

IJRCS

International Journal of Research in Choral Singing

The Scientific Research Journal of the American Choral Directors Association

International Journal of Research in Choral Singing
(2023) Vol. 11 43-61

Disrupting the Choral Class System: A Journey of One High School Choral Program

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Abstract

This case study sought to investigate one educator's attempt to disrupt "the choral class system" within their public high school choral program. The following questions guided this research: (a) How does one teacher restructure a choral program to increase student access? (b) What meanings do student participants ascribe to participation? (c) What do the choral teacher, singers, and administrators cite as benefits and limitations of the choral program? Over four months, we conducted observations and gathered interviews from the choral teacher, administrators, and 43 student participants. Two waves of data collection and analysis illuminated findings reported as five significant program structures. Findings highlighted the teacher's approach, such as non-auditioned curricular ensembles, deep relationships built among participants, and individual growth and leadership opportunities. Findings also exposed continuing operations of power and a struggle to break free from choral class systems. Suggestions for further investigation include gaining additional insights and understanding into students' needs, and continuing critical examination of the choral curricula and hierarchy within choral music education.

Keywords: choral music education, school choir, auditions, case study

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In late 2016, Mr. A, a teacher from an upper-middle class suburb of a large city began to publicly voice his opinions on what he termed a “choral class system.” Different than constructs of social class, Mr. A defined a “choral class system” as one where teachers classify singers through assignment into different groups as “upper, middle, and lower class” based on teacher-perceived talent, with little hope to move between classes. Through publishing blogs, appearing on podcasts, and posting on social media, Mr. A aimed to abolish the “choral class system” and create more inclusive singing environments. He wrote about choral programs that featured “the best” rather than “the rest” — programs that highlighted some students and created dichotomous systems where those who were not labeled elite singers had no option other than to settle an ensemble perceived as “lesser” or discontinue participation altogether. Mr. A also questioned competitions and festivals as measurements of perceived success. Finally, Mr. A encouraged the development of independent musicianship and placed the responsibility on students and the teacher working collectively to help everyone find their place in the choral setting.

This case study sought to investigate one teacher’s attempt to disrupt “the choral class system” within their public high school choral program. The following questions guided our research: (a) How does one teacher restructure a choral program to increase student access? (b) What meanings do student participants ascribe to their participation? (c) What do the choral teacher, students, and administrator cite as benefits and limitations of the choral program?

Related Literature

Scholars have found that high school students commonly enroll in school choirs as an elective (Elpus & Abril 2019), and that students join choir to sing with others, to express themselves, and to locate balance in a full academic schedule (Adderley et al., 2003; Freer, 2009). Scholars also have illuminated several predictors that influenced students’ high school music participation, including positive musical self-concept, peer influence, and family musical engagement (Demorest et al., 2017; Siebenaler, 2006) and have identified benefits of choir participation, consisting of musical growth, joy, and a sense of belonging and shared experience with others (Bartolome, 2013; Mills, 2010; Parker, 2010, 2014). In Parker (2014), “being chosen” in auditioned contexts fostered adolescent development of positive social identity, defined as the experience of belonging to a social group. However, when singers do not gain entry to their preferred ensemble or reside in what they perceive as “middle-level groups,” their attitudes about participation and perspectives about their ensemble may be negatively impacted (Gauthier, 2005). Furthermore, the compounded stressor of SATB ensembles at the top of the choral hierarchy and an abundance of treble-voiced singers increases competition for some participants, and brings a continued need for positive image-building in treble ensembles, even those that rival their SATB counterparts (Gauthier, 2005; O’Toole, 1998, 2005; Wilson, 2012).

Often characterized by performance and competition (McPherson & Hendricks, 2010),

scholars have called for reform of traditional ensembles to envision school music education for all students (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Morrison, 2001), which has led teachers to look critically at ensemble structures. As such, teachers have attempted to heighten engagement by offering alternatives to a mostly Western Classical repertoire base (Hess, 2015), vocal production (Good-Perkins, 2020), and vocal timbre (Shaw, 2020). Additionally, scholars have identified that the perceived value of school music declines for many students when they enter adolescence (McPherson & Hendricks, 2010; Simpkins et al., 2010) and poor self-concept influences a student's decision to participate in an ensemble (Demorest et al., 2017; Sichivista, 2004). Accordingly, some educators have removed auditions, built non-auditioned ensembles to increase participation, and sought to combat negative self-perceptions of singing ability highlighted by auditions (Abril, 2007; Bartolome, 2013).

