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(Re)building the Secondary School Choir Program: An Organizational Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to understand secondary school choir program (re)building through an organizational lens. Participants were two music teachers who respectively founded or restored middle school choir programs in the last 10 years. Primary data included individual teacher interviews and group interviews with selected students. Secondary data came from field observations and documents. Using instrumental case study methods, we analyzed the programs as voluntary associations, a type of organization in which members (in our case, students) participate by choice and for nonremunerative reasons. Findings showed that to (re)build, the teachers adopted philosophies of open access and cast their choirs as socially rich, emotionally safe, and musically challenging. Students' motivations for persisting in choir were primarily affective and normative (e.g., to develop singing skills and to be with friends) rather than utilitarian (e.g., choir as an easy A). (Re)building was situated and phased, with school culture, policy, administrator relations, and program age emerging as salient factors. We advance teacher profiles, practical implications, and suggestions for further study.

Keywords: *music programs, choral music education, recruitment and retention, organizational theory, secondary schools*

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(Re)building the Secondary School Choir Program: An Organizational Perspective

Large ensembles are mainstays of school music in the United States. Choir, band, and orchestra remain far and away the most popular high school music courses (Elpus & Abril, 2019), and the majority of K–12 music teachers lead at least one performance group (Matthews & Koner, 2017). Beyond the classroom, ensemble experiences provide pathways into postsecondary musical engagement (Isbell, 2019; Madsen & Kelly, 2002). Seventy-six percent of respondents to a national survey by Chorus America (2019) credited primary and secondary schools for introducing them to singing. Despite their prevalence and influence, however, empirical research on building or rebuilding secondary school ensemble programs—hereafter (re)building—lacks in the literature. Scholars have instead focused on broader concerns such as expanding curricula (e.g., Williams, 2011) and advocating culturally relevant policy (e.g., West & Clauhs, 2015). No doubt these tasks are vital, but if thriving music programs are going to be available to as many students in as many schools as possible, understanding the on-the-ground efforts of teachers who (re)build them is essential.

Related Literature

Ensemble programs with records of success are well represented in extant literature. For instance, Adderley et al. (2003) profiled choir, band, and orchestra programs within a "healthy…well-supplied and valued" high school music department (p. 192). Bannerman (2019) selected a school "with a reputation of a successful choral program and quality instruction based on the recommendation of local music teachers" (p. 47). Parker (2016) sampled choral teachers that "received positive verbal recommendations from families, colleagues, and administrators" (p. 224) and whose programs enrolled at least 100 students. Although one of Parker's participants founded the choir program when their school opened, building was not the prime focus of the study. In the community music literature, the same is true; participating directors and programs are often at their pinnacles (e.g., Bartolome, 2013, Kennedy, 2009).

New music teachers have often preferred working in schools like those they attended—suburban, higher-income, and with robust music programs (Kelly, 2003). To the extent such settings feature higher pay and more support from parents or administrators, this tendency mirrors long-standing explanations for why music teachers join, persist in, and sometimes leave the profession (Gardner, 2010; Hancock, 2008). That said, at least some scholarship suggests that apprehensiveness toward (re)building could play a role in keeping new teachers away from jobs in schools serving more diverse and lower-income student populations. In a national survey, Robinson (2012) found preservice teachers preferred suburban contexts and rated "program sustainability" over socioeconomic conditions or racial/ethnic makeup when deciding where to work. Bruenger (2010) studied why preservice choral teachers—after participating in a "substantial field practicum program that stressed cultural diversity" (p. 36)—applied or declined to apply upon graduation for positions in urban schools. Eight

of 11 teachers opted against urban jobs, citing their belief that competitive choir programs were less likely to be built in these settings. Tellingly, four of the teachers instead accepted jobs in *midurban* schools located on the urban fringe of better-resourced suburban districts. Despite serving similar populations (low-income and at-risk), they assessed midurban schools more favorably than urban ones. These findings suggest that the prospect of (re)building can impact teachers' employment decisions, but much more data and understanding are needed.

Absent explicit accounts of (re)building, researchers have examined the conditions under which choral programs tend to thrive, specifically highlighting the role of social care and community. Choirs often constitute cultures unto themselves, with shared language, customs, and values (Morrison, 2001) and defined social identities (Bartolome, 2013; Parker, 2014). Parker (2016) found that care, trust, and belonging enriched teacher–student relationships and created community within two middle and two high school choral programs. Directors wanted their students to become "absorbed in shared experience" (p. 233), so even as they cared for students individually, they scrupulously tended to social dynamics. Relational frictions were settled by refocusing on group needs and group musical development, with interdependence and mutuality as key goals. Kennedy (2002) similarly identified "love of singing, influence of the teacher, and the company of friends" (p. 29) as prime motivators for adolescent boys who joined and persisted in choir; social benefits were "by far" (p. 33) the most persuasive. Aggregate evidence tells a similar story. Researchers have found students of color and low-income students are no less likely to enroll in high school choir as compared to their White, more affluent counterparts (Elpus & Abril, 2019). Choir students have also largely reflected the general population on other metrics such as family structure (one/two-parent household) and academic achievement (Kinney, 2019). Stark gender disparities persist, with girls outnumbering boys two to one (Elpus, 2015), but overall, quantitative and qualitative findings suggest social inclusion is a central contributor to choral participation and program success.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

(Re)building is arguably at the heart of music education. Making music programs more accessible, robust, and resilient has and will continue to be a core aim of music and arts education advocates (Shorner-Johnson, 2013). Yet direct empirical evidence on music teachers who (re)build is scarce, even as many hold positions where that work is required. Indeed, while our data collection predated this period, the sweeping impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on music education (Hash, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2021), where many programs thought strong and well populated before 2020 were suddenly in jeopardy, reinforces the need for documenting and theorizing (re)building. Our purpose in this multiple-case study was to provide an initial account. We asked the following questions:

1. What were the experiences of two music teachers who recently (re)built middle school choir programs?

2. How did the teachers' backgrounds and career trajectories, school settings, relations with stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, administrators), and other contextual factors impact program growth?

