

**Harmonizing Growth:  
Exploring the Impact of Participation Joy versus Musicianship Mastery in the Middle  
School Choir Curriculum**

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## MASTER'S DEGREE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

|                                              |                  |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>          | <b>1-9</b>       |
| Personal Education History.....              | 1                |
| Philosophy of Education.....                 | 3                |
| My Vision.....                               | 7                |
| INTASC Standards.....                        | 8                |
| <br><b>Chapter 2: Relevant Research.....</b> | <br><b>10-22</b> |
| Introduction.....                            | 10               |
| Purpose.....                                 | 10               |
| Procedure.....                               | 11               |
| Bibliography.....                            | 13               |
| Themes/Discussion.....                       | 22               |
| <br><b>Chapter 3: Methodology.....</b>       | <br><b>23-30</b> |
| Research Question.....                       | 23               |
| INTASC Standards.....                        | 24               |
| Participants and Settings.....               | 26               |
| Methods and Procedures.....                  | 27               |
| Data Collection and Analysis.....            | 27               |
| Researcher Positionality.....                | 29               |

|                                                                         |                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Chapter 4: Presentation and Discussion of Findings.....</b>          | <b>31-46</b>     |
| Differentiated Instruction as Access to Musicianship.....               | 32               |
| Collaborative Learning and Peer Support.....                            | 36               |
| Joy, Confidence, and Engagement Through Performance-Based Learning .... | 39               |
| Summary of Findings.....                                                | 45               |
| <br><b>Chapter 5: Discussion and Inclusion.....</b>                     | <br><b>46-55</b> |
| Limitations.....                                                        | 51               |
| Conclusions.....                                                        | 53               |
| <br><b>Works Cited.....</b>                                             | <br><b>56</b>    |

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Personal Education History**

My educational journey in the public school system began in 2004 at Aumsville Elementary School in Aumsville, Oregon. While I only have vague memories of this, my parents have made sure that I am aware of how eventful my first day was. As a tongue-tied five year old, talking was not my biggest strength. This proved to be a problem as, like most five year olds, I had a lot to say. While my family learned to understand my speech, others had to take time to adjust. On my first day of school none of the staff knew about my condition and had trouble understanding what I was trying to communicate, even though English was my first language. As I am a biracial student possessing a Spanish name, my teachers thought I might be speaking Spanish and elected to place me in the English as a Second Language program (ESL). Coming home, my mother found out about this situation very quickly and made sure to inform the school of its mistake. While I may recall this as a humorous story to share with others, reflecting back on it I believe this moment marked my earliest encounter with being misunderstood as a learner.

Drawing parallels between my own educational experience and the readings I have encountered throughout this program, I have become more aware of the importance and power of language in education. My own experience of being misunderstood as a young student was not the same as the historical injustices many communities have faced, but it did teach me how quickly assumptions about language can affect a learner's experience in school. Even though English was my first language, adults made a decision about me based on my name, identity, and the way I communicated. Looking back, that moment helps me understand that language is not just a tool for speaking or writing. Language is connected to identity, culture, belonging, and power. When a student's language or communication is misunderstood, ignored, or treated as

something that needs to be corrected, it can make that student feel like part of who they are does not fully belong in the classroom.

In the historical context of education, this issue becomes even more serious. In the United States, language has often been used as a tool of assimilation, especially in the education of Native American children. Boarding schools such as the Hampton Institute show how the education system was used to erase language and culture while presenting English and White society as superior. Reading about this history resonated with me because it helped me see that language-based assumptions are not just isolated mistakes, but part of larger systems that have affected students for generations. Language is something I often take for granted every day, and as an educator, I want my students to understand the value of their own language, voice, and identity, whatever that may be.

At the Hampton Institute, Native American children were removed from their language and culture as a result of an “erase and replace” curriculum. The goal of their education in this sense was to erase their language and replace Native religions with Christianity through English. McCarty 2018 writes, “This wasn’t simply second-language teaching... The idea was that English ‘transmitted a superior culture’” (pg. 271). This quote from McCarty as well as the work of Lomawaia, Synder and MacDonald (2022), showcase the ill intentions of the American education system at the time, as English was not only used to communicate a “superior culture” but also to demand physical labor from the Native Americans. Through this, Native Americans were further oppressed by also being denied the opportunity to receive a real education as White society only wanted these people to work lower class physical labor jobs.

While my encounter with ESL pales in comparison to historical inequities, remnants of language-based superiority persist in modern education. The dominance of English in ESL

classrooms subtly reinforces notions of cultural hierarchy. Genuine bilingual education, as evidenced globally suggests, fosters inclusivity and cultural appreciation, and academic achievement. This contrasts with the prevailing ESL paradigm that continues to convey the message that English transmits a “superior culture”.

Reflecting on my educational journey, I acknowledge my privilege as an English-speaking/White-passing student in a predominantly White school district. I also recognize that many of my peers who also came from similar Hispanic backgrounds experienced a much different version of the school we attended. The absence of diversity among educators emphasizes systemic shortcomings, particularly for my Latino peers whose cultural and linguistic identities may be marginalized. It is my goal to be a part of the solution to this issue by becoming an educator.

### **Philosophy of Education**

As an educator, it is imperative to confront and transcend systemic oppression within our educational framework. In my capacity as a choir teacher, I endeavor to leverage music as a vehicle for exploring themes of oppression, injustice, and cultural diversity. This will give my students the opportunity to interact with musical perspectives they may not normally hear and acknowledge the history that has shaped the music we listen to today. Music serves as a funnel for understanding historical narratives and celebrating cultural nuances, fostering empathy and awareness among students.

Music, one of the main foundations of cultural expression, encapsulates the ethos, struggles, and aspirations of diverse communities. In the Black American music style of jazz, we can see this exemplified as Ladson-Billings (2004) describes, “Jazz does not lend itself easily to definition and prescription and, like jazz, America has conceived itself as an expression of



freedom” (pg. 11). The difficulty in defining jazz can be explained by the genre’s lack of boundaries. Contradicting characteristics, such as beautiful melodies, dissonant harmony, organized arrangements and improvisation all make up what we know as jazz. Many of these defining characteristics come from the frustrations and hopes of African Americans in their struggle against oppression in America. Through jazz, African Americans were given a voice and the freedom of expression.

In choir, jazz is an important part of the performance repertoire as it has influenced a number of genres traditionally sung in choir such as musical theater, rock, and R&B. Many schools and colleges even have their own jazz choirs. That is why, along with teaching the skills needed to be a musician in choir, I will always emphasize the historical importance of the pieces we sing and the cultures they come from. By doing this, I hope to build my students’ understanding of oppression and how it affects their music education today. This will combat systemic oppression as ignoring this history would be continuing to accept these embedded injustices within our schools rather than striving for change.

In addition to teaching students about the difficult histories of cultural oppression, I will always emphasize the importance of honoring and celebrating different cultures. I have exemplified this in my own work as I conducted and programmed a concert designed to reflect the diversity of the students in our classroom. To do this one of our most recent programs included folk songs from China, Ireland, Africa, and Latin America. From these pieces, students were able to learn and identify the similarities and differences between how each culture composes music. Many students were also able to make personal connections with the music as they were familiar with the songs from their own cultures, households, and backgrounds. For

other students, this exposure to different music of the world will help their understanding of different cultures' and find an appreciation for artistic expression.

I also will always prioritize cultivating joy and fostering personal growth in my classroom. Emphasizing experiential learning over rote memorization, I aim to create a nurturing environment where students feel empowered to explore their musical identities. By modeling passion and authenticity, I aspire to instill a lifelong love for music and a commitment to social consciousness among my students. With so many of their other classes focusing on grades or written academic performances on tests and assignments, I want to provide an environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and can focus on personal growth rather than statistical performance. Students should have a chance to genuinely enjoy singing with a choir instead of worrying about grades.

John Dewey (1916) writes on the benefits of this personal connection with the subject matter one teaches when he states "When there is no intimate organic connection between the methods and materials of knowledge and moral growth, particular lessons and modes of discipline have to be resorted to... a scheme of separate virtues" (Pg. 367). These schemes of separate virtues may not be as effective because, as readings and studies suggest, education in our students shouldn't be memorizing facts but rather making deeper and more personal connections with the content. If we expect this of our students it is our responsibility to demonstrate those values as well.

In advocating for justice, I emphasize the ethical imperative of respectfully engaging with diverse musical traditions. Acknowledging the historical context of musical compositions reinforces the importance of cultural sensitivity and empathy. It is important for musicians to acknowledge these facts so that the music can be performed more respectfully and genuinely to

that culture. By encouraging students to critically reflect on the socio-cultural dimensions of music, I aspire to cultivate ethical musicianship and global citizenship.

As teachers, it is not only our job to educate but be a member of the learner's community as well. This can take many forms such as attending school sporting events or buying tickets to the school play and supporting your students' extracurriculars. Showing this level of connection with a students' community proves to students that teachers are not simply in students' lives just to pass on information but rather as an example of how to be a good community member. Because teachers are role models for students, modeling good community membership encourages students to demonstrate the same qualities of being more "*human*" rather than a vessel for receiving and distributing information. This can especially be beneficial to students of color and LGBTQ students. As Rury (2019) writes:

Over the past two decades greater attention has been given to the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or gender questioning (LGBTQ) youth in schools. Historically, students whose sexual identity falls within this broad range of categories have been subject to extensive harassment by peers and discrimination or exploitation at the hands of educators. (pg. 215)

By becoming a part of these students' communities through activities outside of the classroom, these students will feel more supported in whatever their social struggles may be.