Some choral teachers have changed the classroom structure, varied ensemble foci, and invested more time toward process versus product (Dakon & Major, 2017; Hess, 2012; O'Toole, 1994, 2005). Dakon and Major (2017) suggested that choral teachers ensure ensembles have distinct identity features such as unique names and differing performance opportunities. O'Toole (1994, 2005) proposed altering classroom structure from students seated together with the choral teacher set apart to small group arrangements scattered throughout a room. Hess (2012) recommended re-envisioning the "final performance model" to accommodate more process-based music-making. Even with these proposals, O'Toole (1994, 2005) observed that individuals must be aware of constantly changing power relations, relations that reflect the specific setting where they are produced. Noting that traditions fight to be preserved, individuals have continued to reproduce prescribed norms (Garnett, 2005; Hess, 2012; O'Toole, 2005). While extant research supports that some choral teachers have mitigated negative student perceptions (Dakon & Major, 2017), efforts to change the structures of their programs do not always change student perceptions, and students may continue to rank ensembles and strive to become part of their self-labeled "top-level" ensemble (Dakon & Major, 2017; Major & Dakon, 2016). Researchers recommend diffusing power structures in choral classrooms by empowering student voice in repertoire selection and making musical decisions, singing without a conductor, and engaging in group creativity (Dakon & Major, 2017; Hess, 2012; O'Toole, 1994, 2005). With this study, we investigated one educator's efforts to alter the structure of his choral program by abolishing auditioned curricular ensembles and sharing power with his students.

Method

We used a case study approach to more fully understand a complex context bound by time and physical structure (Stake, 1995). Specifically, we engaged in an intrinsic case study as we purposefully selected an information-rich music setting that was both unique and

³ All names used in this study are pseudonyms

common (Stake, 2005, 2010). The case was common in that the school, Eisenhower High School,³ reflected other mid-sized, upper-middle class, suburban high schools (see Table 1 for CCD data). The case was unique in how the choral teacher created and publicized his desire to disrupt a “choral class system.” To bind the case, we limited discussion to the choral program and analyzed data together in one unit. Believing in the “power of the particular” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006, p. 28), we closely engaged in data collection with various constituents of the school choral program including the choral teacher, choral students, and administrators.

Table 1

Eisenhower High School Demographics

School	Geographic Location	School Enrollment	Racial Demographics	Free/Reduced Lunch
Eisenhower High School	Large Suburb	1554	71% White, non-Hispanic, 23% Asian/Pacific Islander 5% Hispanic < 1% American Indian/ Alaska Native, Black non-Hispanic, and two or more races	6.5% eligible

Source. CCD public school data 2019-2020 school year

After Institutional Review Board approval, we visited Eisenhower High School to introduce the study and hand out consent forms with all members of the choral program, the choral teacher, building principal, and arts administrator. Approximately two weeks later, we returned to the school and began our data collection, which lasted four months. Data collection was completed before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants included the choral teacher, the building principal, the arts administrator, and 43 choral students who chose to be a part of the study (see Table 2).

Table 2

Student Participant Data

Pseudonym	Grade	Current Choir Enrollment	Acappella involvement	Data Wave	Type of Interview
Angela	9	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Eliza	9	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Lucia	9	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Jacqueline	9	Treble	No	First	Focus group

continued on the next page

Noah	9	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Olive	9	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Veronica	9	Mixed	No	First	Focus group
Annabelle	10	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Caryn	10	Treble	Yes	Second	Individual
Catherine	10	Treble	No	Second	Individual
Christopher	10	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Francesca	10	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Hannah	10	Treble	Yes	First	Focus group
Jacob	10	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Katelynn	10	Treble	Yes	First	Focus group
Lilianna	10	Treble	Yes	Second	Individual
Maggie	10	Treble	No	First	Focus group
Robert	10	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Suni	10	Treble	Yes	First	Focus group
Claudia	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Emily	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
James	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Jenna	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Liam	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Lorraine	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Luna	11	Mixed	Yes	Second	Individual
Maria	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Individual
Mason	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Michael	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Zoe	11	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Amara	12	Mixed	Yes	Second	Individual
Angelique	12	Mixed and Treble	Yes	First	Focus group
Danielle	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Individual
Eleni	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Individual
Ellie	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Jane	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Individual
Joseph	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Myra	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Individual
Nessa	12	Mixed	Yes	Second	Individual
Nikki	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group
Oliver	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Individual
Robyn	12	Mixed	Yes	Second	Individual
Rose	12	Mixed	Yes	First	Focus group

