Disrupting Power Relations in the Middle School Choir: A Student-Centered Approach

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My students have taught me many things. 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 lives. After more than two decades of teaching, I began to observe that middle school choir—in the traditional sense—no longer addressed the needs and interests of my students. The number of students in the choral program was starting to decline and I was having difficulty engaging students during rehearsals. By interacting with students outside of our regular class time, I found that my students possessed a vast array of musical knowledge from sources outside of school—sources that did not fit into the existing curriculum.

For middle school students, choir is about much more than just singing. From an adolescent perspective, it is primarily a "means of meeting new people and making new friends" (Shehan-Campbell et al., 2007, p. 221). Using actions, words, and miscreant behaviors, my students expressed their desire to study vocal music in a more socially significant setting. Thus, I began to reexamine the middle school choral curriculum.

Point of Departure

Educational problems arise when pedagogical practices are determined to be no longer relevant to their purpose. I suspected that traditional practices in which the teacher exercises autocratic control—and "the primary educational goal is excellent performance" (Brinson & Demorest, 2014, p. 260)—had become problematic. I began to ask critical questions. For example, how do singers learn to make creative artistic and musical decisions when the music and the performance of it are determined by the conductor (O'Toole, 1994)? How does rehearsing and performing concert repertoire in the large ensemble result in the advancement of individual musicianship so that students develop the musical independence needed to make

music in other contexts or at other times in their lives (Regelski, 2017)? What about published repertoire lists, which often silence popular forms of music from non-traditional sources because they are not artistically rich or appropriate in educational settings? I decided to examine "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 alternative approaches to music learning—specifically, an increase in the degree of individual student empowerment and broadening the range of collaborative approaches to music making that teachers and students engage in (Allsup, 2003; DeLorenzo, 1989; Kratus, 2007; Miksza, 2013; Regelski, 2014; Williams, 2011). My aim was to create a student-centered classroom in which students were engaged in collaborative, hands-on activities, and where problem solving was a valued component of the curriculum design (Cremata, 2017; Debrot, 2017). With these pedagogical goals in mind, I conducted a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) study with one class of sixth-grade chorus students.

Purpose and Framework

The purpose of the study was to co-create collaborative and socially relevant pedagogical practices that would empower my students. Through the lens of constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998) and the theoretical perspective of critical inquiry (Abrahams, 2005), I examined ways that social constructionist learning theories informed new pedagogical practices in the choral classroom (Ackerman, 2001; Gergen, 2001; Papert, 1980; Papert & Harel, 1991). I designed a social constructionist learning environment and employed CPAR strategies to critically examine the pedagogical practices that emerged (Kemmis et al., 2014). The research design and pedagogical framework facilitated a shift in power relationships in the classroom.

Constructionism, critical inquiry, and CPAR 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 is focused on socially constructed power relationships. The goal of CPAR 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 & McTaggart, 1987). Two questions drove the inquiry:

- 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?

This framework made it possible to conduct CPAR *with* my students rather than *on* them.

Constructionist Epistemology

Constructionism invited me to reinterpret the pedagogical practices I employed in my classroom. Social constructionists embrace the notion that meanings are formed through human interactions (Crotty, 1998). As such, there are no truthful or valid interpretations. Rather, interpretations may be classified as useful or not useful; liberating or not liberating; oppressive or not. Constructionist researchers act as artisans in the sense that they reconsider and reconstitute information into new contexts and for new purposes with an openness for the discovery of new or richer meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lévi-Strauss, 1966).

The goal of the research was to discover improved, alternative pedagogical approaches to middle school choral education. I sought to 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. I was seeking a learning environment in which the participants were socially engaged, musically challenged, felt safe to take risks, and were supported in their learning. Using the resources available to me, I hoped to find useful information that would help me reinterpret pedagogical practices in my classroom.

Critical Inquiry

Critical theory offered a viable framework for reexamining the discourse surrounding choral music education. In a critical context, knowledge is not abstract or absolute; rather it is a social construction (Malito, 2014). Freire (1970) contended that educators must understand and build upon the experiences and worldviews of their students to further students' cognitive understandings. Abrahams (2005) suggested that "education is a conversation where students and their teachers pose and solve problems together" (p. 64). These ideas informed my decision to reject traditional, hierarchal models of education, particularly in the sense that a hierarchy of knowledge functions in totalitarian ways. Taking a critical stance helped me focus on social aspects of knowledge production *by* students in the choral setting.