While we may be more familiar with top down education as the traditional way of teaching, bottom up education provides another effective way of teaching that would be wise to utilize in these contexts. Allowing students to self-direct their learning and seek out knowledge on their own can be beneficial to their retention of information and keep them more intrinsically motivated. In choir, I can accomplish this in many ways. One would be to introduce a concept

and provide students the tools to execute the task. For example, the act of matching pitch may on the surface seem straightforward: You play a note on a piano or any other instrument and sing the same note back. However, the reality is that this task is very complex as one must be aware of their bodily actions in breath support, vowel shape, and audiation. The road to mastering this technique requires much trial and error which may be more beneficial for students to discover outside of the classroom in their own research. This is consistent with the work of Boggs (2012), who writes, “Today’s schools fail, the Caines explain, because they concentrate only on memorization instead of building on the multiple and complex powers of the human brain. Among these are the capacity to function on many levels simultaneously, to change in response to others, to keep searching for meaning...challenges and opportunities to make a difference” (pg. 130 ). By assigning students tools such as a vocal tuner, or different sets of instruction for proper singing posture, students can explore the resources on their own and come to make their own meaning of how to replicate pitch. This will be much more beneficial than memorizing techniques that might not work for them.

If I were to speak with Boggs, I would like to say I agree that education has turned into the memorization of facts and that there is a lack of personal connection in modern methods. Thinking about my personal education experiences, the most influential teachers to me were always the ones who put in the extra effort for making those personal connections with both the content and their students. However, while I do agree with Boggs, I would also like to question if there is a balance between the two. Are there some things that people cannot personally connect with that they must commit to memory? Or is it possible for learners to memorize information and make a more meaningful connection to it later in their education? While I do not possess the

answers to these questions, I think it would be interesting to hear Bogg's perspective on this because of her experiences throughout social movements in history.

### **My Vision**

Reflecting on my educational philosophy, I aspire to evolve as a socially conscious educator committed to fostering equitable and empathetic learning environments. By interrogating systemic injustices and celebrating cultural diversity through music, I endeavor to nurture compassionate and socially aware individuals. As teachers, it is our duty to consider this in our methods of teaching and demonstrate the same social awareness within ourselves. Through these methods it is my hope to develop more humane human beings in my classroom.

### **INTASC Goals**

This action research project will focus on reflective examination of teaching methods and strategies for enhancing engagement in choir. To ensure I am being the most effective educator I can be, I used the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) core set of principles to guide my project. This framework was developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to guide quality teaching. My work aligns with INTASC standards #7 and #9 by fostering thoughtful instructional planning, reflective teaching practices, and commitment to professional learning as well as the implication of ethical practices. Through this project, I will refine my teaching approaches and contribute to the broader objectives of effective education.

### **INTASC Standard 7: Planning for Instruction**

*"The Teacher plans instruction that supports every student in meeting rigorous learning goals by drawing upon knowledge of content areas, curriculum, cross-disciplinary skills, and pedagogy, as well as knowledge of learners and the community context"*

This project involves planning and implementing interventions within the choir curriculum to enhance engagement. By comparing the impact of choir participation and musicianship mastery, I engage in intentional instructional planning. This includes designing curriculum activities and implementing strategies tailored to the research objectives. Furthermore, I will reflect on teaching practices and evaluate their effectiveness by utilizing observation and feedback mechanisms to inform adjustments to my interventions. This process of refinement aligns with the objective of continuous improvement.

### **INTASC Standard 9: Professional Learning and Ethical Practice**

*“The teacher engages in ongoing professional learning and uses evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice, particularly the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (learners, families, other professionals, and the community), and adapts practice to meet the needs of each learner”*

Through this action research project, I demonstrate my commitment to professional learning and scholarship. Actively engaging in research on teaching practices and their impact on student engagement allows me to continuously expand my knowledge base. Standard 9 brings up the importance of ethical conduct in teaching and learning. Upholding principles of participant consent, confidentiality, and data integrity is essential in this research endeavor. I commit to adhering to ethical guidelines throughout the research process, prioritizing the rights and well-being of my students. Furthermore, this project provides opportunities for collaboration with colleagues, students, and community members, fostering professional growth and enriching the educational community. Reflecting on my progress toward these standards has guided me in becoming a more effective educator.

## **Chapter 2: Annotated Bibliography**

### **Introduction**

I begin by exploring the core principles that underpin both the joy of singing and the pursuit of excellence in musicianship. Understanding these fundamental aspects allows us to appreciate the inherent tension that often exists between them. While the joy of singing celebrates the emotional expression and personal fulfillment found in vocal performance, quality musicianship demands discipline, precision, and technical proficiency.

Moreover, I will also explore the unique dynamics of the middle school choir classroom environment. In any classroom there will be a diverse group of students at various stages of musical development, each bringing their own set of experiences, abilities, and aspirations to the table. It is within this context that I seek to strike a delicate balance between nurturing a love for singing and fostering the growth of musical skills in the choir classroom.

I must reflect on the existing literature and research surrounding music education, examining the strategies and approaches employed by educators to address these challenges of balance. By drawing upon this body of knowledge, I have gained insights and inspiration to inform my own practice and methodology.

### **Purpose**

Learning the joys of singing and cultivating quality musicianship in the choir classroom are both crucial aspects of a comprehensive music education. While both are important, neither is inherently more vital than the other.

The joy of singing is essential because it forms the emotional and personal connection to music. It allows individuals to express themselves, experience catharsis, and find fulfillment through artistic expression. Singing brings peers together, builds confidence, and instills a

lifelong love for music. Without this joy, music education risks becoming merely technical and pointless. On the other hand, quality musicianship focuses on developing the technical skills and musical understanding necessary to perform at a high level. This includes aspects such as sight-reading, vocal technique, intonation, etc. Quality musicianship ensures that singers can perform with precision, accuracy, and artistic sensitivity, elevating the overall musical experience.

In a balanced choir classroom, students experience the fulfillment of both singing with joy and achieving musical excellence. They develop a deep appreciation for music as both an emotional outlet and a disciplined art form. This balance cultivates versatile musicians who can engage authentically with music and contribute meaningfully to the choral classroom as well as the world around them.

## **Procedures**

Conducting a literature search in the context of an action research project is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the existing knowledge and theories pertinent in this field. This understanding serves as a foundational element for framing research questions and designing interventions effectively. By delving into the literature, researchers gain insights into the historical and theoretical underpinnings of their field, enabling them to contextualize their own work within the broader scholarly discourse.

Additionally, a literature review helps researchers identify gaps or areas where further investigation is warranted. Recognizing these gaps allows researchers to contribute new insights and knowledge to the field through their action research endeavors. Through this, the literature search informs the methodology of the action research project. Researchers can draw upon existing studies to inform their choice of research methods, data collection techniques, and analytical frameworks, ensuring the appropriateness and rigor of their approach. By grounding



their interventions in evidence and theory, researchers can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of their action research outcomes, ultimately contributing to evidence-based practice and informed decision-making in their respective fields.

To select literature for this action research project, I utilized many various methods to ensure I would be gathering appropriate information from a variety of sources and perspectives. Through trusted online libraries of academic journals accessed via Western Oregon University's Hamersly Library databases, I was able to find all of the sources in this annotated bibliography.

I found the 15 sources by using key words and phrases such as "Choir Musicianship, Choir and Psychology, Mental Health and Choir, Music Literacy, etc." This brought up journals such as the British Journal of Music Education, Frontiers in Psychology, Music Education Journal, Comprehensive Child & Adolescent Nursing, etc.

The British Journal of Music Education focuses on research in music education, Frontiers in Psychology covers a broad range of topics within psychology including music psychology, Music Education Journal specializes in music education practices and research, and Comprehensive Child & Adolescent Nursing deals with various aspects of care for children and adolescents.

In summary, these journals cover different areas related to education, psychology, nursing, and music education. While some are not directly focused on music, they still provide valuable research and information that connects to my own research study. These journals also maintain rigorous publication standards, as submissions typically go through a peer-review process and must meet criteria for originality, quality, and relevance before being accepted for publication.

## **Bibliography**

de Villiers, A., & Agenbag, G. (2018). Music expressivity in high school choirs: The case of three choirs. *Muziki*, 15(2), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2018.1482227>

This article looks at how high school choir directors understand and teach musical expression. Through interviews with three choir conductors, the authors found that teachers used strategies such as movement, character work, language translation, historical context, and expressive modeling to help students sing with more meaning. The study also pointed out that choir rehearsals can sometimes focus too heavily on preparing repertoire instead of developing broader musicianship.

This source connects to my teaching because it reminds me that strong choir instruction is not only about correct notes, rhythms, and entrances. Students also need to understand how text, tone, emotion, and musical choices shape a performance. One strength of the article is that it gives real examples from choir classrooms instead of only discussing theory. One thing the article could have included is a more student perspective on whether expressive singing made choir feel more meaningful or engaging to them.