Our first wave of data collection included 60-80 minute, semi-structured individual interviews with the choral teacher, Mr. A; Principal S of Eisenhower High; and the fine arts coordinator for the school district, Pat. We also conducted five student-participant focus group interviews lasting 40-50 minutes each with a variety of students enrolled in grades 9-12 and six individual student-participant interviews of 30-40 minutes each. We transcribed and open coded the data separately using topic, descriptive, and pattern codes (Saldaña, 2021) and engaged in weekly analysis meetings to discuss what the data revealed. We then amended the interview protocol to probe emerging categories and went back into the field.

Our second wave of data collection included individual interviews with seven student participants lasting 30-40 minutes and a second interview with Mr. A for 60 minutes. To assist in triangulation, we added to the data corpus field notes from five full days of choral observations and a choral concert, and supporting documents (blogs, parent letters, and website materials). We coded data separately and repeated the same process with emerging categories to add a level of verification to our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As categories emerged, we noted their alignment with Mr. A's choral program structure and organized accordingly. In addition to the rigor of data analysis, varied data sources, supporting documents, and interview transcripts strengthened the trustworthiness of our findings. In crafting the study's findings, we drew from a variety of data sources to verify and illuminate the analysis.

As choral educators and teacher educators, we brought personal subjectivities to this research. To heighten our awareness, we regularly unpacked with one another, through weekly meetings and keeping a research journal, our reasons for conducting this research, our perspectives, and our aim, to understand how one teacher sought to transform his choral program. In addition to analyzing the data separately and then engaging in regular discussions, which provided a platform with which to challenge one another's interpretations, we often compared together student, administrator, and teacher interview transcripts with field notes and support documents to ask questions of one another and uncover subjectivities.

Case Profile

Located in an upper-middle class suburb of a large city and enrolling approximately 1500 students, Dwight Eisenhower is a four-year, co-educational high school with a music program including bands, orchestra, and choirs. Mr. A began in the school district in 2000 and worked with a second choral teacher. Upon his colleague's retirement, the school district eliminated the second position and Mr. A became the sole choral teacher. As Mr. A began leading the program, he noticed balance issues with fewer lower voices and many upper voices in the freshmen choir. He also wondered why there was what he called "triple-dipping" in the mixed, chamber, and jazz choirs as several students participated in the same three groups. Mr. A experimented with a few different choral configurations and in

2004, he changed the focus which currently remains (see Table 3). During the time of our study, the mixed choir enrolled 72 singers and the treble choir enrolled 41 singers. Mr. A said he made changes to both curricular and extracurricular groups to “get rid of the extra things that I’m doing, the teacher-driven things, [so the] students would be empowered to start finding their own opportunities that I could help them foster but not be in charge of.”

Table 3

Choral Offerings Before and After Mr. A Restructured the Program

2000 Choral Offerings (Before Mr. A)	2004 Choral Offerings (Mr. A restructured)
Pull-Out Lesson Program	Pull-Out Lesson Program
Non-auditioned Freshmen Choir	Non-auditioned Treble Choir (grades 9-10)
Non-auditioned Mixed Choir	Non-auditioned Mixed Choir (lower voices grades 9-12 and upper voices grades 11-12)
Auditioned Curricular Chamber Singers	Extracurricular Student-Run Acappella Program
Auditioned Extracurricular Vocal Jazz	

Mr. A strove to facilitate the growth of each student through a pull-out lesson program where he focused on musical literacy and solo-style singing to develop his ideal of choral excellence. Typically involving fewer than four students, each choir student had a dedicated small group voice lesson during one period in their day each week. In a blog post, Mr. A stated that he “pioneered a philosophy that every student is a soloist,” and in our first interview, he said his goals were to teach students, “so they are singing like soloists but all listening, that they can read, that they’re self-sufficient, and that if I’m absent, the group would still function.” Mr. A also used pull-out lessons as a way to help address different levels of singing ability, and developed a flexible curriculum to address varied needs, saying, “We set the bottom line of what you should be attaining. But we do not set a top line. So a senior who’s going off to music school still wants to come to me and learn whenever they can.” During these pull-out lessons, Mr. A focused on developing sight reading ability, solo singing of classical repertoire, and asking students to provide feedback for one another. One aim of the pull-out lesson program was for students to participate in solo and ensemble adjudications and integrate feedback from judges into their practice. Mr. A shared that external feedback was important to confirm student progress; he also indicated that the majority of choir students received top ratings each year.