The critical nature of action research supported the development of pedagogical practices that were "more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 85). Engaging in CPAR enabled my students and I to critically examine and ask questions about our collective practices and their consequences. We employed dialogue to understand one another's point of view and to reach an unforced consensus about our practices. The project moved forward based on the aims, interests, and abilities of all participants rather than being research-directed. During the study, the students and I "reflected upon, explicated, and modified our teaching and learning practices" to foster social and musical

growth in our choral classroom (Kemmis et al., 2014, pp. 86–87).

The Research Process

While we engaged in research, the students and I collected evidence. Evidence (the action research term for data) nurtured "collective self-reflection" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 176). We kept journals, made videos, engaged in ad hoc discussions and interviews, and collected artifacts of learning. The performances, discussions, and reflections we captured on audio and video recordings provided a panoramic lens into our world, and afforded a living, rather than static source of information. A listening approach during discussions and interviews allowed all participants to share their understandings. Suggestions from the students prompted subsequent changes in our pedagogical and organizational practices. Working together, we modified our classroom to account for ways that individual actions, understandings, and relationships enabled and constrained our collective practices.

Reconceptualizing the Classroom

Scholars have developed a broad range of definitions and applications for constructionist learning and its attributes. Experiential learning, self-directed learning, discovery learning, situated learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, and reflective practice are all examples of constructionist learning models (Ackerman, 2001; McLeod, 2003; Slavin, 2000). A key strategy of constructionist pedagogy is to make learning active and relevant for students. In a constructionist sense, learning is most effective when, as part of an activity, the learner constructs a meaningful product (Sabelli, 2008).

To make learning active, I utilized pedagogical practices from the literature; strategies that had been determined to be successful. For example, Wiggins (2015) suggested engaging students in real-life, relevant problem-solving experiences designed to enable them to construct

and act upon their own musical understandings. Student-directed, peer-directed, informal, and collaborative approaches require social interaction and reflect holistic, real-world musical practices. Green (2008) determined that informal, real-world 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.

To put the onus on students, I developed an action plan in which the students established their own procedures, rules, and protocols, and assisted in the analysis of evidence. I was drawn to this approach because 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" (Allsup, 2003, p. 35). I remember thinking that it might be risky to put 11-year-olds in charge of their own learning, but once we started, there was no turning back.

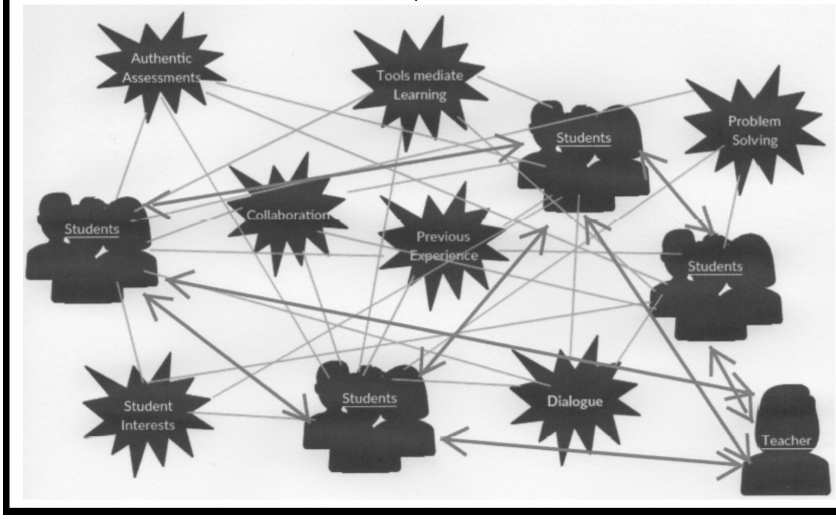
A Constructionist Environmental Design

Our classroom was characterized by mutual engagement as we worked toward the "context-specific utilization of knowledge" (Gergen, 2001, p. 127). I facilitated learning by scaffolding students as they worked together to solve problems related to choral singing. As students worked, they incorporated previous knowledge and the assistance of others in the *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978). Tools—computers, lyric sheets, instruments, and backing tracks—helped facilitate the co-construction of knowledge among learners (Jonassen, 1998; Papert & Harel, 1991; Wertsch, 1991). Authentic assessments demonstrated the students' musical understandings and helped me determine the depth and breadth of their learning (see Figure 1).