Auhuber, L., Vogel, M., Grafe, N., Kiess, W., & Poulain, T. (2019). Leisure activities of healthy children and adolescents. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(12), 2078. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16122078>

This study examined the leisure activities of adolescents, including screen use, physical activity, artistic activities, social life, and socioeconomic status. The researchers found that screen time increased between 2011 and 2017, while participation in artistic activities such as choir, orchestra, theater, and dance declined. They also found differences in participation based on age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

This article gives helpful context for my classroom because it shows that choir is part of a much larger picture of how students choose to spend their time. It pushes me to think about how I can make choir feel relevant, enjoyable, and worthwhile for students who have many other activities and distractions competing for their attention. A strength of the article is that it looks at adolescent life broadly, not just school activities. The article could have gone further by asking students directly why they do or do not choose to participate in artistic activities.

Barrett, M., Page-Shipp, R., van Niekerk, C., & Ferreira, J. (2020). Learning music theory *en passant*: A study in an internationally recognised South African university student choir. *British Journal of Music Education*, 37(2), 155–168.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051719000238>

This article explores whether students can improve their music theory knowledge through regular choir participation. New choir members took a music theory test at the beginning and end of the year, and the results showed significant improvement, especially with intervals. The study suggests that choir can naturally help students grow in music theory, even when they do not have a formal music background.

This source is useful for my ARP because many of my middle school students come into choir with different levels of experience. It supports the idea that students can build musicianship through repeated rehearsal, performance, and guided musical practice over time. A strength of this article is that it shows measurable growth connected to choir participation. The article could have been stronger if it included more specific rehearsal strategies that helped students improve their theory skills.

Bartolome, S. J. (2013). “It’s like a whole bunch of me!”: The perceived values and benefits of the Seattle Girls’ Choir experience. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 60(4), 395–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429412464054>

This ethnographic study explored the benefits of participating in the Seattle Girls' Choir. The researcher used observations, interviews, surveys, and document review to understand how choir affected students. The findings showed that choir supported musical growth, discipline, commitment, emotional expression, interpersonal skills, and a sense of belonging.

This article is one of the most directly connected to my action research project because I am interested in both quality musicianship and students' love for singing. It shows that choir can be musically challenging while still being a place where students feel seen, supported, and connected. A strength of the article is that it includes several different perspectives, including students, parents, and faculty. The article could have included more discussion about how these findings might look in a public middle school choir, where students may have a wider range of musical backgrounds.

Bowden, L., Long, T., & Henry, H. (2020). Evaluation of a choir as a non-medical intervention for children with asthma: BreathStars. *Comprehensive Child & Adolescent Nursing*, 43(2), 128–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694193.2019.1607629>

This article studied BreathStars, a singing project for children with asthma. The researchers used mixed methods to examine whether singing could support asthma control, confidence, and well-being. While the quantitative data did not show major statistical changes, the qualitative data showed that students and families noticed improvements in self-esteem, confidence, and perceived asthma control.

For my teaching, this article reminds me that choir can support students in ways that are not always measured by a performance rubric. Breath work, posture, and vocal exercises can be especially important for students with breathing challenges. One strength of the study is that it connects singing to health and confidence in a practical way. The article could have been more

helpful for music educators if it included specific breathing or vocal activities that could be adapted into a choir warm-up.

Damsgaard, J. B., & Brinkmann, S. (2022). Me and us: Cultivating presence and mental health through choir singing. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 36(4), 1134–1142.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.13078>

This qualitative study explored how choir participation affected mental health, presence, and connection. Through interviews with choir participants, the researchers identified two major themes: “The Singing Me” and “Cultivating Us.” Participants described choir as a space where they could express emotions, feel connected to themselves, and experience belonging with others.

This is the kind of choir environment I hope to create for my students. I want choir to be a place where students are learning musicianship, but also where they feel part of something positive and meaningful. A strength of the article is that it captures the emotional and social side of group singing in a thoughtful way. The article could have included more information about how these ideas apply to younger singers, since middle school students experience belonging and identity in their own unique ways.

Gick, M. L. (2011). Singing, health and well-being: A health psychologist’s review. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind and Brain*, 21(1–2), 176–207.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0094011>

This review examines research on singing and its possible effects on health and well-being. Gick discusses singing through biological, psychological, and social lenses, including respiratory function, immune response, emotional health, and social connection. The review also points out that more research is needed because some existing studies have methodological weaknesses.

This article helps me explain why singing matters beyond concerts and grades. It supports the idea that choir can contribute to students' physical, emotional, and social well-being. A strength of the article is that it gives a broad overview of many different studies and perspectives. The article could have included more school-based examples so teachers could see how the research connects directly to classroom practice.

Kastner, J. D., & Menon, S. (2019). Popular music in choir: Helping students “find their voices.” *Music Educators Journal*, 106(1), 48–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432119856083>

This article discusses how popular music can be used in choir through student-led creative projects. The authors suggest activities such as focused listening, cover songs, mash-ups, and other projects that give students more choice and creative ownership. The article argues that popular music can support musicianship, creativity, cultural responsiveness, and student engagement.

In my own classroom, this article encourages me to pay attention to what students are actually listening to and to find ways to connect their musical world to choir. It also connects to project-based learning because students can make musical decisions instead of only following teacher direction. A strength of the article is that it gives practical ideas that could realistically be used in a choir class. The article could have included more examples for younger or beginning choir students who may need more structure.

Kerzmann, O. L. (2017). *Comprehensive musicianship through performance in the high school choral classroom* (Doctoral dissertation, Minot State University).

This dissertation examines how Comprehensive Musicianship Through Performance, or CMP, affects student learning and engagement in a high school choir classroom. Through student questionnaires, field notes, reflections, and a case study approach, the research found that

CMP helped students better understand musical concepts such as form, phrasing, breath support, blend, vowel shape, and emotional connection to the music.

This source pushes me to think about rehearsal as more than preparation for a concert. Students can develop deeper musicianship when they understand the meaning, structure, and performance choices behind the music they sing. A strength of this study is that it connects teacher reflection, student learning, and musical outcomes. The study could have included a longer follow-up to show whether students continued to use the musicianship skills after the unit ended.

Caetano, K. A., Ferreira, I. M., Mariotto, L. G., Vidal, C. L., Neufeld, C. B., & dos Reis, A. C. (2017). Choir singing as an activity to manage anxiety and temporomandibular disorders: Reports from a Brazilian sample. *Psychology of Music*, 47(1), 96–108.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735617739967>

This study examined anxiety, stress, and temporomandibular disorder symptoms among choir singers compared to people who did not sing in choirs. The results showed that choir singers had lower levels of anxiety and fewer TMD symptoms than the comparison group. The authors suggest that choir singing may have psychological and physical benefits, although more research is needed to understand the causes.

This gives me another way to talk with students about the value of singing. Choir is not just about sounding good; it can also connect to stress relief, body awareness, and mental health. A strength of the article is that it connects emotional and physical well-being instead of treating them separately. The article could have included more detail about the choir experiences of the participants, such as rehearsal frequency, type of repertoire, or the social environment of the choir.

Schladt, T. M., Nordmann, G. C., Emilius, R., Kudielka, B. M., de Jong, T. R., & Neumann, I. D. (2017). Choir versus solo singing: Effects on mood, and salivary oxytocin and cortisol concentrations. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2017.00430>

This study compared the effects of choir singing and solo singing on mood, oxytocin, and cortisol levels. Participants completed both choir and solo singing sessions, while researchers collected mood questionnaires and saliva samples. The study found that both types of singing improved mood, but choir singing led to a stronger increase in happiness and a greater decrease in sadness and worry.

This article is useful because it gives research support to something many choir teachers notice in practice: singing together can change the energy and mood of a group. I could see myself sharing this kind of information with students during a unit about the mental health benefits of music. A strength of the article is that it compares solo singing with group singing. The article could have explained more about how the group environment influenced the results, since the social part of choir is such an important piece.

Shieh, E., & Allsup, R. E. (2016). Fostering musical independence. *Music Educators Journal*, 102(4), 30–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24755678>

This article explores the idea of musical independence and what it means for music students. The authors explain that musical independence involves responsibility, freedom, tradition, culture, and the ability to make meaningful musical choices. They argue that teachers should help students develop independence in multiple ways instead of relying only on teacher-directed instruction.

This article changed how I think about student learning in choir. I do not want students to only depend on me to tell them what to fix. I want them to grow into musicians who can listen,



reflect, collaborate, and make musical decisions. A strength of the article is that it challenges teachers to think deeply about student ownership. The article could have included more concrete examples of how to build musical independence in a middle school choir setting.

Wan, C. Y., Rüber, T., Hohmann, A., & Schlaug, G. (2010). The therapeutic effects of singing in neurological disorders. *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 27(4), 287–295. <https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2010.27.4.287>

This article reviews research on the therapeutic effects of singing for people with neurological disorders, including stuttering, Parkinson’s disease, acquired brain injuries, and autism. The authors explain that singing involves auditory, motor, language, and emotional systems, which may explain why it can support speech and communication. The article presents singing as a potentially powerful tool for different neurological needs.

This source reminds me that students bring different strengths and challenges into choir, and singing may support them in ways I do not always immediately see. It also reinforces the importance of inclusive teaching strategies, especially for students who may process music, language, or movement differently. A strength of the article is that it explains the connection between singing, the brain, and communication. The article could have included more direct suggestions for classroom teachers working with students with neurological differences.

West, C. (2022). (Re)Building the secondary school choir program: An organizational perspective. *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*, 10, 21–47.

This qualitative study examined how two middle school choir teachers built or rebuilt their choir programs. The study used teacher interviews, student interviews, field observations, and documents to understand how successful choir programs develop over time. The findings

showed that rebuilding a choir program involves open access, emotional safety, musical challenge, student motivation, leadership, school culture, and program structure.

