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# Social constructionism in the middle school chorus: a collaborative approach

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Dissertation

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CHORUS:  
A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, who taught me the importance of hard work and dedication.

To my students, who have taught me many things; may you always love music.

To Jana, Karin and Tawnya who guided me through my journey.

## **Acknowledgements**

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**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CHORUS:**

**A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH**

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**ABSTRACT**

Middle school programs occupy a unique place in choral music education. This study builds upon and makes a unique contribution to the body of literature in choral music education by introducing critical participatory action research into the social ecology (Shotter, 1993) of the middle school choral classroom during the “regular” school day with a non-select choral ensemble. I employed critical participatory action research methodology—a collaborative approach to understanding specific problems in education—because it is a systematic research process conducted for the purpose of generating knowledge that is valid and vital for the well being of learners, communities of learners, and for promoting social change (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1987; Mills, 2010). The purpose of this critical participatory action research study was to create a collaborative model of practice in order to make sixth grade choral music education more relevant and meaningful for learners. In order to accomplish this, I created a constructionist learning environment, applying domains of relevance set forth by Gergen (2001), and examined how this model of practice impacted the pedagogical practices of 19 sixth grade chorus students and their chorus teacher over the period of one semester. All participants collected evidence in the

form of video recordings, interviews, journals and portfolios. All evidence was considered in light of the changes that occurred—individually and collectively—in pedagogical and organizational practices and in regard to the original research questions. This report illuminates ways that constructionist principles might be used to create a collaborative model of middle school choral music education and the pedagogical and social practices that emerge when beginning sixth grade students and their chorus teacher share responsibility for teaching and learning.

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## Chapter One: Constructionist Consciousness

*I think I have always been a singer. Though I remember little else about my early childhood, I can still recall my grandmother and I singing “Oopsie la, la” while she bounced me up and down on her lap. When I was in kindergarten, my sister and I could reproduce the two-part harmonies we heard on old 78-RPM records of “Patience and Prudence.” By middle school my sister and I were teaching ourselves how to play piano and guitar so we could accompany our singing. We sang songs we learned at school, at camp, and on the radio, adding harmonies that we made up.*

*Our family moved to Mississippi the year I entered high school. Singing was the catalyst for social acceptance. I did not really enjoy singing in the school chorus because the songs were mostly slow and religious, but I organized and helped run a girl’s pop group called the “Triple Trio.” I had my first professional “gig” in high school singing with a trio that played at country barn dances on Saturday nights. After that I sang in rock bands. During the summer our family participated in the summer showcase at Ole Miss and we sang songs from musical theater.*

*By the time I started college I had an enormous vocal repertoire. I knew children’s songs, popular songs, rock songs, folk songs, country songs, and show music. My Dad wrote songs and played the old jazz and big band songs so I knew those songs too. I decided to major in voice.*

*At my first formal voice lesson, the teacher gave me “O del mio dolce ardor” by Gluck and explained that we would be singing music in the bel canto style. Gluck’s song had nothing in common with any of the music I already knew; the musical style was as foreign as the language. My teacher expected me to be able to read Western notation, which I did not know how to do very well. In order to work toward a degree in voice, it became apparent I would need to dedicate a large amount of study and practice time and devote it exclusively to learning about classical music. This would be in addition to engaging in and performing music in my “real” life.*

*I have lived in two worlds ever since. In one world I am a professional singer, performing diverse genres of music that I connect with on a social, creative, and communicative level, and in the other world I am a classically trained singer. These worlds mesh in the “me” that has become a music educator. In many ways, my musical life represents the dichotomy of middle school choral music education.*

When students enter middle school, they bring with them vast repertoires of music reflecting their personal interests and passions, music that does not easily fit into traditional methodologies and prescribed curricula. Chorus is about learning to sing in a group, but from an adolescent perspective it is primarily a “means of meeting new people and making new friends” (Shehan-Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007, p. 221). Music

has been found to provide adolescents with a medium through which to construct, negotiate, and modify aspects of their personal and group identities, offering them a range of strategies for knowing themselves and connecting with others.

Based on this and my experience with adolescents over the past 23 years, I have found that traditional methods of choral teaching—in which the director controls the membership, group purpose, discipline, concert repertoire, rehearsal activities and criteria for assessment (Brinson & Demorest, 2014)—do not address the intellectual and social needs of middle school students. My students have taught me many things and perhaps the most important thing I have learned from them is that they long to study music in social settings that are relevant to their needs, their interests, their hopes and desires.

This study emerges from my desire to discover improved, alternative pedagogical approaches to middle school choral education so that I can better meet the needs and interests of my middle school choral students. From a wider perspective, I believe that this research presents positive alternatives to traditional middle school choral music education that may help adolescents develop a life-long regard for the relevance of music as a presence in their lives, whether it be as singers, performers, listeners, composers, arrangers or songwriters.

## **Introduction**

In this chapter I present the theoretical and conceptual foundations that guided the design and implementation of this research study. To begin with, I present the problem and introduce the questions that guided my inquiry. I then explicate the epistemological framework surrounding social constructionism in order to clarify the ideology used in this

dissertation. After explaining how social constructionist learning theories offer a lens for exploring pedagogical alternatives to traditional practices surrounding middle school choral education, I begin my story.

### **Research Problem**

*“...problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have already known” (Wittgenstein, 1963, aphorism 109).*

The role of the conductor, the singers, repertoire to be sung, rehearsal techniques, and what is considered to be a good performance are historically situated discourses that have become routine paradigms in middle school choral education. The following characterization problematizes historically situated pedagogical practices and discourses, which have been prevalent in choral music education since the 1900’s (Williams, 2011).

In the paradigm of traditional middle school choral education, the teacher exercises autocratic control and the primary educational goal is excellent performance. Rehearsals are typically formulated around specific behavioral objectives for the purpose of improving choral performance (Brinson and Demorest, 2014, p. 260). Visions of middle school choral music education include a conductor standing in front of a group of singers, who sit in chairs or stand on risers, arranged by voice part (Brinson & Demorest, 2014). The conductor has chosen what is termed “quality” choral literature (Phillips, 2004). He or she conducts the rehearsal, beginning with warm-ups, correcting posture, vowel placement, diaphragmatic breathing, intonation, blend, phrasing, and other musical details that will yield a “good” performance (Dillworth & Crocker, 2009).

The goal of musical excellence is the rationale for a successful choral program (Emmons & Chase, 2006). In this scenario, “good teaching” is defined by the degree in

which the choral director manages to lead students toward the successful execution of specific musical tasks specifically related to the concert literature (Rosenshine, Froehlich, & Fakhouri, 2002, p. 308). Wiggins (1999/2000) observed:

As a profession, we have a long history of “teacher control.” The traditional vision of school music making consists of the teacher standing in front of the room conducting or directing students who carry out the teacher’s instructions. For many years, our image of a good music teacher was one who could get students to make music the way he or she wanted them to with the smallest number of verbal instructions (p. 30).

Educational problems arise when pedagogical practices are determined inadequate to their purpose. Chorus, in the traditional sense, no longer meets the social needs, nor does it address the musical interests of adolescents. How do singers learn to make musical and artistic decisions when the music and the group’s performance of it, determined by the director, supersede the individual experiences and musical interests of the singers (O’Toole, 1994)? Choral singers have no voice in their own learning, but are treated as instruments, serving the dictums of the conductor, who in turn, receives credit for the group’s performance. What about repertoire? Miksza (2013) argued that the use of sanctioned published repertoire lists silences popular music or music from non-traditional sources; criticized because they are not “artistically and/or educationally rich” (p. 49).

For over two decades I have worked with middle school students and my arguments are based on first-hand knowledge. I have found that teacher-centered traditional choral methods do not address the intellectual and social needs of middle school choral students. I have observed that middle school students bring a passion for music and learning into the choral classroom that cannot be fully addressed within the realm of traditional choral pedagogy. Using actions, words, body language, and miscreant

behaviors, my students have clearly communicated they long to study music in social settings that are relevant to their needs, their interests, their hopes, and desires (Shehan-Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007).

Examination of these problems in choral music education led me to the realization that “teachers and students in the public schools could benefit greatly from ‘critical’ discussions that result in shifts in professional perspective and reconceptualized visions of the traditional curricular models and modes of instruction for music education” (Miksza, 2013, p. 49). Many proposed curricular reforms have suggested the inclusion of constructionist approaches; specifically, an increase in the degree of individual student empowerment and broadening the range of collaborative approaches to music making that teacher and students engage in (Allsup, 2003; DeLorenzo, 2003; Kratus, 2007; Williams, 2011; Miksza, 2013; Regelski, 2014). The possible benefits of constructionism have been documented in the literature. However there remains a paucity of research studying the effects of constructionist approaches in the large ensemble (Webster, 2011, p. 76).

The perspectives expressed in the preceding section lead to the proposition that action inquiry regarding pedagogical praxis is in order to determine ways to make middle school choral music education more socially and musically relevant for learners. This research study will explore alternative pedagogical possibilities offered by constructionist epistemology.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this critical participatory action research study was to discover and

co-create collaborative and socially relevant practices in the sixth grade chorus. I sought to determine how constructionism, a theory about knowledge and learning, informs pedagogical and social practices in the sixth choral ensemble. To accomplish this, I reconceptualized my pedagogical practices and made organizational changes, i.e., I designed and implemented a constructionist learning environment, applying domains of relevance set forth by Gergen (2001). I then used critical participatory action research strategies to “critically” examine the discourse, i.e., social and institutional structures, surrounding my constructionist approach to middle school choral education. The results of this study illuminate ways these pedagogical and organizational changes informed the musical and social skills of adolescent learners in the sixth grade chorus.

### **Research Questions**

1. How might constructionist principles be used to create a collaborative model of middle school choral music education that is focused on the needs and interests—pedagogical and social—of sixth grade choral students?
2. What pedagogical and social practices emerge when beginning sixth grade students and their chorus teacher share responsibility for teaching and learning in sixth grade chorus?

### **Constructionist Epistemology**

*“Constructionism is nowhere more compelling than in the psychology of art and creativity. Blake, Kafka, Wittgenstein and Picasso did not find the worlds they produced. They invented them” (Bruner, 1986 p. 97).*

Through the lens of constructionist epistemology and the theoretical perspective of critical inquiry this study examined ways that social constructionism informs

pedagogical practices in music education in general and brings a new paradigm to the middle school choral ensemble in particular. I chose this framework because constructionist epistemology, critical inquiry, and critical participatory action research share common themes and purposes (Crotty, 1998). Constructionists believe that truth and meaning are created by persons' interactions with the world and that meaning is socially *constructed*, not discovered. Critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on socially constructed power relationships to expose hegemony and injustice. Critical participatory action research complements this framework because its purpose is to generate knowledge that is valid and vital for the well being of learners, and for promoting social change (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1987; Mills, 2010).

Social constructionist pedagogy offers viable, new alternatives to traditional pedagogies, thus opening the door for discovering new pedagogical practices. However it is important to note that the alternative themes offered by social constructionists do not favor wholesale abandonment of all traditional educational practices. According to Gergen (2001):

Constructionism makes no claims to being a first philosophy, a foundation upon which a new world may be erected. There is no attempt to replace all traditions in the name of truth, ethical principle, political vision or any other universal criterion. Rather, the hope is to augment and expand on existing resources... This point is closely related to another: There are no policies of pedagogies that cannot be understood through the lens of social constructionism. All traditional practices—for good or ill and with varied efficacy—serve to construct worlds of the real and the good. In effect, all make a certain contribution to the sea of intelligibility. The central question is whether the implications of a specifically constructionist consciousness can open promising new avenues of departure (p. 124).

Although constructionist themes counter many well-established pedagogical practices in choral education, we might bear in mind that all pedagogical practices construct the world in certain ways, contain values of sorts, and lend themselves to certain outcomes at the expense of others. The following themes, influenced by Shotter (1974), guided the overall development of this study:

- That which anchors me as a person in reality is the sense or responsibility that I can have for my own actions.
- That treating *time* realistically as the medium through which people develop leads to the idea of an indeterministic contingent world in which, to a degree, what happens is up to us.
- That people, working collaboratively, construct a human world out of the natural world, and in that world they have the capability to express new forms of humanity and transform themselves.
- That the source of responsibility for people's actions may not always be located *in* individuals; sometimes it is shared *between* them.
- That there exists a “knowing of a third kind,” not a knowing that, nor a knowing how, but a “knowing within” (Lock and Strong, 2010, p. 327–328).

When considering the potential outcomes of employing social constructionist pedagogical practices (Ackerman, 2001; Gergen, 2001; Papert, 1980; Papert & Harel, 1991) in the context of choral music education, I found that constructionist epistemology and the theoretical perspective of critical theory offered a viable framework for

examining the discourse surrounding choral education. These ideas framed my efforts and in turn, those of the participants as we came together for the purpose of creating a learning environment that was collaborative and socially relevant to teaching and learning in the middle school chorus.

### **Constructionist Pedagogy**

*I have come to see that in a constructionist frame, we can move beyond both traditionalism and skepticism. Social constructionism may grow from the soil of critique, but this does not mean abandoning the past. Unlike any other world-view that I know of, constructionism does not seek to establish the truth of its own premises...constructionist premises are themselves socially constructed (Gergen, 2015, p. 32).*

*Those who like to play with images of structures emerging from their own chaos, lifting themselves by their own bootstraps, are very likely predisposed to constructionism. (Papert & Harel, 1991, p. 3)*

Constructionism and constructivism appear prominently in the lexicon of education although the terms are applied inconsistently and to different things (Howe & Berv, 2000). The literature employs the terms *constructivism* and *constructionism*, often with little distinction. Although there are differences, constructivism and social constructionism share the same supporting structures (McCarty & Schwandt, 2000). Both are characterized by skepticism of epistemological traditions in which knowledge is held to represent an extra-mental world. Both are concerned with the procedural aspects of knowledge construction and the use of media or tools. Both reject behaviorism and are “opposed to a picture of education in which the accumulation of knowledge is a primary educational aim” (p. 68).

The constructivist learning theories of Piaget have provided “a solid framework for understanding children’s ways of doing and thinking at various stages of

development” (Ackerman, 2001, p. 3). However, Ackerman (2001) contended that Piaget overlooked the “importance of individual styles, in human learning and development” (p. 4). Gergen (2001) described Piaget’s theorizing as exemplary, but argued that constructivism remains tied to an unresolved internal/external dualist epistemology, makes mental as opposed to social processes the focal point of inquiry, and tends to remain tied to empiricist tenets of value neutrality (p. 124).

Constructionist theories are grounded in Piaget’s constructivism, but constructionism—associated with the art of learning, learning to learn, and the significance of “making things”—adds the notion that learning is most effective when as part of an activity, the learner constructs a meaningful product (Sabelli, 2008).

Papert (1980, 1991), who worked closely with Piaget in Geneva, is credited with introducing constructionist learning theories into the pedagogy of science, math and technology. Papert’s theories—developed through educational research at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and in public schools in Massachusetts—are more situated and pragmatic than Piaget’s constructivism or Vygotsky’s socio-constructivism (Ackerman, 2001). In the first chapter of *Constructionism*, Papert and Harel (1991) defined the term:

Constructionism—the N word as opposed to the V word—shares constructivism’s view of learning as “building knowledge structures” through progressive internalization of actions... It then adds the idea that this happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it’s a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe (p. 1).

Windschitl (2002) contended there is no methodology or definitive set of instructional procedures associated with constructivism or constructionism. Rather, there are theoretical interpretations and methodological implications associated with both.

Among these are “teaching for understanding” (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), “child-centered teaching” (Chung & Walsh, 2000), “authentic pedagogy” (Wiggins, 2007a), and “teaching for musical understanding” (Wiggins, 2015). These theoretical interpretations and methodological implications were critical considerations when designing this study.

### **Critical Participatory Action Research**

*“Action research is critical. It expresses a commitment to bring together broad social analysis—the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, the way in which language is used, organization and power in a local situation, and action to improve things”*  
(Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 273).

The goal of this research was to reconstitute—discover collaborative and socially relevant pedagogical practices—through “informed, collective human agency” (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014, p. 73). I employed critical participatory action research methodology—a collaborative approach to understanding specific problems in education—because it is a systematic research process conducted for the purpose of generating knowledge that is valid and vital for the well being of learners, communities of learners, and for promoting social change (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1987; Mills, 2010). Critical participatory action research, as defined by Reason and Bradbury (2001) is:

A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview, which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (p. 1).

The purpose of critical participatory action research is to allow educators to engage in the immediate and continuing betterment of practice rather than merely being

informed about practice (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). In order to discern collaborative and socially relevant pedagogical practices specific to sixth grade choral music education, I reflected on what the participants thought about our changes in pedagogical practices, and how participants reacted when pedagogical changes were put into place. In addition, I accounted for ways that individual actions, understandings, and relationships with others are part of—and help to construct—the cultural-discursive arrangements that enable and constrain our collective practices (p. 76).

### **Prologue**

Months later I began my research project with a class of sixth grade chorus students. I remember being enthused about the possibilities offered by social constructionism. I also remember being fearful that the project I designed might not work in a real choral classroom with real children. There were elements of my study that seemed particularly risky, especially the part about putting 11 year olds in charge of their own learning. I wondered if we—the students and I—were ready for the challenges and responsibilities of doing this research project. When September arrived my head was swimming with these thoughts, and then school started. There was no turning back.

## Chapter Two: Avenues Of Departure

*“Construct: to build, create. Constructivism deals broadly with building and creating knowledge (if you’re looking for trouble, meaning)” (Becker, 2011, p. 61).*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that guided my constructionist approaches to teaching and learning during this study. In this chapter I present sources that inspired the premise of this study, that culture and context shape thinking. The following literature made it possible for me to critically examine constructionism as a fluid, and ever-changing theoretical approach, situated within and limited by the polyphonic voices who write about it, and the diverse conceptions that shape its discourse.

As I examined the literature, I discovered that constructivism and constructionism are words that many people use to address many different issues and connotations. Furthermore, I found that the understandings surrounding constructivism and constructionism are not always congruent. In this review, I explore writings on the “construction of knowledge” knowing that they do not add up to a neat and tidy package; there is no grand theory, nor is there one definitive source.

In spite of the inconsistencies, the literature on constructivism and constructionism heightened my awareness of the many ways knowledge construction orients us toward reconceptualizing pedagogical practice. Allsup’s (2002) applications of active, creative, and collaborative learning illuminated avenues for meaningful social interaction among instrumental students in a constructivist music composition environment. In choral education Becker (2011) weighed in as a “reluctant” constructionist. Her narrative was particularly compelling because of her angst, which was

generated by a very profound concern for the musical and social development of eight middle school singers. I found Erickson's (2014) call for reconceptualizing middle school curricula—in order to make music learning more relevant, inclusive, and learner-centered—to be persuasive and highly relevant to my own work.

Collmer (2012), Holsberg (2009), and Loren (2003) experienced challenges with the implementation of constructivist learning environments. These researchers identified similar difficulties surrounding student behavior, organization, and incorrect amounts of scaffolding. Observing inability on the part of students to stay on task without teacher supervision and uneven levels of participation during collaborative group work, they suggested that students needed more scaffolding and additional supports to help transition from a traditional teacher-centered paradigm to a student-centered classroom.

Kent's (2014) research on culture and identity corroborated the notion that “music provides adolescents with a medium through which to construct, negotiate, and modify aspects of their personal and group identities” (Shehan-Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007, p. 221). Recognizing the importance of culture and identity made me cognizant of the fact that selection of repertoire not only impacts levels of social and musical engagement in the classroom; it is the primary catalyst for knowledge construction. Consequently I understood the significance of allowing children to explore actively, freely, and to work collaboratively—using music of their own choosing—so they are able to create music that “reflects a world that is theirs; a world they understand and a world that defines who they are” (Allsup, 2003, p. 35).

The sources presented here are as unique and diverse as the individuals who wrote

about it; ranging from teachers who implement it in their daily practice to scholars who conduct theoretically-based research. This loosely connected body of literature has informed my own, and in turn, my students' social construction of choral music education.

Like the philosophers, theorists, scholars, and practitioners who have influenced me, I believe that culture and context shape thinking. This is the conceptual premise of this study. Using constructionism as a theoretical and pedagogical framework, this study critically examines the discourse, i.e., social and institutional structures, surrounding middle school choral education. This is not a neutral approach to pedagogy, but rather, one in which the teacher facilitates. In this chapter I present literature that helped me reconceptualize pedagogical and organizational changes in my own choral classroom; changes that helped me create and develop a learning environment in which the students and I, working together, grew and developed both musically and socially.

### **Philosophical Foundations**

*“The world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and... its principles are therefore to be recovered within the modifications of our own human mind” (Vico, 1744, p. 331).*

Social constructionism may be traced back to the pre-modern era, originating in the philosophical works of Giambattista Vico (1725, 1730, 1744) and Immanuel Kant (1781). Both Vico and Kant confronted Cartesian notions of mind-body dualism and rationalistic conceptions of mind. In Vico's work we find the beginnings of *historicism*; the claim that history is the key to understanding human nature, later developed in the nineteenth century by Hegel and Marx (Locke & Strong, 2010, p. 12). Vico's axiomatic

style and interest in language as the key to human understanding foreshadowed Wittgenstein's (1963) aphoristic approach in the twentieth century; e.g., "Minds are formed by the character of language, not by the language of those who speak it" (Vico, 1965, p. I.I.95) Vico understood humans as historically-situated beings, whose minds and cultural and social understandings are continually reconstructed over time.

Kant's (1783) philosophy was founded on the idea that reason is both transcendental and practical; it transcends yet produces particular experiences. Hegel, borrowing from Kant's notion of *phenomena*, argued: "Reason is not a faculty of an individual mind, but a *dynamic historical product*" (Regelski, 2002, p. 107). In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel (1969) contended that reason "permeates every relationship of man to nature, his sensation, intuition, desire, need, instinct, and simply by so doing transforms it into something human...into ideas and purposes" (p. 32). By distinguishing reason, i.e., human logic as the progressive elaboration of ideas implicit in social and cultural institutions, Hegel linked rationality with other cultural products (such as art and music), making them products of human interaction.

From Hegel forward the study of knowledge diverged into two branches, philosophy and social theory. Marx and a group of philosophers associated with The Bakhtin Circle were concerned with what people produce socially and through their social interaction, specifically language (Locke & Strong, 2010). In the twentieth century, members of the Frankfurt School—in particular Habermas (1972, 1974) and postmodernists Gadamer (1976, 1988) and Foucault (1980)—viewed human discourse as a product of social institutions and practices. Near the end of the twentieth century, Searle

(1995) merged social theory and philosophy in *The Construction of Social Reality*, articulating theories concerning the social construction of knowledge; theories specifically concerned with the social interactions of individuals within a historically situated context as the producers of knowledge.

### **Critical Theory**

*“Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator” (Freire, 1970, p. 247).*

The tenets of critical theory and critical pedagogy are consistent with social constructivist pedagogical ideals. For example, Freire’s (1970) critique of the “banking concept of education,” parallels Dewey’s (1897, 1916) rejection of teaching practices that positioned students as passive receptacles of inert knowledge. Freire (1970) embraced problem-solving, social approaches to learning. Likewise, Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural approach emphasized the importance of active social environments and the active construction of meaningful ideas in authentic, holistic contexts. Both Freire (1970) and Dewey (1916) contended that educators must understand and build upon the experiences and worldviews of their students in order to further students’ cognitive understandings.

Critical theorists in music education (Abrahams, 2005a; Allsup, 1997; Regelski, 2002, 2004) as well as social constructionists (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1982; Papert & Harel, 1991) reject traditional, hierarchal models of education, particularly in the sense that a hierarchy of knowledge functions in totalitarian ways. Central to the framework of this research is Foucault’s notion that “the way of formulating the world in a particular

*discourse* acts to make some things appear to be “the natural way that things are” (Locke & Strong, 2010, p. 246). In multi-cultural public school classrooms where different value systems co-exist, students find themselves confronted with a variety of authoritative discourses, which they may find remote or irrelevant. By adopting a critical view of the criteria that govern what kinds of knowledge are valued in education, constructionism alters the nature of the learning process; it shifts the balance between transfer of knowledge to students (whether via book, teacher, or tutorial program is essentially irrelevant) and focuses on the production of knowledge by students (Papert & Harel, 1991).

In music education, Regelski (2002) located social constructionism as a learning theory embedded within the philosophical tenets of critical theory. Within the paradigm of critical pedagogy, Regelski (2004) determined:

“The study of the social construction of knowledge, social reality, and ‘social objects’ (such as art and music) is concerned with the logic of social processes and the forces that condition both the form and the content of knowledge and everyday reality, as experienced and amplified through institutional and social filters and influences of various kinds” (p. 107).

Following Regelski (2002, 2004), Abrahams (2005a, 2005b) confirmed that the tenets of constructionism—particularly the sociocultural constructionism of Rodriguez (1998), which emphasizes active, experiential learning—reside as a learning theory within the philosophical framework of critical theory.

Abrahams (2005a) expanded the paradigm of critical pedagogy to include Elliot’s (1995) praxial philosophy, the ideas and ideals of critical theory (Freire, 1970), constructivism (Rodriguez, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978) and experientialism (McCarthy 1987, 2000) (p. 7). Significantly, Abrahams (2005a) aligned Vico’s philosophical idea that

“humans can only clearly understand what they themselves have constructed,” to principles within critical pedagogy; i.e., “students construct their own sense of reality and that, through instruction, that reality changes” (p. 3). By recalling the ideology of Vico, Abrahams placed social constructionism squarely within the paradigm of critical theory.

### **Psychological Foundations**

*“Social constructionism insists we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves” (Burr, 2003, p. 2).*

Social constructionism is interdisciplinary, stemming from psychology, philosophy, sociology, and linguistics. Constructionism may be defined as “the view that all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). “Social reality is, therefore, a function of shared meanings; it is constructed, sustained and reproduced through social life” (Greenwood, 1994, p. 85)

Constructionism embraces the notion that culture is the source, rather than the result of human thought and behavior. We interact with the world and with objects in the world and it is out of this interrelationship that meaning is born. From this perspective it is easy to understand how diverse understandings can be formed from cultural perceptions of the same phenomenon. Constructionism emphasizes there can be no truthful or valid interpretations. Rather, interpretations may be classified as useful or not useful; liberating or not liberating; oppressive or not (Crotty, 1998). Like a *bricoleur*, who is able to reconsider, revise, recast, and reconstitute bric-a-brac into new contexts and for new purposes, constructionist research requires openness in order to foster

potential for new or richer meanings (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). In this sense, constructionism “is an invitation to reinterpretation” (Crotty, 1994, p. 51).

In this research I reinterpreted middle school choral teaching and learning in order to discover collaborative and socially relevant practices in the sixth grade chorus. I reconceptualized my pedagogical practices and made organizational changes in order to create a collaborative, student-directed learning environment in which the participants were socially engaged, musically challenged, felt safe to take risks, and were supported in their learning. When planning this study I hoped that I, like the *bricoleur*, through reconsideration and reconstitution of my practices, might come to find useful information about the application of social constructionist theories of learning in middle school choral education.

### **Pedagogical Foundations**

*“Constructionism invites practitioners to view knowledge as historically and culturally situated—thus subject to critique and transformation” (Gergen, 1985, p. 273).*

Educational scholars have developed a broad range of definitions and applications for constructivist and constructionist learning and its attributes. Pedagogical approaches vary and are informed by the philosophical ideas of John Dewey and William James; the psychological work of Jean Piaget and Seymour Papert; and the sociocultural work of Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner, Kenneth Gergen, and Ernst von Glasersfeld (Ackerman, 2001; Fosnot, 1996; Kivinen & Ristele, 2003; Yilmaz, 2008). Experiential learning, self-directed learning, discovery learning, situated learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and reflective practice are all examples of constructivist and constructionist learning models (Ackerman, 2001; Gilliani, 2003; McLeod, 2003; Slavin,

2000).

Since there is no singular constructivist or constructionist approach, the pedagogical landscape can be “vexed and messy” (Perkins, 1999. p. 7). According to Phillips (1995), most classrooms feature active, social, and creative learning. Active learning involves problem solving, discussion, debate, and investigation by taking into account varying viewpoints and offering possibilities for divergent outcomes. The construction of knowledge in classrooms is highly social, viz., collaborative and dialogic. Creative learning emphasizes the application of knowledge and skills in activities that lead to deeper understandings. Perkins (1999) described constructivist pedagogy as a pragmatic “toolbox” of strategies that facilitate student learning rather than “one size fits all” method (p. 8). Instructional approaches may vary from classroom to classroom, but the common denominator is that they are always active, creative and characterized by a social approach.

A key strategy of constructivist and constructionist pedagogy is to make learning active and relevant for students. Educational leaders such as Ackerman (2001), Boardman (2002), Brooks and Brooks (2001), Bruffee (1993), Fosnot and Perry (2005), Wiggins (2015), and Zemelman (2005) affirm the importance of student-centered classrooms, in which students are engaged in collaborative, hands-on activities and where problem solving is a valued tool in curriculum design. To make learning relevant, Wiggins (2015) suggested engaging students in real-life, relevant problem-solving experiences designed to enable them to construct and act on their own understandings. Student-directed, peer-directed, informal, and collaborative learning require social

interaction and reflect holistic, real-world musical practices. Green (2008) determined these strategies make learning relevant because students are engaged in the lesson design, understand the learning goals and objectives, and are invested in the outcomes of learning.

**Critics of constructivism/constructionism.** Brooks and Brooks (2003) contended that constructivist pedagogical frameworks subordinate the curriculum to the interests of the child (p. 35). However, it is important to note that, although both constructivism and constructionism are concerned with making learning relevant, topics under scrutiny do not necessarily need to be of pre-existing interest to students. However, new material should be carefully introduced and relative to students' previous knowledge. "Ideally," Bruner (1960) wrote, "interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning" (p. 14). Brooks and Brooks (2001) contended that pedagogical relevance and student interest can and should be cultivated through teacher facilitation.

Phillips (1995) questioned how teachers might compare "discovered" learning to the prevailing views of a discipline. In music for example, how does the teacher account for the "discovery" of principles of composition that are counter to the canons of music theory? This raises another important question: How do we reconcile constructed knowledge that emerges from students that seems to be at variance with our own traditional, accepted canons of music education?

**Pedagogical dilemmas.** Teachers who promote constructivist and constructionist learning find themselves faced with unsatisfactory choices (Windschitl, 2002). For instance, how does one prepare students for musical performances in a constructionist

learning environment? Can all students be trusted to accept responsibility for their own learning? How can the teacher's thinking shift to a role that is not the central focus of learning in the classroom? These are a few of the pedagogical questions that dominate contemporary literature in music education (Perkins, 1995; Webster, 2011; Windschitl, 2002).