In the next section I describe what happened during the research. My narrative

demonstrates the working out of constructionist pedagogies in the classroom and reveals the ongoing reflection that took place. Using a "warts and all" approach, I share some of the struggles that occurred and highlight significant ideas and opinions which impacted the outcomes of our project.

FIGURE 1: Constructionist Guidelines Implemented in the Classroom



Source: Adapted from Windschitl (2002).

Phase One: Enacting the Plan

The action plan that guided our research was open ended to allow for process-oriented and divergent outcomes. Although the project culminated in a performance, the end-product was not the focus of our investigation. In September, I told the students:

> 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 (pseudonym) responded with questions:

> Olivia: [anxiously] So how are you going to be the teacher? Are you going to help? Are you going to teach us?
> RD (Ruth Debrot)**:** 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.
> 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.

Based on the students' facial expressions, I could see that some of them were excited. I could also see there was skepticism and uncertainty in the classroom.

On the first day of the project, I divided the class into four, equal-ability groups of seven students using a transparent group-formation process from team-based learning (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008). I prepared broad and inclusive diagnostic questions, worded in a positive manner, to help me evenly distribute the students into groups based on their previous musical knowledge and musical behaviors. To begin, four students who played piano lined up at the back of the class. They were followed by students who played other musical instruments. Next, I requested that students who took voice lessons join the line. Finally, I asked students who listened to music to join the others. When all students were in the line, they counted off by four, creating what I hoped would be heterogeneous groups based on information the students provided.

Each group received a blue notebook to journal/write down answers to *discussion/reflection* #1, prompts designed to scaffold their learning (see Appendix A). As the students worked, I circulated around the room. The students worked quietly and diligently, but they proceeded much more slowly than I anticipated. The bell rang before they finished making

their song selections, and I began to question whether sixth graders could handle so much responsibility. I decided to simplify the task.

At the beginning of the next class, I reiterated the assignment and wrote the following instructions on the board:

- Choose one song to perform.
- List four reasons why you think your song is a good choice.

At the students' request, I provided each group with one laptop computer so they could listen to their song nominations on YouTube. Finally, I explained that after 40 minutes, each group would be expected to present their song selection in front of the class.

This time, while the students worked, I observed serious, sometimes fiery discussions. When the students presented their song selections, I noticed a few of them looked as though they had been through a knock-down, drag-out fight. Group One chose "Mr. Blue Sky" (Lynn, 1977), performed by the Electric Light Orchestra. Group Two selected "Thriller" (Temperton, 1983), sung by Michael Jackson. Group Three chose "It's Time" (McKee et al., 2012), performed by the Imagine Dragons. The vocabulary used by Group Three suggested they had previous musical knowledge (see Figure 2). Julius, the self-appointed leader of Group Four, announced that his group had chosen "Just the Way You Are (Amazing)" (Mars et al., 2010), sung by Bruno Mars. When the second class was over, I felt a sense of relief. Each group had made their song selection, but more importantly, the students had demonstrated their ability to work independently. And so, we moved to phase two.

Figure 2: Song Selections with Criteria

Group One: "Mr. Blue Sky"	Good beat	Good Melody	Easy to Learn	We finally agreed
Group Two: "Thriller"	Good beat	Classic		
Group Three: "It's Time"	Good for Hope, who played guitar	Potential for harmonies	Good key	Modern
Group Four: "Just the Way You Are (Amazing)"	Good beat	Good message	Easy to Learn	Good for school

Phase Two: Carnival

The plan was to prepare for a concert in January, but other than that, the students and I had no idea what we were doing or how to go about it. As a result, things were chaotic. At first, the students and I improvised, supporting each other as we figured out what to do next.

My teaching strategies included scaffolding and a meta-cognitive instructional technique called purposeful questioning (Freire, 1970) to facilitate learning. To help the students organize themselves, I had them develop lesson plans:

> 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 [*sic*].
> 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!