Mr. A created an extensive student leadership structure with executive and non-executive leadership positions. An example of executive leadership included president of the choral program or alto section leader, whereas a non-executive position might include room decorator or photographer. The application process for these roles involved submitting a form and resume, speaking in front of the choir, and interviewing with Mr. A and current offi-

cers. Mr. A stated the students took pride in these positions because “they realized if they get a position they earned it and they’re going to have respect from their peers and from me and that they’re really going to do something.”

To further encourage student voice and leadership, Mr. A started a student-run acappella program. At the time of study, eight student-run acappella groups rehearsed once weekly in students’ homes and performed in biannual acappella concerts. A distinguishing feature of the acappella program was that current students auditioned aspiring singers three times a year to fill their rosters. Though singers and Mr. A encouraged acappella students to participate in curricular choirs, and a majority enrolled in choral classes, singers could participate in acappella groups without becoming part of the curricular program.

Findings

Our findings focused on the perspectives of Mr. A, choral students, and administrators in realizing and understanding Mr. A’s aim to disrupt “the choral class system.” Findings also illuminated the support and complexity of fulfilling Mr. A’s aim for varied stakeholders. Our data analysis revealed five salient program structures, including (a) non-auditioned curricular choirs, (b) the pull-out lesson program, (c) student leadership roles, (d) social events, and (e) the student-run acappella program.

Non-Auditioned Curricular Choirs

Mr. A removed choral auditions to provide more opportunities and lessen barriers for students to join the curricular choral program. Mr. A’s policy aligned with the school’s open-enrollment policy, permitting students to enroll in any course, as long as they fulfilled the prerequisite, if one existed. The Fine Arts Coordinator Pat supported Mr. A’s policy stating his appreciation, “he doesn’t turn kids away.”

Student participants framed the benefits of a non-auditioned curricular program by stating what might prevent a student from auditioning, such as fear or feeling called out. Tenth grader Hannah said, “People might be nervous to join or people might think that they’re going to have to sing in front of everybody, and think that they’re going to have to be put on the spot, but it’s not like that.” Other student participants stated a non-auditioned policy fostered a space where everyone worked together to improve. Ninth grader Jacqueline said, “It gives everybody a chance to be a part of this so it’s not just the best of the best, it’s everybody; we all work together to be the best.” Several participants described that a non-auditioned program encouraged the choir to become a family because individuals were not competing with one another.

Student participants also shared several realities of the choral program. Even though students could easily sign up for choir without audition, participants discussed other factors prohibiting their participation. For example, participants suggested that guidance counselors dissuaded them from enrolling to focus on college readiness courses. Tenth grader

Robert said, “They’ll [guidance counselors] discourage it and I know also a lot of parents are like, ‘Well, do you want to do music or take more science electives?’...they don’t understand it’s more than just singing.” Though courses were designated technically as open enrollment, ninth and tenth grade treble singers were assigned to Treble Choir. Several participants described their excitement to “move up” to what they perceived was a more advanced Mixed Choir when they entered eleventh grade.

Even without auditioned entry, several participants highlighted that becoming a choir family involved prioritizing stronger musicians, particularly around performances. For example, when participants felt they could not sing a phrase of music accurately after several attempts, many stated they would “self-select” (using this exact term) and not sing the phrase, allowing others to perform the music successfully. Once the choir performed the phrase, participants would join back in with the choir. Participants also discussed the concert standing order, where Mr. A would place leaders and strongest singers in the front few rows of the ensemble. Rather than viewing self-selection or standing order as negative, participants expressed Mr. A’s choices benefitted the choir program as a whole.

