framing positions restraint not as absence of agency, but as its maturation—an orientation that complicates dominant leadership narratives that equate agency with visibility or assertive action.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest the value of providing students with varied opportunities for exposure and authorship while maintaining relational support. Inviting interpretive dialogue, allowing space for student questioning, and recognizing quieter forms of contribution can support agency without equating visibility with value. Additionally, regular check-ins with student leaders—both formal and informal—may help educators attend to the emotional dimensions of responsibility, particularly as students navigate increased visibility and expectation.

Across contexts, students emphasized that safety and confidence emerged through consistency rather than declaration. This finding highlights the importance of sustained relational presence. Educators who prioritize reliability, transparency, and follow-through contribute to ecosystems in which students are more willing to take risks, persist through difficulty, and assume responsibility over time.

While the Music Classroom Ecosystem offers a lens for interpreting student experience, it is not intended as a linear model or a prescriptive sequence to be implemented uniformly across contexts. Community, motivation, and agency do not develop in fixed stages, nor do they increase steadily or simultaneously for all learners. Importantly, agency should not be conflated with constant leadership, visibility, or assertiveness; in many cases, students' most agentive actions involved restraint, listening, or timing rather than overt direction. Similarly, community does not imply enforced togetherness or uniform participation, but rather a relational environment in which

belonging and contribution can take multiple forms. The framework therefore resists checklist-driven application and instead depends upon educators' professional judgment to interpret student readiness, context, and need. Viewed in this way, the Music Classroom Ecosystem is best understood not as a method to be adopted, but as an interpretive orientation that supports responsive, context-sensitive pedagogical decision-making.

Implications for Music Teacher Education

The findings of this study suggest important considerations for music teacher education, particularly regarding how future educators are prepared to design and sustain learning environments that balance community, motivation, and agency over time. While preservice preparation often emphasizes technical competence, classroom management, and repertoire selection, students' narratives in this study point toward the importance of preparing teachers to recognize learning as an ecological process—one shaped by relational dynamics, developmental timing, and contextual responsiveness.

The Music Classroom Ecosystem framework offers a conceptual lens that may support this preparation. Rather than functioning as a method to be implemented, the framework invites preservice teachers to attend to how different ensemble contexts cultivate distinct forms of participation and responsibility. Large ensembles, small ensembles, and solo experiences were not interchangeable in students' accounts; each played a unique role in supporting belonging, sustaining motivation, and fostering agency. Teacher education programs that foreground these distinctions may help novice educators move beyond one-size-fits-all instructional approaches and toward more intentional ensemble design.

Importantly, the findings caution against preparing teachers to optimize any single dimension of the ecosystem in isolation. Preservice educators are often encouraged—explicitly or implicitly—to prioritize efficiency, engagement, or student autonomy without sufficient attention to how these aims interact. Students’ experiences in this study suggest that overemphasis on community can suppress agency, while premature emphasis on independence can erode belonging. Teacher education programs may therefore benefit from helping candidates recognize imbalance within learning environments and develop professional judgment for recalibrating instructional decisions over time.

For music teacher educators, these findings suggest a need to move beyond presenting ensemble teaching as either directive or facilitative, and instead prepare future teachers to navigate the dynamic relationship between authority and agency. This includes modeling rehearsal practices in which conductors explicitly articulate stylistic frameworks, invite interpretive input, and demonstrate how musical decisions are negotiated within ensemble contexts. Teacher preparation programs might incorporate structured opportunities for preservice teachers to practice shifting between roles—as conductor, facilitator, and collaborator—while reflecting on how their decisions shape student participation and meaning-making. Additionally, engaging preservice teachers in small ensemble and solo contexts alongside large ensemble work can help them experience how authority and agency are distributed differently across settings. In this way, music teacher educators can support the development of pedagogical approaches that are not simply student-centered or teacher-directed, but are responsive to the relational and contextual nature of musical learning within the Music Classroom Ecosystem.

The findings also highlight the importance of preparing future teachers for the emotional and relational dimensions of ensemble leadership. Students described trust as something that emerged gradually through consistency, transparency, and follow-through. These qualities are rarely foregrounded in preservice curricula, yet they appear central to sustaining learning ecosystems in which students are willing to take risks and assume responsibility. Structured opportunities for reflection on relational practice—such as guided observation, mentorship dialogue, and analysis of ensemble dynamics—may help preservice teachers develop awareness of how trust, authority, and care operate within musical communities.