Theoretical Framework

We applied organizational theory—specifically Knoke and Prensky's (1984) framework for voluntary associations—as an analytic lens. Even though it typically relates to firms (e.g., corporations, bureaucracies, other large complex institutions), Knoke and Prensky argued that organizational theory was also relevant to voluntary associations, which they defined "organized named groups, most of whose participants do not derive their livelihoods from the organizations' activities, although a few positions may receive pay as staff or leaders" (p. 3). Rather than profit or government service, voluntary associations are normally oriented towards affective, moral, or political ends; members continually weigh the costs and benefits of persisting in the association and can, without the specter of losing pay or breaching a formal agreement, decide to separate at virtually any time. Examples of voluntary associations include charities, political parties, churches, and professional societies. For the purposes of this study, and as we further explain below, we view secondary school music programs as voluntary associations.

Knoke and Prensky (1984) delineated voluntary associations by five characteristics:

- *Formal Structure*: Voluntary associations tend to be smaller and less structurally complex than formal organizations (Knoke & Prensky, 1984). They exist chiefly to "aggregate and coordinate the expression of political or socioemotional values of their participants, functions that require neither complex nor technically esoteric processes" (p. 7) and have a "simple division of labor" (p. 14).

- *Incentives and Commitment*: In voluntary associations, when incentives are compelling, members grow in commitment, subordinating their individual interests to those of the group. When costs are too high, members detach from the association. Incentive types are delineated as normative (calling on members' values and convictions), affective ("interpersonal relations and the symbolic, emotion-laden attachments of persons to their groups"; p. 5), and utilitarian (material benefits such as wages and salaries). Knoke and Prensky stipulate that in voluntary associations, utilitarian incentives are "clearly denigrate[d]" (p. 6) compared to normative and affective incentives.

- *Leadership and Authority*: Undergirded by an "ideology of democratic participation" (Knoke & Prensky, 1984, p. 8), voluntary associations "severe[ly] restrict…leaders' autonomy to act without consulting or taking into account the interests and preferences" (p. 9) of their members. Leaders, though often paid and increasingly professionalized, are primarily motivated by "ideological, collective-good, life-style, and other nonutilitar-

ian benefits" (p. 9). They view themselves as advocates and managers of the association's broader mission.

- *Environmental Conditions*: Unlike large, structurally complex firms which are "buffered from external environmental complexity, uncertainty, and changes" (p. 11), voluntary associations are particularly susceptible to "actors and events lying outside…formal organizational boundaries" (Knoke & Prensky, 1984, p. 10). Support for organizations is finite and competition often fierce; to survive, voluntary associations form "protective alliances with powerful allies" (p. 11).

- *Organizational Effectiveness*: In voluntary associations, effectiveness typically means "satisfying members' demands for services (including socioemotional needs for sociability) [and] achieving recognition and legitimacy from the public and community elites" (Knoke & Prensky, 1984, p. 13).

Scholars have used Knoke and Prensky's framework to explore voluntary associations in various domains (e.g., food banks, Torres et al., 1991; youth sports organizations, Caldwell & Andereck, 1994; Kim et al., 2010). Ours is a novel application in a school context, but there is recent precedent in music education with Mantie and Tan's (2019) study of community wind bands in the U.S. and Singapore. The decision to apply an organizational lens in the present study turned on two factors: (a) that secondary school choir teachers could be understood as leaders of organizations rather than "just" teachers and (b) that secondary school ensemble programs generally, and choir specifically, are voluntary associations. We address each factor in turn.

Alongside artistic, educational, and social missions, choral teachers in many respects have organizational mandates too. Program leadership is multifaceted. Choir teachers are conductors, voice instructors, arrangers, and pianists; they interface with policymakers and administrators; and they oversee public relations, budgets, recruitment and retention, advocacy campaigns, and in some larger programs, multimember staffs (e.g., assistant director(s), accompanist, private voice teachers). Effective teaching and musicianship are necessary, but establishing or regenerating a program is often a long-term, encompassing commitment. As Ryan (2009) observed in a handbook on program building for preservice and novice teachers, "While musical skills and pedagogical knowledge may be in place, [new teachers] often lack an understanding of the multiple roles of today's music teachers" (p. xi). Ballantyne (2007) emphasized that music teachers were often "one-man band[s]" whose workloads and roles extended "beyond that of other classroom teachers" (p. 185). Apfelstadt (1997) maintained a similar view: "[M]any [preservice] students work diligently to meet course demands without functioning very effectively on the podium" (p. 23). Missing, she contended, were leadership skills, an "extramusical" responsibility within the "comprehensive whole" (p. 26) of choral teaching. To understand (re)building, we adopted this embracive lens, common in many choral methods texts (e.g., Holt & Jordan, 2008; Phillips, 2016; Ward-Steinman, 2018)

if mostly missing from empirical work.

We also analyzed the choir programs as voluntary associations, a type of organization in which members (in our case, students) participate by choice and for nonremunerative reasons (Knoke & Prensky, 1984). School itself may be compulsory, but beneath that high-level mandate lies substantial discretion, especially for middle and high school students deciding whether to enroll in music. Only 22 states and the District of Columbia require arts credit for high school graduation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Moreover, even as music courses are available in at least 90% of U.S. secondary schools (Abril & Gault, 2008; Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012), student participation endures at between one-fourth and one-third (Elpus, 2014; Elpus & Abril, 2019). Students choose whether to join ensemble programs, and critical to (re)building, whether to remain in them after the initial enrollment year. Although structural factors curtail students' discretion (e.g., parental support, course availability, minor status of children) and certain features may imply a formal agreement (e.g., grades, arts-credit requirements), on balance we find secondary school music programs are best categorized and studied as voluntary.