During one focus group, student participants highlighted the challenges around addressing every singer’s growth in a non-auditioned choir program. For example, sophomore Annabelle suggested that she would enjoy a choral program which featured non-select and select groups for students who were more serious about choir saying, “It would be nice if we had non-select plus a select chamber group, not acappella because that’s all pop, but a classical choir.” Though participants described increased musicianship and confidence, some participants appeared to question what might be possible if Mr. A structured the program differently.

The Pull-Out Lesson Program

Mr. A sought to establish an environment of respect for what each student brought to the program, and a belief that everyone held the capacity to improve. Student participants likened Mr. A’s beliefs to the simple phrase “everyone can sing” (Oliver, 12th grade) and everyone should have a place to grow their skills. Additionally, student participants noted that they experienced personal growth and tied their growth to Mr. A’s beliefs. Eleventh grader Michael explained, “He talks a lot about how you grow...it’s not just like I’m here to be in choir, it’s a personal experience [and] you’re gaining something from it.”

Student participants indicated that their growth occurred through two central aims of the pull-out lesson curriculum—learning solo repertoire and practicing sightreading. Madison mentioned, “Like for me, it’s helping for college because I’m learning the music.” Jessica said, “We do a lot of solo repertoire and I can only say like my confidence from when I first started here has gone up so much, but not only in music, like in everything.” Student participants also recognized that their growth happened over time. Eleventh grader Zoe said, “Stick with it for four years, or even if you join a couple years in, you’ll 100% see growth in the end.”

Ninth- through eleventh-grade students described preparing for lessons by practicing solo repertoire and completing Smart Music assignments. They also exhibited pride in reporting their superior scores from solo performance and ensemble competition. Luna said, “So like we have the lessons to work on the songs and then from January to the second or third week in May we’re all on solo repertoire and getting our songs ready to get the best possible grade [score] we can.” When students became seniors, Mr. A tasked them with mentoring younger singers rather than developing their solo work in pull-out lessons. Mentoring younger singers intersected with officer roles, such as sightreading leader. Senior Myra, a sightreading officer, said, “Right now I’m only working on teaching kids sight reading, so I’m not really learning...I wish I had time on a solo piece or something that’s maybe not even a piece but some college work.”

Student Leadership Roles

Our field notes described student leaders giving announcements, taking attendance, facilitating ticket sales for an upcoming concert, and suggesting corrections to others in their voice part during rehearsal. Mr. A expressed the importance of mentoring young leaders, and met with the executive board weekly to discuss upcoming events and address needs of the program. Student participants described the usefulness of leaders, particularly musical leaders, who could organize a sectional and sing out when they encountered challenging music. Student participants also discussed how leadership opportunities encouraged confidence and personal growth. Tenth grader Maggie said, “It’s taught me a lot about responsibility and being a good role model.” Senior Eleni expressed a similar sentiment that having so many leaders “exudes confidence across the whole program; it kind of trickles down.” Student participants who began in non-executive positions described their desire to ascend or their ascent to executive positions over years of choir involvement.

Mr. A described empowering students to make decisions, which the principal and arts administrator cited as beneficial and challenging. As beneficial, the principal noted the importance of Mr. A upholding boundaries while guiding students, saying:

It’s important that even though he is empowering them there still has to be somebody that oversees it, because we are talking about students and it is a school setting, and in order for them to learn somebody has to tell them when they’re doing something right or wrong or could be better and giving them feedback. So, he does provide that; he does give that to them, but he is also teaching them to be able to teach others.

Similarly, Pat, the Fine Arts Coordinator commended Mr. A for building a program where students lead effectively. He relayed a story:

We [Mr. A and I] were actually once speaking on a totally unrelated topic and his

class started and without prompting all of a sudden, we just heard singing, and two or three of the seniors had just gotten up and started to do the warm-ups and started to just lead the class until we were ready. There were no behavioral issues or things like that. Now from an administrative point of view I don't just see five minutes of a kid that's leading a class; I see five minutes of a kid leading a class but I know that took months to build up; that took a routine and a structure that had to be established, not only over the course of a couple of months, but a couple of years.

With regard to challenges, the principal noted that Mr. A had difficulty with what he termed "blurred lines" around the extracurricular acappella program and social events located off of school grounds. He mentioned that while Mr. A was busy with the varied expectations within the choral program, his students sometimes ran extracurricular performances and social events without him and he received feedback about Mr. A's lack of response to some student decisions and activities. Student participants appreciated the opportunity to gain leadership experience, yet a few of the oldest students also expressed challenges with having more responsibility than they wished, such as Myra, who said, "As a choir, I think he definitely tries to run on students and rely on them."