Finally, this study suggests that music teacher education should prepare candidates to think developmentally rather than sequentially about learning. Students' trajectories were characterized by recursion, re-entry, and renegotiation of responsibility rather than linear progression toward independence. Framing growth as adaptive and context-sensitive may help future educators interpret hesitation, consolidation, or withdrawal not as failure, but as part of an ongoing developmental process. Such preparation positions preservice teachers to design learning environments that remain responsive to students' changing needs while sustaining the long-term health of the Music Classroom Ecosystem.

Structural and Policy Implications: Fragility, Leadership, and Sustainability

While the Music Classroom Ecosystem demonstrated resilience, student narratives also revealed its fragility—particularly in relation to leadership stability and institutional support. Across sites, students emphasized the importance of consistent relational structures and clear communication. Disruptions such as leadership changes or

program instability were experienced not merely as logistical challenges, but as threats to trust, belonging, and identity.

This fragility was especially pronounced in urban contexts. Students described music programs as central sources of stability, meaning, and emotional support—often functioning as what some students characterized as a “family” within the school. For these students, ensemble participation was not ancillary to schooling; it was foundational to attendance, persistence, and well-being. In such contexts, abrupt changes in leadership or unexplained transitions carried heightened emotional stakes, sometimes leaving students questioning whether the relationships they had built were ever secure. In this sense, ecosystem fragility was not simply a function of resources, but of relational disruption—underscoring how leadership continuity and institutional care function as equity issues rather than administrative concerns alone (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Findings suggest that transparency during leadership transitions may be critical to sustaining ecosystem health. When students felt informed and acknowledged—particularly when departing directors communicated openly—trust was more likely to endure. Conversely, silence or sudden absence risked leaving students feeling abandoned, destabilizing the sense of continuity upon which the ecosystem depended. These patterns point toward an ethical responsibility for educators and institutions to attend carefully to how transitions are managed, especially in programs serving vulnerable populations (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

At the policy level, these findings raise questions about how music programs are valued and supported within broader educational systems. Sustainability depends not

only on individual educators, but on structural conditions that allow programs to persist through change. Equally central to these structural conditions is time itself. Ecological learning environments require duration in order for trust, responsibility, and identity to develop and recur meaningfully. When music programs are subject to constant scheduling disruption, staffing turnover, or short-term funding cycles, the relational continuity necessary for ecological balance is undermined. Students cannot experience re-entry, recursive growth, or sustained belonging when programs are repeatedly reset or destabilized. In this sense, time functions as an invisible policy condition: without sufficient continuity, even well-resourced programs struggle to function ecologically. Music education, as experienced by students in this study, depends not only on what is provided, but on how long relational structures are allowed to endure. Resource allocation, staffing stability, and institutional recognition of music programs as relational spaces all shape the viability of the ecosystem. Without such support, even well-cultivated ecosystems remain fragile.

At the same time, students demonstrated adaptive capacity. Peer support, shared norms, and collective memory often sustained engagement through periods of instability. However, adaptability was not infinite. Sustainability required ongoing cultivation, underscoring that ecosystems must be intentionally supported rather than assumed to endure on goodwill alone.

Implications for the Profession: Educators as Ecosystem Stewards

This study demonstrates that secondary music-educators function not only as instructors, but as stewards of complex relational ecosystems. Teaching within this framework requires simultaneous attention to musical outcomes, emotional climate, and

developmental timing. The work extends beyond repertoire and performance to include sustaining trust, managing responsibility, and supporting students through cycles of growth and re-entry.

Importantly, the findings caution against romanticized narratives of resilience. While students often described music classrooms as safe and transformative spaces, these experiences were contingent upon relational consistency and care. Educators play a central role in shaping whether ecosystems remain generative or become destabilized, particularly during periods of change.

The Music Classroom Ecosystem framework provides a conceptual model for understanding how learning environments function over time. By recognizing community, motivation, and agency as interdependent processes rather than isolated goals, music educators can design experiences that honor students' developmental realities. Such an approach foregrounds belonging, sustains effort, and invites responsibility—not as outcomes to be achieved, but as conditions to be cultivated (Palmer, 1998).