### **Theoretical Foundations in Music Education**

*“Vico held that humans can only clearly understand what they themselves have constructed” (Abrahams, 2005a, p.14)*

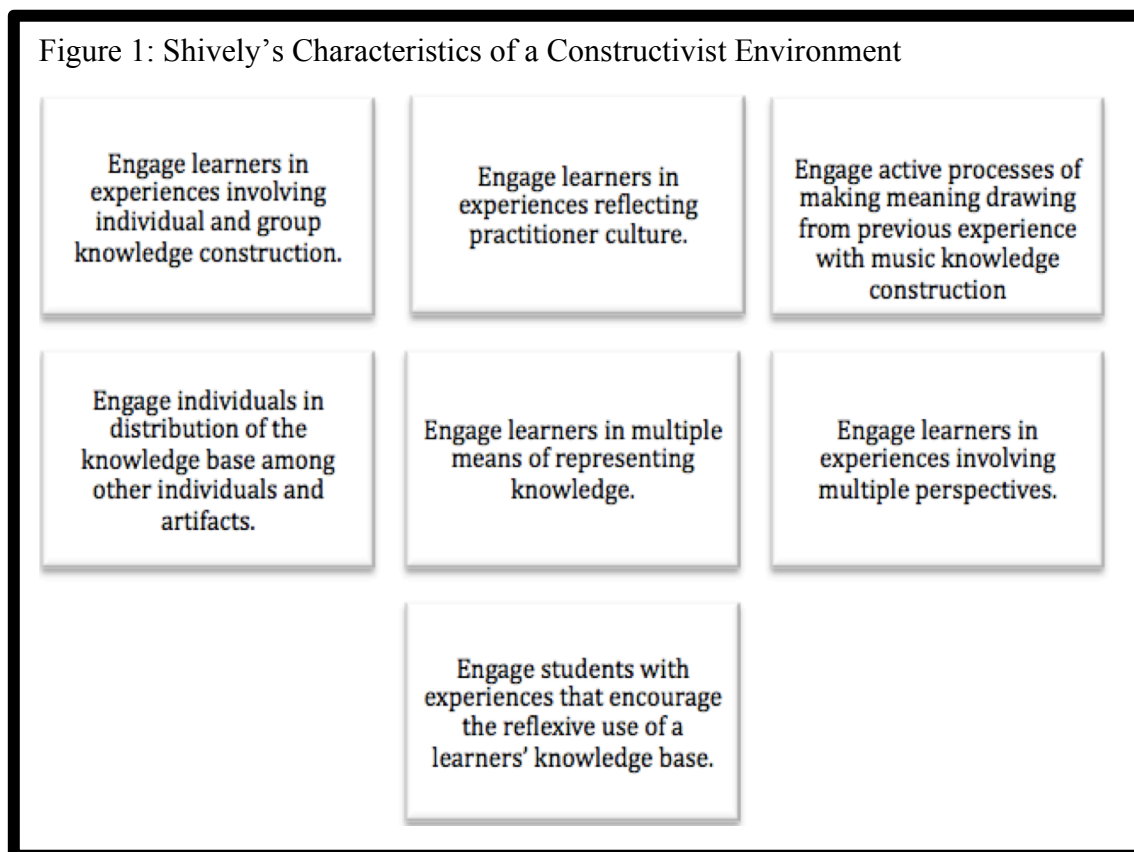
My exploration of constructivist and constructionist learning theories and their applications began with *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning* (Colwell & Richardson, 2002) and the *MENC Handbook of Research on Music Learning, Vol. 1: Strategies* (Colwell & Webster, 2011). Summaries by Hanley and Montgomery (2002) and Webster (2011) provided the backdrop for my understanding of contemporary pedagogical practices, their theoretical bases, and in particular, constructivism and constructionism in music education.

In a study of the construction of musical knowledge, Shively (1995) examined the role of teacher and learner in the context of a beginning band program. This study provided the setting for constructivist thinking in music education, particularly in the areas of *collaborative learning, situated cognition, authentic learning, cognitive apprenticeship, and scaffolding*. The purpose of the study was to develop a framework for the development and implementation of a constructivist environment for beginning band classes. Shively (1995) determined that music learning should always be grounded in a constructivist approach, and that a constructivist environment should be

characterized by active, real-world, experiential, collaborative, and contextual knowledge construction (see Figure 1). Shively (1995) declined to offer specific pedagogical procedures related to generalized, practical application, concluding, “This framework should be used to create a learning environment that reflects the principles of constructivism. Any teacher implementing this framework must consider his or her own knowledge base and the learners in that class” (p. 213).

Hanley and Montgomery (2002, 2005a, 2005b) located the principles of constructivism within the paradigm of postmodern music education. This paradigm, which shares a profound concern with the social nature and consequences of knowledge (Elliott, 2001), challenged my notions of “truth” in research and “understanding” within the pluralistic, social ecology of the music classroom. As I began to realize that truths are “made not found” that we “construct” the realities we live in, I began the critical next step; to look for pedagogical alternatives reflecting the principles of constructionism.

The preceding literature constituted my introduction to constructivism and constructionism. As I set out to discover improved, alternative pedagogical approaches to middle school choral education and make learning more active, collaborative, and social, I searched for alternatives that would empower students, connect their music learning with their lives outside of school, and help them discover the relevance of music as a presence in their lives. In the next section I introduce how I came to understand ways that culture and context shape thinking; the conceptual premise of this study.



Source: Adapted from Shively (1995).

**Postmodernism.** That students construct their own learning resonates with the ideas and ideals of postmodern thinking (Abrahams, 2005a, p. 14). Similarly, Barrett (2005), Dunbar-Hall (2005), Green (2005), and Rideout (2005), who represent diverse cultural and political interests and an international perspective, have supported the integration of educational, political, cultural, and social mechanisms of postmodernism using constructivist principles. Espousing postmodernism situated within a critical view of music education, Hanley and Montgomery (2005b) advocated for reconceptualizing pedagogical practice by incorporating constructivist practices, e.g., active learning, collaborative learning, student-directed learning, informal learning, and student-selected

curriculum content, so that students might begin to “understand the role and relevance of music education and the power of music in their lives” (p. 44). Postmodernism challenged me to adopt a critical stance regarding the discourse surrounding choral music education and in turn helped me reconceptualize my pedagogical practices.

**Reconceptualizing music education.** To make music learning more social and relevant for learners meant moving away from institutionalized approaches, driven by what Froelich (2007a) described as “professional routinization” (p. 16). Along the same lines, Pinar (2011) proposed an alternative conception of curriculum as a communicative structure supported the use of a constructionist curricular model that is dialogic, fluid, and cooperative, revolving around the changing musical interests of the students and their culture. Erickson (2012) for example, reconceptualized pedagogical practice by including middle school youth in the process of planning of their music programs (p. 157). In this curricular framework, Pinar (2006) emphasized, “The student is the most important unit of organization” (p. 3). Reconceptualizing the curriculum empowered my students. It not only gave them a voice in their own curriculum; it necessitated that the students and I share responsibility for teaching and learning in sixth grade chorus.

**Sociocultural theory.** The theories of Dewey and Vygotsky—that people learn (from each other) in social contexts—influenced my decision to incorporate a collaborative learning environment. Dewey (1897, 1916, 1933, 1938, 1956) is often cited as the philosophical founder of social constructivism, while Vygotsky (1978, 1986) is the principal learning theorist among social constructivists (Chaiklin, 2007; Gallagher, 1999; Glassman, 2001; John-Steiner & Mann, 1996; Karpov, 2007; Scott & Palinscar 2013).

Vygotsky (1986) suggested that learning takes place through the social interactions students have with their peers, teachers, and other experts, and that culture is the primary determining factor for knowledge construction.

In the classroom, constructivist teachers incorporate collaborative learning exercises. Through social interaction less competent children develop with help from more skillful peers within the *zone of proximal development*. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The ZPD has become synonymous in the literature with the notion of *scaffolding* (McLeod, 2012). Vygotsky himself did not use this term; it was introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), who defined scaffolding as "those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him [sic] to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (p. 90).

Sociocultural theory proposes that when students are working within the ZPD and become more capable of completing musical tasks on their own, scaffolding or supports can be gradually removed. When students are fully capable of completing musical tasks independently, learning has taken place. This approach to learning resonated with me because I wanted my students to become independent musicians, not just in chorus, but outside of chorus as well.

Sociocultural approaches helped me understand the various ways children

construct musical knowledge collaboratively and how musical behaviors are transformed and transferred socially within the learning environment. Partnering concepts of creativity and community in a study of the dimensions of creative thinking in music and the nature of the creative processes, McCarthy (1997) employed a sociocultural approach. Emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between the social environment and creative performance, McCarthy (1997) suggested:

Creativity and learning is dominated by ideas closely related to community—for example, Lev Vygotsky’s social-constructivist view of learning; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s systems view of creativity, which implies an interactive relationship among society, culture, and the individual; views of cognitions as socially shared or as culturally situated; the emerging view of the classroom as a learning community; and the widespread use of cooperative learning strategies in education (p. 10).

McCarthy determined that sociocultural learning theory provides both social and cultural explanations of the music transmission process that have been determined to be “central to understanding and researching music in formal education” (p. 564).

In my effort to discover improved, alternative pedagogical approaches to middle school choral education and make learning more active, collaborative, and social, I examined the construction of musical knowledge using sociocultural approaches to learning. I noted that scaffolding, collaborative learning, peer mediation, and tool use, were pedagogical strategies associated with positive learning outcomes in formal and informal settings. I determined that sociocultural and constructionist approaches celebrate student-centered learning and favor collaborative forms of *musicking* (Webster, 2016).

“Sociocultural influences include knowledge of music that is constructed in formal and informal settings” (Wiggins, 2007b, p. 462). Smith (2008) conducted a case

study of nineteen 4-year old children in a pre-school setting while engaged in informal musical play. The study, situated within a social constructivist paradigm, was guided by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development and Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) notion of scaffolding. Smith recommended that early childhood music instruction should include musical play, rather than whole-group instruction, and that teaching strategies such collaborative learning and scaffolding facilitate knowledge construction and should be encouraged as an integral part of the pre-school music curriculum.

Scaffolding and collaborative learning have been determined to be successful pedagogical strategies for propelling children's growth in musical understanding. The examination of spontaneous singing and peer interaction in a child-care center determined that pre-school aged children can be "valued and valuable co-constructors of their cultures" (Whiteman, 2008, p. 26) The children's spontaneous singing was videotaped during free play each morning and the songs were transcribed into Western notation. Three types of "knowledgeable other" emerged from the data. During free play the children corrected each other, modeled for each other, and invited each other to join in the singing. Whiteman determined:

We have come to know scaffolding as a good pedagogy when working with young children. As a child attempts to piece together and refine new knowledge, a high-quality learning environment is characterized, among other things, by a teacher responding sensitively, using a range of strategies to model, question, challenge and support the child's endeavors. Although in general, this notion is not new, its evolution has been shaped over time by cultural and political contexts (p. 26).

Whitman (2008) concluded that through a sociocultural lens it is possible to gain insight

into how children co-construct the “knowledgeable other” and ways musical signs and behaviors are transformed and transferred during everyday *music*ing.

In a formal setting, Lim (2005) examined how sociocultural theory and music context influence elementary children’s construction of musical knowledge. The research setting included three elementary schools, three music teachers, six elementary classrooms, and a professional community orchestra in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area. The study attempted to integrate musical and sociocultural factors by incorporating multiple activities; the music class activity, the classroom musical activity (group work), the school arts project, the Arts in Community Education Project (ACE) ensemble visit, the ACE concert, and the ACE festival.

The findings of Lim’s (2005) study informed the pedagogical strategies I incorporated when conducting this research. First, music learning was enhanced by the use of cultural tools (e.g., iconic devices, enactive movements, devised materials, and other individuals), and social activities (e.g., mediation, scaffolding, and collaboration) facilitated the process of musical knowledge construction. Second, the students developed shared frameworks for interpreting their musical experiences. Lastly, musical learning and development were determined to be domain specific. The children’s construction of musical knowledge depended on accessibility of and familiarity with specific musical repertoire. Lim concluded, “the conceptualization of music can be acquired when the children study musical elements within the meaningful music whole” (p. 201).

Not all research studies implementing sociocultural constructivist principles have

met with positive results. The following study (Loren, 2003) made me aware that, implemented incorrectly, pedagogical strategies concerning classroom management, collaborative learning, levels of organization, and amounts of scaffolding could hamper learning. I learned about pedagogical strategies to avoid, in particular the use of pre-determined or standardized learning goals, when designing my own constructionist learning environment.

For example, Loren's (2003) action research study implemented a constructivist framework for the purpose of examining the motivation of 22 fifth grade general music students for 18 class sessions. Musical topics for study were generated by the students' regular music teacher and were based on a set of pre-determined learning goals and state standards. The state standards indicated that students should be able to sing/play in parts (ostinato, rounds, and partner songs); perform from notation; be knowledgeable about the lives and works of selected composers; and demonstrate the use of appropriate music vocabulary when discussion the perception of musical works (p. 222). Students selected learning activities from the prescribed list of topics, worked in collaborative groups and were supervised by the researcher who scaffolded by redirecting unfocused behaviors, clarifying learning tasks, assisting with goal-setting, and providing learning prompts. Loren documented power relationships (teacher-student, student-student) within the classroom environment, the development of student autonomy, and issues surrounding goal setting and motivation. While Loren (2003) described successes with student collaboration, he reported some difficulties surrounding student behavior, poor organization, and incorrect amounts of scaffolding. Loren recalled:

Indeed, students responded favorably to the opportunity to direct their own learning. However, learning strategies alone do not necessarily develop student's interest in learning. Even when children had the opportunity to shape learning activities according to their interests, intrinsically motivated learners was not a guaranteed outcome. A few students still required teacher intervention to remind them of the learning expectations that accompany the pursuit of their interests (p. 193).

Citing both challenges and rewards associated with social constructivist principles, Loren (2003) called for more action research on music teaching and learning, particularly in the areas of critical thinking, problem solving, student goal-setting, cooperative learning, and affective domain within the actual practice of teaching general music.

While learning about sociocultural theories, I noted different approaches for conducting research in one's own classroom. For example, Blair (2007) conducted an ethnographic study of her own fifth grade general music students. By observing informally while teaching and formally through the study of videotapes, Blair was able to observe the various ways participants—with peer scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976)—constructed a visual representation of a piece of music. Blair (2007) concluded, “In order to show graphically what students know about the music, they must think and rethink about what they hear in the music” (p. 7). Listening and mapping required student reflection-in-action—thinking that informs doing and doing that informs thinking (Dewey, 1916; Bamberger & Schön, 1991; Schön, 1983, 1987)—enabling musical understanding. Narrative research and musical mapping, as modes of inquiry, share the common feature of an informed and informing experience—“reflective discourse that is the result of the manipulation of materials and images resulting in the transformation of self, and through discourse, the transformation of others” (Blair, 2007, p. 15).

Employing sociocultural theory as a framework, Berg (1997) studied the social construction of musical experience in two high school chamber ensembles. The study centered on the rehearsal dynamics of two separate chamber groups as they prepared for a performance with and without the assistance of a coach. Berg sought to determine “whether identifiable patterns of musical thought and action existed within the two ensembles and how patterns of musical thought and action reveal ways that students assist each other as they move through the zone of proximal development ” (p. 62). Of particular interest were notions of intersubjectivity, tool use, and social interaction. Berg (1997) suggested that intersubjectivity was facilitated when students posed questions, clarified their observations, and identified specific strategies to solve a problem. Tool use facilitated problem solving during the rehearsal process. Tools were differentiated as technical, (e.g., problem solving aids such as clapping, musical symbols, and a metronome), or psychological, (e.g., symbols, signs, or semiotic systems). Social interaction during the rehearsal process—questioning, discussion, and co-construction of musical ideas—facilitated learning in the ZPD.

In addition to providing an example for conducting this research, the results of Berg’s study support the premise of this study, that culture and context shape thinking. Specifically, Berg (1997) concluded that most approaches to traditional instrumental music education do not allow students’ perspectives to be heard and advocated for allowing, encouraging, and expecting students to contribute to their own construction of musical interpretations Berg determined: “Peer collaboration has enormous potential to not only foster growth through social construction of musical experience, but also to

prepare students for lives that can truly be enriched by the unique experience of contributing meaningfully to shared musical creation” (p. 263).

**Situated cognition theory.** In this scenario, learning is situated within the realm of collaborative and social processes. Holistic knowledge, which is shared, is embedded in practice and transformed through goal-directed behaviors. According to Lave and Wenger (1991):

Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities – it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person... Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. (p. 53)

Several models located within the social constructivist paradigm reflect some aspect of situated cognition. Cognitive apprenticeship—originating in the work of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978)—is directly related to situated cognition theory. Citing Rogoff (1990) and Gardner (1991), Wiggins (2015) suggested that in order to make learning in music classrooms more relevant, similar to ways children learn informally, outside of school, the classroom environment should incorporate the following:

- Learners need to engage in real-life, problem-solving situations.
- Learning situations must be holistic in nature.
- Learners need opportunities to interact directly with subject matter.
- Learners need to take an active role in their own learning.
- Learners need an opportunity to work on their own, with peers, and with teacher support when needed.

- Learners need to be cognizant of the goals of the learning situation and their own progress toward goals (pp. 18–19).

**Informal learning.** Music acquisition, like other forms of human development, may be viewed as an enculturation process (Rogoff, 2003). Informal learning—documented by Berliner (1994) in jazz and Green (2002, 2008) in popular music—is closely associated with the tenets of constructivist and constructionist learning theories, although the terms do not appear in the literature. Through these studies and the ones I describe in the following section, I determined that informal music learning might offer the kind of alternative pedagogical approach that could connect my students’ music learning in school with their musical lives outside of school; one that might help my students discover the relevance of music as a presence in their lives.

Seeking to bring aspects of informal popular music learning practices into the realm of the school music classroom, Green (2008) initiated practice-based research involving 21 secondary schools, 32 classroom teachers, and over 1,500 students (p. 14). The first step in the design of the project involved differentiating informal versus formal learning practices. Green (2008) delineated these practices into five fundamental principles of informal learning:

- Informal learning always begins with music that learners choose for themselves.
- The main method of skill-acquisition in the informal realm is aural.
- Informal takes place through self-directed learning, peer-directed learning, and group learning.
- Skills and knowledge in the informal realm tend to be assimilated in haphazard,

idiosyncratic and holistic ways, starting with “real-world” pieces of music.

- Informal approaches usually involve a deep integration of listening, performing, improvising, and composing throughout the learning process with an emphasis on personal creativity (p. 10).

Although Green’s (2008) study focused on informal musical practices associated with popular musicians, students who participated in the research identified their learning experiences as an “active and constructive process” (p. 110). Green’s (2002, 2008) hypotheses—that informal learning processes make music learning more relevant, enhance student motivation, make music education more critical and inclusive, and increase a broad array of musical skills—concluded with the development of an alternative pedagogy for classroom music. According to Green (2008), the strengths of informal pedagogies “lie in the fact that the strategies were developed by learners, through learning, rather than teachers by teaching” (p. 22).

In a study of the informal learning processes of bluegrass fiddler Bill Monroe and Nashville fiddler Vassar Clements, Cutler (2002) detailed the ways that country musicians learn to play their instruments through imitation and apprenticeship. Citing the acquisition disposition of the Suzuki approach and contending the music learning should be more self-constructed, like language learning viz., children learn language out of a necessity to communicate, Cutler advocated for the adaptation of problem-based, constructionist teaching techniques—specifically, teaching techniques that incorporate student-driven objectives, questioning and exploration—in string education.

Seeking to coalesce music learning in and out of the music classroom, Pearce

(2005) applied constructivist approaches in a middle school jazz band. Using the life and music of 20<sup>th</sup> Century bandleader Paul Whiteman as a theme, students in the jazz band engaged in Internet research; listened to recordings on their computers and 78-rpm records, interviewed friends and family, and visited historical societies. After completing the project, Pearce determined that the constructive approach provided the students with a deeper understanding of Paul Whiteman and his music, stating, “Students learned much more than they would have if our approach had been to hand out, rehearse, and perform a song by some dude who used to live in Denver” (p. 44). Pearce’s holistic approach was thought provoking because it made music learning active, collaborative, and social; moreover, it created a connection between music learning and the students’ lives.

Incorporating informal approaches historically used by jazz practitioners with more formal approaches used by educators, Wetzel (2007) developed a constructivist, school-based jazz method of instruction. Drawing from the learning theories of Vygotsky (1978), the writings of Bruner (1960), Greene (1973), and the instructional techniques of Brooks and Brooks (1993), Wetzel determined:

The method will incorporate aural exercises and activities that allow the student to learn new concepts by ear while using student-centered activities, yet provide a comprehensive and sound pedagogical approach based on constructivist learning theories and models. In keeping with constructivist views, the new curriculum would help students to construct their own knowledge, presenting concepts holistically or as wholes (as when listening to a recording of a musician improvising a solo) while the student breaks them into smaller ideas (such as specific notes, articulation, fast or slow notes, etc.) according to his/her current and former experiences (pp. 13–14).

Wetzel’s (2007) *Learning Jazz Language* curriculum offered an instructional CD supported by a teacher’s manual and web site. Units of instruction were organized around

traditional folk tunes, blues progressions, and jazz standards with emphasis on oral/aural skills, improvisation, and memorization rather than notational skills. In spite of difficulties related to time constraints associated with jazz music education in public schools, Wetzel (2007) maintained that, for educators who are committed to teaching beyond the goal of performance, it is possible to create a constructivist curriculum to teach beginning jazz improvisation that is based on aural modeling, using a sequentially based, non-linear approach. Although Wetzel (2007) incorporated aspects of constructivist and informal learning, in particular, student-centered activities and an emphasis on aural skills, this study made it clear that the use of pre-determined, teacher-driven learning objectives—as previously noted in Loren (2003)—were pedagogical strategies to avoid in a constructivist learning environment.

Seeking a better understanding of constructed music learning within the realm of informal music making, Jaffurs (2004, 2006) piloted and conducted an ethnographic study of a three-member, middle school aged, garage band. Jaffurs engaged Prouty's (2002) definition of informal learning environments (i.e., employing self-constructed types of learning strategies) and Allsup's (2002) concepts of informal learning, democratic practice, and constructivism as a theoretical framework. The purpose of the study was to determine how members of a garage band learned and interacted with one another in and out of formal and informal settings and at the boundaries of these environments. Several implications for pedagogical practice emerged. Jaffurs (2006) suggested that music teachers might restructure traditional music ensembles by incorporating the practices of the garage band. The garage band model was found to

encourage musical inquiry as well as recognize and value the individual voices of each ensemble member. Jaffurs (2006) concluded:

A democratic learning environment begins with a teacher who is willing to step aside, to go off the script or lesson, and facilitate. The stickiest part of creating democratic learning environment is in becoming a facilitator who guides the learning yet knows when and how to step in and scaffold instruction... It also demonstrated how both teachers and students co-constructed the learning environment, which is important in a democratic learning environment and leads to socially constructed knowledge (p. 181).

Jaffurs' (2006) conclusions corroborated Green's (2002, 2008) findings, and influenced my decision to incorporate informal learning practices; practices in which teachers and students co-construct the learning environment, i.e., share responsibility for teaching and learning.

Erickson (2012) used the results of a youth-led participatory action research study conducted by O'Neill and Erickson (2011) in order to reconceptualize the middle school general music curriculum. The purpose of the youth-led participatory action research project, conducted with middle school students, was to empower students to have a voice in their own learning. Erickson (2012) contended that youth participatory action research (YPAR) represented a "significant shift in *conducting* research *on* people to the realm of *accompanying* them during much of the process" (p. 157). In addition to providing a model for conducting this research, Erickson's (2012) aims and purposes articulated the ideology I was attempting to infuse into my own classroom within the context of choral music education.

Using examples from Green's (2002) research and the U.K. based *Musical Futures* program, Erickson (2012) developed a curriculum based on students' interests

using informal learning pedagogy. Asking the student researchers what mattered to them necessitated curricular changes that included working with friends and incorporating popular music, dance, technology, the Internet and electronic instruments. Erickson (2012) concluded by cautioning against being caught up by a singular approach to music teaching and learning, suggesting instead that learning should be holistic and collaborative so as to “avoid reductionist or dichotomized human behavior” (p. 218). Erickson’s (2012) profound regard for his students’ musical development encouraged me to critically examine, i.e., reconceptualize my curriculum. As a result I implemented pedagogical changes in order to make learning more relevant and empower students to have a voice in their own learning.

The literature on informal music learning resonated with my goal to discover improved, alternative pedagogical approaches. Green’s (2008) students found their learning experiences to be an “active and constructive process” (p. 110). Cutler’s (2002) recommendations in string education corroborated Green’s (2008) findings in general music; that the strengths of informal pedagogies “lie in the fact that the strategies were developed by learners, through learning, rather than teachers by teaching” (p. 22). Pearce’s (2005) holistic approach—making music learning active, collaborative, and social—created a connection between music and the student’s lives. Jaffurs (2006) framed teaching and learning in a garage band as a co-construction of the learning environment. Erickson (2012) made compelling arguments for reconceptualizing curriculum and empowering students to have a voice in their own learning. All of these findings—empowering students, making music learning more relevant, enhancing student

motivation, increasing a broad array of musical skills, and making music education more critical and inclusive—corresponded with the purpose of this study.

**Critical pedagogy.** Closely related to critical theory (Freire, 1970) and critical musicality (Green, 2008), critical theory is inexorably tied the theoretical framework on which this research is based. Critical pedagogy invites students to “recognize and discover power relations and symbolic violence both in and through the curriculum by presenting alternative ways of viewing the world, and challenging commonsense or hegemonic views” (Moore, 2000, p. 86). The following section illuminates some ways music education researchers have partnered critical theory and its associated pedagogy within a constructionist framework.

In recent decades, scholars (Abrahams, 2005a, 2005b; Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2007) have developed specific epistemological principles of critical pedagogy for education. In the critical context, knowledge is not abstract or absolute; rather it is a social construction (Malito, 2014). Abrahams (2005b) offered five key principles for the implementation of critical pedagogy in the context of classroom music:

- Education is a conversation where students and their teachers pose and solve problems together.
- Education broadens the students’ view of reality. The goal of teaching and learning is to bring about a change in the way that both students and teachers perceive the world.
- Education is empowering. When students and teachers realize they know

something with a depth that goes beyond the recall of information, this is “conscientization” (Freire, 1970). This knowledge includes a new understanding and an ability to act on this knowledge in such a way as to effect change.

- Education is transformative. A lesson has been learned when both teachers and students can acknowledge a change in their own perceptions. It is this change or transformation that teachers can assess.
- Education is political. There are inherent issues of power and control inside the classroom, the school building, and the community. Those in power make the decisions about what is taught, how often classes meet, how much money is allocated to each school subject or program, and so forth. Those who use the critical-pedagogy model are able to transcend these constraints by focusing on the valuable knowledge that students bring to the classroom (p. 64).

Critical pedagogy, similar to Gergen’s (2001) domains of relevance, acknowledges that teaching and learning music is socially and politically constructed. Both critical theory and constructionism advocate for a shift in power relationships within the classroom whereby teachers and students learn mutually from each other.

Using social constructivism and critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework, Allsup (2002) sought to discover how the composing process might help to define collaborative or mutual learning communities and the notion of democratic music making. Drawing from Freire (1970)—who called attention to the interdependent nature of democratic learning environments—Allsup emphasized that “a dialogic relationship” is indispensable to knowledge construction. Guided by democratic principles and

constructivist learning theory, Allsup (2002) contended:

The notion of democratic education is a complex one, more nuanced than, for example, letting the members of a choir select the color of the group's robes, or giving members of the pep band an opportunity to vote on music. Democracy requires collaboration, and it must involve more than just adults—its practice should incorporate the rights and opinions of both students and teachers... Unfortunately, the authoritarian conception of learning is found more frequently in schools (and in schools of music) than among “outsider” organizations like teen rock bands or local choral societies... (p. 27).

Seeking to create original music that was meaningful and self-reflective, Allsup (2003) implemented an action plan—similar to the one used in this study—using an open-ended research process in which the participants shared in the design of the study, established their own procedures, rules, and protocols, and assisted in the analysis of data. The overall results of Allsup's study suggested that choosing a genre of music and working within the traditions governing that process (composing, problem-solving, and musicianship) were the largest determinant of the group's culture and that the creative process—in which everyone's musical ideas are valued—was the most important factor in creating collaborative, democratic, mutual learning communities. In informal settings, music making was self-directed and thus personally meaningful, emphasizing personal relationships, peer learning, peer critique, and the expectation that members take responsibility for each other.

When designing this research, Allsup's (2002, 2003) research plan, research process, and the involvement of participants in the design and direction of the study weighed in heavily because, like Allsup (2003), I wanted to be able to “teach *with* students rather than *to* students,” (p. 34). Similarly, I was drawn to this pedagogical approach because, as Allsup (2003) advised, when students are given the opportunity to

explore freely and work democratically—using music of their own choosing—they will create music that “reflects a world that is theirs; a world they understand and a world that defines who they are” (p. 35).

Cho (2010) made a similar discovery regarding student/teacher relationships when attempting to transition away traditional “banking” approaches within the realm of studio instruction. To develop a more holistic approach to instrumental instruction, Cho (2010) conducted a case study with five adult flute students to explain how students and teachers might co-create an instrumental curriculum and how student’s thinking about playing the flute might be transformed by learning in a constructivist instructional environment. Building upon precepts set forth by Pogonowski (2005), Cho’s curriculum design looked at music learning holistically in order “to move from drill to thought-provoking matters that require musical thinking” (Cho, 2010, p. 10). Findings indicated that the curriculum design encouraged holistic musicianship, evident in the responses of students, who expressed that they were becoming musicians, not just flute players. Cho’s (2010) perspectives within the realm of studio instruction paralleled my objectives within the realm of choral music education. In particular, I learned about metacognition, exploration, critical reflection, and problem-solving strategies within a constructivist/constructionist approach. Like Cho, I wanted to “adjust the curriculum to meet the needs and interests of the students” in order to “go with the flow of the class.” Similarly, that “responsibility for learning lies jointly on both teacher and students” (p. 146) was exactly what I was hoping to discover in choral education.