Method

Design and Sampling

In this multiple-case study (Stake, 2003, 2006), we focused on two teachers who (re) built secondary school choir programs. We examined their experiences in-depth, but the main goal was to "pursue the external interest" (Stake, 2003, p. 137) of understanding (re) building broadly, making our case study instrumental rather than intrinsic. We purposefully sampled teachers who had (a) built or rebuilt a middle or high school choral program in the 10 years prior to 2019, (b) experienced substantial growth in student enrollment in that program, and (c) demonstrated achievement as indicated by some external measure (e.g., adjudicated festival/contest results). Considering these criteria, we met to discuss participants, preliminarily identifying Calli and Kaylen, two middle school choral teachers in the southern U.S., as possibilities. Kaylen had conveyed her (re)building story informally to Justin after he led a clinic with her choirs a few months before the study began. Jason had worked in the same district as Calli (different schools) several years ago and knew of her (re)building efforts. We contacted them to gauge their interest and to determine if their programs could be considered (re)built under our definition. With support on both fronts, we then sought approval of school and district gatekeepers and had the study sanctioned by our Institutional Review Board. To safeguard privacy, participants and entities in this report are referenced pseudonymously. See Table 1 on the next page for participant contextual data.

Table 1

Participant Contextual Data

Name	Teaching Experience (current school/ total)	School	Grades	Enrollment*	Setting	Race/ ethnicity	Free/ reduced-price lunch eligibility*
Calli	8/10	Southeastern Middle School	7–8	840	Suburban, public	< 1% Asian 52% Black 2% Hispanic 42% White 4% two or more races	45%
Kaylen	6/15	Fields Middle School	6–8	920	Suburban, public	3% Asian 25% Black 6% Hispanic 64% White 3% two or more races	30%

Note. National Center for Education Statistics public school data, 2019–2020 school year. Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

*Rounded to nearest 5 to preserve anonymity

Data Generation

We used multiple data sources to develop holistic accounts of Calli, Kaylen, and their programs (Yin, 2018), with collection occurring between November 2019 and March 2020 (before the onset of COVID-19-related school closures). Primary data included three individual interviews with each teacher as well as group interviews with selected students. In the first teacher interview we surveyed participants' full musical and professional paths, from their upbringing and preservice preparation to their current work in the programs they (re)built. In the second teacher interview we delved into prior teaching positions, which for Kaylen included a previous (re)building experience. In the third and final teacher interview, we explored in greater depth participants' present positions, the (re)built programs that qualified them for this study. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Justin interviewed Kaylen, and Jason interviewed Calli.

For further perspective, we had participants recommend a few current students who were in at least their second year in the choral program. After receiving parent consent and child assent forms, eight students were interviewed, five from Calli's program in groups of three and two, respectively, and three from Kaylen's program in a single group. We asked students about the reasons they joined choir, the benefits and challenges of being in the program, their relationships with their teacher and peers, and their perceptions of how choir is viewed

by others (e.g., non-choir friends at school, parents). Student interviews lasted 30 minutes on average. Demographically, the student panels reflected the racial-ethnic makeup of the schools at large (see Table 1). Four of Calli's students were Black, and one was White. Two of Kaylen's students were White, and one was Black (see supplemental materials for semi-structured teacher and student interview protocols).

Secondary data came from field observations and documents. We twice visited selected classes for each participant: Calli's seventh and eighth-grade girls' choirs, and Kaylen's seventh-grade boys' choir and eighth-grade girls' choir. Overall, we accumulated about 12 hours of fieldwork across four visits. Both researchers were present for all observations. The goal was to understand how the live teaching setting reflected participants' perspectives on (re)building. Our fieldnotes included descriptions of activities and interactions in the classroom as well as reflections on happenings most pertinent to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During class breaks, we informally conversed with participants. These ad hoc interviews were not audio-recorded or transcribed, but we summarized them in fieldnotes. We debriefed after each visit, discussing what we had observed and outlining preliminary judgments. Finally, we requested documents from participants (e.g., choir handbooks) that they thought would provide insight into their (re)building process and their programs as organizations.

Data Analysis

Teacher interview transcripts, student interview transcripts, and observation fieldnotes yielded 156, 102, and 64 pages of double-spaced text, respectively. We received nine representative documents from Calli (i.e., recruitment flyers, contest adjudication forms, fundraising receipts, concert programs, local newspaper feature) and seven representative documents from Kaylen (i.e., new course proposal, choir handbook, recruitment flyers, concert programs). Analysis commenced in two stages. First, we independently combed the data to construct a high-level, inductive understanding of participants and their programs, working "from the 'ground up'" (Yin, 2018, p. 169). In the second stage we narrowed our lens, this time applying the five analytic categories of Knoke and Prensky's (1984) theory of voluntary associations. We met repeatedly via videoconference throughout both stages to discuss emergent themes.

Trustworthiness

To boost credibility, we applied triangulation procedures (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). We collected evidence from interviews, observations, and documents (methods triangulation). Our interviews were conducted over the course of three (Kaylen) to five months (Calli). With at least two months between the first and second interviews, participants were able to reflect back and harden (or amend) initial impressions (data triangulation). Finally, as a two-person team, each of us independently and then collectively examined the full dataset, negotiating meanings until we reached thematic agreement (investigator triangula-

tion). Other credibility enhancers included our manual, word-by-word transcription of each interview. We also did two waves of member checking, the first with raw data (sending verbatim transcripts to participants for accuracy checks) and the second with abstract meanings (sending theme descriptions to ensure our impressions were fitting). Participants affirmed our interpretations without requests for revision, a sign we were accurately reflecting their experiences.

Positionality

As former high school choral directors, we both had (re)building experience. We also knew the participants professionally prior to the study. These relationships provided access and enabled us to quickly build rapport with participants. Nevertheless, we took steps to minimize any undue influence. In interviews and observations, we set our experiences and connections aside and strove to remain open to different perspectives and practices. We also conducted observations together, comparing our impressions to ensure they converged. Through memos, debriefings, and independent-then-joint analyses, we developed confidence that our conclusions were reasoned and evidence-based.

