

“CHOIR MIGHT ACTUALLY SAVE YOUR LIFE”: A CONVERGENT MIXED METHODS
STUDY ON ADOLESCENTS’ ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SINGING AND
MIDDLE LEVEL VOCAL MUSIC

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“CHOIR MIGHT ACTUALLY SAVE YOUR LIFE”: A CONVERGENT MIXED METHODS
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University of Nebraska – Lincoln, 2019

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As students progress through grade levels in school settings, the instructional frameworks through which music education might occur become more numerous and varied. Most students are provided general music courses at the elementary level; however, current approaches to middle level music instruction rely on the ensemble approach or the general music model (Cronenberg, 2017; Wayman 2005). To serve the needs of students who desire a breadth of music education, schools have explored composition and theory; music technology; and guitar, keyboard, harmonizing instruments courses (NAfME, 2014). Yet, the ensemble method of teaching music permeates schools throughout the United States (Heuser, 2011; Kelly 2016).

Currently, scheduling models for secondary music classes are inconsistent. Vocal music is offered both as a curricular class that meets during the school day and also as an extracurricular activity that meets outside of the school day. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of eighth grade students toward singing and choir participation in relation to gender, voice mutation stage, and method of music instruction. Within this study, method of music instruction includes curricular vocal music instruction, curricular instrumental ensemble instruction, curricular music instruction and extra-curricular choral ensemble, and curricular instrumental and curricular vocal ensemble instruction.

The results of this mixed methods study suggest that the gap between instrumental and vocal music participation continues to widen at the middle level. Curricular instrumental ensembles significantly affect attitudes and perceptions of singing and vocal music in middle school. Gender has a significant effect on singing interest in male students ($M=2.19$, $SD=.54$) and the retention of male singers is still a priority in the middle school classroom. Classroom singing activities continue to have both positive and negative effects on singing experiences and students tend to feel more comfortable with out of school singing experiences. Yet, adolescents find something unique in choral singing in school that is not otherwise present in other environments.

Keywords: middle level, vocal music, curriculum, vocal maturation, attitudes, perceptions

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Dedication

This dissertation and all it represents is lovingly dedicated to Lillian, Declan, and Liam; may you three always be relentless in pursuit of your life goals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“A critical component of school knowledge is not only what is taught, both explicitly and implicitly, but also what is not taught.”

– *Growing Musicians* (Sweet, 2016)

Statement of the Problem

Between the ages of 10-15, young people experience “rapid and profound personal changes” (NMSA, 2010, p. 5). With these changes, students experience difficulties in singing on a technical and emotional level (Cooksey, 1977, 1992, 2000; Freer, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2012; Gackle, 2006, 2011; Kennedy, 2004; Killian, 1997, 1999; Leborgne, 2016; Sweet, 2010, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Thurman & Klitzke, 1994; Welch, 2016). These difficulties can either be accompanied by positive or negative learning experiences. In order for a student to find value in learning, he or she must first be given the opportunity to experience learning on a continuous basis.

At the middle school level, general music is often considered an exploratory subject. More specifically, an exploratory course has several functions:

First, an exploratory program enables students to discover their particular abilities, talents, interests, values, and preferences. This self-knowledge helps students to prepare for adult life, not only in terms of vocation, but also as family members and citizens. Second, courses and activities are taught so as to reveal opportunities for making contributions to society. Finally, exploratory experiences acquaint students with enriching, healthy leisure-time pursuits, such as lifetime physical activities, involvement in the arts, and social service. Looked at in this way, opportunities exist for all areas of the middle level curriculum to be exploratory. (Brazee, 2000, p. 3)

To highlight the last sentence of the quote above, opportunities do exist for all areas of the middle level curriculum to be exploratory, however, Poor (1999) found “...the exploratory concept placed music classes in a subordinate educational role” (p. 201). Moreover, it is more common for middle schools to have instrumental music courses that are not considered an exploratory course than vocal music courses. The core issue of the current problem with vocal music in middle level education is equity.