**Problem-based learning.** I was seeking a collaborative model of choral education in which teachers and students share responsibility for learning. I learned that constructivist approaches to learning are rooted in the “pedagogy of inquiry” (Scott, 2007, p. 35). Inquiry-based learning, also known as *problem-based learning* (Barrell, 1997, 2010; Jonassen, 1991a, 1991b, 1998; Papert & Harel, 1991), draws from the processes of scientific inquiry and leads to the development of shared musical understandings.

Drawing from sources outside music education (Bakhtin, 1981; Beals, 1998; Mehan, 1984; Rogoff, 1990), and within music education (Campbell, 1995; Claire, 1993/1994; DeLorenzo, 1989; Kaschub, 1997; Marsh, 1995; Wiggins, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1998), Wiggins (1999/2000) researched the nature of shared understanding as a basis for musical problem solving in order to determine its role in empowering musical thinking and learning. Wiggins (1999/2000) concluded, “Shared understanding is the primary basis for musical problem solving and for the development of musical understanding” (p. 87).

This research was the foundation for the textbook *Teaching for Musical Understanding* (Wiggins 2015), which provided me with insight regarding the application of social constructivist strategies in the music classroom. Employing a pedagogical approach rooted in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Wiggins transcended disciplinary boundaries by amalgamating teaching techniques used in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The text provided exemplars of student-centered lessons integrating problem solving, cognitive apprenticeship, and

collaborative learning strategies. Characterizing learning as constructed understanding,” Wiggins (2015) stated, “people engage in [problem solving] experiences and, from those experiences put ideas together and figure things out for themselves” (p. 4). Blair and Wiggins (2010) explained:

Constructivist, problem-based learning experiences enable personal and collective engagement with music, foster genuine growth in musical independence, and provide opportunities for students to recognise [sic] the musician within themselves and others (p. 29).

Wiggin’s ideas about problem-based learning helped me to design a learning environment that placed responsibility for learning on the students while allowing them freedom to work independently and collaboratively. I chose to implement a problem-based approach hoping that we—the students and I—might develop shared understandings regarding our pedagogical and social practices in choral music education.

In another study that integrated problem-based instruction and technology, Bower’s (2008) had students assume the roles of “real musicians,” by composing, publishing, rehearsing, and performing compositions in their chorus classrooms. Results of the study suggested that technology could be used effectively in the interest of developing young composers. Surprised to discover that technology can “even out the playing field” in music education by allowing students with little or no musical experience to become musicians and composers, Bower (2008) reflected:

[The study] has unearthed certain related problematic issues in music education in general and suggested ways the implementation of technology, when carefully used, can address these issues. For example, a major problem of our western music education system is that there are a select few regarded as the “elite” amongst our student bodies. Those students come to us already interested in music and equipped with what we perceive as exceptional “talent” and the ability to excel about their contemporaries in the course of study we structure for them.

Technology can even out the playing field in music education, allowing those whom [sic] might be perceived as “non-musical” or “untalented” to function in a virtual musical reality developing their skills ontologically so they can take musical thinking in the computer lab and apply it to the real world (pp. 127–128).

In an epilogue, Bower (2008) recalled life-altering consequences related to his research. As an educator, Bower witnessed positive, long-term effects on his students as they matured; not only did the students grow and develop musically, their social competencies were described as remarkable. Bower (2008) concluded that his own personal and professional developments led to another kind of transformation that could only be experienced from within: “An evolving approach to teaching and openness to change” (p. 128). Bower inspired me to be open to the use of technology as a pedagogical tool and to encourage my students to assume the roles of “real musicians” in the context of sixth grade chorus.

Holsberg (2009) merged a teacher-centered model by Revelli and a student-centered, problem-solving model based on principles set forth by Dewey, in order to create more relevant and personally meaningful experiences for students enrolled in instrumental music education. Three main goals for the study included a description of a band curriculum, an investigation of the roles of all participants, and an analysis of the promises, problems, and challenges such a course of study might hold (p. 11). During the research period, forty all-male high school band students spent five hours per day for five weeks working on composition projects, improvising, working with a performance artist, going on field trips, and participating in full band rehearsals. The five-week immersion culminated in a final performance.

Positive themes that emerged from the study were that trust was vital to the

composition process, a high level of risk was necessary during the process of creating, the power dynamic was inclusive, and the dichotomy between process and product became more fluid (pp. 150–151). Holsberg (2009) contended that the negatives that emerged were the result of confusion and ambiguity (from lack of clarity in expectations and instruction), and the negotiation of power (because students had little experience in a self-regulated learning environment) (p. 152).

From my reading, I surmised the negatives might be related to the implementation of teacher-designed and directed learning activities, which did not account for students' musical ideas or interests. Nevertheless, Holsberg (2009) maintained the findings suggested that a constructivist environment held many promises for instrumental music education, contending that students took increasing ownership of their learning, made significant progress on their instruments, and assumed leadership roles that would not have been available to them in many traditional instrumental classrooms. Holsberg (2009) concluded:

I believe that there are exciting new possibilities for band, ones that are student-centered and inclusive, free of fear and nurturing, high-performing and reflective. By taking what we have learned in the past century and incorporating cutting-edge educational theory, we can make band a living, adapting, and vital tradition that will continue to evolve and create new traditions. As someone who loves music and all that is beautiful in the band world, I hold out great hope for this new band tradition. In this way, band is able to accommodate all of its community members and make the band room a place where all can share in the creation of art (p. 215).

When designing my own research, I considered the various ways constructivist, problem-based learning experiences enable personal and collective engagement with music (Blair & Wiggins, 2010). Drawing from Holsberg (2009), Loren (2003), and

Wetzel (2007), I purposefully moved away from teacher-designed and directed learning activities, which do not take into account students' musical ideas or interests, or make student ownership of the learning process and product a priority. In order to enable personal and collective engagement with music, I implemented a student-centered lesson plan integrating problem solving, cognitive apprenticeship, and collaborative learning strategies. This made it possible for students to assume the roles of "real musicians" and facilitate the development social and musical understandings.

**Collaborative learning.** Blair (2009) determined, "student collaborations and contributions enable student-learner ownership of the musical processes and product" (p. 42). Collaborative learning is a teaching technique that uses groups or teams to problem-solve tasks that promote learning (Huffman, 2012). Educational leaders such as Boardman (2002), Brooks and Brooks (2001), Bruffee (1993), Fosnot and Perry (2005), Wiggins (2015), and Zemelman (2005) have advocated for collaborative learning, leading me to examine the nature of student-centered classrooms, in which students are engaged in collaborative, hands-on activities and where problem solving is viewed a valued tool in curriculum design.

For example, Wall (2013) investigated collaborative emergence, i.e., a performance that results from group creation and arrived at by a collective social process (Sawyer, 1999), in order to create more relevant and personally meaningful experiences for students enrolled in instrumental music education. Wall (2013) described multiple understandings of students' musical fluency, the students' rhythmically driven displays of collaborative emergence, and the roles of teacher as student and student as teacher. Wall

(2013) reached two significant conclusions that informed this research. First, the role of the teacher became one of listening, responding, and suggesting. The students' role was to learn by exploring, discussing, and deciding. Second, without teacher direction, young improvisers were able to make collaborative pedagogical and musical decisions relevant to their own interests.

In addition to collaborative emergence, collaborative grouping strategies were an area of concern when designing and implementing this research. Kosak (2012) used collaborative grouping strategies in order to examine sociocultural influences in collaborative composition. Eight fourth-grade students were instructed to compose and perform an original piece of music. Three activities were completed in collaborative groups and two activities were completed individually. Results of the study suggested that intrapersonal-interpersonal relationships were the strongest sociocultural influence in the compositional process. Although he did not offer specific procedures for group selection, Kosak (2012) proposed that music educators might carefully select members for collaborative groups and that students might benefit from being placed in groups of differing creative ability (p. 240).

Social interaction in collaborative learning informed Ferguson's (2014) understanding of constructivist student learning in an auditioned elementary school Collegium of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass (SATB) recorders. The purpose of the study was to discover ways in which the students, instructors, teachers, and parents conducted themselves working toward a performance as a community-of-learners (Rogoff 1994, as cited in Ferguson, 2014). The close interactive behaviors that developed among the

participants within the constructed learning environment appeared to be influenced by students' foundational and educational backgrounds, students' exposure to recorders, and a collaborative community of learners approach. Ferguson (2014) affirmed the efficacy of collaborative learning by concluding that music educators should establish learning environments that promote collaborative learning and provide ample opportunities for students to engage with each other socially during the learning process.

In another study examining the significance of the social sphere and the pivotal nature teacher-student relationships in the educational process, Foster (2014) incorporated social constructivism and social interdependence theory in a post-secondary piano lab. Ten participants from a small private university were comprised of non-music majors who had little or no previous instruction in piano. The purpose of the study was to determine the ways knowledge may be constructed and shared, and how interdependent personal relationships are formed. Foster (2014) concluded that the positive academic, technical, and social results for students who participated in the study corroborated with the self-actualizing potential of constructivism and social interdependence theory in music education. In this scenario students were able to learn through educational activities that provided them with opportunities to “discover, construct, express, self-assess, create, communicate, and collaborate through the dynamic process of reciprocal peer mentoring” (p. 232). Affirming the importance of social interaction among student musicians, Foster went on to suggest there might be implications for traditional practices in music education, particularly those espousing hierarchal teaching methods. Foster's (2014) findings affirmed Gergen's (2001) domains of relevance regarding the importance

of social interaction and the pivotal nature of relationships in music teaching and learning.

**Community music.** Findings in the realm of community music support the conceptual premise of this study, that learning takes place through the social interaction and that culture is the primary determining factor for knowledge construction. In this context, *musicking* is an activity “brought forth through collaborative human endeavor” and “committed to cultural democracy” (Higgins, 2013, p. viii). By incorporating concepts put forth by Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1978), and Bruner (1996), Paavola and Hakkarainen (2005) developed an epistemological framework within the realm of community music that parallels social constructionism. Distinguishing three metaphorical categories of learning, the framework developed by Paavola and Hakkarainen (2005) centered on individual knowledge acquisition, learning as “located” in relationships, i.e., an interactive process of participation in various cultural practices and shared learning activities, and specific objects of activity (such as musical outcomes) that are systematically developed within communities. The framework specifically refers to the notion of epistemic agency, which emerges through sociocultural activities. Karlsen, Westerlund, Partti and Solbu (2013) substantiated this framework by stating: “It is noteworthy that current educational theories support the perspective where learning is examined in the context of human practices and communities” (p. 41).

In order to determine ways that communities of practice influence individual and collective identity formation, Kent (2014) conducted an ethnographic study at a Jewish summer camp. Themes that emerged from the data suggested music at Jewish summer

camp aided personal and communal Jewish identity (i.e., culture); communal song played a central role in camp ceremonies (enculturation); and in order to encourage greater participation, the Jewish community should be more “critical” of their song selections (i.e., attend to selecting songs that do not promote gender bias and stereotypical gender roles).

Kent’s (2014) findings corroborated Shehan-Campbell, Connell, and Beegle’s (2007) observation that “music provides adolescents with a medium through which to construct, negotiate, and modify aspects of their personal and group identities” (p. 221). Both studies substantiated Green’s (2008) notion of critical literacy, wherein children are allowed to explore freely and work collaboratively so that—using music of their own choosing—they will create music that “reflects a world that is theirs; a world they understand and a world that defines who they are” (Allsup, 2003, p. 35).

### **Choral Music Education**

*When a child sings out, she knows she is beautiful. (Becker, 2011, p. 80)*

I was seeking a pedagogy that would involve my students and help them make personal connections with music in chorus and in their lives. I found Becker’s (2011) research within the realm of choral music education to be relevant and thought provoking. Working with a select eight-member, middle school aged, after-school lab chorus in New York City, Becker (2011) aimed at breaking though unexamined generalizations about constructivism. Focusing on constructivist epistemology, psychological constructivism, social constructivism, and constructivist pedagogy, Becker

explored ways that constructivist theories inform music learning generally and how they may be situated in the choral ensemble setting specifically.

To articulate some tangible elements related to teaching, Becker (2011) generated a list of personal constructivist pedagogical qualities:

- I try to create strategies for rehearsing that address the students' internal processes of learning and meaning making.
- I try to accept children for where they are, what they can do, and what they bring to the rehearsal setting, and I aim for our work to meet them where they are.
- I try to enable students to feel ownership of the rehearsal process and the music they create, and I try to nurture the steps that students make in this direction, such as when they begin to offer their opinions and suggestions.
- I present the repertoire *musically*; we begin with the whole pieces and break them down only as necessary to address problems that we observe or questions we have.
- I seek opportunities for students to make discoveries about how the music works, to appreciate aspects of its form by analyzing it in different ways, including by choreographing it, changing the arrangement we sing, and by figuring out, by ear, the parts we sing together.
- We take time in rehearsal to explore the texts to songs in depth, for the students to think about and share their interpretations of the texts, and to experiment with delivering and inhabiting the lines as actors would.

- I try to help students claim ownership of their singing voices, to help them consider what they like about their voices and how they would like to develop vocally, and then to offer them technical support for achieving those ends.
- The choir works toward preparing a concert that represents the students as fully as possible with respect to the work they have done, the growth they have undergone, the challenges they took on, and the ownership they have claimed of their singing, of the music, and of the choir (pp. 236–237).

In addition to generating a list of desirable pedagogical qualities, Becker (2011) asserted that constructivist pedagogy represented ways of teaching that built upon what students brought to the table by stating:

It [Constructivism] honored students' interests and their ways of thinking and being. It required that students have autonomy because they can only enact what they bring and the ways they learn if they are free to do things their own way. Given the possibility of creating their own paths of learning, they could make connections, relating what they discovered to what they know. It sought to give students ownership so that they would invest in what they did. It addressed motivation, since students pursuing what they are interested in, in the ways that draw them, are intrinsically motivated to continue. That was the constructivism I sought (p. 236).

According to Becker (2011), teachers in a constructivist environment must allow for the students' musical (how to use their singing voices, incorporating listening skills, critical thinking, confidence, and performing skills) and social (skills for living) growth to happen naturally, a process requiring patience. Students' autonomy and ownership of the learning process motivated them to make personal connections to the music in ways that promoted meaning making, (i.e., find personal meaning in the pieces they were singing), fostered engagement, and encouraged self-expression.

Becker's (2011) described the eight-member ensemble as being exceptionally talented and told of the strong pre-existing relationships among the students and herself. Becker's suggestions for future research have been incorporated into this research, particularly how constructivism might be interpreted in the context of a larger ensemble, with students who possessed a wider range of abilities, and had fewer shared understandings among group members and the teacher.

Whereas Becker (2011) was looking for deeper personal understanding of constructivism within a small choral setting, Collmer (2012) focused on the development of teaching strategies in a large high school choral ensemble. The purpose of the study was to identify strategies that most effectively support constructivism and music learning in a large choral ensemble, examine the roles of the teacher and students in a collaborative learning environment, and examine which instructional and collaborative learning strategies most effectively developed students' musical understanding and skill development (p. 6). Collmer (2009) concluded that students could benefit from additional practice in the following areas; self-analysis and reflection, learning and incorporating music vocabulary to better express their ideas, and developing the confidence to share their ideas among a large group of peers. Challenges that arose during the study—specifically, the ability of the students to stay on task without teacher supervision and uneven levels of participation during group work—suggested that students needed a more gradual transition from a traditional teacher-centered paradigm to a student-centered, student-run ensemble rehearsal. Recommendations for further research included the study of pedagogical strategies and structured environments for the purpose of transitioning

from a teacher-centered to a student-centered performing ensemble. In particular, Collmer (2009) proposed; “a sequence of learning activities might be developed in order that students are transitioned into roles in which they carry more responsibility and autonomy” (p. 54).

Although Becker (2011) and Collmer (2009) examined constructivism within a choral context, their results were divergent. Collmer (2009) implemented teacher-designed and directed learning activities, which did not take into account students’ musical ideas or interests. Her students did not take ownership of their learning process, needed teacher supervision and experienced uneven levels of participation. Collmer recommended providing more structured learning (p. 54). Becker (2010), on the other hand, relinquished teacher control and gradually discovered the importance of honoring her students’ interests and their ways of thinking and being. She found constructivist learning required that students have autonomy because “they can only enact what they bring and the ways they learn if they are free to do things their own way” (p. 236).

Since I was seeking a pedagogy that would allow my students to make personal connections and learn the relevance of music in their own lives, I felt connected with Becker’s (2011) personal constructivist pedagogical qualities. I was also interested in developing a learning environment that would allow for the students’ musical (how to use their singing voices, incorporating listening skills, critical thinking, confidence, and performing skills) and social (skills for living) growth to happen naturally. Although Becker described it as a “process requiring patience,” it appeared to me that this was the constructionist ideology I sought in my own classroom.

## Arrival

*“Theory and practice are not separate: theorizing in music education—as in all education—is rooted in practice and gets its significance from its pragmatic consequences” (Vakeva, 2007, p. 7).*

This chapter represents an extensive sample of literature regarding knowledge construction and related theoretical and practical applications in a variety of educational settings, revealing what Webster (2011) described as a “complex mosaic of beliefs” by philosophers, researchers, and pedagogical practitioners rather than a set of hard and fast precepts (p. 36). The readings in this chapter have coalesced into my own construction of constructionism (Gergen, 2001; Papert & Harel, 1991). I was particularly drawn to studies by Allsup (2002), Becker (2011), and Erickson (2014) because their findings highlighted the many ways constructivism orients us toward reconceptualizing pedagogical practice and is focused on the social and intellectual needs of students. In particular, I valued Allsup’s (2002) notions of active, collaborative learning communities and how they fostered meaningful interaction between the teacher and students in a constructivist music composition environment. Becker’s (2011) concern for the social and musical development of middle school students was admirable and her ambivalence regarding her own constructivist consciousness was provocative. I found Erickson’s (2014) call for reconceptualizing middle school curricula—in order to make music learning more informal, relevant, inclusive, and learner-centered—to be compelling and pertinent for middle school students.

The principles and practices of informal learning appeared familiar to me because in my “real life” I engage in them. Most significant was how eloquently Green

(2008) validated the use of popular music in the classroom by articulating ways popular music provides critical and alternative ways of viewing the world and challenges taken for granted cultural beliefs (p. 83). Of relevance to this study was Green's (2008) notion of *critical musicality*, which suggests that when students are allowed to bring their vast and divergent musical knowledge of popular music into the classroom, learning becomes culturally and personally relevant. Critical musicality, in this sense, is closely tied to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and Gergen's (2001) fourth domain of relevance whereby authoritative discourse must be opened to evaluation from alternative standpoints.

Social constructionism, and its' predecessor social constructivism, is as diverse as the conceptions that shape its discourse; i.e., different things to different people. When designing this study I incorporated pedagogical strategies determined to affect positive learning outcomes. Then, seeking to build upon and broaden the existing knowledge base in choral music education, I set about reconceptualizing middle school choral pedagogy in order to discover pedagogical practices that might make choral music-learning socially relevant and learner-centered; to be compelling for sixth grade middle school choral students.

### **Chapter Three: Reconstructing Pedagogical Practice**

*“The aim of empowerment is rational and just decisions and actions that will be regarded as legitimate by those involved and affected”  
(Carr & McKemmis, 2005, p. 318).*

In this chapter I reveal how I reconceptualized my pedagogical practice in the context of critical participatory action research order to create a collaborative learning environment focused on the needs and interests of students. First I use Windschitl’s (2002) guidelines and Gergen’s (2001) domains of relevance to enact my constructionist model of learning. Next, I describe how the aims, interests, and abilities of all participants informed the direction of my research. Finally, I describe how co-participants were included in the processes of data collection, analysis, and reporting so that my findings would reflect the varied, emergent issues and concerns of all participants in addition to my own assumptions about teaching and learning. Critical participatory action research methods made it possible to reveal multiple understandings so that I might illuminate various ways that constructionist pedagogical and organizational changes impacted choral teaching and learning. This inclusive approach allowed me to represent the divergent perspectives of all participants in a manner that may be helpful and credible, rather than indisputable.

#### **Social Constructionist Environmental Design**

*“Social constructionist writings first call into question all taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the real, the rational and the good”  
(Gergen, 2003, p. 41).*

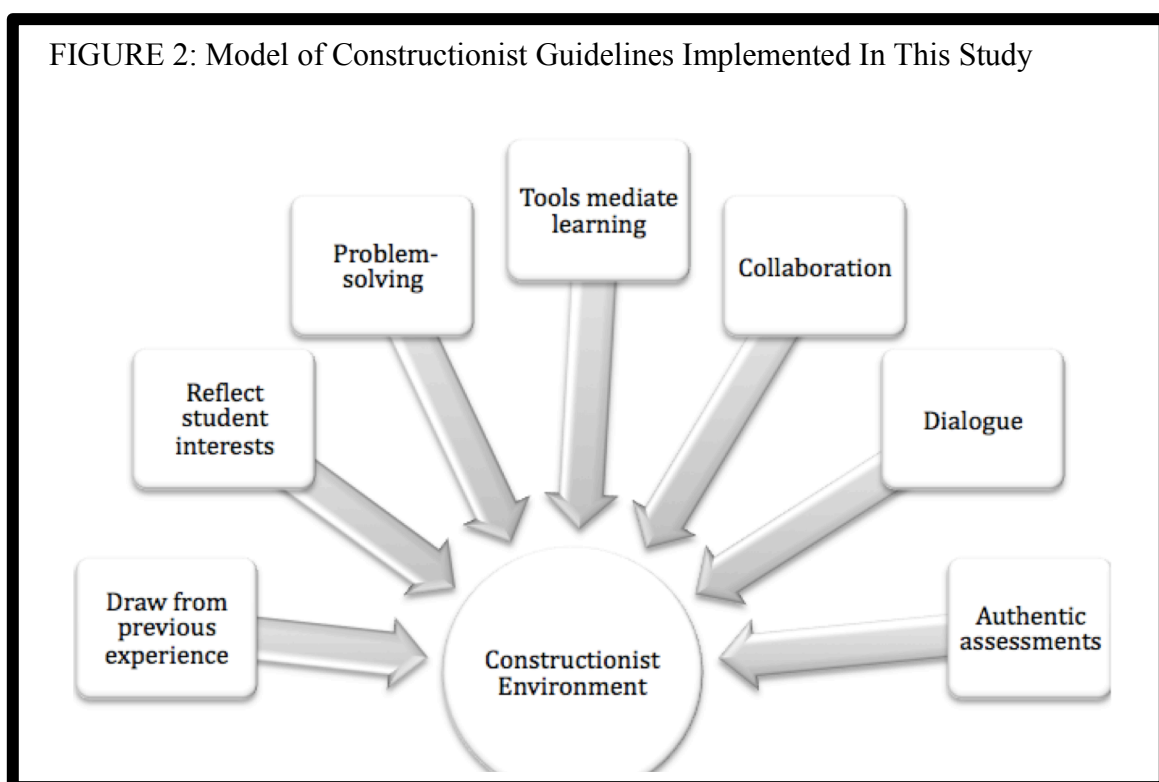
In this study I used critical participatory action research strategies to “critically” examine the discourse, i.e., social and institutional structures, surrounding middle school

choral education. In order to create conditions of learning that invited the re-interpretation of pedagogical practice, I designed and implemented a social constructionist learning environment. The theoretical approach I chose to characterize teacher and student activities in this environment presupposes that knowledge is both personally constructed and socially mediated and that these components cannot be viewed as separate in any meaningful way (Windschitl, 2002). My environmental design centered on the constructionist precept that learning, in the middle school choral context, denoted increasing students' abilities to participate with others in meaningful, thoughtful, and productive ways.

Methods of instruction derived from constructionist explanations of learning have not coalesced into any one comprehensible, widely applicable model (Fosnot, 1996; Pappert & Harel, 1991). However, Windschitl (2002) offered research-based guidelines that connect what we know about how people learn and the kinds of classroom conditions that support learning. These guidelines, illustrated in Figure 2, form the basis for constructionist teaching strategies teachers might use. Using these guidelines, a teacher examines what is being taught and then determines ways to implement these strategies in order to facilitate knowledge construction. For example, to facilitate problem solving, constructionist teachers assist by providing a variety of tools that mediate learning. In this environment, collaborative learning provides opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Collaborative dialogue in turn, facilitates the application (transfer) of knowledge, reflection, and opportunities for negotiating cognitive understandings. Finally, a variety of authentic assessments allow students to demonstrate how ideas are evolving and

provide opportunities for feedback (from both peers and the teacher) on the processes (formative) and products (summative) of their learning (Windschitl, 2002, p. 137).

The significance of the social sphere and the pivotal nature teacher-student relationships in the educational process, particularly relevant to middle school, prompted



Source: Adapted from Windschitl (2002).

me to enact Gergen's (2001) five domains of relevance as a pedagogical guide. The first domain, from hierarchy to heterarchy, refers to the critical examination of traditional, hierarchal choral methods of learning, built around a *nutritionist* model (Freire, 1985), which views the instructional process as the transmission of knowledge from expert to novice. Alternatively, constructionism advocates for mutual engagement among teachers and students as they work toward "context-specific utilization of knowledge" (Gergen,

2001, p. 127). To make learning more relevant for the students, I created a constructionist learning environment in which lessons were student-driven, i.e., centered around collaborative learning projects in which students worked on and presented musical selections of their own choosing. I relinquished my role as a traditional chorus teacher and supported student learning by scaffolding students as needed during the learning process.

In constructionism, learning is viewed as “an act of interpretation and negotiation with other individuals” (Windschitl, 2002, p. 142). Gergen’s (2001) second domain refers to an educational process that moves outside traditional domains or bodies of knowledge. During this study, students were encouraged to explore non-traditional domains of practice, i.e., popular music, computers, backing tracks, in order to achieve a holistic, understanding of choral singing and performance.

The third domain of relevance refers to an open-ended as opposed to static, contextual approach to knowledge acquisition. In order to make learning more relevant, i.e., give meaning and purpose to our pedagogical practices, students were purposefully engaged in knowledge construction through active, contextual, collaborative, and holistic problem-solving learning processes. The fourth domain refers to reflexive deliberation, which suggests that authoritative discourse must be opened to evaluation from alternative standpoints. My report of this study reflects *differentiated understandings* among the participants regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of our pedagogical and social practices.

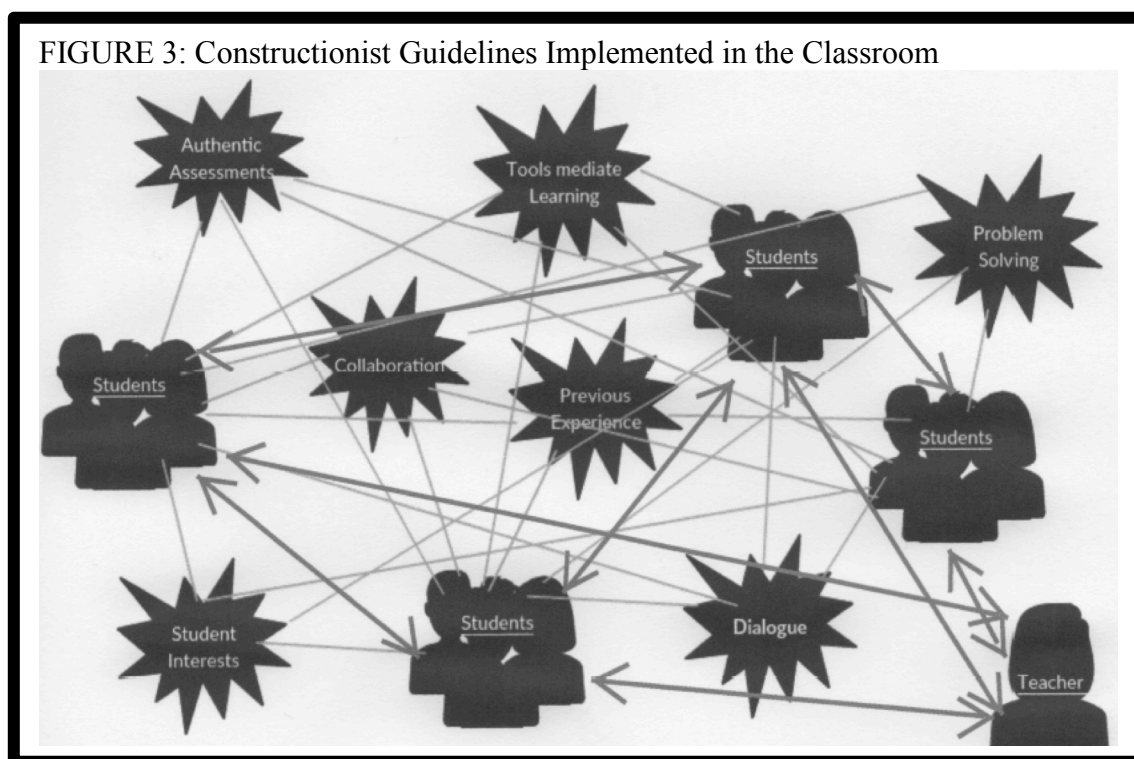
Finally, the fifth domain or relevance refers to the distinct division between

teacher and student that has been perpetuated in traditional Western views of knowledge transmission. The relational matrix frames the act of teaching as a process of “co-constructing knowledge *with* students” (Windschitl, 2002, p. 135). These five domains of relevance offered by Gergen (2001) not only guided the application of constructionist theories to pedagogical practice, but they also provided opportunities for participants to discover collaborative and socially relevant pedagogical practices specific to sixth grade choral music education.

Following constructionist guidelines (see Figure 2), a lesson plan (see Appendix A) was structured to provide students with autonomy and responsibility. I determined that lessons should involve collaborative learning in which groups of students worked to solve problems related to choral singing. As students worked on musical selections based on their own interests, they incorporated previous knowledge and worked with the assistance of others in the zone of proximal development (Leontiev, 1978, 1979; Luria, 1928; Vygotsky, 1978). Tools—a computer, lyric sheets, instruments, and speakers—helped facilitate the co-construction of knowledge among learners (Jonassen, 1998; Papert & Harel, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). Authentic assessments, in which students demonstrated their musical understanding, helped to determine the depth and breadth of student learning.

The constructionist learning environment that emerged in practice was not nearly as neat and tidy as the theoretical model I created prior to the study (see Figure 2). Figure 3 illustrates how teaching and learning in a constructionist environment might be perceived as messy and chaotic. Both figures illustrate how classroom activities were

centered on interactive constructionist guidelines that involved shared responsibility for teaching and learning. In this environment, I relinquished my position as a traditional chorus teacher who dispenses musical knowledge from the podium, and became a “mediator” of musical learning. My new role included some telling, some showing, and some joining in, based on the learning needs of the students.