Limitations

(Re)building is a years-long, often fitful, process. By necessity, the findings that follow are progressive and linear, and may make (re)building appear simpler than it is in practice. Furthermore, participants recounted their (re)building experiences retrospectively, that is, after the period of acute growth and into a phase of maintenance. Observing in real time how teachers conceptualize and implement program development, before they know whether their efforts are going to pay off, would yield insights we necessarily leave out here. Even though our study focused mainly on teachers and students, we recognize the influence of other organization stakeholders (administrators, parents, community residents) and recommend a wider scope in future scholarship. Finally, while our two cases provided some diversity of setting and perspective (e.g., Title I vs. non-Title I school, building vs. rebuilding), the data we present were situated and may not generalize to other middle or high school choir programs.

Findings

We begin with teacher profiles to explicate the "unique vitality…[and] particular situation" of each case (Stake, 2006, p. 39) and position participants' (re)building experiences within their broader personal and career trajectories. Each profile opens with a vignette reconstructed from observation fieldnotes. We then discuss participants' stories of (re)building. Following this is a presentation of seven themes we developed according to Knoke and Prensky's (1984) theory of voluntary associations: choir as an open system, choir as a social and musical haven, parental engagement, student agency, micropolitical maneuvering, public performance achievement, and long-term musical engagement.

Teacher Profiles

Kaylen

Seventh-grade boys enter the choir room in somewhat of a frenzy. "Eat fast," Kaylen tells them as they unpack granola bars and potato chips. Asked why she allows snack time in middle school—her remedy for student lethargy in mid-morning—Kaylen replied that she's "all about meeting needs." While students eat, she takes roll and fields a few inquiries about an ongoing cookie fundraiser. Then, about three minutes in, she starts warm-ups. The boys, many seemingly in the throes of adolescent voice change, have trouble distinguishing head and chest voice. They are also at times antsy and talkative, but overall, rehearsal unfolds smoothly. A White woman in her late 30s, Kaylen maintains a genial disposition even as she alternates between instances of reprimand and moments of praise. The students take it all in stride—singing, enjoying themselves—evidence of healthy teacher–student relations and a hospitable choir culture.

Kaylen founded the choir program at Fields Middle School (FMS) three years ago; before this, the only music offering was band. Of nine middle schools in its suburban district, FMS was the only one with a choir program. In fact, when Kaylen began her FMS tenure, she taught math, not music, attributing her hiring to the "school's desperation" to fill an unexpected vacancy. Kaylen had moved states in late summer for her husband's job and sought any open teaching position, even if it was not music. Despite a lack of relevant experience and credentials, Kaylen adjusted well. "I enjoyed teaching math," she said, "It was satisfying." After two years, however, she missed teaching music, so she suggested an afterschool choir.

In a written proposal to administration, she described the "Choir Club" as an "engaging opportunity to participate in a music education program that will enrich their overall curriculum and boost self-confidence." She included information about program financing (a $10 per-student "copyright fee"), logistics (they would meet in FMS's band room), and membership eligibility (no audition, but students would need to maintain passing grades). With the principal's assent and an initial membership of 25–30 students, the FMS Choir Club began meeting once a week. They performed a joint middle school–high school Christmas concert in the fall and a concert on their own in the spring. Near the end of that year, the principal asked Kaylen if she wanted to teach choir during the school day, an offer she enthusiastically accepted: "They had an elective position to fill [when another teacher retired] and since I was doing the afterschool Choir Club, I guess…it just made sense to offer choir as an elective." The school purchased a digital piano and assigned her a permanent space (the former art room), with "everything else [coming] from fundraising and hand-me-downs." She taught choir and typing the first year; then, with participation exceeding 80 students, she transitioned to full-time choir. At the time of this study, FMS had six choirs overall: two gender-separate ensembles for each of grades six through eight.

Kaylen was not new to (re)building. At Chesterton Middle School (CMS), her post prior to FMS, the choral program had once thrived under a director whom Kaylen described

as a "genius" who was "very well known in the community." However, in the three years between his departure and Kaylen's arrival, the program had been hollowed out, enrollment now insufficient for full-time choir. To fill her schedule, Kaylen had various non-music duties, including assisting the theater director and even being the school's person "in charge of sound equipment." Over six years, Kaylen grew the choir program from 80 to 270 students. When asked whether rebuilding was intentional, Kaylen demurred, saying she was "not highly ambitious in personality" and that the growth was due more to outside pressures than to anything she did. CMS faced competition from nearby magnet schools, to which it responded in part by offering a robust slate of arts programs. In this context, high enrollment meant job security: "I guess I did work at growing the program, [but it was] more out of fear than ambition." "Your full-time position was constantly in danger," Kaylen said, adding, "if you didn't have your numbers high enough, [administrators] would threaten you with bringing you down to .80 time." Despite it all, she concluded, "I loved that school." Indeed, we saw evidence of this when visiting Kaylen at FMS. Five years removed, CMS memorabilia—photos with former students, autographed concert programs—still adorned the wall near her desk.

Calli

It is cold and cloudy in mid-February. "Little chickens in the back, let's move it!" Calli playfully prods seventh-grade girls' choir students to get to their seats at the beginning of the hour. A White woman in her early 30s, Calli is warm and maternal in relating to students. "I think that every aspect of her life is just making sure that we get the best of what we do . . . I really love her," one of her students later told us. Projected on the screen is a preclass writing prompt: "What is something you should listen for as you sing?" Once class begins, students discuss their answers, with Calli affirming and then expounding their points. Shortly thereafter, warm-ups start—stretches and posture checks ("position 1," Calli reminds students) followed by breathing exercises ("Engage that core"), vocalises, and then sight-singing. "We cannot create a great sound without air," Calli instructs. She tells students that air and confidence are all they need, joking that she might even get these words tattooed on her forehead for students' easy reference. Calli overhears one student singing an octave below the rest of the ensemble and asks if she is feeling sick. The girl says yes and Calli says it is okay for her to sing down the octave "as long as it isn't hurting her vocally." Interactions like these are a common occurrence throughout Calli's rehearsal, likely one of the reasons her students express feelings of love and care when discussing their connection with her: "I like everything about [Calli]," one student said. With annual festival only a few weeks away, students are serious, attentive and well-adjusted to Calli's rehearsal routine and expectations—no doubt an outcome of the years spent rebuilding.