Chapter Synthesis

This chapter interpreted the findings of the study to examine what the Music Classroom Ecosystem reveals about learning, development, and sustainability in secondary music education. This study reconceptualizes community, motivation, and agency as relational, recursive processes shaped by time, context, and interaction. Students moved through the ecosystem in dynamic ways, revisiting familiar spaces with altered perspectives and responsibilities rather than progressing through linear stages.

Effective music education emerges from relational systems that support trust, sustain effort, and invite meaningful participation. When these systems are balanced, students not only develop musical skill, but also come to understand themselves as capable, responsible contributors within and beyond the music classroom.

The final chapter turns to reflection and closure. Viewed through this lens, the Music Classroom Ecosystem emerges not merely as a site of instruction, but as a developmental commons—one whose vitality depends on time, trust, and the careful stewardship of relationships that allow students to become contributors and return as such.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This study examined how secondary students experience learning within music classrooms through the interrelated domains of community, motivation, and agency. Guided by the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework, the dissertation traced how these dimensions were enacted across ensemble contexts and over time, attending to students' narratives of belonging, persistence, responsibility, and growth. This study challenges models of learning that conceptualize development as linear progression or the isolation of its components. Instead, it approaches music education as a dynamic system shaped by relationships, structures, and sustained participation over time.

The preceding chapters presented findings, synthesis, and implications that together illuminate how Music Classroom Ecosystems function and endure. Student narratives revealed that experiences of belonging often served as an entry point into motivation, that motivation supported the development of agency, and that emerging agency reshaped how students re-entered and contributed to musical communities. These processes were not uniform or sequential, but recursive, with students moving among ensemble contexts and developmental positions in ways that reflected both individual trajectories and collective conditions.

This concluding chapter brings the study to a close by revisiting its central insights and situating them within the broader aims of music education research and practice. It begins with a summary of core findings, synthesizing the patterns that emerged across student narratives and reaffirming the contributions of the Music

Classroom Ecosystem framework. The chapter then addresses considerations of transferability and limitation, acknowledging the contextual nature of the study and the boundaries of its claims. From there, it outlines directions for future research that may extend or complicate ecological understandings of music learning across settings. Finally, the chapter concludes with reflections from the teacher-researcher, considering how conducting this study has reshaped understandings of teaching, learning, and responsibility within the ecosystem examined.

Taken together, this chapter does not seek to offer a definitive account of music learning, but to close one inquiry while opening others. By foregrounding student experience and attending to the interdependence of community, motivation, and agency, the study contributes a perspective that invites continued reflection on how music classrooms can be designed, sustained, and reimaged as spaces of collective growth and individual becoming.

Summary of Core Insights

Across interviews, students consistently described music learning as movement rather than progression. Learning was not framed as a steady climb toward independence or mastery, but as participation in a system that required ongoing negotiation between individual responsibility and collective reliance. Students moved repeatedly between ensemble contexts, revisiting familiar musical spaces with altered perspectives, increased awareness, and evolving responsibilities.

Belonging emerged as a foundational condition for participation, yet it was not experienced as immediate or guaranteed. Students described trust as something built over time through consistency, reliability, and repeated shared experience. Language such as

“eventually,” “over time,” and “looking back” permeated interviews, underscoring that safety and belonging functioned as outcomes of sustained participation rather than prerequisites for entry. This temporal dimension of trust shaped students’ willingness to persist through challenge and to remain engaged during moments of uncertainty. Motivation was most often described as relational rather than intrinsic or extrinsic in isolation. Students emphasized practicing and preparing not primarily to achieve personal success or avoid failure, but to meet obligations to peers. Effort mattered because others were listening, relying, and working alongside them. Particularly in small ensemble contexts, motivation was sustained through shared responsibility and immediate consequence, reinforcing persistence even when musical difficulty or frustration emerged.

Agency developed through exposure to responsibility and risk, yet it did not manifest uniformly as visibility or leadership. Students narrated agency as authorship, judgment, and ownership of musical outcomes, often expressed through attentiveness, restraint, and timing. Knowing when not to act—when to listen, support, or step back—was described as an equally important expression of agency. As agency expanded, students frequently described returning to ensemble spaces with increased empathy and responsibility, positioning agency as a resource that circulated back into community rather than as an endpoint beyond it.