Lesson planning was a helpful scaffolding strategy. The analytic process—facilitated by purposeful, reflective questions—required that students employ metacognitive strategies, engage in critical dialogue, and target common goals.

I discovered that metacognitive questioning was more effective than telling. At first, while the students worked, I circulated among them, assuming they would welcome my artistic advice and musical expertise. Surprisingly, I found that my physical presence kept students on task, but unsolicited musical advice fell flat. The students were polite, but unenthusiastic when I told them what I thought they should do. Their indifference prompted me to reflect on the nature of scaffolding. In my reflection journal I asked: How much [scaffolding] is too much, how little is too little? Had I been too assertive? Had I behaved in a manner that was authoritative and undemocratic? Ultimately, I found that working within a constructionist, student-centered learning environment necessitated that I "stand back, observe, and empathize with the goals the pupils set for themselves" (Bülow, 2014, 3'00"). Facilitation was more successful when I assisted the students in an inquisitive manner that helped them figure things out for themselves.

Organizational Changes

Pedagogical changes necessitated organizational changes. When the four groups began rehearsing, the noise in the chorus room became intolerable. In response, I moved the "Mr. Blue Sky" group across the hall into a practice room and asked Sally (pseudonym), one of the aides, to supervise them. The noise level was still oppressive, so I created a makeshift rehearsal space in a storage closet for the "Just the Way You Are (Amazing)" group. Once the noise level in the

room became tolerable, I noticed that the "Thriller" group looked unhappy and more importantly, they were not singing. When I asked what was wrong, Natalie, the spokesperson, expressed frustration that the choral arrangement I purchased did not correspond with the recording by Michael Jackson. Furthermore, none of the students could comprehend the choral sheet music I provided because they could not read Western notation. Natalie asked me for "music with the words only." I found lyric sheets on the internet, which helped the students create their own arrangement of the song.

I learned that, to work independently, the students needed a suitable rehearsal space and developmentally appropriate learning materials. Separate rehearsal spaces provided an acoustic environment in which the students could focus on their singing. Lyric sheets facilitated informal, aural learning so students could rehearse and arrange their voice parts while listening to recordings on YouTube.

Assessments

I assumed students would be excited about performing. However, when the four groups performed for the first time, I was taken aback by their lack of musical expression and confidence. Rather than providing corrective feedback, I asked the students to watch their performances on video and complete *discussion/reflection #2* (see Appendix A). Self-assessments required that students employ critical thinking and target subsequent learning goals. We discussed the themes that emerged during a whole-class discussion:

> 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.

Windschitl (2002) suggested that 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" (p. 137). Specific, self-generated goals helped the students improve their performances and in turn, develop greater confidence.

Technological Tools

Shortly after the first performances, I began to think about using backing tracks. I observed that the students sang well, but they were not being expressive. In fact, they looked frightened. I reasoned that backing tracks might provide the type of musical support that would help the students to focus their energy on singing with expression and performing together as a group, which is what chorus is all about. I hesitated because I had been taught that recorded accompaniments were *faux pas* in choral music education. However, when I consulted with the students they reassured me, "It's only cheating if you lip synch." Backing tracks proved to be a useful scaffolding tool.

Constructionist teachers assist students by providing tools that mediate learning (Windschitl, 2002). During classes, we used school-owned laptop computers, backing tracks, and remote desktop speakers during every class. YouTube scaffolded aural learning. Laptop computers functioned as audio/video playback devices and audio/video recording devices. Using Avid Pro Tools, I was able to edit and arrange a suitable backing track for the students' arrangement of "Thriller." GarageBand enabled me to record accompaniments for rehearsals and

create a custom piano/drum track for "Mr. Blue Sky." Technological tools facilitated problem solving, mutual learning, and fostered engagement in our classroom as the students worked toward their concert in January.

Practice, Perform, Critique

As the project moved forward, I conducted focus group interviews during the school's advisory/extra help block. Anyone was welcome to join at any time. During the first open-ended interview, Hope told me she liked having the freedom to work independently:

> Hope: Well, I like this project. I think it's really cool [*sic*]. 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.