When Calli started teaching at Southeastern Middle School (SMS), nine years before this study commenced, the choir room looked like any ordinary classroom, complete with seated student desks. Now, when one enters, the choral risers, posture-enhancing chairs, solfege

signs, and back wall lined with trophies from recent festivals and competitions tell a story of music—and achievement. Calli's tenure began with 60 students enrolled and peaked at over 115. In recent years, she said, participation wavered between 60 and 80 in three choirs (two beginning, one advanced). The school restructured as a 7–8th grade campus (from 6–8th), and it added an orchestra program, which siphoned some music-curious students from choir. Calli also recounted high teacher turnover and "inconsistency" at the elementary feeder program. Nevertheless, SMS's program was active and highly regarded, earning top marks at regional and national festivals and producing annually in conjunction with the theater department well-received schoolwide musicals.

Prior to SMS, Calli taught music and art for three years at Spruce Stream Elementary School (SSES), her first post-college job. She left SSES for SMS not for any particular interest in (re)building but because she wanted to teach choir. Nevertheless, navigating various challenges at SSES—insufficient resources, lack of school and district support, bans on fundraising, performances, and travel—informed Calli's approach to leadership at SMS. She became more adaptable, improved her class structure and design, and learned to rely on support through friends, colleagues, and previous teachers. She also drew inspiration from her former middle school choir director: "I learned everything from [her]. I mean, she is absolutely amazing. I direct like her; I teach like her." Calli's philosophy of music education was tripartite: (a) developing student confidence and independence was her main goal; (b) increasing musicianship through notation reading skills, vocal technique, and performance opportunities was a close second; and (c) encouraging her students to learn to apply and transfer the first two concepts to their future lives were also important to her. This philosophy informed every aspect of her teaching and spoke to her desire for students to "grow in their musicianship and apply those things . . . in and outside of the classroom."

Themes

Formal Structure

Like most voluntary associations, the choir programs at SMS and FMS were structurally noncomplex. Each was led by a single director; all other members (e.g., students) were volunteers. One theme relating to formal structure emerged: choir as an open system.

Choir as an Open System. Kaylen and Calli structured their programs as open systems. Any interested student could join. One of Calli's students stated, "No matter how old or young you are, you can always go and be in choir. It's not like a thing where you have to have a certain amount of experience to be in it." Still, both teachers implemented (or wished to implement) intraprogram hierarchy (e.g., beginning, advanced choirs). Calli retained authority to decide who was placed in the top eighth-grade choir at FMS. But she eschewed formal auditions: If a student had been in choir the prior year, they were automatically enrolled in the advanced group. FMS's six ensembles were separated by gender (boys, girls) and grade (sixth, seventh, eighth) but not by achievement or experience. This structure had evolved during the (re)building process, starting from the Choir Club, which

was a nonauditioned mixed choir, to the six gender-separate choirs. At the time of the study, Kaylen was still working toward establishing a merit/experience-based hierarchy:

> I would like to be able to have hand-selected levels of choir [at FMS]. I'd like to be able to choose an advanced choir, intermediate choir, and beginning choir. And choose who's in each of those groups. I'd love to have more control over the classes' schedules.

Incentives and Commitment

When asked why they joined choir, the students we interviewed alternated between normative ("I just really like singing") and affective incentives (their friends said, "it's really fun and you should join"). They credited utilitarian incentives much less (e.g., field trips, choir as an easy A). Kaylen and Calli recognized this rational calculation: If students perceived choir as more taxing than enriching, they would decamp for other electives. One theme relating to incentives and commitment emerged: choir as a social and musical haven.

Choir as a Social and Musical Haven. To gain students' favor and enhance students' commitment to their programs, both teachers cultivated choir as a social haven and as a place for substantive musical growth. These purposes were not inherently oppositional, but during (re)building it took effort to preserve equilibrium, particularly at FMS. Kaylen said that FMS's school culture was "anti-authority" and rife with "negativity and disrespect." Students did not hold the classical music in high esteem:

> There's not already an appreciation of music in place with the kids. There's not a culture of appreciating…more fine art styles of music. In that case, it's more about getting the kids more involved, more enthusiastic, motivated, confident…There's really low confidence [at FMS].

Earlier in her career, working for schools with robust music education supports, Kaylen stressed the "integrity and perfection of the performance." To build at FMS, she undertook a "total adjustment of [her] standards" and challenged herself: "Is it more about the music or more about the kids you're teaching?" Once she moved from a product to process orientation in her teaching, she said, "rehearsals got a lot more fun, but [students] also performed much better." Furthermore, she tackled students' low confidence head-on:

> I was on [students] for weeks about being professional and about pride and about representing yourself [and] about how to behave at the [first] concert…And they killed that. They were so well behaved, and they were so professional on stage. And they got such good responses from parents and teachers and stuff…Then the next school day, some of the kids who are usually very immaturely behaved…kind of difficult for their teachers and stuff—I mean, they walked differently. They had so much pride that next day after that first concert, it was so obvious….they just sat

> taller, they walked taller, they acted more mature, it boosted their morale; it gave them something to be really proud of.

Like Kaylen, Calli saw performance achievement as a byproduct of social and emotional care. She did not, however, express as much tension between her social and musical goals, perhaps as a function of being further along the (re)building process. Overall, to boost student commitment, Calli tried to "create a culture of encouragement in the room" and "shut down disrespect in any form." She elaborated:

> [T]he biggest thing for me is that I feel like if I can connect with my kids and encourage even the one that sits there with their head down the entire time to find the strength within…even if it's not a solo, even if it's just to sing out in their part. [I] really praise them for that, [to] help them to feel a part of something… [T]hey'll do anything after that. I mean they will, they'll perform for you [if] they know that you're there for them.