Source: Adapted from Windschitl (2002).

### Critical Participatory Action Research Design

*“Herein we locate a groundless grounds for proceeding – a set of logics that can inspire but not require, sensitize without sanitizing, unify without universalizing. In what follows I link the emerging logics of social construction with the action research movement” (Gergen, 2003, p. 40).*

**Timeline.** This study was conducted during the 2014–15 school year (beginning on September 2, 2014) and lasted for one semester. Walker Middle School (pseudonym) has a master schedule that is based on a seven-day cycle, and all music classes meet twice during each cycle. Consequently, the study took place for 25, 50-minute class periods. This amount of time afforded the opportunity to establish a constructionist learning environment, implement collaborative groups, and reflect upon the propositional, practical, experiential, and presentational aspects of the pedagogical practices generated from newly constructed modes of practice.

**Procedures.** I enacted my critical participatory action research plan based on procedures outlined by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) in their critical participatory action research (CPAR) approach. The first three steps reflect the “critical” nature of action research, i.e., to make pedagogical practices “more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive” (p. 85). Because CPAR is distinctly a “social practice” (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014), the participants and I worked collaboratively as we:

- **Closely examined** our collective practices, the understanding of those practices and the conditions under which those practices occur. As we established new practices, we examined our practices to determine if they were rational, just, sustainable, or if changes were needed.
- **Asked critical questions** about our collective educational practices and their consequences. We sought to know which constructionist practices, if any, were flawed or unjust and which practices would promote social and musical

engagement.

- **Engaged in dialogue.** Although as researcher I initiated pedagogical changes, I hoped the participants might reach an intersubjective agreement about the way we understood our collective practices, agreement regarding the language we used, mutual understanding of one another's point of view, and an unforced consensus about what to do next. I continually sought the opinions of everyone involved in order to monitor the differentiated understandings of those who were affected by the practices under scrutiny.
- **Took action.** The first step was to establish a constructionist environment. Then, during the research process, the project evolved based on the aims, interests, and abilities of all participants.
- **Documented and monitored what happened.** All of the participants—the students, the academic assistants, and myself—assisted with evidence/data collection and analysis by keeping journals, participating in small-group interviews, and building portfolios.
- **Reflected.** Because of the ongoing, cyclical nature of the evidence/data analysis, the students and I kept journals so we could reflect upon, explicate, and modify our teaching and learning practices. I conducted interviews and continually asked probing questions to help me understand how our new pedagogical practices impacted teaching and learning. As I began to think about the conditions of our practices, I not only took into account what had occurred, but what was revealed by our efforts. I considered how certain practices are bound by discourses that

both enable and constrain practice. When describing each segment of the action cycle and narrating the results of the study I attempted to reveal how pedagogical and organizational changes impacted the learning environment from the perspectives of all participants in a manner that is credible, rather than indisputable, representing the consciousness of all concerned (pp. 86–87).

Each phase of the project did not unfold as a tidy package of instructional design because the directionality of the lessons developed in relation to the emancipatory aims, interests and abilities of all involved, rather than being research-directed. I will include a more detailed description of how the research unfolded in Chapter Four.

**Evidence sources/collection.** In critical participatory action research, data/evidence collection and analysis are embedded in the research design. During the project we collected evidence (an action research term) in the form of data (a qualitative research term) (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014) from three sources; observation, enquiry, and documents for examination (Mills, 2011). Evidence was collected during the teaching and learning process and by conducting interviews. The following is a list of the evidence we collected:

- **Video Recordings.** According to Mills (2010), AV observations allow the researcher to document verbatim conversations and actions, see beyond routine classroom activities from an “etic” perspective and look for paradoxes or the unintended consequences of classroom practices. Classes were recorded from the back of the room order to preserve the “big picture” in an authentic manner for subsequent analysis. Students made video recordings of their own work, and

*small-group discussion #3* (see Appendix B) on laptop computers, which they shared with me. The concert was filmed by cable access television.

- **Interviews.** Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) recommended engaging the participants to help document shared understandings. Students conducted three formal *small-group discussion/reflections* during class (See Appendix B). Their reflections were recorded in their student journals and on laptop computers. Focus interviews were conducted to solicit the opinions of the students regarding our practices and the direction of the project. Participants were encouraged to generate topics of concern informally during ad hoc group discussions and during classes.
- **Journals and Portfolios.** Each group was given a folder in which they collected artifacts including their arrangements, backing tracks, musical scores, and reflection journals. I kept my own research journal and made entries after each class.

**Analyzing the Evidence.** Drawing from critical participatory action research processes (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014), evidence was analyzed concurrently during the research process and after evidence collection was completed. The analysis presented in this report is strictly a CPAR initiative, conducted with co-participants, and does not include an “undisclosed, un-negotiated study of other participants” (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 189). During the project we analyzed the architecture of our new practices, specifically the language, actions, relationships, skills, and dispositions we observed, the values and insights gained through discussions and

interviews, and the artifacts generated during learning activities.

The primary purpose of collecting evidence in critical participatory action research is to feed and nurture self-reflection, especially collective self-reflection (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014, p. 176). Therefore, all the evidence was considered in light of the changes that occurred—individually and collectively—in pedagogical and organizational practices and in regard to the original research questions. All of the participants—the students, the academic assistants, and myself—assisted with evidence collection and analysis by keeping journals, participating in discussions, and building portfolios. The students’ portfolios and my research journal made it possible for us to document the ideas and the events that emerged during our project. The participants’ dialogue, i.e., interpretations of events, provided a panoramic lens into our world, and provided a living, rather than static source of information. A “dialectical” approach allowed the participants to share their personal understandings as we went along, generating new avenues of inquiry regarding our teaching and learning practices. This approach, in turn, engendered impetus for collective self-reflection.

As I began to form a “critical” view of the conditions and constraints that sustained old and new pedagogical and organizational practices, my own self-reflection came into play. Early on I began a narrative in which I reflected on things that I had anticipated and things that I did not anticipate. I thought about the intended and unintended effects of the changes in my pedagogical and social practices and some unexpected issues that affected our procedures. I shared my thoughts with my co-participants in order to corroborate my interpretations and to help me gain an

understanding about our divergent points of view. During the project I sought an unforced group consensus about what we should do next, since we were in a process of learning what we needed to learn to make our pedagogical practices more meaningful, thoughtful, and productive.

My approach to “understanding how my thinking and the thinking of others had been changed” during our project was much more visceral than calculated (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 189). When the project was over, I organized all the evidence we collected into chronological order. I then sorted through the evidence numerous times focusing on key words and ideas. I scribbled notes in the margins regarding different issues that emerged. I carefully reflected upon each varied, emergent issue in light of the co-participants sayings and doings, and my own assumptions about teaching and learning, and in the context of the research questions. Then I wrote. I prepared a straightforward, chronological account of what happened—a ‘warts and all’ narrative—which I pared down until I had an “account I could use as a basis for reflection” (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, pp. 108–109). Afterward, before the end of the school year, I conducted member checks with the participants in order to spot problems or find issues, and then edited accordingly. As I refined my report, certain ideas amalgamated with social constructionist theories of knowledge acquisition.

**Narrating the evidence.** A key issue for teacher researchers studying their own practice relates to the fact that they are acting not only as researchers, but also as members of a community, who should be guided by broader social issues including democratic processes, equality, and emancipation (Mills, 2010). These considerations

took on different dimensions during the various stages of this research. When narrating our story, I was particularly conscious of my dual responsibility not only to the participants themselves, but also to a community of scholars and practitioners. Member checks of Chapter Four, which included a description of the setting and events drawn from transcriptions of classes, interviews and the participants' final reflections, insured that the voices of the participants—the academic assistants and students—were represented as truthfully and accurately as possible.

In the forthcoming chapters I describe what happened during each phase of the project and by doing so, reveal the themes that developed. I corroborate my interpretation of these themes with evidence from student portfolios, video recordings, interviews, and from my research journal. I chose this approach because it demonstrates the working out of constructionist pedagogies that emerged, and it reveals the “in the field” reflection that took place during the study. This format allowed me to illuminate some of the struggles that occurred, characterize the participants, and explain the significant ideas and opinions students offered that had impact on our learning.

## Chapter Four: Confusion and Bewilderment, A Shared Experience

*It is the first day of school and the students in sixth grade chorus are arriving for their first period—first ever—middle school chorus class. They enter, dressed in back-to-school attire, and sit down quietly in anticipation.*

*The chorus room, which is large enough for 80 singers, is in the old wing of Walker Middle School. Built in the 1960's, the chorus room features three levels of seating in a horseshoe shape so that choir members can sit facing the teacher, who is located directly front and center. The room has been updated to support 21<sup>st</sup> century learning; there is a smart board, projector, electronic keyboards, computer cart and an acoustically treated ceiling. The walls—painted a pale shade of green—are decorated with colorful posters and the bulletin board has been decorated with music terms to give the room ambiance. As the students enter the classroom, I am reminded how much this scenario perpetuates the traditional, “banking” model of choral music education.*

*I begin in the usual manner, by taking attendance. I look at each child's face after calling their name; there is so much I want to know about these students. After taking attendance I ask the students why they signed up for chorus. Danny, an energetic, freckle-faced boy with curly blonde hair raises his hand enthusiastically to tell me, “Cause last year I really liked it at my school so I signed up for it this year.” Christy, a shy girl with a soft voice offered, “Well because I've done it for two years and I like to sing.” I respond, “Beautiful, so I'm assuming that people are here because they like to sing, is that correct?” I see the students shyly responding; nodding affirmatively, smiling, or whispering, “yes” under their breath. (video recording, September 2, 2014)*

In this chapter I describe the project and how it unfolded. I recall our adventure, the excitement and wonder of our project, and how it evolved into a shared experience among the participants. The goal of this chapter is to present what happened from multiple perspectives knowing that there is no veritable truth. Instead, my story depicts the ways participants heard and responded to the voices of others, and the gradual transformation that resulted from our experience together. The language I use will be at times colloquial, juxtaposing the past and present tense in order to expose various insights, concerns, and consequences. Most importantly, the voices of the participants will be heard as I recall events that will help me address the research questions guiding this study:

- How might constructionist principles be used to create a collaborative model of middle school choral music education that is focused on the needs and interests—pedagogical and social—of sixth grade choral students?
- What pedagogical and social practices emerge when beginning sixth grade students and their chorus teacher share responsibility for teaching and learning in sixth grade chorus?

### **The Setting**

*“It was our personal journey” – Olivia*

On September 2, 2014, with the permission of the superintendent of schools and the principal of Walker Middle School, I began my research with one section of the sixth grade chorus, which meets twice in a seven-day cycle for 50 minutes. I followed protocols dictated by Boston University and the specific criteria for recruitment approved by the Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects (see Appendix C). To avoid the possibility of coercion, and to allow students the opportunity to opt out without fear of retribution or other negative consequences, I informed the students that their participation was optional and that their participation would remain anonymous to me until the study was completed (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006). I told them that I would use pseudonyms to protect their identity when reporting the results of the study. Per guidelines agreed upon by the IRB, the assistant principal collected the consent and assent forms from the students and instructional assistants and held them in his office until the data collection period was over (see Appendix D, E and F).

At the beginning of the school year there were thirty students enrolled in the

research section of sixth grade chorus. All of the sixth graders, age 11 or 12 years old, were new to the school. Two boys were transferred to special education classes during the first week. Several weeks later, Miranda, who played the saxophone, transferred to band. In November, Danny was dropped from the project because of problems related to his stepbrother, who was also enrolled in the chorus. Out of the remaining 26 students, seven students and their parents or guardians opted not to participate in the research, resulting in a research group that consisted of nineteen students: seven boys and twelve girls. Demographic information indicated that eleven students were Caucasian, five were Indian, and three were Hispanic. Three of the male participants were characterized by special needs, specifically autism and developmental delays.

Two instructional assistants were assigned to the three male special education students who participated in the research. Sandra Smithson assisted Robbie and Daniel from the Developmental Learning Program (DLP) classroom and Sally Turner assisted Max, from the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) classroom. Sandra's primary role was to supervise Robbie and Erik's social behavior, but as the research unfolded, she engaged in some coaching, feedback, and facilitated group discussions. Sally's primary role was to conduct formal observations during classes, charting Max's positive and negative social interactions with the other students based on an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

These instructional assistants were a valuable addition to our classroom. As the project unfolded, Sandra and Sally became my critical friends. They helped supervise special education students but more importantly, they both provided informal and formal

critical feedback during the research. Their perspectives will be heard later in this chapter.

### **Plan of Action**

*Ruth Debrot: I want to know how chorus has met your expectations, exceeded your expectations, or not... (focus interview, January 26, 2015)*

Prior to the beginning of the 2014–15 school year, I prepared the following lesson plan:

- The plan of action will be to prepare for the winter concert on January 15, 2015. The action plan will be open-ended and process-oriented with a final performance, although the end product is not the focus of investigation.
- Groups of participants will have an opportunity to decide or vote upon the subject matter (song they will perform) and create their own plan of action (how they will learn and perform their music). Groups will be encouraged to create their own working environment and to establish in effect, their own curriculum. The objectives, assignment of tasks, sharing of materials, discussions, and rehearsal protocols should be a shared responsibility.

### **Phase One, Polyphony**

*“So how are you going to be the teacher?” – Olivia*

We spent most of the first class going over particulars about our research project. I went over the IRB protocols. I answered student questions about the research and handed out copies of my cover letter with consent and assent forms (see Appendix D and

E). I explained that privacy was paramount, participation was optional, participants could drop out at any time, and I would not know who was participating in the study until after the term was over. Toward the end of class I announced:

RD (Ruth Debrot): Here is the plan. You have a concert on January 15. I'm going to break you up into groups of about eight students. You're going to pick the music. You're going to rehearse the songs. You're going to practice the songs in front of us and then on January 15 you're going to give a concert. Okay? It's all going to be in your hands. You get to pick everything. You get to decide how you're going to sing the songs. You're going to get to make up the harmony. I'm going to help you—if you need it.

Olivia: (anxiously): So how are you going to be the teacher? Are you going to help? Are you going to teach us?

RD: That is an excellent question, because when you're working in groups and you have questions, who are you going to go to?

Olivia: You.

RD: That is how I am going to teach you. Instead of me telling you everything to do or what to do all the time and what songs to do, you're going to decide. And when you have a problem or if you need something, you're going to come to me.

Olivia: Can we move around while singing?

RD: Of course you can. I won't be telling you what to do.  
(class transcription of video recording, September 2, 2014)

My response was purposefully vague because at that moment I was not certain about our roles and how my approach to teaching in a constructionist environment would evolve.

**Group formation.** During our second class the students asked questions regarding the consent and assent paperwork. As I answered them I felt keenly aware of how the learning environment recalled the “taken for granted” traditional choral model. I was calling the shots; I had initiated the project, I had determined our purpose, and I made the schedule. The atmosphere was one of separation; I sat directly in front of the students, who sat submissively in chairs in “choral formation.”

The first step toward establishing a constructionist learning environment was to

form collaborative groups. In order to form collaborative groups I used a transparent group-formation process called “Team Based Learning” (Michaelsen, 2008; Sweet, 2013). My goal was to create four groups with five to seven students and spread the variety of assets and liabilities (social and intellectual) within the class equally—so that no single group would have an unfair advantage. I prepared diagnostic questions described below that would help me become familiar with students’ previous musical knowledge and musical behaviors. I worded each question in a positive manner and designed the questions to be broad enough to include every member of the class.

I said to the students: “We have a job to do. I want to sort of get to know you so I’m going to ask some questions. Would you just raise your hand if you agree? Sort of like a “me too” exercise, but instead of saying “me too” you’re just going to raise your hand.” I then asked the following questions:

- How many of you like to listen to music?
- How many of you like to dance and sing?
- How many of you make up songs in your head?
- How many of you sing when no one is listening?
- How many of you sing in the shower?
- How many of you have taken voice lessons?
- How many of you play an instrument?
- How many of you specifically play piano?

An informal show of hands indicated that four class members played the piano; nine students played an instrument; four took voice lessons, and all of the students listened to

music, liked to dance and sing, made up songs in their heads, sang in the shower or sang when no one was listening (class transcription, September 8, 2014).

Although it was clear the students were eager to choose their own groups I explained, to be fair, we needed to create equal-ability groupings. Using a meta-cognitive instructional technique called purposeful questioning (Freire, 1970), I asked the students to think about and tell me why having equal-ability groups might be important.

RD: The idea is for us to have groups of equal ability. Danny, can you tell me why that is important?

Danny: So you can move along and learn something?

RD: That would be great, wouldn't it? But why do we want equal groupings? Midge?

Midge: Cause you don't want to have one group that sounds really good and another that's not so good.

Olivia: Cause if you put all the piano players in one group, then they would fight over the role cause there's only one piano.

RD: And we would call that an unfair advantage, wouldn't we?

Hope: Having a diverse group is easier to work with and you can do a lot more by working with everyone's skill.

RD: That's a good way to put it. You can make use of everyone's skills. That doesn't always make it easier to get along, but it does make it easier to have different people's strengths and weaknesses. So I'm going to ask you to line up; we're going to make four groups.

(class transcription, September 8, 2014)

I directed the four piano players to form a line at the back of the class, followed by students who played instruments. Next, I requested that the students who took voice lessons join the line. Finally, I asked the students who listened to music to take a place in the line. By this time all of the students were standing in the line so I asked them remain in place and count off sequentially by fours. The class was now divided into what I hoped would be prove to be four equal-ability learning groups based on information the students had provided.

After four groups had been determined, I instructed the students to have a meeting at the four corners of the room. Each group was given a blue composition book to journal in and a separate sheet of paper with *small-group discussion/reflection #1* (See Appendix B). Their first task—an introductory activity—was to interview each other, write down the names of each group member, and then include a descriptive word beside each person's name. The second task was to generate a list of songs they might like to sing at the concert. Finally, the groups were instructed to determine their song selections by some kind of democratic process, i.e., vote or discussion, and then list four reasons for choosing that song.

While the class worked, I circulated around the room, observing the students' progress and interactions. I noticed that each group operated under differing protocols for completing their journal entries. Group one passed the booklet around democratically and each person entered their name and a descriptive characteristic. Group two chose Hazel, who was determined to have good handwriting, as a scribe and she wrote down answers for the group. Group three worked under the leadership of Maria and Hope, who appeared to be confident and more experienced. Group four worked with the help of Sandra, the instructional assistant from the Developmental Learning Program (DLP) classroom. Sandra kept Erik, in particular, and the other members of the group, in general, on task by following the procedure on discussion guide while Midge made journal entries.

The process moved much more slowly than I expected. In my research journal, I wrote, "the students appeared to have difficulty making group decisions." I wondered if

the slow pace was relative to the fact that the students were new to each other and the school or whether they lacked experience working a self-directed classroom. I also entertained the possibility that self-directed learning might be too difficult for 11 and 12 year olds. The students worked diligently, but they did not finish their assignment and I felt uneasy.

**Song selection.** Because of my uneasiness I modified the instructions to make them simpler and more concise. At the beginning of the third class, I reviewed only the most crucial aspects of the discussion/reflection questions from the previous class (see Appendix B); those specifically related to repertoire selection. I wrote on the board:

- Make a list of songs you might like to sing at the concert. Choose one song from your list that you will perform by voting or discussion.
- Write down your song selection and list four reasons why you think it's a good choice.

(class transcription, September 11, 2014)

To scaffold for the students, I provided laptop computers, so they could listen to their song proposals before making a final selection. I informed the class there was a time limit: Each group was to present their final song choice and provide four reasons for making that choice during the last fifteen minutes of class.

The students broke off into their respective groups and began negotiating. Group one engaged in a lively and emotional group discussion. When finished, they looked like they had been in a knock-down-drag-out fight. This group, made up of three high-spirited boys and four vivacious girls, seemed relieved, self-conscious, and highly fidgety when

they explained to the class that they had chosen “Mr. Blue Sky” by the Electric Light Orchestra. Olivia announced the title and said, “It’s a classic.” Then she passed the journal around so that Crystal, Nicky, Danny, and Giselle could tell the class that “Mr. Blue Sky,” had a good melody, had a good beat, was a classic, and was easy to learn. Danny got a laugh when he interjected, “Everybody finally agreed!” The group wrote, “EVERYONE FINALLY AGREED” in capital letters in their journal.

When group two got up to present, they stood as far back as the room would allow and had to be coaxed forward to the front and center. The group voted four to three for “Thriller” by Michael Jackson. Miranda, who would soon drop chorus and switch to band, announced, “Our final decision was ‘Thriller’ and...um.” Then she looked to the rest of the group for support. When no one said anything Miranda informed the class the song was a tribute to Michael Jackson. The group, thinking they were done, got ready to sit down so I asked, “So what makes you want to sing it?” Miranda responded first followed by Natalie and Hazel, “it’s classic, the rhythm, and it has a good beat.” As the group sat down I asked Miranda to write down the reasons in their journal. (class transcription, September 8, 2014)

Moving eagerly to the front and center of the room, group three appeared enthusiastic. Hope sat in the “teacher chair” and the rest of the group gathered around her. The three serious girls and four quiet boys appeared confident when they reported they had chosen “It’s Time” by the Imagine Dragons. Roger spoke for the group, citing six reasons for choosing “It’s Time.” He said the song was good for Hope, who could play the guitar. It also had a good chorus, offered good harmonies, was modern, and was

in a good key for sixth grade boys and girls. (class transcription, September 8, 2014)

Group four worked productively and arrived at a group consensus fairly quickly. They chose “Just the Way You Are (Amazing)” by Bruno Mars. Julius, a player in the school marimba ensemble, spoke for the group. He had, without assistance from me, already downloaded and printed a lyric sheet for his group from the Internet. Julius began for the group. He explained, “Just the Way You Are (Amazing)” was “okay for school.” Then he passed the journal to the other students in the group to allow them to speak. Midge, Omar, and Christy, respectively, explained that “Just the Way You Are (Amazing),” sent a good message, had a good beat, and would be easy to learn. (class transcription, September 8, 2014)

Phase One was complete. Our constructionist learning environment was operative. The class had been divided into four collaborative groups. The students were working independently. Everyone had reached a consensus or at least made a decision about repertoire. In three classes we had begun to move away from the traditional choral model and were ready to begin Phase Two.

### **Phase Two, Carnival**

*“I just think we need to stop fooling around.” – Midge*

Rehearsals leading up to the concert--were Bakhtinian, carnivalesque, and I will admit, somewhat chaotic. Although I initiated pedagogical changes, the aims, interests, and abilities of the participants would inform the results. We had a purpose—the concert on January 15—but no experience to guide us so we mostly improvised, supporting each other as we went along. In the beginning, I do not think any of us—the other teachers, the

students and myself—thought our experiment would even work, but by this time we were obligated to move the project forward.

**Lesson plans.** The project resumed on September 30, 2014 after school-mandated testing. I proposed an approach to lesson planning that put the onus on the students. I told the class:

RD: You're going to do what I usually do. You're going to make a plan for your learning and include a timeline of when things need to get done. Julius, why do you think that might be difficult?

Julius: Because it has to involve everyone in your group. It has to have a lot of teamwork.

RD: Okay! Yes, Midge?

Midge: You're gonna have to work hard to get stuff done in time.

RD: Yes! So Natalie, what happens if you don't make your deadline?

Natalie: If there's someone in your group who doesn't do what they're supposed to and you don't get something done by a certain day, then they mess up the whole group.

RD: It happens to me all the time. I think you students are going to learn something really fast or really slow and then I'm surprised. Then I have to make revisions. Hope, why is it important to have a plan?

Hope: Well if you know what you're doing, everything becomes easier. You don't have to worry about how fast you're doing everything.

RD: Right. So you're going to make a plan for your learning and you're going to put it in your blue book so you don't forget. Don't forget to write your plan in your blue book (journal). And if you need "stuff" you're going to let me know and I'm going to get it for you. And I will be right here if you need me. That's my job. So instead of me telling you what to do, you're going to tell me what to do. That's kind of backwards, isn't it? How much do you get to tell your teachers what to do?

Midge: Never.

RD: That's why it's an experiment! Now get your stuff and go!  
(class transcription, September 30, 2014)

Each group recorded a rehearsal plan in their journal. "Mr. Blue Sky" created a three-step learning process:

1. Start
2. Revise

### 3. Harmony

“Thriller” made a list with five bullets:

- Memorize tune.
- Memorize lyrics.
- Decide which verses we want and don’t want.
- What instruments to play.
- When to play instruments.

“It’s Time” created a plan structured around parts of the song:

- a) chorus/melody
- b) harmony
- c) change song
- d) body percussion
- e) practice

“Just They Way You Are (Amazing)” created a monthly timetable.

- a) get music 9/30/14
- b) middle of October, sing with music
- c) down to end of song by beginning of December
- d) fix problems (parts) by end of December,
- e) can do full song beginning of January
- f) concert 1/15/15

(student journals, September 30, 2014, formatting original)

**Troubleshooting.** It was Friday morning and the behavior of the students as they entered the room indicated they were not in a listening mood so I took attendance quickly, gave them packets with choral sheet music I downloaded, told them to refer to the rehearsal plans they had recorded in their journals during the previous class and begin the process of learning their songs. Then I spent the rest of the class troubleshooting.

The first issue I had to contend with was noise; the students were having difficulty hearing themselves with so many people in the room. I moved the “Mr. Blue Sky” group to a practice room across the hall so they could work independently with Sally supervising. When I went to check on the group’s progress, I observed that Danny was having trouble controlling his behavior. Olivia and Giselle complained that Danny was crawling under the table in the practice room and being disruptive. Danny denied it. Later on I found out that Danny was having emotional difficulty because his mother was getting married again. In addition, his soon-to-be stepbrother was in the chorus class. In spite of the tension, the group managed to practice. They sang along with the YouTube video of “Mr. Blue Sky” and then discussed how to divide the high and low parts on the recording.

Meanwhile, even with “Mr. Blue Sky” out of the room, the noise level in the chorus room was too loud so I created a makeshift rehearsal space in a storage closet for “Just the Way You Are (Amazing).” Once the students were settled, I could hear them practicing with YouTube. The students were singing in tune, with the exception of Erik, who was singing off pitch in a lower register. This surprised me because according to Erik’s IEP, he played the cello and piano, and I just assumed he could match pitch. When

I returned later to check on the group, Erik was playing the piano, with Julius coaching.

I hoped Erik would be able to accompany his group. However, I soon found out that the choral sheet music I purchased was too complicated for Erik. Erik, having no experience as a choral accompanist, could not decode which staves contained the piano part. I made a note to find an easy piano/vocal version for him (research journal, October 3, 2014).

The remaining two groups worked at opposite sides of the music room. “It’s Time” was singing along with YouTube. I could hear Hope adding a harmony part a third above on the chorus. A bit later, they were creating body percussion parts that corresponded with percussion on the recording. They worked independently and did not ask for assistance from me.

On the opposite side of the chorus room the “Thriller” group looked unhappy. I worried because they were not singing. After a few probing questions, I realized that the group could not understand the choral sheet music I had given them. The lyrics on the choral sheet music did not match the original Michael Jackson recording causing the students to become even more frustrated. Natalie asked me for “music with the words only.” I made a note to find lyric sheets for them (research journal, October 3, 2014).

After class I felt frazzled but I learned a lot about the needs of the students. I mistakenly assumed that choral sheet music, used in traditional educational settings, would be useful. However, I observed that the students preferred learning aurally and that YouTube was their primary music-learning source. The most important thing I learned was that in order to learn independently, students needed developmentally appropriate

materials.

The students wanted lyric sheets that corresponded to familiar recordings by the original artist so I replaced complex choral sheet music with simple lyric sheets downloaded from the Internet. I purchased easy piano/vocal scores and replaced the choral sheet music. I arranged each group's music into a color coded folder and put the folders into a labeled a storage box so the students would have a place to store their music and other artifacts of their learning.

In response to the noise, I modified the learning environment. During my preparatory periods, I cleaned out two storage areas, and arranged for the use of an additional practice room across the hall. The three small spaces and large music room provided four separate rehearsal areas for students to use that were acoustically isolated. I put a keyboard in each rehearsal space, hoping to encourage piano accompaniments.

**Scaffolding.** By the next class on Day 5, October 9, 2014, I had solved the problems we encountered during the previous class. I showed the students the box with the newly organized materials and told them about the practice areas. I also brought up the idea of song sharing so they could start performing.

RD: I have done my homework and in your chorus box (showing the students) you will find all the music you requested. I hope that I have done justice to you as a teacher. Now I'm going to ask you for the next class to have a "snippet" of your song to show the rest of the class. Now it can be just the chorus. It can be just a verse. But something that we can watch you perform so we can get an idea of your progress. Question?

Julius: What do you mean by that?

RD: Natalie, can you explain?

Natalie: So she's asking us to have a piece of the song you would like to perform to share with the rest of the class.

RD: A piece of the song that you want to share with the rest of the class. So that doesn't mean you have to be completely performance ready. We have till

January. But if you work on one piece at a time then you will be able to put all the little pieces together and it's a little bit easier that way and it gives you some focus. Each of these rooms is now a rehearsal space. So there's a keyboard inside each room. You can have your computer to take in each room and then one group can be working in the big room so you can all stay in this vicinity. Does that make sense? And if you need anything, who do you ask? I will be happy to get whatever you need for you. I'm here to help.

Julius: So we're going to make a little piece of our song to share.

RD (repeating): A little piece of your song to share with the class. That is perfect, Julius.

(class transcription, October 9, 2014)

While the students rehearsed, I rotated among the four areas in order to scaffold as needed and monitor students' behavior. Having separate practice areas made the noise level tolerable and helped the students rehearse without distraction.

I observed the "Mr. Blue Sky" group rehearsing with piano/vocal sheet music.

Giselle, who could play piano, was attempting to coach the group. Danny once again was being uncooperative. I stepped in and tried to coach him. I encouraged him to act more like a "rock star," i.e., be more aggressive, when he sang. My advice fell flat. I decided not to push it. In spite of Danny's negative demeanor and my intrusion into the group's rehearsal, Giselle persevered and succeeded in dividing the group into high and low parts.

Miranda had moved to band so Natalie took charge of the "Thriller" group. The group was working with lyric sheets I downloaded for them, but they still looked unsettled. I sensed they were looking for some direction so I suggested they consider organizing the song their own way to make it less complicated. Arranging music was a new concept—something the group had not considered—so I decided to let them think about it.

