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MUSIC EDUCATOR

Title IV, Part A Grant
Funds: Everything You
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The Merger Story
by Dr. Hortense Reid Kerr

Scandalous: The Art
of Controversy
by Nathan Street



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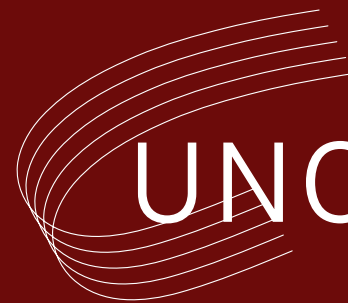
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Finding S.P.A.C.E

Five Essential Steps for Student Success in the Middle School Classroom

by Dr. Alyssa Cossey

Many teachers who find themselves in middle school settings feel they have a gap in their teacher training as middle school students embody the space between elementary general and high school choral classrooms. However, middle school students are not simply an “in between” group of students; they are a unique population with their own strengths and needs. By following five simple – albeit not easy – steps, middle school teachers can affirm and support student growth and ultimately create a classroom where all students can find success.

Safe Space

Though singing in choir requires a great deal of vulnerability at any age, this is perhaps most true at the middle school level. Along with vocal change and development, adolescents also experience extreme physical, psychological, and emotional changes as well as a clear shift in the emphasis on peer approval and the need to belong.¹ Understanding this, middle school music educators have a responsibility to create a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment for their students. Kenneth Phillips addresses this very point in *Directing the Choral Music Program*; “directors should make a conscious effort at building a mutually supportive group environment” because, “students will participate more actively when they feel safe in the classroom.”² As Phillips explains, creating a safe space is the first, and perhaps most crucial, step in ensuring student success in the middle school classroom and will undoubtedly lead to more active student participation.

Participate

Once students trust that their middle school choral classroom is a safe environment in which to experiment, then singers will participate actively, take more risks, and fully engage in vocal warm-ups, sight-reading activities, and repertoire practice and performance. This leads to faster development of musicianship and sight-reading skills as well as development of essential vocal skills like head-voice or falsetto singing – skills which are nearly impossible to address and teach in an environment where experimentation and risk-taking are not supported and valued. Most importantly, when students participate fully, teachers can

more authentically and accurately assess their skills and needs.

Assess

Assessment, often thought of as the “A” word in educational settings, can and should be a useful tool in the middle school choral classroom. By evaluating student’s current skills, vocal development and range, and areas of deficiencies, teachers can better select repertoire and supplemental learning activities to engage and motivate students in the choral classroom. As Don Collins writes, “The most important consideration is to deal with the singers’ needs. Find music they can sing.”³ This can’t be done without assessing each student individually.

An excellent source for testing middle school voices can be found in Barham and Nelson’s, *The Boy’s Changing Voice: New Solutions for Today’s Choral Teacher*.⁴ Perhaps the most important take-away from their testing procedures is to “meet them where they are.” When first auditioning or assessing a new student, begin by determining their spoken pitch. This can be done quickly by asking a few informal, get-to-know-you questions and listening for the pitch at which their voice primarily speaks. Barham and Nelson also suggest using the word “hello.” Ask the student to speak the word slowly, and as they stretch out “heellloooo” you can listen for their spoken pitch. Then, use their spoken pitch, rather than a randomly selected note from the piano, as the starting pitch for a three-note (or less) vocalise that can be moved up or down to test

their vocal range. Though assessment includes much more than testing students’ vocal ranges – and even this requires a great deal of additional detail – it is a key step that should inform repertoire selection that will ultimately challenge and motivate middle school singers.⁵

Challenge

Finding the perfect balance of challenge for middle school singers is like living in the children’s storybook, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. If the repertoire is too easy for the choir, they quickly grow bored and lose interest; if it is too hard, they are likely to become frustrated and give up. If either situation goes unaddressed for too long, students may drop out of choir all together. Successful

middle school teachers understand that to find that “just right” challenge level, they must match activities and repertoire with students’ current skill levels – rather than try to fit students’ voices into pre-selected repertoire – and provide appropriate challenges.

Encourage/Motivate

Setting students up to successfully meet challenges in the choral classroom is perhaps the greatest motivator a teacher can provide. When students become aware of their progress and development by performing music which was previously too difficult, they feel encouraged to continue improving and begin to see themselves as successful musicians. Likewise, if students can chart their own vocal development and see growth in the range and quality of their voice, they may see their voice change as a temporary experience rather than a permanent state. When a teacher can create a learning environment where middle school singers can acknowledge their current limitations, and accept them as temporary, while simultaneously experiencing continued growth they will not only feel successful in the moment, but see themselves as life-long musicians.

Success

Patrick Freer, a leading scholar in middle school choral research, examines the importance of student success at the middle school level in his article, “Two Decades of Research on Possible Selves and the ‘Missing Males’ Problem in Choral Music.” In it, he briefly explains his “possible self-theory.” Freer argues that adolescents use personal experiences to determine their eventual identity. If they have repeated success at an activity they begin to attribute those successes to their future self. If, for example, a

student finds repeated success in the choral classroom, they will identify as future musicians but, if they face too many road blocks in the learning process, they may decide that their future self cannot be musical, and move on to another activity where they can be more successful.⁶

Student success, at any level, must always be a priority for music educators. If teachers can create a safe space for students, then students will participate fully. If students participate fully, then teachers can assess their students’ skills and use that assessment to design achievable challenges. If students are able to meet those challenges they feel encouraged and motivated. And, when students are encouraged and motivated by their own musical development, they will experience success. By following these five simple steps, music educators can provide the space and opportunity for every student to find success in the middle school choral classroom.

¹ Patrick K. Freer, “Boys’ Descriptions of Their Experiences in Choral Music,” *Research Studies in Music Education* 31, no. 142 (December 2009); Lynne Gackle, “Finding Ophelia’s Voice: The Female Voice During Adolescence,” *Choral Journal* 47, no. 5 (November 2006).

² Kenneth H. Phillips, *Directing the Choral Music Program* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 110.

³ Don L. Collins, *Teaching Choral Music*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 121.

⁴ Terry Barham & Darolyne L. Nelson, *The Boy’s Changing Voice: New Solutions for Today’s Choral Teacher* (New York: Alfred Music, 1991), 7-10.

⁵ For more information on testing procedures for middle school voices, visit www.alyssacossey.com.

⁶ Patrick K. Freer, “Two Decades of Research on Possible Selves and the ‘Missing Males’ Problem in Choral Music,” *International Journal of Music Education* 28, no. 17, 17-30.

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