Calli described her program as a "little choir family." She endeavored to create a "safe" experience for students. SMS students seemed to concur, with social solidarity and vulnerability arising as themes in interviews. On "rough days," one student said, "I come [to choir] and I can just sing. And no one [is] judging, no one's mean to you or anything like that." Another student chimed in: "Letting my emotions go and not having to hold back anymore" was a compelling feature of choir membership. Mutual interests and compatible personalities enriched the social fabric. It was not just about relationships; it was about the right kind of relationships. "I think my choir friends are really quirky like me…just as weird as me," one student described.

Leadership and Authority

Formal leadership was vested in the teachers. Calli and Kaylen were responsible for setting and assessing their programs' goals (e.g., student participation and learning) as well as carrying out their programs' core functions (e.g., teaching). Despite this, to (re)build, both teachers understood parents and students as essential partners. Two themes emerged: parental engagement and student agency.

Parental Engagement. As the SMS and FMS choir programs matured and Calli and Kaylen coul no longer personally execute every task, they relied increasingly on parental delegation. Calli contrasted her SMS parents with those at her previous school, SSES, whom she was "afraid to call." Over time at SMS, she said she developed "thicker skin" and learned not to take personally the "rare" criticism she received from parents, acknowledging that in the aggregate they were "very supportive" and "always willing to help." She reported "constantly get[ting] volunteer slips" from parents to assist with transportation, costuming and makeup, and other tasks. Asked whether this was always the situation at

SMS, Calli said no, explaining that she "definitely had to cultivate 'Choir Parents'":

> There was really no program when I got there. [SMS was] all about theater and… there were "theater moms, theater moms, theater moms," and before I knew it—it's taken some years—but finally we have "choir moms."

Kaylen conveyed that, although FMS choir parents were generally supportive, they had not yet shown they would back music over sports.

> I've never been a big fan of doing after-school stuff for middle schools. Because [students] can't drive, and it's just such a hassle with parents. For whatever reason, it's so much easier to get parents of students involved in sports to find [transportation] for them to do after school stuff. There seems to be no objection to that. But after school for choir stuff is just, I don't know, they're not into it.

To compensate, Kaylen implemented "rehearsal field trips" to the performance venue during the school day. This was the only way she could practice with the full 7th-and 8th-grade choirs, which were respectively split between two class periods on the schedule.

Student Agency. Both teachers allowed for student input and discretion. For instance, Calli appoints students to lead rehearsal "pods." In class after a performance trial, but prior to providing feedback, Calli has students separate into their pods to interdependently define and remedy vocal and musical issues. Then, the choir would reconvene to discuss recommendations. By decentering herself, Calli gave students personal stakes in musical problem-solving. Even more, since she made appointments on a rotating basis, every student had a turn as pod leader. One student cited the pods as a context in which she made friends in choir: "We're all helping each other. It makes [choir] like 10 times easier."

For her part, Kaylen spoke of how she privileged students in the repertoire selection process, at least to an extent:

> I don't want to force them into having to perform stuff. I want them to want to perform. And so far, that's been happening. But it happens only with a carrot…you know, like with having them sing "Glory"…they've been wanting to do that song and wanting to do that song…It's probably going to be so-so with a middle school choir doing it. But they're just so enthusiastic about it. And that's when they're going to sound their best is when they're very enthusiastic about the song they're doing and want to do it. They always sound…ANY choir sounds best on the songs they like the most. I've been giving them a lot more influence on that.

Neither program had defined mechanisms for student leadership (e.g., officers). Kaylen and Calli instead conveyed informally that they valued students' perspectives and that students' interests were forefront in shaping program outcomes. One SMS student said of Calli,

"She works so hard for us."

Environmental Conditions

Calli and Kaylen understood the give-and-take power dynamics of their school contexts (i.e., the environment). One theme relating to environmental conditions emerged: micropolitical maneuvering.

Micropolitical Maneuvering. Participants navigated stakeholder relationships with strategy and care, working to influence various constituencies toward what they believed would boost (re)building. Campus administrators were key actors. They decided if trips were approved, new risers bought, and master schedules made more accommodating—determinations that facilitated and, at times, hindered (re)building. For instance, when Kaylen asked for gender-separate choirs, the structure she thought best suited to her adolescent students, FMS's principal balked. He was concerned about the collateral impacts on the master schedule (e.g., imbalanced enrollments in physical education). Kaylen moved to solve the problem for him, explaining:

> I did beg and beg and beg and I had to bug him a lot. The last two months before the break that year, I got a bunch of research support. I got all the supporting evidence of why it's best…I went to the P.E. department and got their numbers and kind of configured it in two different ways, which days it would make sense to have all the boys on one day and the girls on another day for each grade level. And, anyway, he got frustrated a few times, but…he eventually gave me the nod and I was able to switch them over.

Kaylen said she learned to never advance a request "without asking other people in the office what kind of day [the principal] was having." "The motto around here is you just have to catch him in a good mood." This strategic maneuvering—though "not consistent with any principal" for whom Kaylen had worked—proved shrewd. Her appeals were seldom denied.

Calli was similarly conscious of how to craft a persuasive case for (re)building, or more precisely, with whom to ally to advance that case. Of her campus leadership, she said:

> It's always been me going to my principal. I think if I were to go to the district, they would absolutely say no. It's been my principal's voice to [the district], saying, 'I have an ask for this, and we need it, so we're getting it.'

Calli said she "got to know [the principal] and what appeals to [her]." She knew that the principal was sensitive to unfavorable comparisons between SMS and other schools: "She doesn't like to hear that [the neighboring districts'] programs have this, and we don't." Thus, in developing her arguments, Calli would assemble "examples of other programs

that were successful."