In arts education, music course offerings in the public school become more complex as grade levels increase. Most students are provided general music courses at the elementary level; however, current approaches to middle level music instruction may include a performance (ensemble) or non-performance (general music) approach (Cronenberg, 2017; Heuser, 2011; McAnally, 2016; Wayman 2005). Although both approaches are included in the newly revised 2014 National Music Standards, many middle school scheduling models emphasize choosing an instrument and participation in an ensemble. In this instance, instrument is defined as the human voice or a traditional band/orchestra instrument. To serve the needs of students who desire a breadth of music education, schools have explored composition and theory; music technology; and guitar, keyboard, harmonizing instruments courses (NAfME, 2014). Yet, the ensemble model of teaching music permeates schools throughout the United States (Heuser, 2011; Kelly 2016; West, 2018; Williams, 2011)

Currently, scheduling models are inconsistent. The absence of consistent vocal music courses at the middle level is problematic (Hamann, 2007). Adolescents can be overwhelmed by challenges of balance between academic courses, extracurricular activities, and paid work (Crosnoe & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2011). To provide a variety of singing opportunities for middle level students, vocal music is often offered both as a class that meets during the school day and

as an extracurricular activity. Although a curricular subject and an extracurricular activity may possess some shared outcomes, a curricular subject will have observed and assessed learning objectives. Those unfamiliar with curricular offerings of vocal music and extracurricular vocal music activities tend to view these two groups as fulfilling the same purpose, therefore justifying the limited curricular exposure to vocal music in public schools.

The disparate nature of vocal music requirements affects adolescent attitudes and perceptions toward singing at the middle school level (Hamann, 2007; Wicks, 2015). Middle school students are at risk of developing poor vocal technique or dislike for singing due to limited classroom experience. To better understand how scheduling, attitudes, and perceptions have changed overtime, I will examine the evolution of the middle school model and explain the shift in the vocal music paradigm as a result of this model.

At the beginning of the 21st century, research-based models of middle school practice increased thus motivating many school districts to adopt the middle school model (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016). Initially, the middle school model was conceived in 1963 by William M. Alexander who desired a change in the curriculum development for middle level learners. In the current middle school model, emphasis is placed on building 21st century skill and cross curricular units also known as interdisciplinary teams (Alexander, 1968; Alexander & McEwin, 1989; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003; McEwin & Greene, 2010). The interdisciplinary concept gave birth to general music courses being labeled academic connection courses or exploratory courses. The original purpose of an exploratory course (Brazee, 2000) is contrary to some current definitions which include exploratory courses as being supplement classes to core academic classes such as math, science, and English. Although courses are labeled exploratory, it should not be assumed that they are not

academic subjects. In fact, “exploration is an attitude and approach, not a classification of content” (NMSA, 2010, p. 20). Yet, not all music courses are considered exploratory subjects. Instrumental music, for example, remains a subject that is a curricular elective. Harrison (2006) noticed that “...vocal ensembles and vocal training are considered second or third string to instrumental ensembles and training” (as cited by Wicks, 2015, p. 35). Although this perception may be due to investment in instruments and sequential approaches to instrumental training, scheduling choices for vocal and instrumental music courses can influence the attitudes of middle level students, especially attitudes regarding vocal music as a curricular subject.

Middle school student perspectives of vocal music can be summarized into four categories: vocational, academic, belongingness, and agency (Wayman, 2005). Students who have an effective vocal music teacher and/or a peer support system often describe positive singing experiences (Miller, 1993; Mizener, 1993; Poor, 1999; Wayman, 2004, 2005). However, student attitudes change with grade level.

Grade level is a predictor of attitudes toward vocal music. As grade level increases, student interest in singing decreases (Mizener, 1993; Philips & Aichison, 1998). This may also be due to stages of vocal maturation most commonly experienced in students between the ages 8-15 years of age (Ashley, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013; Cooksey, 1977, 1992, 2000; Freer, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010, 2012, 2015; Gackle, 1991, 2000, 2006, 2011; Killian, 1997, 1999; Leborgne, 2016; Sweet, 2010, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Although voice maturation may initially cause a negative response to vocal music, singing instruction often has a positive effect on students’ attitudes toward singing (Philips & Aichison, 1998).