Together, these insights suggest that community, motivation, and agency functioned as recursive processes. The Music Classroom Ecosystem framework offers a way of understanding learning as relational development unfolding over time,

foregrounding movement, temporality, and interdependence as defining features of musical learning.

Considerations of Context, Transferability, and Limitation

As a qualitative inquiry grounded in student narrative, the findings of this study are contextually situated rather than universally generalizable. The Music Classroom Ecosystems examined were shaped by specific institutional structures, ensemble configurations, leadership practices, and community conditions. While patterns of belonging, motivation, and agency emerged consistently across interviews, their expression and sustainability varied in relation to context.

In particular, students in urban school settings described music programs as carrying heightened emotional and relational significance. For these students, ensemble participation often functioned as a primary source of stability, identity, and support within the school experience. As a result, disruptions such as leadership changes or program instability were experienced not merely as logistical challenges, but as relational ruptures. This fragility does not suggest deficiency within urban programs, but rather highlights how ecosystem health is closely tied to continuity, care, and institutional support—conditions that operate as equity issues rather than administrative concerns alone.

At the same time, students across contexts demonstrated adaptive capacity through peer support, shared norms, and collective memory. However, adaptability was not infinite. The sustainability of the ecosystem depended upon ongoing cultivation rather than assumption, underscoring that even strong relational systems require intentional stewardship.

The study is also bounded by its focus on secondary ensemble-based music education within a curricular framework. Student experiences beyond graduation, perspectives from educators, and long-term developmental trajectories were not within the scope of this inquiry. These limitations do not diminish the study's contributions, but instead frame opportunities for future research.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several directions for continued inquiry into ecological and narrative approaches to music education. One promising avenue involves examining how the Music Classroom Ecosystem framework functions in musical settings beyond U.S. curricular models. In many countries, including the United Kingdom, music education occurs primarily through after-school, community-based, or voluntary programs rather than as part of the formal school day. Preliminary reflections from participants familiar with such contexts suggest that motivation, belonging, and agency may operate differently when participation is opt-in rather than required.

Future research might explore how ecological dynamics shift when students choose to enter musical communities rather than being assigned to them, how authority and leadership are negotiated in less hierarchical structures, and how agency develops when institutional expectations differ. Comparative studies across national and cultural contexts could deepen understanding of how ecosystems are shaped by structural design as much as by relational practice.

Additional research could examine longitudinal trajectories, tracing how students carry ecological experiences beyond secondary school into higher education, careers, or community music-making. Investigating educator perspectives during leadership

transitions, as well as the emotional labor associated with sustaining musical communities, may further illuminate the relational demands placed upon both students and teachers within these ecosystems.

Researcher Reflection and Positionality

Conducting this study as a teacher-researcher positioned the author within the ecosystem under examination. This proximity afforded deep insight into students' experiences, while also requiring ongoing reflexivity regarding interpretation, representation, and ethical responsibility. Decisions to exclude certain narratives or experiences were made intentionally, recognizing that closeness can introduce bias as well as care.

Engaging with students' stories of belonging, persistence, and vulnerability reshaped the author's understanding of music teaching as relational stewardship rather than instructional delivery alone. The study reinforced that responsibility within the ecosystem extends beyond musical outcomes to include emotional presence, transparency, and attentiveness to developmental timing. Teaching, in this sense, involves sustaining conditions that allow students not only to perform, but to remain, return, and grow.

Closing Synthesis

This study contributes an ecological perspective on music learning that centers student experience and honors the complexity of ensemble-based education. Community, motivation, and agency emerged not as isolated constructs, but as interdependent processes continually reshaped through participation, time, and relationship. Students

learned music while simultaneously learning how to belong, persist, and contribute meaningfully to others.

Viewed through this lens, the Music Classroom Ecosystem emerges not merely as a site of instruction, but as a developmental commons—one whose vitality depends on time, trust, and the careful stewardship of relationships that allow students to become, and return as, contributors. In closing this inquiry, the study affirms that music classrooms matter not only for what students produce, but for who they are able to become within them. In doing so, this study positions the Music Classroom Ecosystem as a framework for rethinking how music learning is understood, enacted, and sustained across time.