This article feels especially relevant to my own teaching because I am also building a choir program at my school. When I started, choir was only a half-time position, and it has since grown into a full-time position. This source helps me see program growth as more than enrollment numbers; it also includes culture, student buy-in, access, and the kind of environment students want to return to. A strength of the article is that it focuses specifically on secondary choir programs. The article could have included more about challenges like scheduling, funding, and administrative support.

Więch, P., Sałacińska, I., Walat, K., Kózka, M., & Bazaliński, D. (2023). Can singing in a choir be a key strategy for lifelong health? A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Voice*, 37(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2020.11.010>

This study compared adult choir singers with a control group to examine quality of life and health-related factors. The results suggested that choir singers reported a higher quality of life across several domains and showed stronger health-related indicators than the control group. The study suggests that choir singing may support lifelong health and well-being.

This article connects to one of my long-term goals as a choir teacher. I want students to leave my class with enough confidence and joy in singing that they may continue singing later in life, even if they do not become professional musicians. A strength of the article is that it frames choir as a lifelong activity with possible benefits beyond school. The article could have included more information about whether participants had positive school choir experiences that encouraged them to keep singing as adults.

## **Themes/Discussion**

Across these sources I uncovered many common themes and findings. One of which being that choir singing has been linked to numerous health benefits, including stress reduction, improved mood, and even physiological effects such as altered oxytocin and cortisol levels (Schladt et al., 2017). These findings highlight the potential of choir singing not only as a recreational activity but also as a therapeutic tool for managing anxiety and promoting well-being, aligning with the growing interest in music-based interventions for various neurological and psychological conditions (Caetano et al., 2017; Wan et al., 2010).

Various studies also explore different approaches to teaching music, including choral singing, integrating music with language learning, and enhancing music theory knowledge through choir participation. This connection to musical expressivity and its development in choral settings is a recurring theme, emphasizing the role of conductors, repertoire selection, and rehearsal techniques in fostering expressive singing.

Lastly, some studies delve into the interpersonal coordination and synchronization involved in choir singing, exploring how these mechanisms contribute to the positive effects of choir participation on mental well-being and social interaction.

Overall, these themes highlight the multifaceted nature of choir participation and its potential to impact individuals' lives beyond musical skill development. Through this explored research I now have a better understanding of core principles of both the health benefits of singing and the pursuit of excellence in musicianship. Through this understanding I can implore teaching strategies that fosters an equal balance of both spectrums in music education.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Action research requires a clear and organized methodology because the purpose is not only to study teaching, but to improve it. Sagor (2000) defines action research as “a disciplined

process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action,” which connects directly to the purpose of this project. Since this study focuses on my own choir classroom, the methods I used needed to help me reflect on my instruction, understand student engagement, and make informed decisions about my teaching practice.

In this chapter, I will first review the research questions guiding this project and explain the methods and procedures I used for data collection. Then, I will describe the context of my study, including my school setting, my role as the teacher/researcher, and the students involved in the project. Finally, I will explain how I analyzed my own teaching through multiple sources of evidence, including planning documents, assessments, observations, reflection journals, and feedback. This methodology helped me look for patterns in my practice and better understand how differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and collaborative learning supported student engagement, quality musicianship, and joy in choir.

### **Research Question**

The focus of this project is to see what teaching strategies I can personally use in my practice to most actively engage students while fostering quality musicianship and maintaining a healthy joy for singing. Particularly, I want to focus on the strategies of differentiated instruction, project based learning, collaborative learning and incorporating educational technology. This will align with the previously discussed INTASC standards 7: Planning for instruction and standard 9: Professional learning and ethical practices.

The reason why I chose to do this research project is because often times in my class I have many students that come from trained musical backgrounds that intentionally sign up for my class and many students with no musical background that were placed in my class due to

scheduling practices. With these findings, my hope is to bring and refine these strategies in my practice in order to bridge the gap between these two types of students to ensure that I am creating a positive learning environment and fostering an equal education to give students the skill for quality musicianship and accessibility to finding the joys of singing. The overall research questions is:

*How can different teaching strategies like **differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and collaborative learning** be effectively utilized to engage students in choir, regardless of their musical background, while fostering quality musicianship and a love for singing?*

## **INTASC Standards**

As I discussed earlier in Chapter 1, the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards are a set of principles that outline what all teachers should know and be able to do. These standards are crucial as they provide a clear framework for teacher preparation, ensuring that educators are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively meet the needs of diverse learners and excel in their teaching practice. Both new and experienced teachers can benefit from the INTASC standards by using them as a support for professional growth and development. New teachers can rely on the standards to set goals and improve their teaching practices, while experienced educators can utilize them to innovate their strategies, mentor colleagues, and engage in continuous professional development. Overall, the INTASC standards serve as a valuable tool for all educators to enhance their teaching effectiveness and meet the diverse needs of students. I plan to keep referencing these standards throughout my career. For this project I have chosen to focus on standards 7 and 9.

Standard 7 focuses on planning for instruction. It emphasizes the importance of teachers being able to plan and prepare instructional experiences that promote the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and performance skills in students. Teachers are expected to design coherent instruction that is responsive to the diverse needs of learners and incorporates appropriate resources and technology to enhance student learning. Additionally, this standard highlights the significance of assessing student understanding and adjusting instruction accordingly to ensure student success. As I previously stated, the middle school choir classroom is full of diverse musical perspectives from no musical training to many different types of musical training backgrounds that stem from cultural, religious, etc. assets. I have utilized these in planning for instruction to enhance student learning and promote their performance skills, critical thinking of music within the context that is relevant to their own lives.

Standard 9 emphasizes professional learning and ethical practice. Teachers are expected to continue growing in their own teaching by using evidence, reflection, and feedback to evaluate the effects of their choices on students, families, colleagues, and the larger school community. This standard also highlights the importance of adapting instruction to meet the needs of each learner while maintaining ethical responsibilities such as confidentiality, fairness, and respect for students. This standard is especially important to my action research project because I am studying my own teaching practice and using data to better understand how my instruction affects student engagement, musicianship, and joy in choir. Through observations, reflections, assessments, and feedback from others, I am able to examine what is working, what needs to be adjusted, and how I can continue improving as an educator. Standard 9 connects directly to this process because action research requires me to be honest, reflective, and responsible in how I collect data, analyze student learning, and make instructional decisions.

## Participants and Settings

I will be using my 8th period 6th grade choir class for this research. This class meets for 42 minutes each day and includes 37 students, with 17 male students and 20 female students. Within the class, 12 students are identified as TAG (Talented and Gifted), 7 students are emergent bilingual learners whose home languages include Japanese, Korean, Hindi, and Spanish, and two students have an IEP with an eligibility of autism and emotional behavior disability. These students require consistent visual support, regular teacher check-ins for understanding and regulation, and access to earmuffs during louder rehearsal moments when sensory input becomes overwhelming. Attendance is generally strong, however, because choir is performance-based, even occasional absences can greatly affect learning. The diversity within this classroom requires intentional planning around language scaffolds, sensory awareness, structured routines, and equitable participation.

Students in this class bring many strengths, including creativity, strong academic skills, multilingual abilities, and high levels of achievement. The significant number of TAG students allows for deeper musical analysis, advanced sight-singing challenges, and leadership roles within the ensemble. At the same time, students' needs include developing vocal confidence, collaborative rehearsal habits, resilience when musical material becomes challenging, and, in some cases, structured sensory support. My instructional routines help meet these diverse needs. I accomplish through how I greet students at the door, begin with announcements, lead structured vocal warm-ups, incorporate daily sight-reading practice, and dedicate the remainder of class to rehearsing concert repertoire. Clear visual agendas, predictable transitions, and consistent teacher check-ins support all learners, particularly the student with autism. These routines create a safe,

structured, and inclusive environment that balances rigor with accessibility for every student in the ensemble.

### **Methods and Procedures**

To describe my teaching practice I chose to conduct an action research study. This will address both the standards for teaching and my own focus on improving through professional research. Action research is a vital tool for educators as it empowers them to systematically investigate their own teaching practices, leading to continuous improvement and professional growth. By collecting and analyzing data as well as self reflection, teachers can make informed decisions that enhance student learning and address educational standards effectively. John Dewey states "We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience." Through this reflective approach through action research one will commit to the meeting and exceeding of educational standards.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For this action research project, I collected data that helped me study my own teaching and understand how differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and collaborative learning supported student engagement, quality musicianship, and joy in choir. My main sources of evidence included my unit plan, lesson plans, attendance and completion data, assessments, informal observations, teaching reflections, and feedback from my mentor teacher and field supervisor. Sagor (2000) explains that classrooms are already data-rich environments, so I focused on evidence that naturally came from my planning, instruction, student work, and reflection.



My unit plan and lesson plans helped me look at how I organized instruction over time. These documents showed how I planned for rhythm literacy, performance skills, student engagement, and support for students with different musical backgrounds. Attendance and completion data helped me notice patterns in participation and whether absences or incomplete work affected student progress. Assessments, including the pre/post quiz, formative rhythm packet, group rhythm practice, and individual rhythm recording, helped me see how students grew in their ability to identify, read, and perform dotted quarter and 16th-note rhythms using the ta/ti counting system.

