


# Chapter 19

## An Ethnomusicological Approach to Culture in Culturally Relevant Pedagogies and Curricula

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### ABSTRACT

*Although the frameworks of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Culturally Responsive Curriculum tend to reduce educational disparities, pedagogical approaches focused on minoritized populations now draw controversy. This chapter examines the essentializing potential of historical notions of “culture” used in these frameworks and proposes instead an ethnomusicological definition that conceives culture as a malleable collection of habits shared by different individuals and groups. This definition avoids equating culture with specific traits of minoritized people and helps valorize collaborative teaching and learning. After situating Culturally Relevant Pedagogy within the intellectual history of “culture,” and overviewing the field of ethnomusicology and its contributions to the topic, the chapter illustrates ethnomusicological applications to culturally responsive teaching and curriculum, drawing from the author’s teaching collaborations at a large Hispanic Serving Institution in the United States.*

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## INTRODUCTION

After Gloria Ladson-Billings advanced the notion of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to meet the educational needs of underachieving African American students in public schools in the United States (1994; 1995), Geneva Gay similarly proposed Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) to reach more equitable educational outcomes among students of color more generally (2000). Concepts of culturally appropriate teaching, under different names, have since expanded to respond to the educational needs of members of other minoritized groups in the U.S. (even high-achieving ones) including LGBTQ+ students, and students in rural communities (Fugate et al., 2021). Within this context, Culturally Responsive Curriculum (CRC) emerged to address structural components of educational inequities by reconceiving curricula taught in schools as well as curricula used to train teachers and school administrators, all with the goal of achieving greater inclusivity of minoritized populations in educational settings (Marshall and Khalifa, 2018; Pill et al., 2022; Villegas and Lucas, 2002).

While efforts to implement culturally responsive teaching and curriculum have somewhat improved educational outcomes, disparities persist, and pedagogical approaches focused on minoritized individuals and communities now draw controversy. In recent years, rhetoric has surfaced claiming that highlighting structural inequities pits people of different backgrounds against each other and may even result in discrimination against non-minoritized students; these claims have resulted in proposals in several state legislatures to ban Critical Race Theory (the study of how race is constructed, codified, and reified through social structures such as law) from primary and secondary schools (Sawchuk, 2021). In Texas, where I teach, bills began to target higher education in 2023, proposing to limit discussions on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality in college classrooms (McGee, 2023). The situation calls for a reexamination of the goals, methods, and theories at the basis of culturally responsive teaching and curriculum, all of which are increasingly scrutinized and misrepresented.

As an instructor at a large Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) who draws inspiration from CRP (Amado, 2023), and as a music scholar who studies and teaches “culture,” I wish to contribute theoretical insights on this very concept to advance more nuanced approaches to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Teaching, and Curriculum. Regardless of possible motivations and effects, the present opposition to culturally responsive pedagogies reveals an uncomfortable problem in CRP discourse: the idea that “culture” refers only or mostly to minoritized and marginalized individuals and groups. At present, whether understood as malleable and dynamic or as a critical aspect of individual or group identity (Gay, 2000; Zilliacus, H. et al., 2017) culture effectively functions as a euphemism for race, ethnicity, gender

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