The students in the focus group admitted there was a lot of chaos and too much fooling around but there was a lack of student consensus regarding how to deal with the chaos, and what the role of the teacher should be:

> 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: [grasping for ideas] Um chaos is good and bad and chaos [*sic*], 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.

Using a dialogic approach, members of the focus group and I brainstormed ways to incorporate performing and feedback as a strategy to help the students maintain focus and manage the fooling around. Eventually we arrived at the *practice/perform/critique model* of middle school choral learning. The model was comprised of time limits for rehearsal, performing regularly, and receiving peer feedback. Time limits kept the students on task, performing regularly made the students accountable for their progress, and receiving feedback from peers kept the students

apprised of their learning goals.

The first time we tried the new model I wrote on the board: 1. Rehearse, 2. Perform, 3. Critique. I explained that each group would be given 25 minutes to practice. Afterward, every group would be expected to perform what they had rehearsed. After each performance, students would have the opportunity to provide helpful comments. The first performance was comprised of one verse and chorus of "It's Time" by Imagine Dragons. The introduction included body percussion the group created during their rehearsal. When the group was finished singing, I saw many hands shoot up into the air. Midge was the first to speak:

> Midge: I really liked the beginning. How you did the stomping and clapping and snapping.
> Natalie: I also like the beginning, but I thought the music was a little bit loud.
> Giselle: [to the class] I think at the beginning they could have looked up a little more. Just to make sure they have the right expression.

When class was over, Midge stopped to talk to me on her way out the door. She said she thought the class had gone well. I thought so too. In my journal, I noted that the students were "positive and helpful with their comments."

The new model provided us with a consistent class structure. The structure gave the students autonomy in the classroom and at the same time, made them responsible for their own social and musical growth. Pedagogically, the model required that the students' function interdependently, employ metacognitive strategies, engage in critical dialogue, and target common learning goals.

Phase Three: Reflection

The concert was merely a stopping point so that we could reflect on what had occurred during the project and move forward to the next phase of our choral journey together. During their performance I could see that some students were nervous, but they were prepared, and they

performed wonderfully. The standing-room only audience was supportive; they cheered and applauded enthusiastically after each song. When the performance was over, I perceived that the mood among the students was triumphant.

After the concert, before the research ended, the students and I engaged in reflection. According to Allsup (2003), when students themselves analyze what they have created and ponder possibilities for future projects, they make known to others what they most value. During class, each group of students submitted video responses to prompts on *small-group discussion/reflection #3* (see Appendix A). Overwhelmingly, each group articulated, in divergent ways, the benefits that came with effort, teamwork, the acceptance of new ideas, and respect for others. Evidence from transcriptions indicated that the sixth-grade chorus students wanted to continue working in groups and performing music of their own choosing.

What I learned

During the project, power relationships in the classroom were transformed and the students and I learned to work together. As a result, I developed greater respect for the students' musical and cognitive abilities and the students began to value my intentions and perspectives. I learned to trust that students were able to work independently and that I needed to give them autonomy to learn from their mistakes and successes. I was impressed by the depth of reasoning and the cognitive capabilities exemplified by this group of sixth graders.

The students acknowledged the challenges of working collaboratively and independently. During the final focus group interview, Maria explained:

> Maria: Well I really, really liked this [project], 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.

There was pride in the students' voices as they articulated how they had learned to take responsibility for their own learning during the project.

Arrival

This study informed my approach to choral learning and teaching in several ways. Pedagogical and organizational changes made it possible to explore a curricular model that was collaborative, active, dialogic, and non-hierarchal, valuing the perspectives of the students (Froelich, 2007; Pinar, 2011). I found that it was important to engage students in "natural learning processes" (Green, 2008, p. 65) as they worked cooperatively and independently on music of their own choosing. Being responsive, rather than directive, gave students 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.

The shift in power relationships within our classroom appeared to be a critical factor for creating a model of choral education in which the teacher and students share responsibility for social and musical growth and development. Although the results of this study may not be generalizable, I believe that my students and I discovered some viable approaches for middle school choir. It is my hope that incorporating some or all aspects of this model may empower others to help their students experience a more joyful approach in the middle-school choral classroom.

Appendix A

Small-Group Discussion/Reflections

Reflection 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.

Reflection 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.

Reflection 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?

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