APPENDIX A
INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Date: November 6, 2025

Study #: IRB-FY2026-78

Study Title: FROM BELONGING TO BECOMING: NAVIGATING THE ECOSYSTEM OF COMMUNITY, MOTIVATION, AND AGENCY IN SECONDARY MUSIC CLASSROOMS

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Approved

Research Team:

Thomas Torrento

Joseph Shively

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to involve no more than minimal risk to participants and to be Approved, with the following expedited categories:

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Notes for Researcher(s):

This submission includes the following approved documents:

- Recruitment Letter
- Date-Stamped Parental Permission V. 10/30/2025
- Date-Stamped Adult Consent V. 10/30/2025
- Date-Stamped Child Assent V. 10/30/2025
- Focus Group Guide
- Interview Protocol
- Metaphor Prompts
- Observation Protocol

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the [Submission Details](#) page under [Letters](#) and [Attachments](#), respectively.

The IRB approved version of the consent document must be used in consenting participants. Federal regulations require that each participant receive a copy of the consent document unless a waiver is granted by the IRB. Signed consent forms must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project. Please remember that informed consent is a process that continues throughout the project, starting with recruitment and assurance of participant understanding of the project, and followed by a signed consent form when applicable.

Permission from Research Sites:

Please note the following:

- This IRB approval letter means that the research has met the federal criteria for approval per 45 CFR 46.111 Criteria for IRB Approval of Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your records.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to the approved project must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Incidents:

All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others, serious and unexpected adverse events, non-compliance issues and/or serious complaints regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB by submitting an INCIDENT report.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE PERMISSION LETTER

ers you viewed previously

Permission Form

Study Title: FROM BELONGING TO BECOMING: NAVIGATING THE ECOSYSTEM OF COMMUNITY, MOTIVATION, AND AGENCY IN SECONDARY MUSIC CLASSROOMS

Principal Investigator: Thomas A. Torrento

Institution: Oakland University – School of Music, Theatre, and Dance

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Joseph Shively

Purpose of the Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study exploring how students experience community, motivation, and agency in secondary music classrooms. This study seeks to better understand how ensemble environments support belonging, persistence, and independence among music students. The results will inform future teaching practices and help improve the design of instrumental music programs.

What Your Child Will Be Asked to Do

Participation will involve:

- Interviews and/or Focus Groups: Students may be asked to share stories about their experiences in band or orchestra. These sessions will last approximately 60 minutes and may be audio recorded with consent.
- Share your ideas through creative activities, like drawing or using metaphors to describe your music experiences. (approximately 15-30 minutes)
- Classroom Observations: The researcher will observe selected rehearsals and performances, taking written notes and, when permitted, recording short video or audio clips for later analysis.
- Review of Archival Recordings: With permission, the researcher may use existing video recordings from prior classroom rehearsals or performances that include your child, as part of extended data analysis.
- **Participation is expected to take between 1 and 1.5 hours, and all activities will be completed within one day**

Participation is entirely voluntary, and your child may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Recordings and Data Handling

- Types of Recordings: Audio from interviews and focus groups; video from classroom observations and existing (archival) recordings.
- Use of Recordings: Recordings will be transcribed for thematic analysis and may be used for illustrative, de-identified excerpts in the researcher's dissertation, academic publications, or conference presentations.
- Data Retention: All recordings and transcriptions will be securely stored on a password-protected device for five years after the completion of the study, then permanently deleted.
- Confidentiality: No identifying names, images, or personal information will appear in any reports or publications. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and schools.

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Potential Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks associated with this study beyond those experienced in typical classroom participation. Students may benefit from reflecting on their learning and contributing to research that helps strengthen music education practices.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your child may skip any question, refuse recording, or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Choosing not to participate will not affect grades, class standing, or participation in music programs.

Confidentiality

All information gathered will be treated as confidential. Data will be coded using participant numbers, and any identifying information will be kept separate from research data.

Contact Information

If you have questions about the study, please contact:

- Thomas Torrento (Principal Investigator) – torrento@oakland.edu

- Dr. Joseph Shively (Faculty Advisor) – shively@oakland.edu

For questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (248) 370-2762 or haddad@oakland.edu

Parental Permission Statement

I have read the information above and understand what my child's participation will involve. I understand that participation is voluntary and that my child may withdraw at any time. I give permission for my child to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian Name (Print): _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____

Child's Name (Print): _____

Child's Age: _____

School: _____

I give permission for my child to be recorded (audio/video) as part of this research:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

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