More broadly, Calli made sure to put on quality performances from the beginning of her tenure, repeatedly citing the need to "produce good shows" that satisfied the district's "high standards." To the extent she couched her propositions to decision-makers in these values, she was more likely to prevail. Calli was also often at pains to conspicuously link any resources she received to program outcomes. She explained her thinking in reference to a successful petition for new uniforms:

> [T]hat was the first thing I got. Buddy, I still have 'em! I'm still using them. I am taking care of them. I perform in them… I handled it well. I took care of it. I utilized it to its fullest and [the principal] saw how—she was able to come and view and see the things improve and then, slowly, it was like step by step, then I asked for the next thing and then I asked for the next thing. I don't bombard. You never bombard anybody with a zillion things, because Lordy knew I had a list when I got here. But, at the same time, I was like, 'nope, this is a process.'

Organizational Effectiveness

Calli and Kaylen defined program success both narrowly and broadly. Two themes representing these poles emerged: public performance achievement and long-term musical engagement.

Public Performance Achievement. While Calli and Kaylen addressed students' psychological and musical needs in day-to-day instruction, to (re)build, they also acknowledged the importance of developing and sustaining public profiles for their programs via concerts, community performances, and adjudicated festivals. Calli made sure her choir students were active in local events:

> It's fun to take my eighth graders [to the annual community Christmas festival]. They wear the little silly hats, and they love it because they can hang out, eat at the food trucks and different things. The community gets to see them, and lots of times, they'll put it in the paper…and so I really do think that the community is very supportive of the arts.

In spring 2019, one year after the program's founding, Kaylen's FMS choir students earned top scores at the annual choral festival. Kaylen described FMS's program as "very beloved right now by administration and teachers," noting that "student engagement, morale, [and] pride" had increased markedly. The SMS program was similarly decorated. In their most recent contest appearance, one adjudicator wrote about one of Calli's choirs: "Best of the festival. How can I comment?"

Long-Term Musical Engagement. In addition to proximate performance goals, Calli and Kaylen also prioritized the development of lifelong musicianship. They understood

their programs as but single stops on students' musical journeys, stressing the need for them to be autonomously and persistently engaged in high school and beyond. Long-term membership, maturation within the program, and continuity between years were core effectiveness themes. Kaylen talked to her 7th-grade boys about goals for the following year, teaching them that choir was a multiyear endeavor. She spoke of establishing a culture of growth in the FMS program:

> [Students are] excited about performing. That's there. They like to sing. They like to perform. They like the attention it gives them. They like the pride that they feel from it. But I want the desire to improve to be just as natural as that is...I want that to be part of the culture as well as well as the desire to perform and the expectation that they're going to sing, but I want to add the expectation that they are going to sing and that they're going to open their ears and listen to what I'm saying so they can get better at stuff and really refine it. That's still missing from about half of them.

Calli described SMS choir as a "good well-rounded choral program." She elaborated on the benefits she hoped her students would gain:

> I really do think that they learn the ins and outs of music, not just how to read it, but also how to connect with it on a personal level and emotional level. I think that that brings them a lot of joy. And learning how to not only read the music, sing the music, but perform the music well…my goal is that if they can learn how to sing and learn how to perform the music well and relate to it, I think that's really all I can ask of my middle schoolers.

Discussion

In this inquiry, we sought to understand secondary school choir program (re)building through an organizational lens (Knoke & Prensky, 1984). Findings showed that (re)building was situated and phased, with school culture, policy, administrator relations, and program age emerging as salient factors. Participants adopted philosophies of open access and cast their choirs as socially rich, emotionally safe, and musically challenging. Students' motivations for persisting in choir were primarily affective and normative (e.g., to develop singing skills and to be with friends) rather than utilitarian (e.g., choir as an easy A). With some caveats, which we discuss in what follows, our data mostly reinforce Knoke and Prenksy's (1984) theoretical insights on voluntary associations.

Incentives and member choice were central to (re)building (Knoke & Prensky, 1984). The FMS and SMS choir programs were, and their directors understood them to be, fundamentally voluntary. This impression, though present in most elective music programs, seemed to take on added weight because of (re)building. Recruitment, for instance, is top

of mind for virtually any ensemble director (Luethi, 2015). For Kaylen at FMS, however, the issue rose from imperative to existential. Enrollment governed how many choirs she had, if they could be gender-separate, and ultimately, whether there would be a choir program at all. FMS's recent history was one without choir; to the degree student interest waned, the school could easily revert to its band-only status. Teaching against such a backdrop—where program growth and student participation are tantamount to job security—is a sobering reality for many teachers who (re)build. Optimizing enrollment is in a sense a core professional competency.

For Kaylen, Calli, and their students, normative and affective incentives superseded utilitarian incentives. Students were keen on being engaged and challenged musically (normative), and they sought acceptance within the choir community (affective). These findings reinforce long-held notions about the social value of choir (Adderley et al., 2003; Kennedy, 2002), but they also support more recent scholarship linking psychological needs satisfaction to students' persistence in music. Freer and Evans (2018, 2019) demonstrated that in addition to teacher and peer relationships, music students valued competence. "Fun" but otherwise nonsubstantive classrooms, the authors held, were unlikely to grow participation in school music. In the current study, we reveal a further nuance. Compared to Calli, Kaylen struggled to keep her musical and social aims in balance, needing more proverbial "carrots" to sustain student engagement. This difference is possibly attributable to the age of Kaylen's program (3 years) compared to Calli's (9 years). Prior research has shown tradeoffs between group cohesion and artistic excellence even in established choral communities (Parker, 2016), but further inquiry is needed on how these tensions affect (re)building, whether they dissipate as programs mature, and how teachers should properly respond.