I also used informal observations and teaching reflections as qualitative data. These sources helped me look beyond scores and focus on how students participated, collaborated, took risks, and showed confidence during rehearsal. Feedback from my mentor teacher and field supervisor gave me another perspective on my planning, classroom routines, student supports, and instructional delivery.

To analyze the data, I followed a traditional qualitative analysis process. First, I gathered my sources of evidence and reviewed them multiple times. Then I looked for repeated ideas, patterns, and moments that connected to my research question. Sagor (2000) describes data analysis as finding the “story” within the data, so I tried to look across all of my evidence to understand what my teaching strategies were showing me.

I used coding to make the data easier to understand. As I reviewed my plans, reflections, observations, assessments, and feedback, I marked repeated ideas such as differentiated instruction, collaboration, performance-based learning, student engagement, confidence,

musicianship, classroom routines, and teacher adjustment. These codes helped me organize the data into clearer categories instead of looking at every piece of evidence separately.

The codes helped me focus on the main themes that were emerging. One theme was that students were more engaged when instruction was scaffolded through modeling, speaking rhythms, clapping rhythms, and applying skills to repertoire. Another theme was that students showed more joy and confidence when they felt prepared and safe with making mistakes. A third theme was that collaboration was helpful, but only when students had clear expectations and a specific musical goal.

I triangulated my data by comparing different sources of evidence to see if the same themes appeared in more than one place. For example, I looked across lesson plans, assessments, reflections, observations, and outside feedback to see whether my conclusions were supported in multiple ways.

### **Researcher Positionality**

My identity shapes how I understand this project. As a biracial, White-passing, English-speaking person with a Spanish last name, I have experienced being misunderstood as a learner. Because of that, I pay close attention to whether students feel included, confident, and valued in my classroom.

This connects to my Chapter 1 theory because I believe choir should balance quality musicianship with joy, personal connection, and cultural awareness. My identity may influence my data collection because I am naturally drawn to notice participation, confidence, and belonging, not just musical accuracy. To balance this, I collected multiple types of evidence,

including assessments, observations, reflections, and feedback, so my analysis was not based only on my own perspective.

#### **Chapter 4 : Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

Three major themes emerged from analyzing my data. These themes were: differentiated instruction as access to musicianship, collaborative learning and peer support, and joy, confidence, and engagement through performance-based learning. I used my lesson plans, teacher observation logs, attendance data, reflection journals, supervisor/clinical teacher feedback, and assessment evidence to identify these themes. My coding key helped me organize the data into major and supporting categories: differentiated instruction/access to musicianship, collaborative learning/peer support, joy/confidence/engagement, evidence of growth/assessment data, and teacher reflection/instructional adjustment.

The story my data tells is that students were most successful in choir when technical musicianship was not taught as something separate from joy or performance, but instead as something that helped students participate more confidently. At the beginning of this project, I was thinking about the tension between the “joy of singing” and “quality musicianship.” Through the data, I noticed that these two things were not really opposite goals. Students seemed to enjoy choir more when they felt prepared, and they performed more musically when the skill work was connected to actual repertoire, peer support, and a final performance goal.

#### **Main Themes**

**Yellow = Differentiated Instruction / Access to Musicianship**

**Green = Collaborative Learning / Peer Support**

**Blue = Joy, Confidence, Engagement**

#### **Supporting Themes**

**Pink = Evidence of Growth / Assessment Data**

**Purple = Teacher Reflection / Instructional Adjustment**

Figure 1: Thematic Coding Key

#### **Differentiated Instruction as Access to Musicianship**

The first theme that emerged was that differentiated instruction gave students more access to musicianship. This was important because my 6th grade choir students did not all enter the class with the same musical background. Some students had previous choir, piano, or outside music experience, while others were newer musicians and were still learning basic routines, notation, and vocal expectations. Because of this, one size fits all instruction would not work. My data showed that students were more willing to participate when I broke musical tasks into smaller steps and gave them multiple entry points.

This theme appeared clearly in the beginning of the observation logs. During the first week of the semester, many students were still learning how choir class worked. Most students participated in warm-ups, but some were hesitant to sing out or respond by themselves. In my reflection, I noticed that students were more confident when they could hear the group around them. When the task became more technical some students got quieter or relied on stronger singers nearby. This showed me that differentiated instruction was not just an extra support, but something that helped students feel like they could actually access the music.

One way this showed up in my teaching was through the sequence of speaking, clapping, and then singing rhythms. In the observation notes from February 2nd, students improved technically when they first clapped, spoke, and then sang the rhythm. Partner checks also helped students compare answers before performing in front of the whole class. This mattered because students were not being asked to immediately perform a new concept perfectly. They had a chance to work through it physically, verbally, and socially before applying it musically.

This pattern also appeared in my five-lesson rhythm unit. The central focus of this unit was for students to develop rhythmic literacy by learning to identify, read, and perform dotted quarter note rhythms and 16th note patterns using the ta/ti counting system. Across the lessons,

students moved from identifying rhythms, to completing a formative packet, to group rehearsal, to small group performance, and then finally to an individual recorded performance and post-quiz. This gradual structure gave students multiple chances to practice the same concepts in different ways before being assessed.

**Central Focus:**

Students will develop rhythmic literacy by learning to identify, read, and perform dotted quarter note rhythms and 16th-note patterns using the ta/ti counting system, then apply those skills in choir through speaking, clapping, and performing rhythm patterns with 80% accurately.

|                          | <b><u>Unit goal 1</u></b><br>Students will be able to identify and distinguish dotted quarter note rhythms and 16th-note patterns in written rhythmic examples using the ta/ti counting system | <b><u>Unit goal 2</u></b><br>Students will be able to apply dotted quarter note rhythms and 16th-note patterns accurately using the ta/ti counting system through speaking, clapping, and applying rhythms in choir music. |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>Diagnostic</u></b> | Students will complete an in-class pre-test on their Chromebooks.                                                                                                                              | Students will perform exercises from the rhythm method book as a class until they are no longer able to perform the examples accurately.                                                                                   |
| <b><u>Formative</u></b>  | Students will complete a rhythm worksheet and turn it in at the end of the unit.                                                                                                               | Students will perform rhythmic excerpts in groups. The teacher will assess them using a rubric and provide immediate feedback.                                                                                             |
| <b><u>Summative</u></b>  | Students will complete a post-test on their Chromebooks.                                                                                                                                       | Students will individually perform a displayed rhythm in the teacher's office, where it will be recorded for assessment.                                                                                                   |

Figure 2: Five-Lesson Rhythm Unit Goals/Assessments

Differentiation also did not always mean that students were doing completely different assignments. In my observation journal after spring break, I reflected that some students needed review of basic counting and notation, while others were ready to focus more on tone, blend, and expression. By layering tasks inside warm-ups and repertoire, I could challenge students without lowering the expectations for the whole group. This was an important finding because it showed that differentiated instruction in choir can happen through different musical entry points while still working toward the same ensemble goal. Another example, when students were working on rhythm literacy, newer students could focus on identifying the rhythm and keeping a steady pulse, while more experienced students could work on a phrasing, or expression with dynamics at the same time.

This helped the whole class stay together while still giving different students what they needed. In my lesson plans, this appeared through chunking, visual supports, verbal prompts, small group support, peer tutoring, frequent check-ins, and extension challenges. These supports helped students work toward the same learning target but not necessarily from the exact same starting point.

My supervisor feedback supported this theme as well. During the March 11th observation, my supervisor noted that the learning target was clearly shown and read in class, informal assessments were used throughout the lesson, visual aids and checks for understanding were incorporated, and previous material was connected to the new lesson. The same feedback also noted that students were actively engaged in rhythmic examples after modeling, and that students were given multiple opportunities for success through warm-ups, examples, and repertoire. This outside feedback helped confirm that the differentiated supports I was using were not only visible in my own reflection but were also noticeable to another observer.