A bit later, the group still seemed unsure about which part of "Thriller" they

wanted to share for the class so I suggested they begin with the chorus. The group sang the chorus for me in multiple keys because they had no accompaniment. Adopting a “to the rescue” attitude, I grabbed the sheet music and slipped into accompanist mode. They sang very well with the piano so I told the group to continue practicing the chorus until they felt confident.

When I stepped back into the music room, I could hear the piano part for “It’s Time.” Maria was on the computer and the rest of the group was working on body percussion parts they were creating. Later I heard the group practicing the chorus of “It’s Time” with YouTube. Hope was still working on a harmony a third above the melody on the chorus. During “down” time, I noticed the boys jumping up and down, waving their arms and being playful, but the group did not seem to be having any problems.

When I entered the “Just the Way You Are (Amazing)” practice room, Julius and Omar were watching the spider that lived in the upper corner of the practice room. The girls were watching YouTube and singing along. I gently reminded the boys they were supposed to be singing and they joined the girls. When I came into the room for the second time, the group had reached some kind of impasse. I responded by taking over the piano and making the group sing the chorus for me. Then I tried to “help” by making the boys sing harmony. When they lost interest I backed off.

After class, I wrote in my research journal: Scaffolding: How much is too much, how little is too little? Had I had been too assertive? Had I behaved in a manner that was authoritative and undemocratic? I had assumed control of three groups because they appeared tentative. The students reacted politely, but they were unenthused. I reflected on

my behavior:

There is a lot to learn from this, particularly about how and when to support them musically. Should I offer suggestions? How much should I “fix” things? Or do I just let it happen?

(research journal, October 9, 2014)

**Performing.** The students were going to perform for each other for the first time.

I asked each group to make a video of their performance so they could reflect on their progress.

RD: Christy, what is a reflection?

Christy: Where you can look back and see how you did.

RD: Okay. And how does a reflection help you?

Christy: You can correct things.

RD: You can correct the mistakes you made. That’s how we learn and that’s what we’re here for, right?

(class transcript, October 15, 2014)

All of a sudden, the students became serious. There were questions:

Julius: Do you have the laptops here?

RD Yes I do. Anything else you need? Midge?

Midge: Do we have to perform in front of people?

RD: You have to perform in front of everyone today. So you can see and hear what you’re doing, what everyone’s doing. Won’t that be interesting? It’s only going to be a snippet. Natalie, what do I mean by snippet?

Natalie: We need to do one or two verses and a chorus?

RD: Even one verse and a chorus will be fine. Any more questions?

Olivia: Are we going to be able to practice? We didn’t get to warm up.

RD: I would like to start in 15 minutes. Go to work everyone! Practice!

(class transcript, October 15, 2014)

“It’s Time” volunteered to perform first. They sang one verse and a chorus. It was difficult to determine who was singing because they were singing along with the original recording by the Imagine Dragons. I wondered, what happened to the piano accompaniment? “Mr. Blue Sky” went next. The group sang a verse and chorus with a recording of the Electric Light Orchestra. I noticed the girls straining to sing the melody,

which was too low for them, and the boys were inaudible or not participating. The high and low parts they practiced had disappeared. “Just the Way You Are (Amazing)” sang a verse and a chorus in unison. Erik attempted to accompany the group on piano. Midge sang clearly in her “little girl” voice while the other group members mumbled along. The piano could not keep up with the singing. Finally, “Thriller” sang a verse and chorus with me as their accompanist. Most group members did not come in on cue and a couple of students did not sing at all. They appeared to be petrified of singing in front of an audience (video recording, October 15, 2014).

The performances were not at the level I expected based on what I had heard during rehearsals. Afterward I asked some questions to help me understand the students’ thinking about their learning process.

RD: Natalie, what did you find difficult about this process?

Natalie: Process?

RD: Yes, working with others and putting music together?

Natalie: I found it hard because when people don’t cooperate, like when you go one, two, three and nobody starts to sing, it’s annoying.

RD: (to Giselle and Olivia, who are giving thumbs up in agreement): Okay, so you’re having some of the same issues? (they nod).

Hope: Staying focused (there is chatter and agreement).

RD: So Natalie, you are not alone. Next time you’re going to have a group meeting and talk about the things you done so far. This is a good start. There are things you’ve done well, but everyone has room for improvement. That’s normal. What does everyone have to do to get better?

Students (in unison): Practice.

RD: Yes, and focusing on the things you need to work on. Coming in on time. Making sure you’re ready to go. Making sure you’re with your accompaniment. These are things that musicians have to work on.

Olivia: That goes for everyone, not just musicians.

RD: Wow. You’re even getting the bigger picture! Good connection. Don’t forget to save your videos on your computer!

(class transcript, October 15, 2014)

When the students left class that day, I wrote in my journal that I feared the sixth grade chorus might not possess the musical skills and social understandings they needed to be successful in a constructionist learning environment. I felt as though I had thrown the students “into the deep end,” but I realized a commitment to the project had been made. Watching Lucy Green talk about *Musical Futures* on YouTube reminded me that using a student-centered approach required that I “stand back, observe, and empathize with the goals the pupils set for themselves” (Bülow, 2014).

**Reflecting.** I hoped to gain a better understanding of the students’ progress after they watched video recordings of their performances. I passed out papers containing *small-group discussion/reflection #2* (see Appendix B) to guide the students’ thinking. Each group recorded answers to the following prompts in their journals.

- Now that you have worked together for a few classes, please refer to your original plan and reflect on what you have accomplished and what needs to be done.
- Make a list of what you have done so far and then make another list of what needs to get done.

“Mr. Blue Sky’s” list of accomplishments included to know the lyrics, have participation and harmony, and to know the whole song. Areas for improvement were to sing louder, practice more pitches (high and low parts), and find a place to stand (student journal, October 21, 2014).

“Thriller” did not identify any accomplishments. Improvements included they needed to sing louder, articulate/exaggerate, use percussion instruments for beat, and add emotions/harmony. A revised plan indicated the group intended to improve what they had

done, memorize, and add sound effects, if time (student journal, October 21, 2014).

The “It’s Time” group wrote that they were accomplished on body percussion, harmony, the chorus, and the balance between melody and harmony. Their list of improvements included they needed to be more enthusiastic, be more together, be louder, and to sing the right pitch. They did not revise their original rehearsal plan (student journal October 21, 2014).

“Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” felt they had accomplished creating harmony parts, memorizing the chorus, and singing. They felt they needed to work on memorizing the whole song, being louder, smiling and, Pay Attention! A revised rehearsal plan indicated they would make video recordings of every rehearsal and practice at home what they “did in class” (student journal, October 21, 2014).

Based on the students’ journal entries, guided self-assessments appeared to be a helpful scaffolding strategy. The analytic process—led by purposeful reflective questions—required that students employ metacognitive strategies, engage in critical dialogue, and target common goals as a community of learners. I hoped having specific goals would help motivate the students to improve and help boost their confidence.

**Backing tracks.** I started thinking about backing tracks right after I saw the students perform for the first time. After reviewing student performances on video, I wrote in my journal that they sang well but were not “owning” the music. Even though the students were singing popular music, the learning objectives of singing in a chorus remained intact. I wanted them to be able to sing independently and take artistic ownership of their music. I felt like I needed to give them more support and guidance. I

hoped that backing tracks might allow the students to focus all of their energy on singing with expression and performing in a group, which is what chorus is all about.

It was Friday afternoon and the class entered the room in their usual, celebratory and raucous manner. It had become routine for us to gather at the beginning of class to discuss the “plan for the day” and then break out into rehearsals. I announced:

RD: Happy Friday! The good news is that I have located practice tracks for all of you to work with while you’re rehearsing your songs so even if you... (pointing to Erik) have a piano player, you might want to use a practice track. (to Giselle) I made you a practice track on the piano so you will have something to rehearse with. I hope that practice tracks will make your rehearsals easier. Do you think so?

Students (nodding affirmatively and speaking simultaneously): Yes.

RD: Okay, cause then you’ll have the feel of the real song. You’ll have to put them on the computers. I have your songs on a thumb drive and “Mr. Blue Sky,” I’ll let you use my computer. So do you have any questions or concerns before we start? (There is no response). Are you all thrilled and excited? (whooping and hollering) Okay, let’s go!

(class transcript, October 24, 2014)

I got the “Mr. Blue Sky” rehearsal started by familiarizing them with the backing track I recorded for them on GarageBand. After they were situated, I began checking in with the other groups. “Thriller” was still frustrated. The backing track I gave them corresponded to the original Michael Jackson version. I assumed this was the version they wanted but it turned out that the track did not match the arrangement they had created on their lyric sheets. I sat down with the group and had them show me the arrangement they had created on their music with “no notes.” I promised to get them the music they needed over the weekend.

When I returned to the music room Maria was leading the “It’s Time” group. It looked like she was playing the role of the teacher because she was standing in front. The

group members appeared to be playing the role of students and were raising their hands when they wanted to speak. Midge took charge of working with the track of “Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” and the group was singing in unison. Erik was singing an octave below the other students and he was perfectly in tune. I felt ecstatic.

I was conflicted about using recorded accompaniments, particularly in the context of choral music education, but the students reassured me, “It’s only cheating if you lip synch.” Our project was supposed to be non-traditional, but I still had difficulty shaking the feeling I was somehow cheating by not using live accompaniments. The bottom line was that it was impossible to supervise, observe and accompany all four groups simultaneously.

Technology, specifically backing tracks and computers, provided us with mediating tools for learning. During the project we used school-owned, laptop computers, backing tracks, and remote desktop speakers during every class. Macintosh computers functioned as audio/video playback devices and audio/video recording devices. Using Avid Pro Tools, I was able to edit and arrange a backing track for “Thriller.” Garage-Band enabled me to record a custom piano/drum track for “Mr. Blue Sky.”

**Focus interviews.** I casually made it known to all students that I wanted to hear their thoughts about the project and that I would be conducting interviews during advisory block. Interviews were voluntary and anyone was welcome to join; but no one should feel pressured. Since I did not know who was participating in the research, I could not solicit specific students. The focus group emerged as an ad hoc group of seven girls and one boy. Students attended the interview sessions intermittently during the school’s

35-minute, advisory/extra help block with permission from their advisory/homeroom teacher.

**Hope, Maria, Natalie and Midge.** The girls in the focus group told me they liked having the freedom to work independently, but found it difficult to handle the personal responsibility that came with it. Hope, a gifted musician, singer, and performer with prior experience singing in the Boston Children's Chorus, spoke first.

Hope: Well I like this project. I think it's really cool. All the other years of chorus we had to do songs our teacher chose for us and well, we didn't exactly like any of them (laughing nervously) so it was fun to sing, it was fun to do, but working from personal preference I'd rather do a song that I want to do and this is really cool.

(interview, October 27, 2014)

I asked the students to talk about their groups. Midge and Maria, who studied voice privately, thought the other students fooled around too much.

Midge: I think that we fool around too much...because we're in the (practice) room where nobody can hear us, I guess. I think we should have like someone watching us most of the time. But I like the freedom cause you get to pick your own songs. Like there's not a teacher standing up and teaching everyone so it's in smaller groups so you can focus more on what your group needs, not everyone else. So I like that. I just think we just need to stop fooling around.

Maria: I agree with Midge. It's hard for everyone to cooperate together and I'll be honest, I do get distracted a lot easily, um but I feel as though, um at times some people in our group go way out of hand and they're not even singing the song while everyone else is, so it becomes a problem and everyone's trying to work hard and some people I feel as if they're not really into it...

Hope: I personally like the sense of independence. I like that we can change what we need to focus on. I like that we can play to the best of our abilities like if someone is more soprano they can just "let it rip" and the rest of us can back 'em up on that. I like how that works.

(interview, October 27, 2014)

Natalie, who came in a bit late, joined the other students as they talked about the role of the teacher:

Midge: I know Natalie; she wants the teacher to step in more. I think that's what she told me. Because she wants the teacher to, she wants you to teach more and help a bit more I guess.

Hope: Um chaos is good and bad and chaos, well sometimes it inspires our other ideas like when we're fooling around it actually ends up sounding good. I really like the idea of not having a teacher. I mean I like teachers helping, but I like for everyone to just work together. They're (Natalie's group) doing the song Thriller, right? There's so much you can do with that song. It's so cool. And I think they just need a little bit of a...of a helping hand. I think we should give ideas, feedback about what, uh what they could do...

Natalie: What I meant about wanting a teacher there is like is just like I want you to check in—like how you're doing right now—so that if we're completely off topic you can sort of get us back on topic cause like some kids just won't listen to other kids.

Maria: Uh, I agree with Hope. I also think, um, maybe it would be helpful if not that, if you like uh taught us, but maybe if we like performed something and then um, after a little while you give us feedback about what we have fixed or something so, yeah, kinda like that...

(interview, October 27, 2014)

Together, we brainstormed ways to incorporate performing and feedback as a strategy to help the students maintain focus and manage the “fooling around.”

Hope: I think we should give ideas, feedback about what they could do...

Maria: ...but maybe if we like performed something and then um after a little while you give us feedback about what we have fixed or something...

RD: I get the sense that you need to perform in front of each other more often and we need to work on giving more feedback. I get the idea that you would like more of a sharing thing (performing for each other) and that performing regularly might take care of some of the fooling around because if you know you've got to sing in front of your classmates...

Hope: We're gonna give you some feedback...to help you...Point out what you're really good at...I also think that performing in front of other groups gives you a confidence so when you're actually performing on stage you're not like, “People, whoa.” So you really become confident in front of people.

Maria: I mean not to criticize or anything...but helpful feedback.

Midge: Like my voice teacher. She wants me to be even more confident so she wants me to go like perform in front of people.

(interview, October 27, 2014)

In a constructionist learning environment, teachers elicit ideas and draw from student's experience on key topics in order to enable students to expand upon their current knowledge (Windschitl, 2002). Together, drawing from the ideas of the students, we constructed a workable approach for choral learning that maintained student autonomy. I called it the *practice/perform/critique model* of middle school choral learning.

**The practice, perform, critique model.** I was eager to try out our new model. I wrote on the board: 1. Rehearse, 2. Perform, 3. Critique (class video, October 31, 2014). The first time we tried our new model, students were given twenty-five minutes to practice and then every group was supposed to perform. After each performance, the students would have the opportunity to provide helpful comments.

The "It's Time" group volunteered to go first. Their introduction featured body percussion they had created. After a verse and chorus they were finished. Hands shot up in the air. Midge was the first to speak:

Midge: I really liked the beginning. How you did the stomping and clapping and snapping, but in the beginning I think you need to hold one note longer, cause it's not that fast and stuff.

Natalie: I also like the beginning but I thought the music was a little bit loud.

Giselle: I think at the beginning they could have looked up a little more. Just to make sure they have the right expression.

(class transcript, October 31, 2014)

Next, "Thriller" stepped front and center. They had been working hard with the new backing track I made for them. The group sang well but Robbie came in loudly and off pitch on the chorus. Robbie's developmental disabilities made it difficult to articulate the lyrics and match pitch. Today his singing resembled shouting. I felt uneasy, knowing

that middle school children often laugh when they feel uncomfortable. I relaxed when I saw that Robbie's group and members of the class were unperturbed. We heard two verses and the chorus of "Thriller." Hands went up as soon as the group finished.

Hope: I love the riffs you do with the song (Referring to the ends of the phrases). It's really cool. But you do it so quickly it's going to get lost. So just make sure that the words and notes aren't lost.

Giselle: Articulation.

Maria: I really liked it but the song is really upbeat and I thought you guys could be a little more, not really shy.

(class transcript, October 30, 2014)

"Just the Way You Are (Amazing)" sang a verse and chorus. They looked apprehensive. As soon as they finished hands were in the air.

Crystal: We can't hear them. They need to be louder.

Olivia: Look toward the audience. You guys are kind of looking at each other.

Roger: I can tell you sort of got louder at the end. You got louder and louder as you went on.

(class transcript, October 30, 2014)

The bell rang before we could hear "Mr. Blue Sky." On the way out Midge stopped to talk to me. She told me she thought the new format had worked well. Although we did not get to hear all the groups, I thought so too. In my journal I noted the, "students were positive and helpful in their comments" (research journal, October 30, 2014).

**Danny.** I began the class by asking students to recall the feedback they received from their peers during the previous class. I hoped the feedback would serve as a guide for today's rehearsal.

RD: Hope, do you remember what the suggestions for improvement for your group were?

Hope: Like to sing louder so we feel more comfortable.

RD: Natalie, what were some of the comments for your group?

Natalie: They said kind of like it's an upbeat song and we were kind of quiet, not very confident so we need to work on that.

RD: And your group Roger, what were the comments for your group?

Roger (looking for his notebook): Uh, I have it with me.

Julius (helping him out): Sing louder.

Roger: Yeah.

RD: It seems there are common themes here, singing louder and stage presence.

That seems like the two main things we're working on now. So please get your stuff, get to practicing, and let me know if you need anything.

(class transcript, November 4, 2014)

With feedback to guide them, three groups rehearsed purposefully. “Thriller” was finally making progress with an appropriate backing track. Sandra had begun helping Natalie supervise the groups’ behavior. “It’s Time” continued to work well under the direction of Maria, who had been elected prime minister. Midge was videotaping rehearsals of “Just The Way You Are (Amazing),” and this helped keep her group stay focused.

“Mr. Blue Sky,” was still having problems getting along. Danny was squabbling with Olivia. Olivia stood up to Danny. The bickering upset Giselle, and she began to cry. On top of having emotional issues related to his mother’s remarriage, Danny had been absent from school quite a bit, wasn’t getting along with other classmates and his grades were plummeting. Today, when I attempted to talk to Danny, he became defensive. By the time “Mr. Blue Sky.” performed, the entire group was emotionally drained (research journal, November 4, 2014). Danny, who remained defiant, distanced himself from the rest of the students and refused to sing. I remained calm, hoping they were merely having a bad day, which happens in middle school—a lot.

**Incorporating feedback.** I routinely asked the students what they were planning to accomplish during rehearsals. As a way of checking in, I decided to call on Danny first. His response did not bode well.

RD: Good morning and welcome back to chorus. As usual I'm checking in with you to find out what your plans and strategies are. Last time we heard from "Mr. Blue Sky." So based on that, Danny what is going to be your focus of attention in your group today based on what you learned last time?

Danny: I don't know.

RD: So you didn't learn anything from the experience?

Danny: No.

RD: Well the whole point is...people in this class gave you feedback.

RD: So could someone remind Danny what some of the comments were?

Julius: (inaudible).

RD: Could you speak louder?

Julius: To be louder? (the students chuckle).

RD: So Maria would you remind everybody what needs to happen today?

Maria: We're fixing um, corrections that need to be fixed. When we performed we were given some corrections and we should focus on that.

RD: Julius and Roger, are you listening? (they are looking for some notes).

Would you remind us what your corrections were so that we will know what to look for?

Julius (who has found the notes he has been looking for, reads): Be louder.

Open our mouths. Don't fool around as much. Smile. And um, on the second time of the second verse, the boys do the harmony? (See Appendix G)

RD: Okay so you wrote it down, thank you Julius. That was very responsible of you (students clap for Julius).

(class transcript, November 10, 2014)

When "It's Time" performed, I noticed the body percussion was becoming more controlled. On the chorus the girls sang harmony part a third above the melody, sung by the boys. They added a small amount of movement by changing to a V formation on the bridge. The group finished with a theatrical flair by posing at varying levels with arms outstretched into jazz hands. The performance prompted the class to applaud enthusiastically. Hands went flying into the air to give feedback.

Midge: I think you guys did really great and I really liked the harmony and melody. I think you should be a little louder, like on that part, but I think you need to smile a little bit.

Peri: Some people at the end were getting mixed up on the body percussion a little bit so...

Omar: The body percussion was a little off the beat, a little bit.

Robbie: I like it. You guys are really, really good, and um I like the song. I like the voices, good job!

Hope (smiling): Thank you.

Natalie: And I really liked the harmony and the melody.

RD: Nice. Next group!

(class transcript, November 10, 2014)

Sandra and I exchanged affirmative glances. It was the first time Robbie had raised his hand to participate in a class discussion and his answer had been appropriate and articulate.

“Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” performed next. Julius, who stood to the left, was playing a tubano drum. Erik stood next to Julius and read from a lyric sheet. Three girls stood in the middle and Omar, stood far to the right of the girls. I never found out why Julius added the drum—I never saw it again—nor had a chance to ask about their standing formation. While the students were singing, the classroom clocks were being reset. The hands on the clock started to rotate forward rapidly. The motion caught the students’ attention and some boys began pointing and laughing. It wasn’t long before the entire class became distracted, losing focus and concentration (video recording, November 10, 2014). Frustrated, I reminded the class about audience behavior and then the bell rang.

**Sally.** Max’s instructional assistant from the ASD classroom, agreed to do an interview after school on November 13, 2014. I asked her what she thought about the project, good and bad.

Sally: I didn’t think much would get done between the groups, you know, with the different dynamics. I noticed usually there’s one person that took over as a role, as a teacher role and then the kids work off that student. So I feel

like a student took over your role. It took a lot of responsibility... I guess I'm amazed at how much ownership they are taking.  
(interview, November 13, 2014)

She described the students' behavior:

Sally: I see all the groups but when I hang outside the door, the thing I'm most shocked about, I mean behavior wise, and it's all the groups, it's not just Max. You know when they have little fights or tiffs; they kind of work it out. It never has gotten to a point in any of the groups where—you know what I mean—where it's gotten out of control.  
(interview, November 13, 2014)

Sally, who had been trained in behaviorism, told me that she had begun to embrace the precepts of social constructionism. According to Sally, Max appeared to be happier and more cooperative in chorus because of the social setting, where Max could interact freely. Video data of Max interacting with members of "Mr. Blue Sky" corroborated Sally's comments (transcript of January 20, 2015). Max's social—ability to cooperate and communicate—and emotional growth, documented by Sally on Max's IEP, suggested that a social constructionist learning environment in which students take responsibility for their learning, may be effective for some special learners on the autism spectrum.

**Hope, Julius, Olivia and Peri.** Four students attended a focus interview on November 14, 2014. The three girls and one boy shared some thoughts about their groups and described how it felt to be musically independent. I introduced the topic of conversation, but afterward students spoke freely, elaborating on each other's ideas.

RD: So I want to know what you think about how the project is working, what you thought it was going to be like versus how it's turning out to be, and then suggestions to make it better...

Peri: Well, some people in my group—I don't want to mention names—fool around a lot and don't really sing either, but it's going pretty well because

we have good voices and there are lots of creative ideas like adding instruments and harmonies and it's working very well because like we get responsibility, and I think that's important...

Julius: Well when I saw my group for like the first time. From experience like, I'm not trying to like mention any names, but like some people, like I mean they weren't like...what's the word? Uh... they like weren't (searching...) like they don't participate as much as they should. And then, and then and then, so I was writing down notes. (See Appendix G) So then when our group was talking to each other, I could tell them what I think, like suggestions for the whole group.

RD: Has it worked?

Julius: Yes, it worked a lot.

Olivia: It's sometimes really hard to get everybody really focused and on track but sometimes we can really go with it and we have really good ideas and it helps a lot because a lot of the creative ideas and I thought it was gonna be really hard. And it is really hard and it... But like, I don't know how to explain it. When you get into it and people are all of a sudden starting to be like really focused then you can get stuff done.

Hope: I think in the beginning a lot of people were fooling around and I know that personally, when you're gonna sing in front of a bunch of people, people have nervous energy and they don't really know what to do with it, so people ended up actually jumping over chairs and singing really high pitched and it was funny but actually we've kind of moved past that and eventually confidence started.

RD: That's interesting, how is that working for you Peri?

Peri: Some people they don't sing, they just lip synch. Sometimes they just don't have their hearts in it, so I think they need either a motivation or a confidence boost.

Olivia: Yeah well we have to do a little bit more work on the stage presence stuff. Because we kind of were really focused on the singing we didn't get to do a lot of other stuff because it—singing and performing—involves a lot of other stuff other than just singing, which is kind of surprising to me.

Hope: Obviously, like with stage presence, if you're not confident you're not... you can see that people aren't confident. So we want to make sure everyone is confident. We hope that the ideas we're trying to give them will build up their confidence so they know what they're doing.

RD: How do you think it's going so far?

Peri: You have your own sense of independence and you do things your way and you have to take your time (referring to time management) and you're entrusted with it and it has to be used well or else you don't do what you need to do.

Olivia: I think this is a really good way of learning because um there's like a guide and you go on your own and it's kind of like your own little adventure that you have to conquer.

Hope: Instead of getting tests we're actually self-evaluating ourselves. I think that's harder than getting a test and feedback from a teacher. It's a different perspective on it, so that the whole self-evaluation is something I need to work on and this whole "doing the songs by ourselves" is really helping with that. I think a lot of people are really learning how to um improve on themselves and helping other people to improve as well.  
(interview, November 14, 2014)

**Negatives.** There were negatives. Danny, in particular, was unhappy and his demeanor was having a negative effect on the rest of the group. When I attempted to talk with Danny to find out what was driving his behavior, he basically shut down. I shared my distress in an email to the guidance department. Consequently, when the guidance counselors suggested that Danny be moved to another music class, I concurred. A few days later, Danny was switched out of chorus.

Little by little "Thriller" was showing improvement. The group used hand-held percussion as a means of word painting. The slap stick was used to illustrate "door slam." Peri used a thunder tube to create a storm effect on "close to midnight." Hazel used a rain stick to create a rain effect on "demons closing in," and "close to midnight" (student journal, November 14, 2014). After their performance, Natalie called on classmates for feedback:

Giselle: I'm not sure what that instrument is that you played. I couldn't hear it.

Hazel: Um, it (the slap stick) was supposed to be with the "door slam," but I played it a little too late.

Giselle: And then um, I really liked the instruments, but I think they just need to be kind of louder.

Roger: Um I think it sounds really good and if you have enough time, I think it might go well with some movement if you want to like do a little bit of acting as well.

Maria: You guys were really nervous. I think you guys could be a little more excited about it. You were just really still.

Hope (encouraging): Come on guys, this is "Thriller!"  
(class transcript, November 14, 2014)

**Themes.** The students narrowed down themes for improvement toward the end of November. The students were able to identify the themes during thoughtful questioning.

RD: You need to use your time wisely. Those of you who are performing need to present to us with your new and improved version, yes? I think that we have a couple of themes going here. What do you think is one of our themes?

Roger: Sing louder.

RD: That's really important. Midge?

Midge: Stage presence

RD: Stage presence. Those are the two main things. Yes?

Hope: Confidence.

RD: Well that comes with stage presence; confidence. Yes?

Hope: Yes.

RD: I see those as umbrella themes. Being audible so people can hear you and understand you, and then working on your stage presence, which includes looking happy to be there and looking confident and not just standing there singing with a sad face, but having some facial expression.

(class transcript, November 20, 2014)

After rehearsing, "Just The Way You Are (Amazing)" performed first. The boy-girl window formation that had been used during a previous rehearsal reappeared. This time there was finger snapping during the introduction. The group had revised the song into a boy-girl dialogue; the boys and girls moved forward and backward when it was their turn to sing. Midge called on peers for feedback:

Natalie: I have two things, yeah two things. One, I don't know if the snapping was on purpose, but at the beginning right before you started saying the words, I actually thought that it sounded good. At the end I'd just work on memorizing a little bit more.

Midge: Yep.

Natalie: I thought you guys were great.

Midge: Olivia.

Olivia: I thought it was a really good performance and I really enjoyed it.

Julius (responding): Thank you.

Giselle: I liked it, but sometimes the harmony was confused with the melody and vice versa so maybe you can try and separate that a little more.

Midge: Alright.

Hope: Okay I liked your performance. Just be careful with the windows thing. I like the idea but keep singing, not just walking.  
(class transcript, November 20, 2014)

“It’s Time” performed and Hope took feedback. The following dialogue illustrates Hope’s tendency to be defensive during feedback sessions.

Natalie: I really liked it. I would just say don’t let your harmony get lost. And I have to say I was kind of disappointed cause some people smiled during the body percussion and some people didn’t and some people stopped smiling. It just looked like you guys were having fun when you smiled.

Hope: Can I just say that we kind of did that on pur—not the smiling part—the smiling part I definitely agree with. The soft harmony was on purpose.

Natalie: Okay, never mind

Hope: If some people switch to a harmony it’s gonna... it just sounds better.

Natalie: That’s fine.

Julius: I like how you guys split up some parts boy-girl, boy-girl, and I liked how I was sitting here and I could hear everyone.

Olivia: I think that you guys really felt your confidence and your volume and that it vastly improved your sound.

Hope: Thank you.

Julius: When you did the solo parts I could hear some people more than others and then like when you didn’t do the solo parts I could hear the other people louder, so if you all got the same volume it could sound a lot better.

Robbie: I liked it cause you have a good voice and, um, you’re really confident.  
(class transcript, November 20, 2014)

**Technological glitches.** The day before Thanksgiving break a student closed my laptop computer and I lost the video recording of the beginning of class. Then we discovered the school Internet was down and could not log in to the computers. When we tried to use the Bose Wave Radio, it stopped working. We had to go “old school” and use a boom box to play the accompaniment CD. Because there were so many technical glitches, “Thriller” was the only group that got to perform.

During rehearsal, Natalie surprised me by asking for my assistance. Her group was having some pitch issues on the chorus of “Thriller” so I spent the majority of the

class doing vocal coaching. I was able to persuade most of the students to elongate their jaws, breathe, and articulate. The students were able to identify how longer vowels, breathing and articulation improved their overall tone and increased the volume. I hoped they would feel more confident when they performed at the end of class.

When the group started to sing for the class, Robbie—who was showing off for Erik—made waving gestures with his hands in front of his face and scissor-like movements with his legs. Robbie’s behavior distracted the group, causing them to forget about vocal technique and lose confidence. Discomfort permeated the room, but no one said a thing. I exchanged troubled glances with Robbie’s aide Sandra knowing we would address Robbie’s behavior after class. Natalie, accustomed to Robbie’s erratic behavior, called on classmates for feedback afterward as though nothing had happened.

Midge: I think you just have to be a little louder. And in the beginning it felt like you guys were a little quiet, not quite ready to start. It’s gotten really good; I liked it. I really liked the instruments.

Roger: I think you should, everyone who has the instruments should hold them a certain way, like line up.

Olivia: Well, instead of getting louder, I think you should balance out the sound cause some of you guys are at a good volume and some of you guys are a little too quiet, so I think you should balance it out.

Maria: I thought you guys were really good but I felt like you guys were really nervous, you were wandering around with your eyes looking all over the place so I think if you could focus on one thing it would be good.