Social Events

Mr. A and choir participants facilitated social activities and events meant to encourage bonding within the curricular choirs. Some of these were lighthearted social activities like going to a pumpkin patch or end-of-the-year semi-formal dinner at a local hotel, while other events developed into traditions that solidified the choral program and how the singers felt bonded to one another.

One particular social event that almost every interviewee mentioned was a "candle night," held in the choral room on a late-winter weekend evening with Mixed Choir members. Student participants filled their responses about the night with descriptors such as "really special" and "a great experience" (Nessa, Angelique, Maria). The principal commented on how close the event made students feel, and how Mr. A believed in providing a space where students could come together and develop trust in one another. Though student participants did not offer the exact program of what occurred, they noted the event included lit candles, stories, awards, and a code of silence. They described "candle night" as a space to share personal aspects of themselves they might not ordinarily discuss in school, such as sharing about their home life. The awards focused on senior appreciation and student participants shared that they had the opportunity to tell seniors how much they meant to them. Mr. A acknowledged his role as a mandatory reporter in a few cases, but also explained that "candle night" helped students connect in different ways and brought the choir closer together.

Student participants who had not experienced "candle night" described feeling antic-

ipation for their turn when they became members of Mixed Choir and talked about the legend it held in the reputation of the choirs (Caryn, 10th grade). Events like “candle night” and the overall closeness the students felt in the program prompted several participants to discuss perceptions of “the choir as a cult” from their peers who did not participate in the choral program. They likened the cult metaphor to the closeness of the group; a few described that the closeness of choir students might be a detractor to others perceiving the choral program as open for all to join.

The Student-Run Acappella Program

Student participants explained that the acappella program had similar benefits to the curricular program, including student empowerment, vocal and musical development, and social elements. Though most student participants held membership in an acappella group, a few participants described auditioning multiple times to gain entry, and others had multiple auditions without success. A conversation with twelfth grader Amara shed light on the audition process:

Amara: I auditioned for the mixed groups every chance I could and I never got in. I mean it’s a growing experience because my friends and I would talk after each audition and I was like [telling myself], “You got better from that and you got better from last time.” So even though I didn’t get in it was still a growing experience.

Elizabeth: So, do you think at some point you would [audition again]? Maybe now?

Amara: Well, I definitely feel like at the end of that previous January audition I was like it’s my last audition; if they only let me in they’ll only have to deal with me for four months. But it was never like “Oh I’m going to get in,” like “I know it.”

Elizabeth: Do you get feedback about why [you don’t get in]?

Amara: I don’t really ask why because they kind of scare me, even though they’re my friends...it’s like awkward, like, “Hey why didn’t you guys let me in?”

Elizabeth: Yeah, but that’s not part of the process, I guess, is what I’m asking. Is it?

Amara: Yes.

Elizabeth: Meaning if it is not this time, kind of feedback, and then they don’t follow up, then there is no feedback?

Amara: Yeah, there is no feedback, yeah.

Some student participants stated they continued to re-apply with the hope they would be chosen and were told by student leaders to keep trying.

Acappella students were not required to become part of the choral program, but once individuals joined acappella groups, student participants described encouragement from peers to join curricular choirs. Tenth grade Caryn said, “I got into the group, and they basically said, like, you’ve got to join choir, like it’s just something you do.” At the time of study, all acappella leaders sang in curricular choirs as did most student participants.

In addition to holding auditions, openly competitive behavior between acappella groups did not align with Mr. A’s aim to disrupt “the choral class system.” For example, student participants described competition between groups. Eleventh grade Luna said, “There is definitely competition in between the groups and I don’t even know if it has anything to do with it, but I just feel judged if I say something or I get really nervous.” Student participants also described singers in acappella as those who take music seriously and plan a future in music. Tenth grade Catherine said, “Most of these people are looking to major in music or music education...these kids are dedicated; they go to each other’s houses to rehearse; Mr. A is not involved...our acappella groups are completely on their own.”