To better understand what students’ elect to take in middle school, it is recommended that one gain student perspective on scheduling needs. Listening to the perceptions of adolescents

toward vocal music can encourage “choral music to become part of the “self” of adolescent boys and girls” (Freer, 2006, p.77). Freer (2010) describes the term “self” within the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) which focuses on “...a person’s impressions of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming” (p. 17). In the middle school model, a student’s freedom of choice and exploration of various school subjects allows the adolescent to develop a positive sense of self (NMSA, 2010). A current practice that may have a negative effect on perceptions of self as a singer is enrolling students in elective vocal music courses without freedom of choice (Demorest, 2000; Sweet, 2010). This forced enrollment may manifest into students declaring they hate singing (Demorest, 2000; Cronenberg, 2017). Adversely, students who want to participate in the elective vocal music courses are often belittled for their efforts preventing interested students from actively participating during curricular offerings of vocal music. However, these same students will thrive in extracurricular choirs where they are praised by their peers (Sweet, 2010). Overall, the classroom environment is affected by student perceptions as much as the environment affects the student (Pintrich, Cross, Kozma, & McKeachie, 1986).

Gender issues in middle school vocal music often start with the question, why are choral ensembles dominated by female membership in secondary vocal classrooms? (Freer, 2010, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2007, 2006; Harrison, 2009, 2004; Nannen, 2017; Sweet, 2010). When comparing attitudes toward singing of male band and choir students, male choral students indicated a stronger interest in singing, while male instrumental students indicated more confidence in their abilities as singers (Killian & Wayman, 2010). The voice changing experience has historically been identified as a challenge for singing during adolescence (Behnke & Brown, 1885; Cooksey, 1977, 1992, 2000; Gackle, 1991, 2000, 2006, 2011; Weiss, 1950).

However, researchers more frequently focus on the male changing voice and neglect to include female singers (Sweet, 2016a). Creating awareness in both male and female students during the laryngeal growth process has a positive effect on retention in vocal music courses (Cooksey, 1977; Gackle, 1985, 1991, 2006; Killian & Wayman, 2010; Williams et al., 1996). With this understanding, teachers can incorporate classroom strategies such as vocal mapping, a vocal range chart to track changes in the mutating voice, to display growth and development. However, strategies vary according to teacher perspective.

Teacher perspectives regarding curriculum and pedagogy in middle school music are varied. Some believe in a general music approach while others endorse the ensemble approach (Cronenberg, 2017; Heuser, 2011; McAnally, 2016; Wayman 2005). The ensemble approach focuses on the students' understanding of their own technical skill in the context of a performance group whereas the general music approach focuses on skill development in a wide variety of musical experiences (Abril, 2016; NAFME, 2014). Both approaches are represented in the revised 2014 standards provided by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME, 2014), but the standards are currently voluntary which gives teachers the power to determine the curricular music experience for their students. Teacher preference on classroom approaches has a significant effect on the attitudes of students (Droe, 2008). In fact, teachers can influence a student's decision on whether or not to enroll in a vocal music course (Freer, 2006; Miller, 1993).

Although the literature covers attitudes and singing skill in elementary and high school students, gender issues in middle school vocal music, and teacher perspective of the ensemble v. general music approach, few studies address middle level perspective of vocal music as a

curricular subject. There is need to extend the current body of research to include these new variables.

Limitations of Existing Research

There is a lack of studies which focus on singing through adolescence, especially through the middle school years (Loui, Demorest, Pfordresher, & Iyer, 2015). Although there is literature that covers attitudes and singing skill in elementary and secondary students (i.e. Meizner, 1993), vocal mutation issues in middle school vocal music (i.e. Cooksey, 2000; Gackle, 2006), voice quality of vocal and instrumental middle school students (i.e. Killian & Wayman, 2010), inadequacies in national standards regarding voice maturation of adolescents (i.e. Cooksey & Welch, 1998), and teacher perspective of the ensemble v. general music approach (i.e. Cronenberg 2017), few studies address voice maturation of middle school students while simultaneously inquiring about the students' attitudes and perceptions of vocal music as a curricular subject.

Additionally, there is a need for more research incorporating the student voice (Draves, Cruse, Mills, & Sweet, 2008; Kratus, 1992). Studies that incorporate the student voice provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning experiences in the classroom and "...take more responsibility for their education because is it no longer something being done to them but rather something they do" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 10). There is a body of mixed methods research that utilizes the student voice with instrumental music participants (i.e., Kupers, van Dijk, van Geert, & McPherson, 2015; Riley, MacLeod, & Libera, 2016), but there is still a need to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data concerning vocal music participants (DeAmbrose & Howell Smith, 2018).