(class transcript, November 26, 2014)

**Julius, Midge and Natalie.** Three students attended the focus interview on December 1, 2014. During our discussion, it became apparent that some students were frustrated with peers who were not taking their work seriously.

RD: I’m curious about the relationships that are forming in your groups. You’ve met people that you didn’t know at the beginning of the year; I’d like to know how that’s working. I know you two (Julius and Midge) are leaders

and (to Natalie) I know that you're a leader. How are you getting along or not getting along? What things are going well and what's not going so well?

Midge: I think that some people in our group just have to take it more seriously. Just like the concert is soon and we only have a few more practices before January. I think we have to take it more seriously.

RD: Okay (to Julius). And how are you feeling?

Julius: I totally agree with Midge because some people in our group are doing what they're supposed to be doing, practicing. Then other people are not doing what they're supposed to be doing, fooling around, getting distracted by the stuff around them, and then... (he laughs). Well, we really need to practice because like Midge said, the concert's very soon and we only have a couple more practices. I don't think our group's that ready. I think we need to practice and we need to be louder and some people in our group are just not taking it seriously.

RD: So what are some strategies that we can use? You know you're not alone. Yes? (to Natalie). Talk about your group.

Natalie: So in my group there's seven people. So four of those seven people come from South (elementary school), so we pretty much know each other. So those four kids all know each other and some of them don't get along. I agree with Julius and Midge that we get distracted pretty easily, especially when we're in a small room. They just start like playing the piano, then all the other instruments.

Midge: I think everyone works better in the big room because of all the teachers there.

Natalie: Well, our group didn't work very well in the big room. Some people were just running and jumping. (to RD): Did you see that? They were running and jumping off (the steps) and they were still playing the instruments. I'm one to worry about everything. Like I was worrying in September if we were going to get everything done.

Midge: So was I!

Julius: Yeah me too.

Natalie: And I really couldn't fall asleep and I was like oh my gosh; so and so just quit, and we don't have anything done, and we're not going to be able to memorize, and then we're going to be awful...

(interview, December 1, 2014)

Julius, Midge and Natalie were anxious. They were frustrated that peers did not take things as seriously as they did and I empathized with them. I had often felt anxious and frustrated when middle school students did not take chorus rehearsals and concert preparation seriously. In order to "up the ante" I decided to remind the students that they

had very few rehearsals left.

**Countdown.** The students literally gasped when I reminded them there were only seven rehearsals before the concert. The reminder stimulated a desired outcome: After class I wrote in my journal that the students were putting in “more effort and appeared more focused” (research journal, December 4, 2014).

“Mr. Blue Sky” performed first. They were on better terms now that Danny was no longer in the group. The group seemed unsure of the second verse and I noticed the backing track I made for them did not have an ending or coda. After the group performed, Giselle called on peers for feedback:

Natalie: You guys did a good job with balancing out the harmony and melody. I’d just say work on your stage presence. ‘Cause some of you have your hands in your pockets and you guys are all looking around.

Maria: You guys are a little shy so I think you could be a little more, uh... not shy.

Hope: Yeah, you guys make falsetto sound good so I like what you’re doing.

From the beginning to now your confidence has definitely gone up so just keep pushing that confidence. It sounds awesome.

(class transcript, December 4, 2014)

The students were becoming quite adept at giving insightful feedback. Julius and Midge called on classmates after they performed “Just The Way You Are (Amazing).”

Natalie: I like how you did the snaps, those sounded really, really good. I’m gonna say again you need to work on memorizing (there is a music stand in front of Omar).

Omar (sheepishly): I can’t remember anything (his IEP supports this).

Julius (to Omar): How ‘bout this, why don’t you take this home? (hands Omar Midge’s lyric sheet).

Midge: Hey, that’s mine! (class laughs).

Giselle: Okay I loved it. I think the words are like totally awesome.

Hope: I loved it.

Roger: I liked it, though I felt like some people were mumbling when singing. You need to try singing out a lot and standing with stage presence too. Other than that it sounded good.

(class transcript, December 4, 2014)

“It’s Time” performed last. There was time for one comment before the bell rang:

Natalie: Some of your stage presence is really awesome, but you need to smile cause you were so good at the beginning and then you weren’t smiling at the end.

(class transcript, December 4, 2014)

Later that day, Giselle, Olivia, Nicky and Crystal—members of “Mr. Blue Sky”—asked if they could meet with me during the lunch block. They brought their lunch to the music room. While the students ate, we joked around. Afterward, I banged out the piano accompaniment for “Mr. Blue Sky” and we practiced. Together we decided on the coda. Then we had time to solidify the rhythm of the second verse before lunch ended. When the group left, I recorded the final accompaniment track on GarageBand (research journal, December 4, 2014).

**Workshop day.** Classes were 25 minutes long so it was an ideal day for reflecting, revising, and playing “catch up.”

RD: Look at the board! (pointing) Those are the dates you have left. Remember the blue books (student journals) that I gave you in the beginning? You need to go back into your blue books and make a plan for each of those days. You don’t need any computers or music today. Talk to each other and make plans for what you’re going to do for the next five rehearsals to get ready for the concert on January 15.

(class transcript, December 9, 2014)

Three groups reflected and revised rehearsal plans in their journals while “Thriller” rehearsed for a “catch up” performance.

“Mr. Blue Sky” created a plan that looked like a chart:

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Practice w/end of song	Harmony off key	Whole thing through	Whole Day	Dress Rehearsal

“It’s Time” wrote:

Chouras

12/9 Thiller – dusccess  
 12/15 – Stronger  
 12/18 – Stage-presents  
 1/5 – bridge  
 1/8 – dusccess/work on small errors  
 1/14 – rehearsh whole thing

“Just The Way You Are Amazing” created a bulleted list:

- 12/15 work on harmony and melody
- 12/18 go through whole song and fix what is needed
- 1/5 insterments
- 1/8 insterments/snapping
- 1/14 fix song

(student journals, December 9, 2014: spelling and grammar are original)

When “Thriller” performed, they had given the song an imaginative and dramatic flair. Drawing from the theme of the Michael Jackson video, the introduction featured a fearful Peri, walking in what appeared to be a dark cemetery. The other students played the part of zombies. They crouched behind imaginary gravestones as the song began. Then the “zombies” stood, one at a time, cued by the music. By the time the introduction finished, the group was standing and ready to sing. The result was visually interesting and musically effective. Unfortunately, immediately after the group finished their performance, the bell rang and class was over.

**Showdown.** During thoughtful questioning, students identified stage presence, confidence, volume and energy as overall themes for improvement.

RD: Okay. So what are your concerns at this point? What is it that you feel needs to happen at this point in time? Hope?

Hope: Stage presence.

RD: Stage presence. That is definitely a theme.

Maria: Confidence.

RD: Confidence! Midge?

Midge: Know your words?

RD: Knowing the words. Good. Giselle?

Giselle: (Inaudible).

RD: Pardon?

Giselle: (speaking clearly). Volume.

RD: Volume. Volume when you're speaking, Volume! Anything else? Natalie?

Natalie: Energy.

RD: Energy. Yes!

(class transcript, December 15, 2014)

It was cold in the hallway, so “Mr. Blue Sky” and “It’s Time” shared rehearsal space in the music room. Somehow they became engaged in a spontaneous showdown between groups. While one group performed, the other group “egged them on” by clapping, dancing and singing along. Both groups were having fun, performing boldly, and taking risks. They exhibited copious amounts of energy and enthusiasm in front of each other. I hoped the energy and enthusiasm would carry over into their performances at the end of class.

The joy and confidence that the students’ demonstrated during rehearsal diminished little by little as “Mr. Blue Sky” performed for the rest of the class. As they reached the coda, Olivia rolled her eyes and started to look embarrassed, making it obvious that they still had not practiced the ending.

Hope: That was fun. I like fun. Anyways, work on the ending. On the ending I think you should do a round. I know you have different parts but that might be cool. It’d actually be cool if you did it in a round with different parts. It sounds pretty awesome, so try that. If it doesn’t work, don’t.

Natalie: Don’t be afraid to go “out there” and do something that seems really really dumb to you.

Hope: That should be a goal.

RD: Okay, a quote from Natalie: “Don’t be afraid to go out there and do something that really seems dumb to you” (clapping) Excellent Natalie! (class applauds).

Olivia: Thanks for the suggestion. I’m gonna be dumb. (smiles and lots of chatter).

Maria: You guys seem a bit unsure. You seem a bit unsure so you’re going to have to work on your stage presence but otherwise you guys are really cool.

Hope: Don’t rain on their parade! (class giggles).

Roger: I think you were noticeably strong at the beginning and slowly you got quieter, so have that same confidence all the way through the song. The way you practiced right over there (pointing to where the group was rehearsing).

(class transcript, December 15, 2014)

The class watched intently as “It’s Time” performed. Heads were bobbing to the beat and students were lip-synching the words. The group had confidence; they worked together and today they were smiling. They had become the “stars” of our class. When the group finished singing, the class cheered and there was lots of enthusiastic chatter.

Hope called on Giselle.

Giselle: (inaudible).

RD: Wait a minute. I didn’t hear that.

Hope (clarifying): Like, we didn’t start together.

RD. Okay.

Peri: And then the last thing: I think you should really hold the last pose cause it’s cool. (more chatter and nods of approval).

RD: That last pose should freeze. You’ve gotta freeze.

Julius (bell is about to ring): Okay I have 30 seconds. I really like how you did the V formation. Okay and I think like when you say, “the house doesn’t burn down slowly,” you guys should crumble. (The students all start acting it out) And I really liked how I could hear everyone.

Natalie (enthusiastically): You guys should get the audience to seriously clap with you.

(class transcript, December 15, 2014)

**Julius.** I wasn’t sure what prompted Julius to seek me out during the advisory block, but I knew that he and Midge were frustrated because some members of their

group did not know the words to the song.

RD: Thank you for coming and I really appreciate all the hard work that you're doing. I want to know, because we're almost at this point of performing, can you talk about how things are working in your group? Like how it's working with different personalities. I'm seeing Midge is looking a little stressed.

Julius: Yeah I am too.

RD: Alright. So can you talk about that?

Julius: Because there's like three people in our group who just get distracted really easily, and like aren't taking it seriously, and we have like four more practices before the concert.

RD: Yeah.

Julius: And we're not gonna be ready if this keeps happening.

RD: Alright. So what are you not ready to do at this point?

Julius: Well I think that we need just to practice and memorize our song more and because like everyone, not everyone, but some people in our group, they just get distracted really easily like they look away, they do other stuff, like they don't try to work as hard as they know they can.

RD: Um-hum.

Julius: It just takes away from the group because when one person does it, like then another person wants to do that, and then like the other person wants to do that, so it's just, it gets everyone or most people off focus.

RD: Right.

Julius: And as I said before we have four more practices before the concert. I want our group to make a good impression. See like we're the best group. Stuff like that. It's not like competitive but I want to feel like we're doing a really good job and we're solid. We're great.

RD: I never think of it as competing because you all are getting better all the time.

Julius: Yeah.

RD: Have you ever had to do anything like this before?

Julius: I've never done this in a real chorus class.

RD: Right, right. So...me either. (both laugh). So sometimes I don't know what to expect and I mean it's actually going better than I thought it would at first. Like you guys are really getting better—a lot, and...

Julius: I'm sorry to interrupt you.

RD: No, it's okay.

Julius: Um I really like how you split the groups up, like anonymously, because if we like made our own groups it might, like one group might be all boys and another group might be all girls. Some people might be left out, some people might be singled out and then if they need like a melody/harmony and it's a group of all boys then how are you gonna get those high notes or if it's like a group of all girls then how are they gonna get the low notes?

(interview, December 17, 2014)

I sensed Julius was looking for my assistance so I suggested the use of hand-held microphones as props (i.e., tools). Julius liked the idea.

RD: Alright. Okay, it's really good that you came here and we discussed this. I know you guys want to be, uh, really good. That it means a lot to you.

Julius: Yes.

RD: Tomorrow we'll try working with the microphones. You'll have props and then you can practice the movements. I love those movements!

(interview, December 17, 2014)

**Feedback.** After I met with Julius, I located six Shure SM58 microphones.

During class I observed pleasant surprise on the faces of the students in the “Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” group when they saw the microphones, held them, and then posed for each other. I watched as the group rehearsed and noticed the microphones appeared to function like a stress ball. It looked like gripping the mikes tightly helped ease tension, resulting in an increased ability to focus.

With the newly acquired microphones, the group appeared confident when they began “Just The Way You Are (Amazing).” After the song started, Erik began to sing directly to Sandra. Erik's unwavering eye contact and “come hither” stance—described in my journal, as “his Justin Bieber imitation”—was inappropriate and upsetting. Everyone in the class appeared uncomfortable (research journal, December 18, 2014). The class responded with chatter. Omar appeared to be embarrassed and disapproval was apparent in the students' feedback.

Julius: Natalie?

Natalie: You guys did great (there is chatter).

RD: Wait, wait, wait! Omar, are you going to listen?

Omar: Yes!

Natalie: You guys did great and stop looking at each other cause it's so irritating. When you look at somebody and they're just like looking like that (demonstrates) it's just not...

Julius (defensive): I was just like looking evenly around the room.

Midge: I tried to look around.

Natalie: Don't look at other people in the group (she is referring to Erik).

Julius (also referring to Erik): I think for our group we should not pick out one person to make eye contact. I think we should all spread around the room, look at everyone like yeah.

Midge: Hope?

Hope: I think if you guys do make a mistake, you shouldn't stop and hesitate. You should keep going.

Midge: Yeah?

Hope: Because the song sounds like really good and I like how you're smiling and having a great time. I really like to see that.

Julius (smiling ear to ear): Roger?

Roger: Two things. First of all, I think that was the best performance you guys ever did (applause from class). And second of all I think I really like how you guys have the mics, 'cause it's a good way to practice, like when you're on the stage.

(class transcript, December 18, 2014)

The class encouraged "Thriller" by bobbing heads and clapping along when the music started. The hand-held percussion—a thunder tube, slap stick, and rain stick—created a "spooky" atmosphere. I noticed that Netanya, who did not play an instrument, held her together arms tightly across her body, and this gave her the appearance of being insecure and afraid. The group's singing had become stronger, but it remained inconsistent because some group members did not know all the lyrics.

Today Robbie pleasantly surprised the class by performing a break dance during the instrumental interlude. The dance elicited cheers and drew positive comments from members of the class.

Midge: I really liked it. I think the voices really blend together really well. I just think you need a little more confidence in the beginning. But I really like it.

Robbie: (points to Julius).

- Julius: Okay. That performance was much better from last time and I really like that you guys were much louder, yeah, and I have to say these compliments. It was really good.
- Roger: So Robbie, I like how everyone did that U thing and Robbie just like came and he did a little dance.
- Omar: I think you did a really good job but at some point I noticed that some people um, like sung a lot louder than they sung at other points. I was thinking that; try to have, like be louder at some points.
- Roger: At one point I thought that I heard different people singing different parts of the song.
- Natalie: Oh yeah, we screwed up on the chorus.
- Julius: Okay more compliments. I really liked the beginning how like with that entrance how everybody, like you guys are crouching down and then you guys like stood up.
- (class transcript, December 18, 2014)

By this time it was apparent that all of the students' musical and social behaviors were modified through positive and negative feedback. In addition to being used formally, feedback became implicit in every personal interaction we had. Informal feedback was implicit in a single word, silence, gesture or even a gaze. According to Rogoff (2003), these socially-constructed guidelines and codes that govern group behaviors are necessary, so that learning communities are able to accomplish what they needed to do in order to function—in this case, perform music—together.

**New year.** When we returned to school on January 5, 2015, there were only three rehearsals left before the concert. I quickly called attention to rehearsal dates, and then encouraged the students to use their class time to practice.

When "It's Time" performed, they appeared confident; their body percussion was refined and the vocals were tight. The class erupted into overwhelming shouts of approval when the song finished (video recording, January 5, 2015). Crystal was absent so Giselle sang the melody of "Mr. Blue Sky" by herself. Olivia doubled the part in the

upper octave. Nicky and Max echoed Giselle. The group sang confidently until they reached the end. They still did not know the ending. In particular, they were unsure about how long to hold out the suspended note before the final resolve to the tonic. The uncertainty was obvious because Olivia wrinkled her nose and made a “smelly” face at the end (video recording, January 5, 2015).

It had become clear that the students needed to develop stage presence, confidence and volume so I decided to dispense with feedback in order to give each group more time to perform. Without feedback we found ourselves with extra time at the end of the class so I did some thoughtful questioning.

RD: Now are you having fun?

(chatter and talking).

RD: How do you show you’re having fun when you perform? (points to Julius).

Julius: You’re smiling.

RD: You are smiling. So for your homework...

Students: (incredulous)...Homework?

RD: Homework! (teasing). Listen. When you’re watching TV or you’re watching people sing, please notice what they’re doing. Please just notice. You have precious little time now. Two more practices! And then we go up in front of the audience. You should be excited! (referring to the progress that has been made). Do you remember how you sounded in the beginning?

(groans all around). (bell rings).

(class transcript, January 5, 2015)

**Fading.** It was our last class in the music room. There was much less need for scaffolding because the students had begun to take ownership of classroom activities.

They wanted to practice in the auditorium so I booked the stage for our class on January

14. This prompted questions.

Ashley (checking in): Are we supposed to go directly to the auditorium?

RD: I hadn’t even thought about that, but that’s a good idea.

Midge: Say “yes.”

RD: Yes, yes. Midge says yes, we’re gonna do it.

Midge: Cause otherwise we have to walk, and that'll take like half the time so it will save a whole bunch of time.

RD: Okay, so yes, I'll meet you in the auditorium on the 14<sup>th</sup>.  
 (looks at watch). If we really make it a point to have two performances at one o'clock today—no comments today cause you're not going to get comments the day of the performance—you need to be ready to go. One o'clock: Showtime. No excuses. Professional. Get to work!  
 (class transcript, January 8, 2015)

“Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” looked good and sounded good. Erik toned down his performance after watching himself on video and having a discussion with the lead teacher of the DLP program. Omar, with an SM58 wireless microphone in his hands, smiled and showed confidence. He had memorized the lyrics and it turned out that he was a good singer and captivating performer. Julius and Midge appeared to be more relaxed (video recording, January 8, 2015).

“Thriller” had overcome many obstacles. The group had made significant progress over the term, but was still having ups and downs. Today Robbie, who was behaviorally and emotionally challenged, refused to do his dance during the instrumental break. Undeterred, members of the group compensated by adding improvised “eerie” vocal sounds instead of the dance. I observed that the “Thriller” group, who had created a dramatic representation of “Thriller” and sang well during rehearsals, did not exude confidence when performing in front of an audience (research journal, January 8, 2015).

At the end of class, I consulted with the students about the concert order. We negotiated informally and decided on the following:

1. “Just The Way You Are (Amazing)”
2. “Thriller”
3. “Mr. Blue Sky”

## 4. “It’s Time”

(research journal, January 8, 2014)

**The last rehearsal.** I met the students in the auditorium and we ran all the songs in concert order, twice. During the first run-through I showed each group how to be “on deck,” and ready to go when it was their turn. I also coached the students on appropriate ways to leave the stage when the applause finished. There was a lot of stopping and starting as the groups and I worked out where to stand, how to come in on cue, and the logistics of getting on and off the stage. During the second run-through, we did not stop. The rehearsal ran without incident. While each group was on stage, students in the audience watched intently, lip-synched the lyrics—we all knew all the words by now—and supported each other by clapping and hollering enthusiastically.

In the final moments of rehearsal, during the chorus of “It’s Time,” members of the class leapt to their feet, moved into the aisles, and sang together:

It's time to begin, isn't it?  
 I get a little bit bigger, but then I'll admit,  
 I'm just the same as I was.  
 Now don't you understand,  
 That I'm never changing who I am.  
 (B. McKee, A. Tolman, D. Reynolds, W. Sermon, & D. Platzman, 2012)

I had to catch my breath. The students’ singing was choral, even anthem-like. “It’s Time” had taken on extra-musical significance. “Having confidence and believing in yourself” were the distinct and unifying themes of our project. The spontaneous act of singing together, indicated the students were able to act intersubjectively. I wrote:

***The MOMENT:** During the final performance of It’s Time, most of the class got out of their seats and began to dance around. It was the time when the kids not*

*only supported each other through participation, but also demonstrated the joy they feel in this process. **JOY. What a powerful thing.***  
(research journal, January 14, 2015)

When the rehearsal was over, I realized that chorus at Walker Middle School could never be the same.

**The performance.** The concert was the culminating event, but it was not the focal point of our project. The concert was merely a stopping point, enabling us to reflect and move on to the next phase of our choral journey together.

On the evening of the concert, students arrived early. We had arranged to do a run-through at 6 p.m. to learn the logistics of performing in front of the bleachers in the gym. The students came dressed in attire they had selected. “Mr. Blue Sky” wore jeans and blue t-shirts, “Thriller” chose spooky, ghoulish, Goth-like attire, “It’s Time” wore jeans and jackets and “Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” wore jeans, sneakers and brightly colored t-shirts. During the practice there was an air of kinship among us; students supported each other by cheering, clapping and singing along.

At seven o’clock, after a brief statement from the assistant principal and the singing of the “Star Spangled Banner,” I spoke to the usual standing room only crowd. I began the concert with this statement:

Music can be a distinctive vehicle for discovering who we are. Music is an integral part of our lives on many levels; it is part of the social and emotional fabric that connects humans and informs our lives with meaning. The program you are about to see begins with a vision of choral education that is grounded in social constructionist learning theory. In this experiment for my doctoral dissertation, I wanted to find out how a collaborative, student-centered classroom might impact student learning. Here are the results. Please welcome the sixth grade chorus!  
(concert transcript, January 15, 2015)

I took a seat in the bleachers down front, next to the mixing board and computer. The backing tracks were on a playlist in iTunes and I adjusted the volume of the music as the students performed. Sandra and Sally were seated amongst the crowd. The audience was supportive; they cheered and applauded enthusiastically after each selection. The students were prepared and they performed wonderfully. Some students looked nervous, but there were no emotional breakdowns or panic attacks. I perceived the mood after the concert as triumphant. Our reflections are recorded in the next section.

### **Phase Three, Reflection**

*“Chorus and music: It’s like a big journey that leads you through different obstacles and you kind of have to bump into things and stay there for a while until you are ready to move on to the next thing” – Olivia*

How can we really know what students learn from or get out of a performance? How can we assess student engagement? Greene (2000) suggests thoughtful questioning and dialogue, unforced dialogue regarding performing, music and relationships, casual conversations about mutual discovery, and meaning making. When students themselves analyze what they have created and ponder possibilities for future projects, they make known to others what they most value. In the following section, I allow the participants to speak, hoping to demonstrate a new, grounded and democratic approach to data presentation and analysis.

Phase three was composed of one class period in which the students completed *small-group discussion/reflection #3* (see Appendix B), one focus interview, and email reflections from Sally and Sandra. Each group answered the following questions:

- What worked well?

- What could we have done differently?
- What did you learn about singing and performing in a chorus/group from working on this project?
- What recommendations do you have for future projects in this class?

I asked the students to write answers in their journals and videotape their group discussions. I hoped to obtain a holistic assessment of the students' experience during the project and gain insight to help guide future projects.

“**Mr. Blue Sky.**” While talking about how they had learned to like each other and work together, Giselle wrote and Olivia asked questions.

Olivia: The first question is “What worked well?”

What worked well people? Can you please tell me what worked well?

Giselle: What worked well. I think we...

Olivia (Interrupting): We didn't forget the song.

Crystal: We didn't hate each other at the end.

Olivia (smiling): Yes.

Crystal: Yes.

(group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

When asked what they could have done differently, Giselle said she thought the group should have added body percussion. Crystal—speaking to the video camera with a tone of sarcasm—added, “We could have cooperated more at the beginning so we had time to do it” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). Olivia asked, “What did you learn about singing and performing?”

Crystal: It's HARD.

Giselle: It's hard to come with harmony.

Olivia: It's hard picking everything.

Giselle: Okay it's hard to come up with a melody and harmony

Crystal: It was hard to figure out how to like self-direct.

Olivia: And how we did low and high, that was a big challenge.

Crystal (firmly): Self-correct.

Giselle: Harmony.

Crystal: (reiterating) Self-direct I think was very hard.  
 Giselle: What else did we learn? We learned...  
 Olivia: How to work as a group.  
 Giselle: Stage presence really matters.  
 All: Yeah.  
 Olivia: ‘Cause before we just focused on the singing and sounding good. Stage presence is pretty important.  
 Crystal (to camera): Confidence.  
 (group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

As I transcribed the video, I was surprised to hear Max’s speaking voice. At the beginning of the year he was considered nonverbal. I noticed how the students in “Mr. Blue Sky” watched over and included Max. I watched as the students solicited ideas from Max and seemed to value his participation.

Giselle: Max, Max do you have an idea for what we should do next time?  
 Do you think we should work in groups next time?  
 Max: Yes, next time.  
 Giselle: Or do you think we should work all together?  
 Olivia: He said groups. He said to do groups.  
 Giselle: Yeah we want to do groups. Sam wants groups.  
 Crystal (to Max): Did you like it?  
 Max: Yeah.  
 Giselle: Max wants groups.  
 Olivia: See, that’s a good sign.  
 Giselle: Okay so I think I wrote we should keep doing the separate groups with our own songs.  
 Olivia: Yes! Different people. Same groups.  
 (group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

During their discussion, the students talked simultaneously, made animal noises, poked at each other and mugged for the camera. Although the group agreed “it was hard” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015)—referring to the project as a whole—the “Mr. Blue Sky” group had reached intersubjective agreement about the way they understood their practices, agreement regarding the language they used, and appeared to have a mutual understanding of one another’s point of view (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). As I

transcribed the students' reflection, I began to understand the importance of authentic assessments and how they allowed students to provide feedback (for the teacher and for each other) on the processes (formative) and products (summative) of their learning (Windschitl, 2002, p. 137).

“**Thriller.**” Even with an adult presence—requested by Natalie—the “Thriller” group did not function cohesively during the project. The only thing that went well, according to Peri, was “Well, everybody did what they were supposed to” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). When reflecting about what they could have done differently, Natalie became analytical.

Natalie: The choreography was good.

Netanya: We focused a lot on the choreography.

Natalie: Overall we did a good job. I think we were a little too quiet. We probably should have stood...Okay number two. We probably should have stood closer to the microphones. Apparently people couldn't hear us so we should just have stood closer to where the microphones were.

(group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

Peri asked, “What did you learn about singing and performing in a group from working on this project?” The students agreed that working in groups and making good song choices was difficult.

Netanya: It was very hard.

Natalie: Groups can be so annoying to work with sometimes. I think that we actually executed it pretty well.

Netanya: It was better than we did at the beginning. It was pretty improved. (group agrees).

Natalie: Yeah like at the beginning of the year we tried to sing and then...

Netanya: At the beginning of the year we were pin drop quiet but now we're not so quiet.

Hazel: We built confidence.

Natalie: Next question: Things that we can do for next time.

Peri: Pick an easier song. It needs to be a catchy song.

Hazel: I think that we need to choose an easier song next time.

Natalie: We learned that groups and songs can be difficult to work with.

Peri: Bigger groups.

All (group consensus): Bigger groups.

(group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

The “Thriller” had the most difficulty learning to work cooperatively. Although “it [the project] was very hard,” the “Thriller” group, like “Mr. Blue Sky,” recommended the continuation of collaborative work.

“**It’s Time.**” The most cohesive and independent group was the “It’s Time” group. I observed that the group’s social and musical skills appeared to be more developed than the other groups. They were led by Hope, who sang with the Boston Children’s Chorus, and Maria, who had classical training through voice lessons. Ironically, the group forgot to turn on the videotape during their initial discussion. Overall, the group articulated relatively little about their thoughts during and after project.

Ashley (reading from notes): “What worked well?” Our volume, body percussion, staying on pitch, we were engaging, stayed together, good stage presence.

Hope: What didn’t work well for us?

Maria: We didn’t stay focused. We didn’t concentrate a lot.

Hope: Same as staying focused.

Maria: That’s what I said. We didn’t concentrate a lot.

Ashley: We tried as much as we could to do that. Okay, there’s just like two more things and then we’re done. What we didn’t do well?

Hope: Working together.

Roger: I think we should have worked on not talking at the same time

Ashley: What did you learn about singing and performing in a chorus group from working on this project?

Maria: You need a lot of patience. We needed a lot of teamwork. I mean we needed to accept diversity!

Hope: Um, how bout we need to focus all the time.

Ashley: We need to fool around less. What recommendations do you have for future projects?

Bobby: I’m for doing the groups.

Hope: What does that say?  
 Ashley: Keep doing small groups. We're done!!  
 (group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

Although the students in the "It's Time" group seemed to function very well together, they felt that part of their learning experience was learning to work independently and cooperatively. The group recommended the continuation of small group work.

**"Just the Way You Are (Amazing)."** Midge and Julius facilitated the "Just the Way You Are (Amazing)" group discussion/reflection. Omar, who usually said very little during class discussions, opened up a bit about how he had learned the value and importance of cooperation.

Midge: The first question is "What worked well?"  
 Omar (repeating): What worked well?  
 Midge: I think the harmony.  
 Julius: What worked well? The boy-girl distribution.  
 Midge: Yeah. What could we have done different, with the overall to make it better?  
 Julius: Smile  
 Midge: No, not for just the concert, just this thing of the chorus itself. Not to be specific.  
 Julius: Well stage presence was all right.  
 Midge: We'll write that. (she thinks a bit, then adds) Be more enthusiastic.  
 Omar: We needed to remember notes.  
 Julius: We needed to remember our lines.  
 Midge: So what should we do next time? What did we learn about singing and performing in a chorus/group from working on this project?  
 Omar: That performing here is a lot different than performing in front of like parents. We learned how to work together.  
 Julius and the others: Yeah.  
 Midge: What recommendations do we have?  
 Omar: Work in groups.  
 Julius: I actually liked the "working in groups" thing. Like same thing – different people.  
 (group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

The "Just the Way You Are (Amazing)" group verbalized that they had learned to work

together. Like the other groups, they recommended continuing with collaborative work in chorus.

**Giselle, Hope, Julius, Maria, Midge, and Natalie, and Olivia.** The final focus interview took place on January 26, 2015. When Giselle, Hope, Julius, Maria, Midge, Natalie, and Olivia crowded into my tiny office to offer their thoughts, their mood was festive, high-spirited, and somewhat giddy.