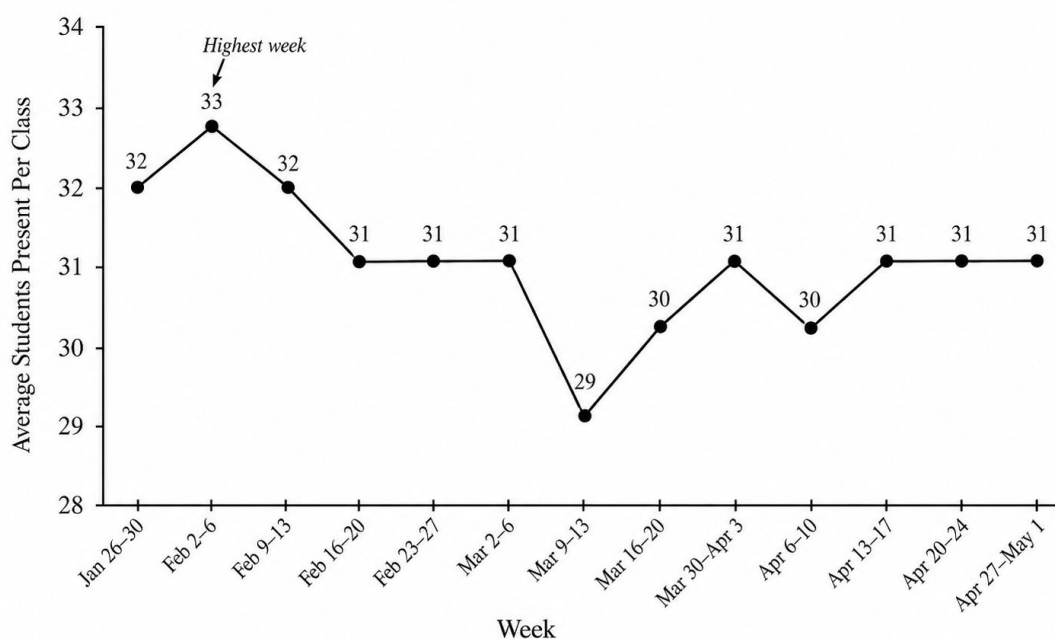
- Q34. 1a. Planning Evidence:** what was seen/heard in plans, what this supported for students.  
Learning target clearly shown and read in class. Informal assessments used throughout lesson to assess student learning and growth. Variable seating, preferential seating utilized. Visual aids and checks for understanding incorporated into lesson.
- Q8. 2. Materials & Supports Reflect Asset-Based Planning**  
**Look-fors:**
- Materials draw on students' funds of knowledge and lived experiences
  - Instruction builds upon student interests
  - Tasks and materials are developmentally appropriate
  - Culturally sustaining practices are embedded (e.g., home language supports, cognates, translanguaging)
  - Technology use is purposeful and developmentally appropriate
- Q35. 2a. Planning Evidence:** what was seen/heard in plans, what this supported for students:  
Previous learned material was reviewed and connected to the new lesson. Materials were connected and transferred to concert repertoire being rehearsed. Slide deck used to show examples of rhythms and how they are subdivided. Terminology defined and connected to past knowledge.
- Q9. 3. Instructional Design Supports Engagement & Learning**  
**Look-fors:**
- Instruction aligns to the stated learning target
  - Lesson design promotes active student engagement
  - Gradual Release of Responsibility is evident (I Do / We Do / You Do)
  - Social-emotional needs are intentionally supported
  - Culturally sustaining practices are embedded (e.g., diverse perspectives, materials, use of funds of knowledge)

Figure 3: Supervisor Observation Feedback

The attendance data also added another layer to this theme. There were 197 total attendance marks in the data set. The largest category was excused absences, with 116 marks,

while unexcused absences accounted for 41 marks. Tardies and late arrivals also appeared in the data, especially in March and April. The highest overall attendance concern week was March 9–13 with 29 total attendance marks, followed by several other weeks with elevated absence or tardy patterns. This matters for differentiated instruction because students were not always present for the same instruction at the same time. Some students missed multiple rehearsals or came in late, which meant they needed review and flexible re-entry points when they returned.

**Figure 4. Average Students Present by Week**



*Note.* Students who were late were counted as present. Values are rounded to the nearest whole student and represent the average number of students present per class meeting each week (class roster  $n = 34$ ).

**Figure 4: Attendance Summary by Week**

This helped me understand that differentiation was also about attendance and access. If a student missed a day when we introduced dotted quarter notes or 16th-note patterns, they still needed a way back into the learning. The use of repeated routines, visual examples, formative packet work, and connecting skills to repertoire helped students rejoin the class without



completely falling behind. This was especially important in choir because each student's preparation affects the group sound, but students still need support as individuals.

Overall, the data showed that differentiated instruction helped students develop musicianship because it made musical skills more reachable. Instead of expecting all students to immediately understand notation, rhythm, vocal technique, and repertoire at the same pace, I created smaller steps and repeated pathways into the content. This helped students build confidence and gave them more chances to be successful.

### **Collaborative Learning and Peer Support**

The second theme that emerged was the importance of collaborative learning and peer support. Choir is naturally collaborative because students are always making music together. However, my data showed that collaboration was most effective when it had structure and a clear musical purpose. Just putting students in one large group and two smaller groups was not enough. Students needed roles, expectations, and a specific goal in order for collaboration to support musicianship.

This theme appeared early in the observation logs. During the first week of the semester, students began collaborating as a choir by using their voices/bodies to learn the warm-up routine together and practicing how to listen across the ensemble. Low-pressure group activities, such as echo patterns and group responses, helped students feel more comfortable participating. This was an important starting point because students were learning that choir is not only about individual singing but about responding with the group around them.

On February 2nd, peer support became more visible with partner rhythm checks. These checks helped students compare answers without feeling put on the spot in front of the whole class. Students were more willing to participate after practicing with a partner first, and peer

support helped some newer musicians feel more comfortable sharing during whole-class responses. In my reflection, I wrote that collaboration helped both engagement and joy because students had a safer place to make mistakes before performing in front of everyone.

This was one of the clearest findings in my data. Students were often more willing to take risks when they had peer support first. In a choir setting, risk taking can mean singing out, clapping a rhythm, answering a question, or trying a new vocal sound. For middle school students, these tasks can feel vulnerable, especially if they do not see themselves as “musical” yet. Partner work and small-group practice created a lower-pressure space where students could test their understanding before being heard by the whole class.

At the same time, the data also showed that collaboration had limits when it was not structured enough. During the week of February 16th, I noticed that whole-class rehearsal routines were working well, but collaborative activities still needed clearer expectations. Students were mostly engaged and showed some joy (smiles, dancing etc.) while singing repertoire, especially after they could hear improvement in the music. However, when students were asked to rehearse in smaller groups, some became nervous, and engagement changed depending on the group. This showed me that collaborative learning does not automatically work just because students are put together. It needs structure, roles, and a careful placement of students.

My fourth lesson plan directly responded to this need. In the group performance lesson, students were placed into small groups and asked to perform a short rhythm example by speaking and clapping with ta/ti. They were tasked with keeping a steady beat, accurate counting, and teamwork. Students were reminded to do their best and ask their group members for help. They were also expected to listen as audience members when other groups performed as

well as track their own grading for each group. This structure helped collaboration become more connected to musicianship instead of just social interaction.

**Performance Rubric**

|                                                                                                    | Mastery - 4                                                                    | Proficient - 3                               | Nearly Proficient - 2                                           | Developing - 1 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 6th MU.5.PR.2.6 – Identify and apply teacher-provided criteria to rehearse and refine performance. | Claps/says the rhythm correctly, keeps a steady beat, and uses ta/ti correctly | Mostly correct, steady beat, small mistakes. | Partially correct, but several mistakes or uneven <u>beat</u> . | Many mistakes. |

Figure 5: Group Performance Rubric

Students benefited when the group goal was to keep a steady beat, identify a rhythm, clap and count together, or listen for accuracy. In the past, when group work was too open-ended, some students needed more direction.

Another part of this theme was peer encouragement. During concert week, students encouraged each other before and after the performance. This stood out because the concert created a shared goal that students cared about. They were not only singing for a grade or a classroom task. They were preparing to perform as people who love music, and this made their peer relationships feel more connected to the outcome. The observation notes and attendance sheet showed that nearly every student attended the concert, arrived in the correct uniform, and participated in the performance. Students showed visible excitement, and the concert gave them a real reason to demonstrate both musical accuracy and joy in singing.

The concert also helped me see the connection between collaborative learning and performance based learning. Students seemed to understand that entrances, cutoffs, rhythm, and tone all helped communicate the music better to an audience. In my observation journal, I

reflected that project-based learning with the upcoming concert was effective because the final performance gave students a reason to care about the details. It did not feel like we were just doing the same thing over and over for no reason. This showed me that collaboration is stronger when students understand the bigger purpose behind the work.

Collaborative learning also gave students more chances to learn from each other. In a middle school choir, students are constantly listening to peers around them. Sometimes this can help, and sometimes it can create problems if students are relying too heavily on the strongest singers. The data showed both sides. At the beginning of the semester, some students relied on stronger singers nearby. Later, students were able to use peer support in more intentional ways through partner checks and group rhythm performances. This shows growth in how students used collaboration. They moved from depending on others to beginning to practice with others.

Overall, this theme showed me that collaborative learning can increase engagement and confidence, but it has to be intentionally planned. Students need to know what they are listening for, how to support one another, and what musical goal they are trying to reach. When those things were clear, collaboration helped students participate more and supported stronger musicianship.

### **Joy, Confidence, and Engagement Through Performance-Based Learning**

The third theme that emerged was that joy, confidence, and engagement grew when students saw a clear purpose for their work. In this project, that purpose often came through performance based learning. Students were more engaged when they understood how a warm-up, rhythm activity, or rehearsal strategy connected to the music they were preparing.

Earlier in this project, I wrote that the joy of singing is essential because it creates emotional and personal connection to music. I also wrote that quality musicianship is important

because it develops the technical skills needed to perform with accuracy and expression. My findings supported this balance. Students did not seem to enjoy choir only because it was fun or social. They also enjoyed it when they could hear themselves improve, when they felt prepared, and when they understood how the skill work helped the performance.

This was especially visible in the February 9th observation log. Students were more focused when the agenda and learning target were posted at the beginning of class. They showed stronger rhythmic accuracy when examples were connected to current concert repertoire. There was also more laughter and willingness to be wrong, which helped students take more risks with their singing. In my reflection, I wrote that students were not just practicing random rhythms. They were beginning to understand how the rhythm skills applied to the music we were preparing for performance.

This mattered because it showed that engagement increased when students understood the “why” behind the skill. If I taught dotted quarter notes or 16th notes as isolated notation only, some students would probably disengage with the lesson. But when students found those rhythms in “Danny Boy,” “Do-Re-Mi,” or other concert repertoire, the concept had a purpose. They could see how reading rhythm helped them sing the actual music better.