Methodological Approach

Currently, music education researchers prefer quantitative research design over qualitative and mixed methods approaches (Sims, Lordo, & Phelps, 2016; Yarbrough, 2002). Quantitative research can provide an objective measure of a research question as it “makes use of measurement, statistical principles, and models to verify the phenomenon being studied” (Phelps et al., 2005, p. 186). As experimental research is the most frequent form of gathering data in other core subjects, music education researchers have followed similar paths (Asmus & Radocy, 2006). In a recent review of submissions to JRME, quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods research designs were included in publication; however, a large percentage of these articles were quantitative (65.95%) (Sims et al., 2016). In another review of the *Journal of Research in Music Education* (JRME), from 1953-2002, only 16 out of 1,124 articles published in this fifty-year time span were qualitative (Yarbrough, 2002).

Qualitative research paradigms provide participants the ability to respond to the art itself in “deeper” ways (Bailey & Van Harken, 2014). Since qualitative research is fundamentally based on how we make sense of phenomena in our world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), using music as a means of communication encourages one to respond in ways that would normally be ineffable (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Reimer, 2003). To this end, reflexivity is necessary to explain any past experience of the researcher that may affect the human as the instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although the subjective view of the researcher may be beneficial, it can also be viewed as a weakness when assessing the credibility of the study.

Mixed methods research is a means to extract the assets from both qualitative and quantitative research to obtain a complete understanding of a research purpose (Creswell &

Plano Clark, 2018; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). A study that addresses student perspective and how these perspectives may change due to voice maturation stage necessitates a mixed methods design to allow for a more complete analysis of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Regardless of which design is applied to a study, “trustworthy research conclusions come only from those studies characterized by a sound design and a careful analysis of the collected data” (Huck, 2008, p. xviii). For the purposes of this study, quantitative information will be gathered to understand the perceptions of middle level students toward vocal music and qualitative information to understand how vocal maturation influences student perceptions of curricular vocal music offerings. Data will then be integrated to highlight the strengths from each research design.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of eighth grade students toward singing and choir participation in relation to gender, voice mutation stage and method of music instruction. I conducted a convergent mixed methods study where quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed concurrently and then merged within a fixed design to “generate inference grounded in both sets of results” (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016, p. 110). I collected quantitative and qualitative data in two separate phases (i.e. Fitzpatrick, 2011). In phase one, quantitative data were collected on singing interest and voice maturation stage on 8th grade students in a small Midwestern school district (n=597) in four groups (curricular vocal music instruction, curricular instrumental ensemble instruction, curricular music instruction and extracurricular choral ensemble, curricular instrumental and vocal instruction) to assess whether enrollment in curricular offerings of vocal music affect

student perceptions of singing. Phase two included qualitative data in the form of interviews of certain important subgroups: voice maturation stage (unchanged, changing, or changed) and exposure to curricular offerings of vocal music. Voice maturation stage was based on the Gackle (1991) and Cooksey (2000) stages. Curricular opportunities for vocal music were identified by the district supervisor of music. Students were identified as being enrolled in programs with consistent curricular offerings of vocal music. The combination of voice maturation stage and curricular vocal music offerings created a six-way matrix in which one student in each category (n=12) was chosen to participate in interviews. The focus of this study was aimed at hearing the voices of students in various levels of voice maturation and in various course scheduling school environments.

Research Questions

Research questions are the foundation of quality MMR studies (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). As such, this dissertation is focused on answering the following five research questions:

Quantitative Questions

1. Is there a difference in attitudes toward singing among eighth grade students in four treatment conditions (curricular vocal music instruction, curricular instrumental ensemble instruction, curricular music instruction and extracurricular choral ensemble, curricular instrumental and vocal instruction) as measured by an adapted Mizener (1993) singing interest survey?
2. Is there a difference in attitudes toward singing among eighth grade students based on gender as measured by an adapted Mizener (1993) singing interest survey?
3. Is there an interaction between instruction groups and gender among eighth grade students as measured by an adapted Mizener (1993) singing interest survey?