RD: You are called the focus group.

Olivia (puzzled): We don't really seem focused.

RD: That's not what I mean. You are the core group that I talked to all the way along and now I want to know how chorus has met your expectations, exceeded your expectations or not, because of the project this term. I want to use this research to improve my teaching—it's not like we do this one time and it never happens again.

Hope (not quite believing): So we get to keep doing this?

RD: Yes, you can talk to me about what you think about what happened and what you think should happen in the future.

The students took turns describing ways that student-directed, collaborative learning had helped them develop social and musical skills.

Giselle: Um, I feel like in groups we got to work with some people that we usually don't get to work with or get to interact with, and we have to come up with harmony ourselves and work on it, and so it wasn't all easy at all. And so it gets easier when you work with people, and I think that you can pick songs that you like so it helps you trust yourself more when you're performing if you know the song and you like the song. Learning-wise I think we're learning a lot about what stage presence means and how much the harmony and way you present yourself really matters.

Midge: I liked how we did it, like how we got to deal with this thing. I wish you would help us a little more like on the technical stuff with the singing, like not with the words but like with vowels and stuff.

Olivia: Well I think that this was very helpful for a learning experience especially if you want to have a music career or any type of business. You need to know how to work with a different variety of different people or you need to know how to collaborate.

Hope: I kind of like the balance between working together and hard work and also fooling around because I mean it's a lot more fun when you get to hang out with people and it's funny, and I really enjoy the people's company. It's just sometimes when the balance goes out of whack and they're too much unfocused it's kind of hard to work with them.

Maria: Well I really, really liked this, uh, because it's like you really, you get to make your own choices, and like Hope said, you get to have the balance of hanging out with your friends and fooling around but you also do like work, and I mean I really like choosing our own song because so far in my whole entire life all I've been doing is classical music so now I get to do like, um, different styles of music.

(interview, January 26, 2015)

There was pride in their voices when they talked about how they had learned to enjoy the social aspects of group work while taking responsibility for their own learning.

Toward the end of the interview, the students were giddy and off topic. The conversation was drifting when suddenly Natalie interrupted.

Natalie: Going back about five minutes or so...and so this whole situation [project], really relates to heart [compassion/caring], because you have to be helpful to your group, you have to put in effort, you have to learn to respect everyone in your group and they respect you and you need to use teamwork. I don't really know why I thought of that!

Hope: That might be why we're so proud of you! (kids cheer, bell rings).

(interview, January 26, 2015)

What struck me most about all of the focus interviews was the depth of reasoning—the cognitive capabilities, i.e., higher order thinking skills—this group of sixth graders, who were mostly 11 years old, demonstrated. Without coercion, the students were able to cite benefits that came with effort, teamwork, the acceptance of new ideas, and respect for others. Although the students acknowledged the difficulties of working collaboratively, in the end, their acceptance of each other's differences helped them outweigh the obstacles that arose during the project.

**Critical friends.** Critical participatory action research is collaborative, “predicated on rational and open [uncoerced] dialogue” (Regelski, 1994/1995, p. 65). After the project was completed, Sally and Sandra provided answers to the following reflection questions via email.

- What do you think were the specific advantages of this model of choral education? Talk about both social and cognitive aspects please. A bulleted list would be fine.
- Can you think of any areas that could be improved upon?
- In critical participatory action research, we look to continually modify and improve the learning model. What would you like to see happen as the class moves forward? This can be a suggestion for projects, groupings, or anything else that concerns or interests you.

Sally thought that chorus “gave students an opportunity be creative and to learn to work with peers they might not normally choose to work with.” She liked how the project “made the students responsible for their own time management and behavior management.” She suggested that I “incorporate teaching/learning strategies that helped build the students’ confidence.” She added, “At this age I feel as though they needed to be given a few more tools/ideas to bring out their confidence while performing.” To help build confidence, Sally suggested that the “students might be encouraged to use instruments or body percussion when performing to create movement on stage.” Regarding future projects and strategies, Sally proposed, “It would be interesting to see if students themselves could coach another group now that they have gone through this

experience” (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

Sandra was hired in late September, after the project had already started. Her primary purpose for being in the class was to supervise Robbie and Erik from the DLP program, but she ended up coaching, facilitating, and providing feedback for the entire “Thriller” group at Natalie’s request. In her reflection regarding the project, Sandra commented on how the students had learned “self and group awareness and constructed their own path as opposed to being teacher-directed.” The social advantages Sandra cited were that students “learned to be accepting of differences and abilities and they incorporated this into their practices and end-product.” In the future, Sandra recommended building confidence by giving students “an opportunity to practice/perform in front of their peers in concert before they did an evening presentation in the gym” (personal communication, January 26, 2015).

### **Chapter Summary**

*“I think we’re learning a lot about what stage presence means and how much the harmony and way you present yourself really matters” – Giselle*

During our final rehearsal, recorded in my journal as “the moment,” it became evident that the students and I had finally eased into non-hierarchical roles. We ultimately reached a point where we were able to enjoy the social aspects of collaborative work while assuming mutual responsibility for singing and performing. Although the students and I had endured periods of chaos and difficulty as we learned to work collaboratively, we learned to accept each other’s individual differences and this helped us overcome obstacles that arose during the project.

Without solicitation, groups of students articulated—in different ways—the benefits that came with effort, teamwork, the acceptance of new ideas, and respect for others. Looking forward, it was apparent that the students wanted to continue working within the social constructionist model of choral education.

Before school ended in June I shared the raw data—transcriptions of interviews, videos, journal entries—and my first draft of Chapter Four so participants could review, respond, provide alternate interpretations, and make changes if needed. The students and academic assistants perused my manuscripts during chorus classes. Each person had the opportunity to pencil in comments if they wanted. After reading, they checked off their names to verify they had read and were satisfied the content.

To scaffold for the students, I listed their real names in the margins, making it easier to locate passages that pertained to them. The students appeared sheepish when reading about themselves. Some laughed. Most commented how they really liked their pseudonyms, which they had chosen for themselves. Some participants gave me affirmative nods and “thumbs up,” which surprised me because middle school students can be a tough bunch to please.

It was hard to tell if Sandra and Sally were impressed or daunted by the long document I handed them. However, like the students, they both graciously took turns perusing highlighted passages pertaining to their roles during the research. Subsequently I made revisions in order to accurately reflect their professional viewpoints and perspectives.

In the end I did my best to tell this story in a way that is credible—though not

indisputable—through the voices of the participants. The story elucidates how we began our project with little more than a plan of action (see Appendix A)—to prepare for the winter concert—to guide us, and how the project evolved into a constructionist, collaborative learning initiative. By explicating divergent perspectives and responses to constructionist applications of teaching and learning, the story reveals how sixth grade chorus students and their chorus teacher, working collaboratively, learned to share responsibility for students' musical and social development.

## Chapter Five: An Alternative Landscape Emerges

*“The tricky part of all this...is that replies (answers) seldom end up being acceptable conclusions. At best they are grounds for further inquiries” (Kelly, 1969, p. 22, parenthesis added).*

In Chapter Four I used the voices of the participants in order to present a narrative account of our actions—sayings and doings—during the project. I used this approach in order to illuminate the ongoing reflection regarding the pedagogical and organizational practices that emerged during our project. In this chapter, I summarize and report what I learned about middle school choral music education using the evidence presented in the previous chapter.

I begin by illuminating the consequences of my move away from traditional, institutionalized pedagogical approaches to choral teaching in order to address my research questions:

- How might constructionist principles be used to create a collaborative model of middle school choral music education that is focused on the needs and interests—pedagogical and social—of sixth grade choral students?
- What pedagogical and social practices emerge when beginning sixth grade students and their chorus teacher share responsibility for teaching and learning in sixth grade chorus?

Next, I reveal what students indicated they most valued about their experience in our constructionist learning environment. I reflect on what I learned regarding my research questions. I follow my reflection with a discussion in which I compare the pedagogical practices that emerged during our project with the social constructionist guidelines

(Gergen, 2001) that were outlined in Chapter Three. After acknowledging the limitations of this report, I describe new insights and awareness that occurred as a result of this research. I incorporate questions that arose during the project as recommendations for future inquiry and then finally, after situating my findings within existing literature, I close with a brief epilogue describing how this research has, and continues to inform my philosophical and pedagogical approach to choral teaching and learning at Walker Middle School.

### **What I Learned**

*“The world of appearance, the very world we live in, is ‘created’ by mind”  
(Bruner, 1986, p. 96).*

In this section I address my research questions by presenting ways that constructionism, a theoretical framework situated within a critical view of music education, allowed me to reconceptualize my pedagogical practices relative to choral music education. Drawing from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), critical pedagogy (Abrahams, 2005a; Allsup, 1997; Freire, 1970; Regelski, 2002, 2004), informal learning (Berliner, 1996; Green, 2002, 2008; Rogoff, 2003), and problem-based learning (Barrell, 2010; Jonassen, 1991a, 1991b, 1998; Scott, 2007; Wiggins, 2015), I created a collaborative, constructionist learning environment. Then, using a critical participatory action research methodology, I documented and monitored the consequences of specific pedagogical and organizational changes.

Using a constructionist pedagogical framework (Gergen, 2001; Windschitl, 2002), I sought to create a collaborative, student-directed learning environment in which the participants were socially engaged, musically challenged, felt safe to take risks, and were

supported in their learning. The pedagogical and organizational changes that emerged allowed me to explore a constructionist curricular model that is collaborative, active, dialogic, and non-hierarchical, valuing the perspectives of the students (Froelich, 2007; Pinar, 2011). In order to address my research questions, I describe how pedagogical and organizational changes altered the practices of beginning sixth grade choral students and their chorus teacher.

**Pedagogical changes.** During the study I continually explicated and modified my teaching strategies in relation to students' sayings, actions, and doings. I chronicled what happened, my thoughts about what happened, and the consequences of what happened in my research journal. I critically examined my own behavior in relation to my students and the constructionist learning environment. For example, I documented my misgivings about the use of backing tracks or recorded accompaniments. I questioned my behavior regarding scaffolding. I made modifications to my pedagogical practices as I sought to determine what my role in a constructionist environment should be. I wrote:

There is a lot to learn from this, particularly about how and when to support them musically. Should I offer suggestions? How much should I "fix" things? Or do I just let it happen?  
(research journal, October 9, 2014)

I struggled to find a delicate balance between how much direction and guidance, i.e., scaffolding, to give students without doing too much or too little.

As the project unfolded, power relationships in the classroom were transformed. The students and I worked together. Consequently, I developed greater respect for the students' musical and cognitive abilities and the students developed greater trust regarding my intentions and abilities. Over time I learned to trust that students were

capable of making their own musical decisions and working independently. I also learned that I needed to give them autonomy and allow them to learn from their mistakes.

Ultimately, I found that teaching within a constructionist, student-centered learning environment necessitated I “stand back, observe, and empathize with the goals the pupils set for themselves” (Green, 2014).

**Organizational changes.** I intentionally suspended hierarchal relationships and dispensed with established routines and procedures associated with traditional choral education in order to discover new approaches to choral learning. Unexpected issues arose when I made erroneous assumptions about the student’s modes of learning or I unintentionally infused traditional habits of thinking e.g., giving students choral sheet music because that’s what I always used, or judging their progress as independent learners against teacher-directed traditions of choral excellence into our constructionist practices. As the project moved forward, the students and I continually revised our pedagogical and organizational approaches. With each revision I monitored, documented, reflected upon, explicated, and modified my role in relation to the students’ sayings, actions, and doings, i.e., collected evidence. After each revision we discussed and reflected upon on the efficacy and appropriateness of our practices to determine how they affected us, and whether or not our new practices needed further modification.

Phase two felt like a carnival in the Bakhtinian sense. I facilitated organizational changes during phase one by organizing the students into collaborative groups and giving them a protocol for their song selection. During the second phase of the project we had a plan of action (see Appendix A), but there were no specific routines or protocols for us to

follow. Lessons were supposed to be developed in relation to the emancipatory aims, interests, and abilities of all involved, rather than being research-directed. Consequently, in the beginning, we mostly improvised, and so it was, I will admit, pretty chaotic. At the first focus interview I asked the focus group to share their thoughts about the project. I asked them to describe what they thought the project would be like versus what was actually happening:

Hope: I kind of thought it (the project) would be more straightforward, like we do this, we do this, we do this. It's a lot more chaotic actually, um, because people are kind of fooling around. We (referring to Maria) try to be the leader but then when everybody tries to be a leader it's just voices overlapping...

Midge: Well I thought it was going to be a lot more chaotic. It still is a little. I thought we're all going to be in one room and everyone would be all running around and screaming at the top of their lungs all talking at once so it wasn't like that but it's still pretty chaotic.  
(interview, October 27, 2014)

As the research progressed, the students and I worked together to design new choral practices that were collaborative and student-centered. While we worked I documented, monitored, and reflected upon the consequence of our practices, our understandings of those practices, and the conditions of our practices (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

Things did not go smoothly for us in the beginning because the organizational changes I put into place created unexpected issues. The first issue I had to contend with was noise; the students had difficulty hearing themselves with so many people in the room. I hastily cleaned out closets and negotiated the use of practice rooms in order to create separate rehearsal spaces for each of the four groups. Having separate practice areas made the noise level tolerable and helped the students rehearse without distractions.

While the students rehearsed, I rotated among the four areas in order to scaffold as needed.

The second issue was the “chaos” or “fooling around.” I began the project thinking I would be able to accompany each group, but soon found that I needed to circulate and supervise the students as they practiced or “fooled around.” The bottom line was that it was impossible to supervise, observe, and accompany all four groups simultaneously.

Hope: Um chaos is good and bad, and chaos, well sometimes it inspires our other ideas. Like when we're fooling around it actually ends up sounding good.  
RD: Well, right. That's why I had to give up playing the piano for different groups because if I'm playing the piano for one group, I'm not circulating around to see what's going on with the other groups.  
(interview, October 27, 2014)

The third unexpected issue arose from the erroneous assumption that students could use choral sheet music as a semiotic tool for learning. To scaffold learning, I obtained a choral octavo or piano/vocal arrangement for each group. When I discovered the “Thriller” group looking frustrated and unhappy during rehearsal, I learned that the choral sheet music I gave them was fairly useless. Their frowning faces and blank looks as they gazed upon the pages made it clear to me that they did not understand what they were looking at. To make matters worse, the group informed me the lyrics on the music did not match the lyrics of the Michael Jackson recording they were listening to on YouTube. Natalie asked me for “music with the words only,” so I made myself a note to download some lyric sheets for them (research journal, October 3, 2014).

I put an electronic keyboard in each rehearsal space, hoping to encourage the students to use piano accompaniments. It turned out that this too was an erroneous assumption. The piano/vocal sheet music I provided was much too difficult for a sixth

grade piano player. I purchased some “easy” piano/vocal scores. Then, during the first performances, it became apparent that, although a couple students could play the piano, they did not have the requisite skills to accompany singing.

After the students’ first performances, I felt distressed. I wrote in my journal that I feared the sixth grade chorus might not possess the musical skills and social understandings they needed to be successful in a constructionist learning environment. The term success, being subjective, was probably not a good choice of words. I had to remind myself that the project was about the journey, not the product, right?

The first time the students performed, I observed the first two groups sing with the original YouTube versions—vocals and all—so it was like watching kids lip synch with the radio on instead of watching a musical performance. When the “Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” group performed, Erik’s piano accompaniment did not even come close to matching the tempo of the singing. I accompanied the “Thriller” group, who performed last. Some members of “Thriller” did not come in on cue and worse, some did not sing at all. I tried not to show my disappointment when the students were finished. Instead I inquired:

RD: Natalie, what did you find difficult about this process?

Natalie: Process?

RD: Yes, working with others and putting music together?

Natalie: I found it hard because when people don’t cooperate, like when you go one, two, three and nobody starts to sing, it’s annoying.

RD: (to Giselle and Olivia, who are giving thumbs up in agreement): Okay, so you’re having some of the same issues? (they nod).

Hope: Staying focused (there is chatter and agreement).

RD: So Natalie, you are not alone. Next time you’re going to have a group meeting and talk about the things you done so far. This is a good start. There are things you’ve done well, but everyone has room for

improvement. That's normal. What does everyone have to do to get better?

Students (in unison): Practice.  
(class transcript, October 15, 2014)

I started thinking about using backing tracks after I saw the students perform for the first time. After reviewing student performances on video over the weekend, I decided they were not as bad as I originally thought. At the very least, the students could sing on pitch. Although I observed that the students sang well, I wrote in my journal that they did not appear to be “owning” their music. Since it was important for the students to take artistic ownership of the music, I decided backing tracks might allow students to focus their energy on singing with expression and performing in a group, which, in my opinion, is what chorus is all about.

Having to troubleshoot unexpected issues like noise, chaos, student behavior, materials for learning, and accompaniments forced me to develop an understanding of what it really means to meet the learning needs of the students; as opposed to having students meet the teacher's objectives for learning. Borrowing from Price (2006), I wanted to make the students the “most important unit of organization” (p. 3). I found that I needed to allow students to engage in “natural learning processes” (Green, 2008, p. 65) as they worked independently. To help students learn to work independently, I needed to be supportive, adaptive, and responsive to their needs.

“Most students would like to have a voice and work with a teacher who will validate their opinions, thoughts, and ideas” (Martino, 2014, p. 112). This corresponds to the notion of constructionist learning, which is viewed as “an act of interpretation and negotiation with other individuals” (Windschitl, 2000, p. 142). As the project progressed

and the students and I became more comfortable with each other, I solicited the students' thoughts and ideas to help me discover ways to make middle school choral music education more meaningful and relevant for them. I asked the students questions and refrained from lecturing, which helped students learn to think critically, to evaluate their own work and the work of others, and to explain and communicate their ideas.

RD: Okay. So what are your concerns at this point? What is it that you feel needs to happen at this point in time? Hope?

Hope: Stage presence.

RD: Stage presence. That is definitely a theme.

Maria: Confidence.

RD: Confidence! Midge?

Midge: Know your words?

RD: Knowing the words. Good. Giselle?

Giselle: (Inaudible).

RD: Pardon?

Giselle: (speaking clearly). Volume.

RD: Volume. Volume when you're speaking, Volume! Anything else? Natalie?

Natalie: Energy.

RD: Energy. Yes!

(class transcript, December 15, 2014)

Discussions were fluid, open, and responsive for the purpose giving students a voice in the process and product of their learning and influence over pedagogical and organizational changes that evolved during the project.

A new approach to middle school choral education grew out of a casual conversation in which members of the focus group tossed around ideas about fooling around, performing, feedback, and the role of the teacher. Midge, Natalie, and Maria disliked fooling around. They preferred that I "step in and help more," so that if they were "off topic," or "not listening to each other," I could get them back on track. Hope, on the other hand, viewed chaos as part of the creative process. She said chaos could be a

catalyst for creativity, “like when we’re fooling around it actually ends up sounding good” (interview, October 27, 2014).

By expanding on the students’ ideas, together we developed the “practice, perform, critique” model of choral education. The model provided our class with a much-needed routine. The model consisted of practicing with specified time limits, performing, and receiving feedback from peers. Practicing with specified time limits kept the students on task, performing made the students accountable for their progress, and receiving feedback from peers kept the students apprised of their learning goals. The model required that the students’ function interdependently, use metacognitive strategies, engage in critical dialogue, and target common goals. More importantly, the model helped maintain student autonomy and made the students responsible for their own social and musical growth.

### **A Reflection Upon The Research Questions**

*“I want to know what you thought would happen, and how does that compare to what’s really happening?” – Ruth Debot*

During the research period I documented and monitored, i.e., collected evidence (an action research term) in the form of data (a qualitative research term) (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014). In critical participatory action research the ongoing collection of evidence obliges the researcher to engage in continual reflection. Reflection is a cognitive process that facilitates explanation and justification; why pedagogical and organizational changes have been made. Evidence helped me determine what was most valuable about changes that I made. Evidence shed light on the issues I was investigating.

To reflect upon my research questions, I illuminate the pedagogical and social practices that emerged when a collaborative constructionist learning environment is implemented.

Reflection—in the context of research with eleven-year-old students—refers to the ability to think seriously about a topic. To help me discern what students most valued about their learning in a constructionist environment, I asked each group to respond to questions contained in *small-group discussion/reflection #3* (see Appendix B).

Transcriptions of group discussions captured on video recordings and notes in student journals helped me understand how the students perceived their learning in collaborative constructionist learning environment.

I learned a lot about the positive and negative aspects of collaborative learning from the students, particularly from the “Mr. Blue Sky” group. In my opinion, the group, who lost Danny early on, came the farthest in their ability “to work as a group” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). The students concurred that it was difficult to figure out how to “self-direct, self-correct,” and that “stage presence really matters” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). Despite the challenges of learning to work together, the “Mr. Blue Sky” group recommended continuing collaborative work in the future, concluding:

Giselle: Okay so I think I wrote we should keep doing the separate groups with our own songs.

Olivia: Yes! Different people. Same groups.  
(group dialogue, January 20, 2015)

The “Thriller” group observed, “groups and songs can be difficult to work with” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). They too recommended continuing with slightly larger collaborative groups. “It’s Time” overwhelmingly agreed to “keep doing small groups” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). “Just The Way You Are (Amazing)” unanimously

advocated for the “working in groups thing” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015).

Reflecting upon transcriptions of group discussions captured on video recordings and notes from student journals helped me determine that this group of sixth grade chorus students perceived the social aspects of collaborative learning to be the most valuable component of their learning experience in a constructionist environment.

I conducted this research to help me discern new pedagogical and social practices that emerge when sixth grade students and their chorus teacher share responsibility for teaching and learning. This study informed my approach to choral teaching and learning in several ways. First, I learned that I needed to step back and allow students to engage in “natural learning processes” (Green, 2008, p. 65) as they worked cooperatively and independently on music of their own choosing. I learned I needed to facilitate (a constructionist term) rather than direct (a traditional term) choral learning, and as a result, the structure of the classroom became more fluid and open-ended. Being responsive—rather than directive—allowed the students to have a voice in the process and product of their learning. By questioning, rather than lecturing, I helped students learn to think critically, to evaluate their own work and the work of others, and to explain and communicate their ideas. This shift in power relationships within our classroom appeared to be a critical factor for creating for a model of choral education in which the teacher and students share responsibility for social and musical growth and development.

## Discussion

*“You have to be helpful to you group, you have to put in effort, you have to learn to respect everyone in your group and respect them, and you need to use teamwork.” – Natalie*

The following discussion compares the pedagogical practices that emerged during this study with the social constructionist instructional design outlined in Chapter Three. I frame the discussion using Gergen’s (2001) five domains of relevance because they guided my application of constructionist theories, offering opportunities for participants to discover collaborative and socially relevant pedagogical practices specific to sixth grade choral music education. After situating my report within the social constructionist pedagogical ideologies that guided my research, I discuss how this study makes a contribution to the field of music education.

The first domain, from hierarchy to heterarchy, refers to the critical examination of traditional, hierarchal choral methods of learning, which are built around a *nutritionist* model (Freire, 1985). In our constructionist classroom, issues of power, democracy, reciprocity, freedom, and responsibility were not treated as rarified abstractions; rather they were defined by our actions and words. During the project I assumed a “critical” stance regarding choral education (Abrahams, 2005a, 2005b; Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy, like social constructionism, acknowledges that teaching and learning music is socially and politically constructed; it is characterized by a shift in power relationships within the classroom whereby teachers and students learn mutually from each other.

A heterarchal, dialogic relationship is indispensable to knowledge construction; it requires collaboration and must involve more than just adults—its practice should

incorporate the rights and opinions of both students and teachers (Allsup, 2002, p. 27). I reconceptualized (Erickson, 2012; Froelich, 2007; Pinar, 2011; Price, 2006) my pedagogical practice in order to involve and solicit key ideas from the students (Windschitl, 2002) and engage them in the learning process.

RD: I think that we have a couple of themes going here. What do you think is one of our themes?

Roger: Sing louder.

RD: That's really important. Midge?

Midge: Stage presence

RD: Stage presence. Those are the two main things. Yes?

Hope: Confidence.

RD: Well that comes with stage presence; confidence. Yes?

Hope: Yes.

RD: I see those as umbrella themes. Being audible so people can hear you and understand you and then working on your stage presence which includes looking happy to be there and looking confident and not just standing there singing with a sad face but having some facial expression.

(class transcript, November 20, 2014)

The second domain refers to an educational process that moves outside traditional domains or bodies of knowledge. In a “critical” learning environment (Abrahams, 2005a, 2005b; Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2007), students construct knowledge by connecting what they already know from outside the classroom. This makes their learning in the classroom relevant to their personal lives and goals (Freire, 1970).

During our project, sixth grade chorus students at Walker Middle School were given the opportunity to bring songs learned outside of school and connect their previous learning to specific learning goals in the school chorus, particularly by engaging popular music, technology, and dance (Erickson, 2012; Green, 2008). Employing a “critical” approach empowered the students and myself to transcend the constraints of traditional

choral teaching and learning and focus instead on a mutual exchange of ideas centered on the “valuable knowledge that students bring to the classroom” (Abrahams, 2005b, p. 64).

“Learning is more likely to take place when learners have a context for understanding new ideas” (Wiggins, 2015, p. 9). Toward meaning in practice—the third domain of relevance—refers to a contextual approach to knowledge acquisition.

Borrowing from Wiggins (2015), my research was based on a single student-centered lesson plan integrating problem solving (Barrell, 2010; Jonassen, 1991a, 1991b, 1998; Scott, 2007), cognitive apprenticeship (Dewey, 1938; Gardner, 1991; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), and collaborative learning (Boardman, 2002; Brooks & Brooks, 1993, 1999; Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Wiggins, 2001; Zemelman, 2005) strategies. During the project students were engaged in self-directed, holistic, real world, collaborative, hands-on activities. Lessons were driven by the following lesson plan:

RD: You have a concert on January 15. I’m going to break you up into groups. You pick the music, rehearse the songs, and then on January 15 you’re going to give a concert. Okay? I’m going to help you, if you need it.  
(class transcription, September 2, 2014)

Learning took place contextually as the students worked to solve problems related to group singing and performing.

The fourth domain refers to reflexive deliberation, which suggests that authoritative discourse must be opened to evaluation from alternative standpoints. I initiated curricular changes, but constructionism, situated within a “critical” (Abrahams, 2005a, 2005b; Darder, 2002; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2007) view of choral education, empowered the students and I to transcend the constraints of hierarchal traditional choral teaching and learning and focus instead on a

more informal, mutual exchange of ideas for the betterment of our practice.

The results of this study reflect differentiated understandings among the participants regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of our pedagogical and social practices. During the project students were encouraged to share their thoughts regarding our pedagogical practices, both positive and negative. I encouraged students to be thoughtful and candid. For example, Hope, Midge, Natalie, and Maria held different opinions regarding the level of teacher involvement. Hope, whose group was able to function independently, thought the project was “fun” and was going well without a teacher stepping in. Midge agreed about the fun part, but contended, “the problem is I think that we fool around too much” (interview, October 27, 2014). Natalie wanted the teacher to step in more, explaining, “some kids just won’t listen to other kids” (interview, October 27, 2014). Maria integrated the students’ ideas and offered, “Perhaps it would be helpful if we like performed something and you gave us feedback” (interview, October 27, 2014).

The relational matrix—Gergen’s (2001) fifth domain of relevance—refers to the distinct division between teacher and student that has been perpetuated in Western views of knowledge transmission. The relational matrix takes on particular significance in this case because “traditional methods often prevent the possibility for shared experiences or what Bruner (1996) described as intersubjectivity” (Allsup, 2002, p. 61).

My understanding of intersubjectivity came to fruition during the final chorus of “It’s Time” when the class got out of their seats and began to sing expressively and spontaneously. During that inimitable moment, our singing was unified, choral, and

anthem-like. The extemporaneous act of singing expressively and spontaneously together exemplified what Shotter (1993) described as a sphere of “joint action” or “knowing from within” (p. 8). After class, I wrote in my journal with a “lump in my throat:”

***The MOMENT:** During the final performance of *It’s Time*, most of the class got out of their seats and began to dance around. It was the time when the kids not only supported each other through participation, but also demonstrated the joy they feel in this process. **JOY. What a powerful thing.***

(research journal, January 14, 2015)

This study contributes to the field of music education by illuminating ways that constructionist learning informed the musical and social skills of adolescent learners in the sixth grade chorus at Walker Middle School. Evidence from transcriptions of videos and interviews, student and teacher journals, performances, and participant/observer observations indicated that the students who participated in this project considered working collaboratively to be the most valuable aspect of their learning in the sixth grade chorus. The overall results of this study indicate that these middle school chorus students were able to function as independent learners, both as individuals and as members of groups, sharing responsibility for their musical and social development.

### **Limitations of the Study**

*“It is not so important to “get it right” about the present because tomorrow may be quite different” (Gergen, 2009, p. 64).*

I acknowledge that certain limitations may have influenced the results of this study. Seven students in the chorus class did not consent to be included in the project although they did participate in regular class activities. Per Institutional Review Board

(IRB) regulations stated in Chapter Four, I was unaware of the identity of the participants until the research period was over. Consequently, their voices have not been heard.

When writing the report of this critical participatory action research, I drew solely on data from those students who agreed to participate in the research. Since critical participatory action research is conducted in collaborative partnership with participants and knowledge construction is a byproduct of social interaction, all of the participants, consenting or not, directly or indirectly, were represented to varying degrees in the results of this research.

### **New Insights and Awareness**

*“The links between freedom, democracy, community, caring, and even friendship are strong ones - they disavow teaching methods that oppress rather than liberate, that separate more than join” (Allsup, 2003, p.35).*

This study grew out of my desire to discover pedagogical practices that were relevant to middle school learners. The majority of participants were fully engaged in the constructionist learning process, but I perceived that constructionism was not equally engaging for all students. This was particularly true in the case of special learners with social/emotional disorders. These students, who often need supervision, may prefer a less challenging, teacher-directed classroom. In order to address the needs of these particular children, I incorporate some teacher-directed lessons, and I provide supervision during group activities.

Students, administrators, and many members of the community have shown enthusiasm for the use of popular music in the curriculum. However, I have become aware that the themes and messages contained in popular music may be offensive to

certain religious communities. It is my hope that, as we continue to live in a global world, that we can engage in educated dialogue and reach an understanding that *musicking* is a very diverse form of human expression. To date, a few children have been withdrawn from chorus—for a variety of reasons—but overall the number of students in the sixth grade chorus has grown from 65 to 105 students since the writing of this report.