The five lesson rhythm unit shows this as in Lesson 1, students learned dotted quarter notes and 16th-note patterns, then applied them to concert music. In Lesson 2, students began a formative packet but also located target rhythms in repertoire. In Lesson 3 and 4, students practiced and performed rhythm examples in groups. In Lesson 5, students completed a post-quiz and individual recording where they spoke and clapped rhythm examples using ta/ti. This progression helped students move from isolated rhythm work to the real world application and performance in their music. The results of this unit showed that students across the class

developed more confidence with these rhythms, as their overall class performance significantly improved over time.

**Part 4:**  
Box the dotted quart rhythm/put a star above the 16th/add ta/ti syllables to the notes in the excerpt

fa-a ti - ki - ti - ki ta ta-a ti ti - ki - ti - ki ta

Match each rhythm to the correct ta/ti count

1. Ta-aa, Ti-Ti, Ta, Tiki-Tiki, Ta, Ta Ta
2. Ta, Tiki-Tiki, Ta, Ta (rest), Ta, (rest)
3. Ti-ti, Ta, Ta-a, Ti, Tiki-Tiki, Ta, Ta, (rest)

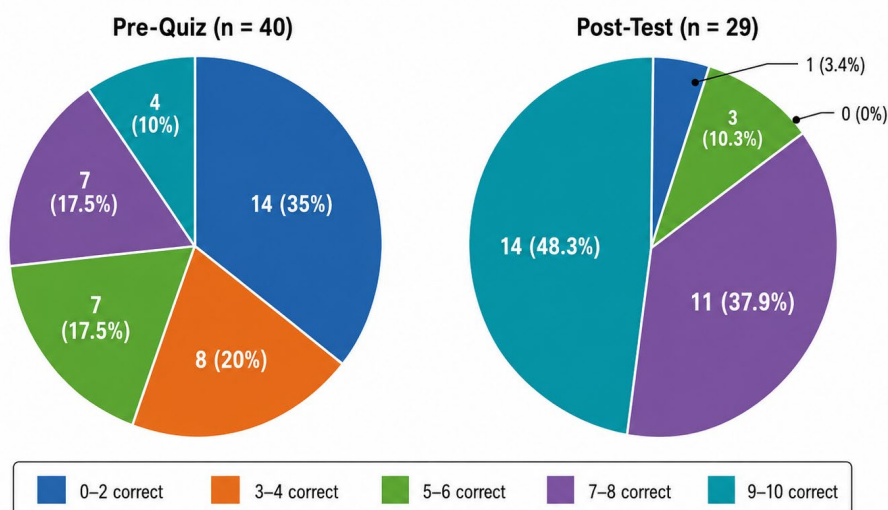
Number: 2

Number: 3

Number: 1

## Pre-Quiz and Post-Test Score Distribution

*Scores grouped into performance bands*



*Note.* The post-test dataset contains 29 recorded scores. Percentages are based on the number of scores provided for each assessment.

Figure 8: Pre/Post Quiz Data

This theme also appeared in my supervisor feedback. During the March 11th observation, my supervisor noted that students were engaged through questions and performance, including warm-ups, rhythmic examples, and concert repertoire. The feedback also said that the slide deck helped break down rhythmic concepts and that the lesson tied new rhythms to previously learned material. This confirmed that students were more engaged when the lesson connected academic vocabulary, visual supports, and actual singing.

Performance based learning also created joy. During concert week, students showed visible excitement for the concert, encouraged one another, and sang with more expression when they understood the mood and meaning of the music. In my reflection, I wrote that their facial expressions, confidence, and willingness to sing out significantly changed. This connects directly to the love for singing that I am trying to foster.

However, the data also showed that joy and excitement needed to be guided. During concert week, musicianship was mostly accurate, but some tone and vowel issues appeared when performance energy and nerves increased. This helped me realize that my job is not to take away the joy, but to guide it into stronger musicianship. Students can be excited and expressive while still working toward accuracy, but they need practice connecting those two things.

This was one of the biggest findings for me personally. At the beginning of the project, I was thinking about whether joy and musicianship were competing with each other. Through my data, I found that they actually support each other when taught well. Joy without technique can become unfocused, and technique without joy can feel boring or disconnected. The strongest moments happened when I framed technique as something that helps the emotion and meaning of the music come through.

The attendance data also supports this finding in an indirect way. Even with attendance interruptions across the term, concert week showed strong participation, and the observation notes recorded that nearly every student attended the concert. This suggests that performance gave students a reason to stay connected to the class. I would not say attendance data proves engagement by itself, but it does add another piece of evidence that the concert served as an important anchor for the unit.





Figure 9: Attendance Data Near Concert Week

Student confidence also appeared in smaller daily routines. In my January 29th teacher reflection, I used a thumbs-up/thumbs-sideways self-assessment asking students how confident they felt warming up their voices. A large number of students showed thumbs sideways, which told me they were not fully confident yet. Later observation logs showed more willingness to sing out, more risk-taking, and more confidence during whole-group singing. This suggests that confidence grew slowly through routines, peer support, and repeated chances to practice.

This growth was not perfect or equal for every student. Some students still needed reminders about tempo, focus, vowel shape, or group expectations. Some students also had attendance patterns that probably made consistency harder. But overall, the data tells a story of students becoming more comfortable participating, especially when they had clear routines, visual supports, peer help, and a performance goal.

## Summary of Findings

Across the data, the biggest finding was that engagement, joy, and musicianship were strongest when they supported each other. Differentiated instruction helped students access the musical skills I need them to learn. Collaborative learning helped students feel safer and more supported. Performance-based learning gave students a reason to care about the details. These themes were not separate from one another. They worked together.

Differentiated instruction helped bridge the gap between students with more musical experience and students who were newer to choir. Collaborative learning helped students take risks and learn through peer support, especially when the task was structured. Performance-based learning connected technical work to something meaningful, which increased student engagement and helped students understand why musicianship mattered.

My data also showed that teacher reflection and adjustment were an important part of this process. I adjusted lessons when students needed more structure, when time was short, when attendance made review necessary, and when collaboration needed clearer expectations. This connects to the purpose of action research because I was not just collecting data after teaching. I was using the data to notice patterns and adjust my teaching as the unit continued.

In the end, the findings suggest that choir students can develop quality musicianship and a love for singing at the same time. The key is that students need access, support, and purpose. Access came through differentiated instruction and scaffolded musical tasks. Support came through collaboration, routines, peer checks, and teacher feedback. Purpose came through connecting daily skill work to repertoire and performance. When these pieces were present, students were more engaged, more confident, and more willing to grow as musicians.

## Chapter 5 : Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this action research project was to examine how different teaching strategies could be used in my choir classroom to engage students while also supporting quality musicianship and a love for singing. More specifically, I focused on differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and performance-based learning. My main research question was: *How can different teaching strategies like differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and collaborative learning be effectively utilized to engage students in choir, regardless of their musical background, while fostering quality musicianship and a love for singing?*

After analyzing my lesson plans, observations, reflection journals, assessment data, attendance data, supervisor feedback, and student performance evidence, I found that engagement, joy, and musicianship were the strongest when they were connected. At the beginning of this project, I thought about joy and musicianship almost like they were competing ideas. I was wondering if focusing too much on technical skill would take away from the joy of singing, or if focusing too much on joy would cause students to lose musical accuracy. Through this research, I found that these two things actually supported each other when they were taught with intention.

The biggest takeaway from this project is that students are more willing to engage in challenging musical work when they feel prepared, supported, and connected to the purpose of the work. For my students, the purpose often came through performance. When rhythm literacy, vocal technique, and rehearsal skills were connected to concert repertoire, students seemed to understand why those skills mattered. They were not just clapping rhythms or learning ta/ti counting because I told them to. They were learning those skills because the skills helped them sing their music more confidently and successfully.

This finding connects to Barrett et al. (2020), who found that students can build music theory knowledge naturally through regular choir participation. My project supported this idea because students were not only learning rhythm concepts through worksheets or isolated examples. They were learning them through repeated rehearsal, group practice, concert music, and performance preparation. The students' growth came from hearing, seeing, speaking, clapping, and singing the rhythms multiple times in different contexts. This showed me that music literacy in choir does not have to feel disconnected from singing. It can be part of the rehearsal process.

My findings also connect to Bartolome's (2013) study on the Seattle Girls' Choir, which described choir as a place that can support musical growth, discipline, emotional expression, interpersonal skills, and belonging. In my classroom, I saw similar patterns. Students were developing musical skills, but they were also becoming more confident, more willing to sing out, and more supportive of one another. This was especially visible during concert week, when students were excited, encouraged each other, and understood that their individual preparation affected the full ensemble. Choir was not just a class where students completed work. It became a shared experience that required responsibility and community.

Differentiated instruction was one of the most important strategies in this project because my students entered choir with different levels of musical experience. Some students already had strong rhythm, pitch, or performance skills, while others were still learning basic notation, rehearsal expectations, or how to sing confidently in a group. Because of this, I had to find ways to keep the whole class moving toward the same ensemble goal while still giving students different levels of support.

One of the most useful differentiated strategies was breaking musical skills into steps. Students often had more success when they first spoke a rhythm, then clapped it, then applied it to the music. This gave students more than one way to understand the concept before being expected to perform it while singing. Visual supports, slides, teacher modeling, peer checks, and repeated practice also gave students multiple entry points. This connects to my INTASC Standard 7 focus because planning had to be intentional. I could not just choose a piece of music and expect students to figure it out. I had to plan how students would access the music.