Our findings partially echoed Knoke and Prensky's (1984) description of voluntary associations as characterized by an "ideology of democratic participation" (p. 8). To (re)build, Calli and Kaylen cast their programs as open systems, enabling any interested student to join. Reducing or eliminating entry barriers has been linked to growth in school music participation (Hawkinson, 2015; Pendergast, 2020). However, the NMS and FMS choirs did not operate as full-throated democracies (Allsup, 2003), and neither program had formal student leadership structures (e.g., officers). The teachers instead took lesser steps to center students and decenter themselves. Examples included Calli's student-led rehearsal pods and Kaylen's more inclusive, student-friendly view of repertoire. These efforts were sufficient to generate student buy-in, but they could hardly be construed as "severe restrictions" (Knoke & Prensky, 1984, p. 8) on teacher authority; Kaylen and Calli retained final say on program matters. This divergence from the purely voluntary association—in degree if not in kind—provides a possible avenue for future inquiry. Student age and maturity may be determinants; we studied middle rather than high school programs. Length of program history could also matter. In the beginning phases of (re)building, power may necessarily be more centralized until students are taught to lead. More research on these and other questions would be useful.

Although the FMS and SMS programs were structurally noncomplex (Knoke & Prensky,

1984), Kaylen and Calli still carefully considered program design, especially as enrollment climbed. Kaylen expressed interest in instituting merit-based ensemble placement. Calli, further along in (re)building, already employed such a scheme: SMS students were eligible for the premier choir after one year in the training group. Structure can come with benefits and downsides. On the one hand, tiered ensembles (e.g., beginning, advanced choirs) are a common means of inducing multiyear retention. Returning singers often value placements commensurate with their experience and commitment. Furthermore, as Kaylen found, physiological differences between adolescent males and females often make gender separation the pedagogically optimal arrangement (Sweet, 2020).

On the other hand, hierarchical structure could undermine open access. Students may be disheartened if intermediate (Major, 2017; Major & Dakon, 2016) and treble ensembles (Wilson, 2012) are viewed as less capable and prestigious than their mixed choir counterparts. Unfettered entry for new students (NMS and SMS) along with advancement for returning students (SMS) was adequate for (re)building in this inquiry, but questions remain. Conventional tiering and gender separation may not always be appropriate. For instance, in programs with one or two choirs, within-ensemble distinctions could be more effective. All students would sing in the same ensemble, but the more experienced students would get increased responsibilities (e.g., solos, section leader duties). To counter perceptions that single-gender choirs are less valued, Palkki (2015) recommended a somewhat atypical structure: an entry-level mixed choir that feeds into premier treble and tenor-bass groups. Meanwhile, discourse continues on possible tensions between choir's social and pedagogical aims vis-à-vis gender and sex (e.g., Freer, 2019; Palkki, 2015). Additional inquiry and practical experimentation would shed much-needed light on how structure impacts student learning, motivation, and more broadly, program (re)building.

To (re)build in schools with finite resources, Calli and Kaylen relied on administrator and stakeholder support, "protective alliances" that proved critical (Knoke & Prensky, 1984, p. 11). They learned how to calibrate engagement with decision-makers. Calli forged strong ties with SMS's principal, trusting her to advocate to district leaders on the program's behalf. She also submitted requests incrementally so as not to overwhelm. Kaylen was not close to the principal at FMS, transacting as needed and only after considering his disposition. If the principal was in good spirits, according to his assistant or other support staff, Kaylen would move forward her appeal; if not, she would defer. These findings echo recent inquiries that showed music teachers deal strategically with administrators, forming strong or weak bonds as circumstances dictate (Shaw, 2020) and understanding where to bring and how to frame their requests to secure favorable outcomes (Major, 2013).

Establishing a large ensemble program requires mediation of varied stakeholder interests. For instance, community support may be chiefly driven by public performances and competitions. Parents, certainly not indifferent to performance quality, nevertheless may focus more on whether their child is safe, contented, and productive in the program, assessments that may or may not track performance outcomes. Administrators have cross-cutting concerns including the program's relative fit within the school's operations and culture, public

regard, and teacher professional competence, among others. Discerning and responding to these complex interests requires an understanding of micropolitics, how power is shared and wielded at the local level (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Micropolitics has been used to examine music teacher practice broadly (e.g., Conway & Hibbard, 2018) but not with respect to (re)building, where our findings suggest it plays a significant role. Kaylen rightly sensed the principal's disapproval of gender-separate choirs was rooted more in operations than in substance. In drafting and proposing a new schedule that preempted any P.E.–choir enrollment imbalance, Kaylen advanced a policy solution instead of merely raising a policy problem. She was able to "talk back to and shape policy" (Schmidt, 2020, p. 4), and she got her gender-separate choirs.

Policy deference, resources, and administrator cooperation—all vital in (re)building—were obtained in large measure through micropolitics. Kaylen and Calli knew how to frame and time their requests, with whom to ally, and who to avoid. They cultivated micropolitical literacy, or the "capacity to understand, navigate and influence the micropolitical realities" of their schools (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002, p. 756). Availability of music programs in schools is often observed as binary: Some schools have music programs, and others do not (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Our findings reveal a more complicated picture. Over three years, FMS progressed from no choir, an afterschool-only choir club, half-time choir, to a comprehensive six-ensemble program. We cannot establish definitively that Kaylen's micropolitical prowess caused this trajectory. It is true, however, that FMS is musically richer for her efforts. Thus, to the extent micropolitics explains music program availability, even partly, it could be a generative lens for future research.

Conclusion

For some teachers, as Kaylen and Calli's experiences illustrate, (re)building is a core element of their work. While general principles of program leadership are well enumerated in the literature (Ballantyne, 2007; Phillips, 2016; Scheib, 2003), missing until now were explanations of how these notions apply in the (re)building context. This study provides both an initial account and a foundation for future scholarship and action. We do not resolve questions of what constitutes success or what determines when a choir program is (re)built; these are best settled situationally. Nevertheless, our findings show that (re)building is a compound process, transcending routines of rehearsal and performance to involve broader concerns such as micropolitics, program structure, and student incentives. As future work commences in practice, advocacy, and especially empirical arenas, we encourage use of the wider, organizational perspective we employed here.

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