Preparing for and conducting this research has given me new insights about my teaching and new pedagogical strategies that are linked to the way adolescents learn. I have discovered that learning, in the context of middle school choral education, is directly correlated with what students “do” rather than what teachers “teach.” Therefore, I no longer “teach” chorus. Rather, I design musical challenges that focus on certain aspects of singing for students to “do.” I then have them think about their “doing” (reflect). Afterward, I make them explain what they “did” (a metacognitive technique). I have found that these middle school students were quite capable of knowing what to do and moreover, they valued active learning with their peers. “Doing” music of their own choosing and “doing music with their friends” has made middle school choral learning more meaningful, relevant, and social for these learners.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

*“Knowledge is never abstract, objective and absolute, but always concrete, situated and tied to human practice” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.29).*

The ideas of great philosophers and learning theorists come alive when they are put into practice. I conducted this study of social constructionism within the social ecology (Shotter, 1993) of the middle school choral classroom during the “regular”

school day using a non-select choral ensemble in the hope that my unique approach might open up possibilities for broader applications within choral music education.

This report is comprised of a single action cycle. With each phase—a critical participatory action research process defined in Chapter Three—I kept in mind that “learning what you need to learn is one of the most important outcomes of the reflection stage” (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 110). During the project, as we engaged in new practices, the participants continually engaged in reflective dialogue regarding the efficacy of our practices. Reflection stimulated questions regarding whether our new practices were educational, reasonable, productive, just, and inclusive. Our questioning guided new lines of inquiry, which I present as recommendations for future research.

The following questions emerged prior to the writing of this report. While completing *small-group discussion/reflection #3* (Appendix B), Ashley declared, “I don’t really like doing songs as a whole chorus” (group dialogue, January 20, 2015). This provoked me to ask: Do the outcomes of constructionist learning lead to life-long engagement with music and in particular, choral ensemble singing? To answer this question, more longitudinal information will be required. During our final interview with the focus group, Midge said, “I wish you would help us a little more like on the technical stuff with the singing, like not with the words but like with vowels and stuff (interview, January 26, 2015). This led me to consider: Is it possible for constructionist teachers to reconcile the dichotomy between informal learning and formal vocal instruction? During the project I observed that scaffolding, collaborative learning, tool use, and the use of thoughtful questioning provided different students with distinct pathways to musical

understanding. It would be interesting therefore, to find out which constructionist techniques, if any, lead to lasting social and musical competencies. Finally, I would like to know if it is possible to maintain student ownership of the curriculum, yet find alternative ways to teach ensemble skills, composition and arranging in a choral setting. Presently I am working, albeit less formally, toward finding effective ways to blend teacher-directed instruction, particularly regarding vocal technique, arranging, and composing, with applications of constructionist learning in the large choral ensemble.

This study emerged from my desire to discover improved, alternative pedagogical approaches in order to make sixth grade choral music education more relevant and meaningful for learners. In order to make that happen, I fostered a constructionist learning environment, then I examined ways that participants' actions, reactions, understandings, and relationships with others helped to "construct, enable, and constrain our collective practices" (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 76). I learned a great deal, however there are avenues of inquiry that have not been addressed in this study.

Since this report encompasses but one action cycle, the learning that transpired during this project will continue as the students and I "evaluate our existing practices, transform our practices, our understandings of our practices, and the conditions under which we practice" (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014, p. 87). That is the cyclical nature of critical participatory action research.

## Conclusion

*“If music educators listen to and learn from students, we can foster a transition from teacher dominated music classrooms to classrooms where students are viewed and view themselves as active contributors to the growth of their own musical understanding”*  
(Berg, 1997, p. 261).

The insights I have offered and the responses to my research questions—related to specific pedagogical and organizational changes described in this chapter—highlight issues for music educators who choose to implement constructionist approaches in the choral classroom. It is important to note that the constructionist practices implemented in this study produced many positive learning outcomes for the participants. Collaborative learning, of particular value to students, was demonstrated to foster musical and social development for the participants. A heterarchal learning environment contributed to intersubjective understandings. Moving outside of domains dictated by traditional choral discourse made it possible for students to engage previous knowledge learned outside of school and transfer their knowledge to holistic, contextual, self-generated learning goals in the school chorus. The incorporation of popular music, technology, and dance into the curriculum made learning more relevant for the students. This paradigm shift suggests that choral educators may be able to implement constructionist practices in a variety of choral settings more easily than has generally been assumed.

What I learned from conducting this study corresponds with outcomes in the literature on constructionism and constructivism. For example, in the realm of instrumental music, Allsup (2003) discovered that informal, non-hierarchal relationships among the researcher/facilitator, characterized as “teaching *with* students rather than *to* students,” contributed to community-making and musical growth (p. 34). Working with a

high school chamber trio, Berg (1997) found; “Peer collaboration has enormous potential to not only foster growth through social construction of musical experience, but also to prepare students for lives that can truly be enriched by the unique experience of contributing meaningfully to shared musical creation” (p. 263). In the area of informal pedagogy, Green (2008) learned that the role of the teacher was to establish ground rules for behavior, explain the learning task, and then stand back and observe what students were doing (p. 24).

Erickson (2012) encouraged middle school educators like myself to critically examine their approaches to curriculum and pedagogy in order to make learning more relevant for middle school students. Ferguson (2014) recommended that music educators establish learning environments that promote collaborative learning and provide ample opportunities for students to engage with each other during the learning process. Within the realm of informal music making, Jaffurs (2006) suggested that music teachers should consider structuring traditional music ensembles in ways that model some of the practices of the garage band. All of these studies influenced my thinking, but it was Green’s (2008) principles of informal learning, which suggested dropping students “into the deep end” so they could select music for themselves, work in peer-directed settings without adult supervision, and learn in holistic, emergent, and haphazard ways with no planned structure that echoed in my brain as I learned to let students work, for better and worse on occasion, on their own (p. 25).

A single study in the area of constructionist choral teaching and learning directly influenced this research. Becker (2011) questioned her pedagogical role as she sought to

“lead the kids to find meaning in music and engage more deeply in the act of singing in chorus” (p. 87). Using narrative, poetry, musical excerpts, and visual art, Becker described angst and ambivalence as she sought to become a constructionist choral director. Becker (2011) concluded:

[Constructionism] recognized students’ interests and their ways of thinking and being. It required that students have autonomy, because they can only enact what they bring and the ways they learn if they are to do things their own way. It sought to give students ownership so that they would invest in what they did. It addressed motivation, since students pursuing what they are interested in, in the ways that draw them, are intrinsically motivated to continue. This is the [constructionism] I sought (p. 236).

I close knowing that constructionism offers many more possibilities for choral education than have been addressed here.

## **Epilogue**

*“For whom are my actions significant?” – Ruth DeBrot*

My interpretation of the literature on social constructionism encouraged me to reconceptualize (Erickson, 2012; Froelich, 2007; Pinar, 2011; Price, 2006) my pedagogical practice for the purpose of adopting a constructionist choral curriculum that is collaborative and socially relevant for learners. However, it is important to note that the alternative themes offered in this research do not favor wholesale abandonment of traditional educational practices. All traditional practices—for good or ill and with varied efficacy—serve to “construct worlds of the real and the good” (Gergen, 2001, p. 24).

Although I remain dedicated to the constructionist ideals presented in this research, I sometimes alternate choral lessons that teach vocal techniques, ensemble

skills, and part-singing. Most lessons serve as a springboard for creating, arranging, and composing on the part of the students. This year, for example, the sixth grade chorus performed small-group songs they worked on collaboratively, and then the concert concluded with a collaborative teacher/student arrangement of a whole-group piece.

My students and I do not appear to be limited by constructionist philosophies and approaches. In fact, we are engaged in various genres of *musicking*. Hope sings with the Boston Children's Chorus. Maria and Midge are engaged in classical vocal training. Hope and Giselle were accepted to the Southeast Jr. District MMEA Festival: I conducted. Maria performed "Valerie," an Amy Winehouse song, at the school-sponsored talent show. Omar made his operatic debut as "Amahl" in a local production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Roger was sound technician for the school musical. Julius continues to play in the Zimbabwe-style, *Tungura* Marimba Ensemble. Crystal, Giselle, Hope, and Olivia are members of the Treble Choir, a select, student-led ensemble at Walker Middle School. I started singing in the choir at my church. As time passes, I hope that my students, like me, will learn to transcend the discourse surrounding Western choral music and become life-long *musickers* in their own manner.

My research grew from the belief that the best approach to middle school music teaching lies in engaging students in music making situations that are important to them. I adopted a "critical" view of school music because I have observed that traditional power relationships are often "detrimental to the celebratory and affirmative nature of the act of *musicking* itself" (Froehlich, 2007b, p. 71). I now know firsthand that constructionism can bring social and musical practices together with great efficacy.

In this report I presented the process I used in order to discover my own unique approach to constructionist learning. This is important because constructionism is as diverse as the people who use it. From a wider perspective, it is my hope that this research inspires some positive alternatives to traditional middle school choral music education. I believe I have found some viable pedagogical approaches for middle school, which might empower others to help adolescent singers develop a life-long regard for the relevance of music as a presence in their lives, whether it be as singers, performers, listeners, composers, arrangers, or songwriters.

## Appendix A

### Plan of Action

The plan of action will be to prepare for the winter concert (January 15, 2015). The action plan will be open-ended and process-oriented with a final performance, although the end product is not the focus of investigation. Groups of participants will have an opportunity to decide or vote upon the subject matter (song they will perform) and create their own plan of action (how they will learn and perform their music). Groups will be encouraged to create their own working environment and to establish in effect, their own curriculum. The objectives, assignment of tasks, sharing of materials, discussions, and rehearsal protocols should be a shared responsibility.

## Appendix B

## Small-Group Discussion/Reflections

## Number 1

1. Make a list that has each of your full names and include one word that you think describes that person.
2. Make a list of songs you might like to sing at the concert. Includes one idea from everyone. Choose one song from your list that you will perform by voting or discussion.
3. Write down your song selection and list four reasons why you think it's a good choice.
4. Write down how you will find the music and/or recording of your song.
5. Make a plan for your learning. Include a timeline for when things should get done.

Include any other notes, ideas or concerns you have on this sheet.

## Number 2

1. Now that you have worked together for a few classes, please refer to your original plan and reflect on what you have accomplished and what needs to be done.
2. Revise your plan of action.

## Number 3

We will use this session to review and reflect on our work together.

1. What worked well?

2. What could we have done differently?
  
3. What did you learn about singing and performing in a chorus/group from working on this project?
  
4. What recommendations do you have for future projects in this class?

## Appendix C

## IRB Approval Letter

Boston University Charles River Campus Institutional Review Board

25 Buick Street  
Room 157  
Boston, Massachusetts 02215  
T 617-358-6115  
www.bu.edu/irb



### Notification of IRB Review: Exemption Request

April 16, 2014

Ruth Debrot  
Music Education  
College of Fine Arts

<b>Protocol Title:</b>	Social Constructivism in the Middle School Chorus: A Collaborative Approach to Choral Teaching and Learning
<b>Protocol #:</b>	3479X
<b>Funding Agency:</b>	Unfunded
<b>IRB Review Type:</b>	Exempt (1)

Dear Ms. Debrot:

On April 16, 2014, the IRB determined that the above-referenced protocol meets the criteria for exemption in accordance with CFR 46.101(b)(1). Per the protocol, the purpose of this study is to determine how social constructivism may inform pedagogical and social practices in the middle school choral ensemble. The exempt determination includes the use of: recruitment letter, consent forms (2), assent form, and interview questions.

Additional review of this study is not needed unless changes are made to the current version of the study. Any changes to the current protocol must be reported and reviewed by the IRB. If you have any changes, please submit the *Clarification Form* located at <http://www.bu.edu/irb/>. No changes can be implemented until they have been reviewed by the IRB.

In approximately six months, you will receive an inquiry from the IRB to ascertain whether your study still meets the requirements for exempt review.

If you have any questions, please contact me at 617-358-6115.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary McCabe".

Mary McCabe  
IRB Analyst  
Charles River Campus IRB

## Appendix D

### Consent Form

#### **Consent to Participate in Research**

**Please read carefully, complete this form, and return it in the envelope provided to Mr. Mann, the Vice Principal, in the office at Walker Middle School.**

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Please read this form carefully. The purpose of this form is to provide you with important information about taking part in a research study at Walker Middle School. If any of the statements or words in this form seem unclear to you, please let us know. If you have any questions about any portions of this form, please ask. Participation in this research study is up to you. If you decide to allow your child to participate in this research study, you will need to sign this form and return it in the envelope provided. You will be provided with a copy of the signed form for your records.

The person in charge of this study is Ruth Debrot, who is the chorus teacher at Walker Middle School and a student at Boston University. She can be reached at Walker Middle School by contacting [rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us](mailto:rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us). Ms. Debrot is being supervised by Dr. Jana Williams from Boston University, who may be reached at [janaw@bu.edu](mailto:janaw@bu.edu). Ms. Debrot will be referred to as the “researcher” throughout this form.

By electing to take chorus, your child is eligible to take part in a participatory action research study. This study will take place during the first semester of the 2014 – 2015 school year during regular school hours at Walker Middle School. Approximately 25 choral students in grade 6 choruses will take part in this action research study. The purpose of the study is to improve both teaching and learning during the regular school day with a non-select choral ensemble.

#### **Learning Environment**

Students who participate in 6<sup>th</sup> grade chorus during the 2014 – 2015 school year will be participating in a constructionist learning environment as part of Ms. Debrot’s action research study. This means that Ms. Debrot will be implementing lessons that require student-directed, small-group choral work within the large ensemble rehearsal. All students will form small choral ensembles that will work independently over the course of the first semester. Specific learning activities include: preparing and rehearsing songs, developing a rehearsal schedule and performing at concerts.

## Data Collection

The data to be collected for this study will include teacher notes about classroom proceedings, video recordings of rehearsals, student work (student-generated scores and performances), and student reflections (peer discussions). Ms. Debrot would like to use student data for research purposes in order to understand the effects of a collaborative and democratic learning environment and its impact on students' social and musical growth. By signing this consent form you will be allowing Ms. Debrot to use your child's data when writing up the results of this study.

In order to keep accurate records of events, Ms. Debrot will be videotaping classes during this study. If you are videotaped it will be possible to identify you in the video. We will store these tapes in a locked cabinet and only approved study staff will be able to see the tapes. We will label these tapes with a code instead of your name. The key to the code connects your name to your videotape. Ms. Debrot will keep the key to the code in a password-protected computer/locked file. The videotapes will be kept for three years and then destroyed.

We ask that you sign this consent form, which will allow Ms. Debrot to use your child's data when writing up the results of this study for her dissertation. Although participation in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade chorus is subject to the academic policies outlined in the handbook at Walker Middle School, **participation in this study is optional.**

Consent forms will be collected and held by Mr. Mann in the office for the entire semester so that those who elect not to participate will not be penalized in any way. It is also important for you to know that you may withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, and you will not be penalized for your decision. Contact Mr. Mann, the Vice Principal, if, at any time, or for any reason, should you have a concern or you decide to withdraw from the study.

## Confidentiality

We will keep all records of this study confidential by storing them in a password-protected computer. We will make every effort to keep your records confidential.

The results of this research study may be published or used for teaching purposes. We will not put any identifiable information on data that are used for these purposes. When writing the results of the study we will replace the name/location of the school and the names of participants with pseudonyms.

## Potential Risks

The main risk of allowing us to use and store your information for research is a potential loss of privacy. We will protect your privacy by labeling your information with

a code and keeping the key to the code in a password-protected computer.

### **Potential Benefits**

There are no benefits to your child for taking part in this research. The purpose of this research is to augment on and expand on choral educational practices in the hope that others may benefit in the future from the information that is learned in this study.

Please remember that taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw your child at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty. If you decide to withdraw your child from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Conversely, the researcher may take your child out of this study without your permission. This may happen because your child is no longer a part of the chorus class at Walker Middle School.

Please contact Mr. Mann to arrange to have your child withdrawn from this study. He may be reached at: (617) 784-1560 or [m\\_mann@walker.k12.ma.us](mailto:m_mann@walker.k12.ma.us).

### **Who to Contact**

You can call or e-mail us with any concerns or questions. Our contact information is listed below:

**Ruth Debrot, Researcher**  
Walker Middle School  
75 Mountain Street  
Walker MA 02067  
[rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us](mailto:rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us)  
781-784-1560

**Dr. Jana Williams, Faculty Advisor**  
Boston University College of Fine Arts  
855 Commonwealth Ave.  
Boston MA02215  
[janaw@bu.edu](mailto:janaw@bu.edu)  
678-461-9656

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Boston University IRB directly at 617-358-6115.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the information in this consent form including risks and possible benefits. I have been given the chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to allow my child to participate in the study.

**SIGNATURES**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have explained the research to the parent/guardian and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the parent/guardian.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mr. Mann – Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix E

### Assent Form

**Please read carefully, complete this form, and return it in the envelope provided to Mr. Mann, the Vice Principal, in the office at Walker Middle School.**

#### **What is a Research Study?**

We want to tell you about a research study we are doing. Research studies help us to learn new things and test new ideas. People who work on research studies are called researchers. During research studies, the researchers collect a lot of information so that they can learn more about something. We are doing this study because we would like to learn more about teaching and learning in middle school chorus. We are asking you join this study because you are a member of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade chorus.

There are a few things you should know about this study:

- You get to decide if you want to be in the study.
- You can say ‘No’ or ‘Yes.’
- Whatever you decide is OK.
- If you say ‘Yes’ now, you can change your mind and say ‘No’ later.
- No one will be upset if you say ‘No.’
- You can ask us questions at any time.
- We will also get permission from your parent/guardian for you to take part in this study.

#### **What will I do if I am in this research study?**

If you decide to be in this study, we will analyze videotapes of regular classes, performances and small group activities. We will also use samples of your written work and conduct peer interviews. This study will take place during your regular chorus classes and last one semester (September to January).

#### **What could happen to me while I am in this study?**

- We will do our best to protect your privacy by changing your name and the location of the school, but it is possible that someone may guess who you are and the name/location of the school.

#### **If I join this study will it help me?**

- We may learn something in study that will help other children in middle school chorus some day.

- This study will help us to learn more about how children think and learn in chorus.

**Will I be paid to do this study?**

- No, we will not pay you to be in this study.

**Taking part in this research study**

You do not have to take part in this research study. You can say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. You can say ‘Yes’ now and change your mind later. All you have to do is tell Mr. Mann you want to stop. No one will be mad if you don’t want to take part in the study or if you change your mind about taking part in the study. Your parent or guardian can also decide to have you stop taking part in this study—that is OK too.

**Who to Contact**

If you have any questions about this study, you can talk with Ms. Debrot at any time or have your parents e-mail me at the following:

**Ruth Debrot, Researcher**  
**Walker Middle School**  
**75 Mountain Street**  
**Walker MA 02067**  
[rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us](mailto:rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us)  
**781-784-1560**

**Dr. Jana Williams, Faculty Advisor**  
**Boston University College of Fine Arts**  
**855 Commonwealth Ave.**  
**Boston MA02215**  
[janaw@bu.edu](mailto:janaw@bu.edu)  
**678-461-9656**

**SIGNATURE**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The research study has been explained to the participant and all his/her questions have been answered. I will give a copy of the signed form to the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mr. Peter Mann - Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F

## Staff Consent Form

**Please read, sign this form and return it in the envelope provided to Mr. Mann in the main office in order to participate in this study.**

Dear SMS Staff Member,

Please read this form carefully. The purpose of this form is to provide you with important information about taking part in a research study at Walker Middle School. If any of the statements or words in this form seem unclear to you, please let us know. If you have any questions about any portions of this form, please ask. Participation in this research study is up to you. If you decide to take part in this research study, you will need to sign this form. You will be provided with a copy of the signed form for your records.

The person in charge of this study is Ruth Debrot, who is the chorus teacher at Walker Middle School and a student at Boston University. She can be reached at Walker Middle School by contacting [rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us](mailto:rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us). Ms. Debrot is being supervised by Dr. Jana Williams from Boston University, who may be reached at [janaw@bu.edu](mailto:janaw@bu.edu). Ms. Debrot will be referred to as the “researcher” throughout this form.

By being a staff member at Walker Middle School, you are eligible to take part in a participatory action research study. This study will take place during the 2014 – 2015 school year during regular chorus classes at Walker Middle School. Approximately 30 choral students in the grade 6 chorus will take part in this research study at Boston University. The purpose of the study is to improve both teaching and learning during the regular school day with a non-select ensemble.

If you agree to take part in this study, we ask that you sign the consent form and return it to Mr. Mann. The data from this study will include teacher notes about classroom procedures, video recordings of rehearsals, student work (student-generated scores and performances), staff and student reflections (interviews).

**Participation in this study is optional.** Consent forms will be collected and held by Mr. Mann in the office for the entire school year so that those who elect not to participate will not be penalized in any way. It is also important for you to know that you may withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, and you will not be penalized for your decision. Please contact Mr. Mann if, at any time, or for any reason should you have a concern or you decide to withdraw from the study.

## **Confidentiality**

We will keep the records of this study confidential by storing them in a password-protected computer. We will make every effort to keep your records confidential. The main risk of allowing us to use and store your information for research is a potential loss of privacy. We will protect your privacy by labeling your information with a code and keeping the key to the code in a password-protected computer.

The results of this research study may be published or used for teaching purposes. We will not use any identifiable information on the data that are used for these purposes. When writing the results of the study we will replace the name/location of the school and the names of participants with pseudonyms.

## **Potential Risks**

The main risk of participating in this study is the potential loss of privacy. Although the researcher will change the names of participants and the name and location of the school, it is possible that some people may be able to identify this information.

## **Potential Benefits**

There are no benefits to you for taking part in this research. The purpose of this research is to augment on and expand on choral educational practices in the hope that others may benefit in the future from the information that is learned in this study.

Please remember that taking part in this study is your choice. **You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason.** No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Conversely, the researcher may remove you from this study without your permission. This may happen because the researcher thinks it is in your best interest or you are no longer a participant in the chorus class at Walker Middle School.

## **Who to Contact**

You can call or e-mail us with any concerns or questions. Our contact information is listed below:

**Ruth Debrot, Researcher**  
**Walker Middle School**  
**75 Mountain Street**  
**Walker MA 02067**  
**[rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us](mailto:rdebrot@walker.k12.ma.us)**  
**781-784-1560**

**Dr. Jana Williams, Faculty Advisor**  
**Boston University College of Fine Arts**  
**855 Commonwealth Ave.**  
**Boston MA02215**  
**[janaw@bu.edu](mailto:janaw@bu.edu)**  
**678-461-9656**

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Boston University IRB directly at 617-358-6115.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the information in this consent form including risks and possible benefits. I have been given the chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study.

### **SIGNATURES**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Staff Participant (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Staff Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

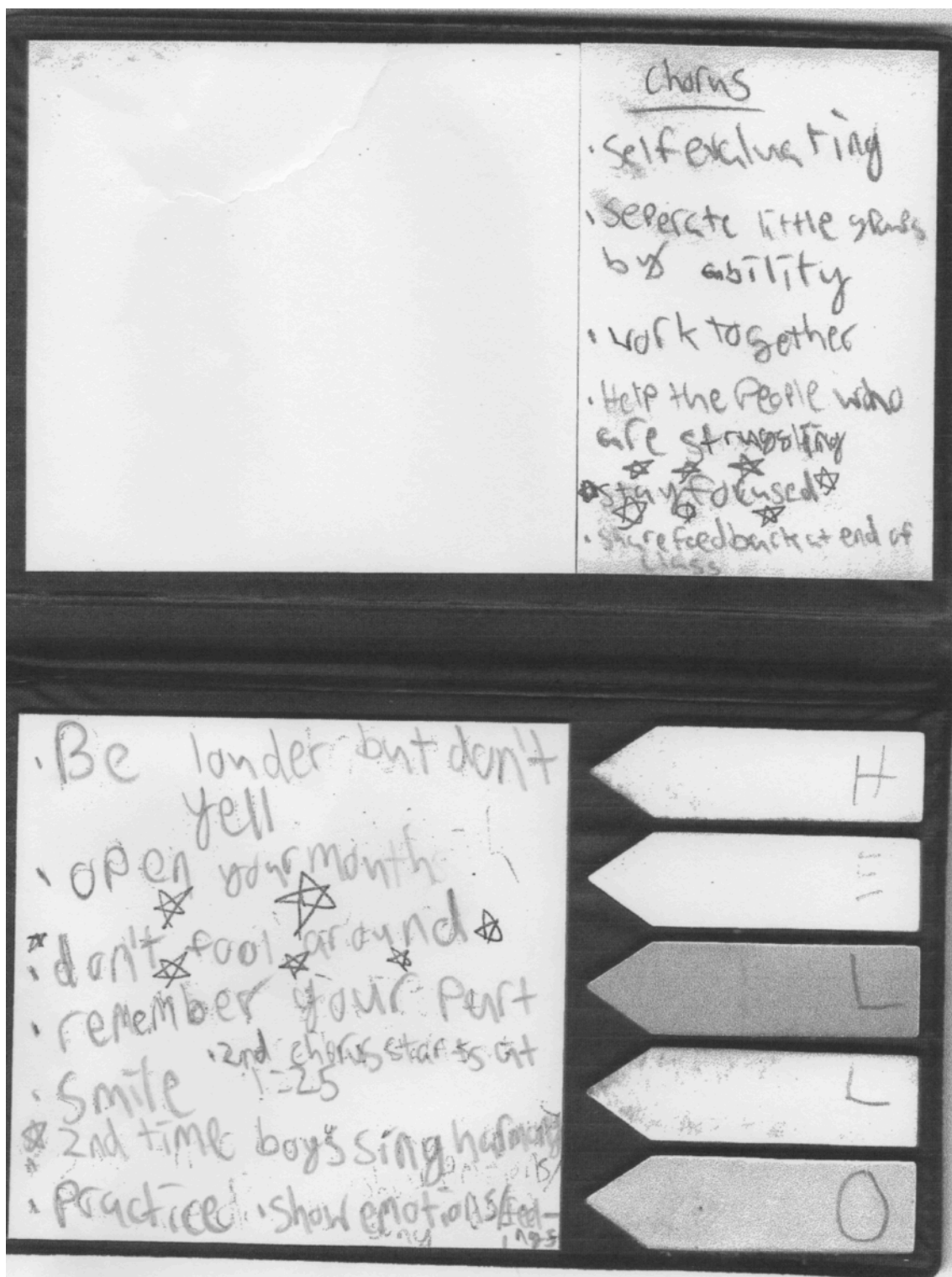
This research project has been explained and all the participants' questions have been answered. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix G  
Julius' Notes From Class



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## Curriculum Vitae

### Ruth Ann Debrot

Ruth Ann Debrot was born in Rockford, Illinois in 1957. She attended The University of Mississippi from 1974 to 1979, and graduated with a Bachelors degree in Music in 1979. In the fall of 1986, Debrot began graduate studies at Hunter College in New York City. In the fall of 1987, she transferred to The City College of New York, where she studied voice under Constantine Cassolas. In 1990, Debrot graduated with a Masters Degree in Vocal Performance. After relocating to Massachusetts, Debrot attended The Boston Conservatory and the University of Massachusetts Lowell, where she completed teacher certification in music education in 1993. In 2003, Debrot completed her certification in Orff Schulwerk Teacher Training with Jim Solomon at the Eastman School of Music.

*New York Newsday* described Debrot's vocal style as "bright and thoughtful." *Billboard Magazine* described her style as "soothing, with a laid back delivery that folks should find pleasing." In 2001, she was honored to sing the National Anthem at Fenway Park in Boston. Presently Debrot performs with her duo, "Double Trouble" and "The Roy Scott Big Band," part of the Sharon Community Band.

In addition to teaching and performing, Ruth is a well-known clinician and has presented numerous times for the American Orff Schulwerk Association. She has presented for the Cleveland, Connecticut, Florida and New York Chapters of AOSA, NE/AOSA, the CTMEA and MMEA All State conference and has conducted workshops at The Boston Conservatory and the New England Conservatory. In addition to conducting select choirs for the Southeast District MMEA and SEMSBA, Debrot has arranged vocal and instrumental pieces for general music classes, children's choirs, jazz and Orff ensembles.

Publications include *The Orff Echo*, MENC's *Spotlight on General Music*, the *Massachusetts Music Educators Journal*, *Segue*, and *The Journal of the New England League of Middle Schools*. Debrot has received the Lowell Mason Award and The SGMM Award for Excellence in General Music.

Debrot has held university appointments at The City College of New York and University of Massachusetts Lowell. At present, she is employed as a music specialist for the Sharon Public Schools in Sharon Massachusetts, where she teaches chorus, general music and jazz band to grades six through eight.

### Presentations and Publications

- Debrot, R. A. (2016). *Composing in the Middle School Chorus*. Presented at the MMEA All State Professional Development Conference, Boston MA.
- Debrot, R. A. (2015). On Creativity: Creativity in the Large Ensemble. *Segue*, 36(2), 10–14. [www.arkmea.org](http://www.arkmea.org)
- Debrot, R. A. (2014). *Problem-Based Learning: Music Instruction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Presented at the MMEA All State Professional Development Conference, Boston MA.
- Debrot, R. A. (2014). *Improvisation: Simple to Complex*. Presented at the MMEA All State Professional Development Conference, Boston MA.
- Debrot, R. A. (2014). Creativity in the Large Ensemble. *The Mass Music News*, 62(3), 61–65.
- Debrot, R. A. (2014). Integrating Orff Schulwerk and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning. *The Orff Echo*, 46(2), 42–46.
- Debrot, R. A. (2013). *Prepare, Practice and Perform!* Presented at the Heart of Florida Chapter of AOSA.
- Debrot, R. A. (2012). *Student Directed Instruction in the Middle School Choral Ensemble*. Presented at the MMEA All State Professional Development Conference, Boston MA.
- Debrot, R. A. (2012) Student Directed Instruction in the Middle School Choral Ensemble. *The Mass Music News*, 60(3), 53–55.
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### **Professional Memberships**

- ACDA – The American Choral Directors Association
- AOSA- The American Orff Schulwerk Association
- NAfME – National Association for Music Education
- NE/AOSA – The New England Chapter of the American Orff Schulwerk Association
- MMEA – Massachusetts Music Educators Association

### **Committees**

- Editorial Board – Massachusetts Music Educators Journal
- Leader of the Council for General Music – MMEA
- MMEA All State Conference Committee – Conference Chair
- Symphony Hall Scholars – MMEA