Differentiation also helped with attendance. Since attendance was not perfectly consistent throughout the unit, students did not all receive the same instruction at the same time. Some students missed rhythm lessons, came in late, or needed review after being gone. Because choir is performance-based, this matters a lot. If one student misses instruction, it affects that student, but it can also affect the sound of the ensemble. Repeated routines, clear visual examples, and connecting concepts back to repertoire helped students re-enter the learning even when they missed part of the process. This taught me that differentiation is not only about ability level. It is also about access.

Collaborative learning was another important part of the findings. Since choir is naturally collaborative, I expected peer support to be helpful. However, my data showed that collaboration works best when it is structured. Students were more successful when they had a clear task, a musical goal, and expectations for how to help one another. Partner rhythm checks, group rhythm performances, and whole-class singing helped students feel less exposed when trying something new. This mattered because middle school choir students can be nervous about making mistakes in front of others.

At the same time, collaboration was not automatically successful just because students were working together. When small group work was too open-ended, some students became distracted or nervous. This helped me understand that collaborative learning in choir has to be planned carefully. Students need to know what they are listening for, how to give support, and what the goal of the rehearsal is. For example, asking students to “practice this rhythm” is not as strong as asking students to “speak the rhythm together using ta/ti, keep a steady beat, and check if everyone ends at the same time.” The second direction gives students a clearer purpose.

This connects to Shieh and Allsup’s (2016) ideas about musical independence. I do not want students to only wait for me to tell them what is right or wrong. I want students to listen, reflect, and make musical decisions with each other. This project showed me that musical independence does not happen all at once. Students need structured opportunities to practice it. Partner checks and group work gave them small chances to take more ownership over their learning.

Performance-based learning also helped students stay engaged. In my Chapter 4 findings, I noticed that students were more willing to care about technical details when they understood how those details connected to an upcoming performance. The concert gave students a real reason to work on rhythm, tone, entrances, cutoffs, posture, vowel shape, and expression. This connects to Kerzmann’s work on comprehensive musicianship through performance, which emphasizes that rehearsal should help students understand music more deeply rather than only prepare notes for a concert. In my classroom, the concert became the project that helped students see why daily rehearsal mattered.

This also connects to the psychological and social side of choir participation. Damsgaard and Brinkmann (2022) described choir as a place where singers experience both “me” and “us.” I

saw this in my own classroom. Students were developing their own confidence, but they were also learning how their voice fit into the full group. This is part of what makes choir different from many other classes. Students are responsible for themselves, but the product is shared. When students felt prepared, they seemed more confident being part of that shared sound.

The research on singing and well-being also connected with my findings. Gick (2011), Schladt et al. (2017), and other sources from my literature review discuss singing as something that can support mood, well-being, and social connection. My project was not designed to measure mental health directly, so I cannot make a large claim that my choir class improved student mental health. However, I did observe that students showed more confidence, joy, and willingness to participate when the environment felt supportive and the musical tasks felt reachable. This supports the idea that choir can be more than a technical music class. It can be a space where students experience belonging, expression, and confidence.

Another important part of this discussion is my own growth as a teacher. This project helped me see that I need to plan for access, support, and purpose in every lesson. Access came through differentiated instruction. Support came through collaboration, peer checks, teacher feedback, and classroom routines. Purpose came through performance-based learning and connecting skills to real music. These three pieces worked together. If one was missing, students were less successful.

For example, if students had purpose but not access, then the performance goal might feel too hard or intimidating. If students had access but no purpose, then the activity might feel like random skill practice. If students had collaboration but no structure, then peer work might become off-task or uneven. This project showed me that strong choir instruction is not just about

choosing good music or having fun warm-ups. It is about designing the learning so students know what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they can be successful.

Overall, my findings showed that students can develop quality musicianship and a love for singing at the same time. The key is that technique has to be framed as something that helps students experience the music more fully. When students saw that rhythm accuracy helped them sing the piece better, or that posture helped their tone, or that listening helped the group sound more unified, musicianship became more meaningful. It was not just about being correct. It was about making music better together.

### **Limitations**

Although this action research project gave me useful information about my teaching, there were also several limitations. One major limitation was the size and context of the study. This project focused on one 6th grade choir class at one school. Because of this, the findings cannot be generalized to every choir classroom or every grade level. My students had their own specific strengths, needs, personalities, and school context. Another choir class might respond differently to the same strategies.

Another limitation was the length of the study. The data was collected across one semester and focused especially on a rhythm literacy unit and concert preparation. While I was able to see growth during that time, a longer study would have given me a better understanding of how these strategies affect students over an entire year. For example, it would be helpful to know if students continued to use ta/ti counting independently later in the year or if their confidence continued to grow after the concert.

Attendance was also a limitation. Because some students missed rehearsals, arrived late, or had incomplete participation at different points, not every student experienced the unit in the



exact same way. In one sense, this became part of my findings because it showed the importance of differentiation and flexible re-entry points. However, it also made the data less clean. If a student struggled on an assessment, it may have been because they needed more support, but it also may have been because they missed key instruction.

Another limitation was that much of my qualitative data came from my own observations and reflections. Since I was both the teacher and the researcher, my perspective naturally shaped what I noticed. As I stated in Chapter 3, my identity and teaching values make me pay close attention to confidence, belonging, and joy. This is not a bad thing, but it does mean that I may have noticed emotional and engagement-based evidence more quickly than other types of evidence. To balance this, I used multiple sources of data including supervisor feedback, mentor teacher feedback, attendance data, lesson plans, assessments, and student performance evidence. Still, future research would be stronger if it included a more direct student voice.

Another limitation is that I did not collect formal student interviews or surveys about how students felt during the unit. I used informal observations, thumbs-up/thumbs-sideways checks, participation, performance evidence, and attendance patterns, but I did not directly ask students to explain how the strategies affected them. In the future, I would like to include student reflection forms or short surveys asking students which strategies helped them feel most confident and which parts of choir helped them enjoy singing. This would make the data stronger because it would include students' own perspectives, not just my interpretation of their behavior.

The audio and video evidence was also limited in how much it could show. Recordings are useful because they capture student sound, rhythm, and performance energy, but they do not always show the full classroom environment. A recording might show musical growth, but it may not capture the peer conversations, teacher adjustments, or student nerves that happened

before the performance. Because of this, audio and video should be viewed as one piece of evidence rather than the full story.

Another limitation was that performance energy could make it hard to separate joy from accuracy. During concert week, students showed excitement and confidence, but performance nerves also affected tone, vowels, and focus at times. This made it difficult to measure musicianship and joy separately. However, this also connects back to the purpose of the study because joy and musicianship were not completely separate in the real classroom. They interacted with each other constantly.

Finally, this project was limited by my own development as a teacher. I am still growing in how I design lessons, manage transitions, use slides effectively, and balance teacher talk with student practice. Some of the strategies I used worked well, but others would be stronger with more experience and refinement. This is also one of the reasons action research is valuable. It showed me not only what helped students, but also what I still need to work on.

## **Conclusion**

This action research project helped me better understand how differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and performance-based learning can support engagement, musicianship, and joy in a middle school choir classroom. The main conclusion I reached is that students do not have to choose between enjoying choir and becoming stronger musicians. In fact, these two goals can support each other when instruction is planned intentionally.

Differentiated instruction helped students access the music. By using visual supports, modeling, chunking, ta/ti counting, speaking, clapping, singing, and repeated practice, I was able to support students with different musical backgrounds. This helped students feel more prepared and made musical skills more reachable.

Collaborative learning helped students feel supported. Partner checks, group rhythm work, and ensemble rehearsal gave students chances to practice with others before being heard individually. This helped lower the pressure for students who were less confident and gave them a safer space to make mistakes. However, collaboration worked best when students had clear directions and a specific musical goal.

Performance-based learning gave students purpose. The concert and repertoire helped students understand why technical skills mattered. Students were more engaged when they could connect rhythm practice, vocal technique, and rehearsal expectations to music they were actually preparing to perform. This helped students care more about details because those details affected the final performance.

The project also helped me see that my teaching needs to balance access, support, and purpose. If I want students to develop quality musicianship and love singing, I have to plan lessons that help them feel successful, connected, and challenged. I cannot assume that students will automatically enjoy choir just because they are singing. I also cannot assume they will develop musicianship just because they are rehearsing music. Both joy and musicianship have to be intentionally taught and supported.

Moving forward, I want to continue using action research as part of my teaching practice. I would like to collect more student voice through surveys, reflections, and short interviews. I also want to continue improving how I use small groups, peer feedback, and student leadership in choir. In future units, I would like to extend this work into more complex rhythms and musical concepts, such as dotted eighth notes, syncopation, changing meters, harmony, and expressive phrasing. I also want to keep finding ways for students to connect their own musical interests and cultural backgrounds to choir.

This project confirmed for me that choir can be a powerful place for both musical and personal growth. Students can learn rhythm, tone, notation, and performance skills while also building confidence, belonging, and joy. As a teacher, my role is to create the conditions where both can happen. When students are given access to the skills, support from their peers and teacher, and a clear purpose for their work, they are more willing to take risks and grow as musicians. In the end, harmonizing growth is not just about improving the sound of the choir. It is about helping students see themselves as capable musicians who belong in the ensemble and can find joy in singing with others.

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