Discussion

Mr. A began his tenure at Eisenhower High School with an aim to open possibilities for more students to sing. In his 20 years at the high school, he and his students removed auditions to curricular choral participation and instituted a thriving acappella program. In particular, we noted that Mr. A built a sense of positive social identity across the high school choral program, reflecting extant research on youth choral programs’ interpersonal benefits (Bartolome, 2013; Dakon & Major, 2017; Parker, 2014). Data revealed the positive social bonds that student participants formed with others, a perceived openness within the non-auditioned curricular program, and unique opportunities for leadership. Our data also uncovered considerable district funding to provide pull-out lessons for every student and issues such as self-selection, concert standing order, and student leadership roles. We observed that student participants created structures within the acappella program that continued to fuel competition and “choral class systems.” In this discussion, we note the benefits and tensions we discovered and offer further considerations for music teachers and teacher educators as they strive to address choral class systems in their choral programs.

Mr. A focused on individuals within his program. He spent the majority of his time on sight-singing instruction and pull-out lessons, in contrast to extant research which asserts a teacher’s focus on the group (Parker, 2016). School district resources made possible Mr. A’s individual focus as part of his full-time position and simultaneously presented several challenges to enacting Mr. A’s aim to break down choral class systems. For example, financial resources gave Mr. A the agency to offer non-auditioned ensembles and individualize student growth, yet, the pull-out lesson program culminated in a statewide adjudication

process, which ranked student performances. Though Mr. A discussed the critical importance of narrative feedback from judges, which supported individual growth, he also cited continued superior ratings year after year, which reinforced and emphasized competition between students.

Even with Mr. A's focus on individual growth, not all students described feeling supported. More-experienced students in the program described limits to their vocal progress because of the focus on supporting less-experienced students in the pull-out lesson program. More-experienced students knew the value of their supportive roles, but they would have felt more challenged if they had the opportunity to enroll in a smaller ensemble with other advanced singers. Thus, even without the small group lesson structure, one implication of our study for music teachers would be to locate varied ways to present musical challenges for all students even if they hold dual roles supporting other singers.

While Mr. A's development of leadership positions strengthened student voice, student involvement, feelings of agency, and hierarchical relationships visible in the structure of executive and non-executive positions challenged his aim to include all. Executive officers enjoyed more facetime with Mr. A and more decision-making power within the choir. Non-executive officers strove to become executive officers and take on more leadership in the program. We also observed that the presence of so many leaders appeared to diffuse Mr. A's leadership and sense of direction with the curricular choirs. Numerous non-musical leadership positions may have shifted participants' focus away from their musical growth to social events that had little to do with the music-making itself. As a result of student participants feeling less musical direction in their curricular program, they created hierarchies of their own, similar to Abril (2013), and built identities around leadership positions and social events. Sometimes participants overtly recognized elements of the choral class system, such as acknowledging how they held auditions within the acappella program; other times, participants did not recognize, but described choral class systems. For example, participants spoke about how they would self-select not to sing passages of music, or how Mr. A placed certain singers in the front row during performances to achieve the best overall choral sound. These findings offer insights that music educators might heed, especially how students interpret a teacher's decisions, such as standing order, and solicit student feedback about the competition they may feel with one another in their ensembles. Another implication of this study is that music educators might construct leadership positions with students that provide direction and reflect shared musical values of the choral program.

After a few interviews, we observed that several student participants answered questions in a script-like way, which made us wonder how participants' choral identity may have been built from their teacher's narrative more than their own. Our findings reflect Mills (2010), who found that when participants explained their choral experiences, they appeared to repeat words they may have heard from their conductor. Findings also resonate with Hess' (2012) conceptions of the "docile chorister" who learned to govern themselves according to the expectations of those more powerful. The rich complexities of what Mr. A sought to achieve, that of developing each student's voice alongside power imbalances between

teacher and student, certainly became evident in this study. Student participants described a feeling of empowerment within their leadership roles but did not question their standing order during concerts or how afterschool activities relied on audition-only entry within a larger non-auditioned structure.

We noted that students in Mr. A's program described meaningful experiences, but program offerings did not address their desires to "move up" to more advanced ensembles (Abril, 2013; Dakon & Major, 2017; Major & Dakon, 2016). Several Treble Choir participants, a group enrolling ninth and tenth graders, stated their excitement to ascend to Mixed Choir or to gain entry into an acappella group. While Mr. A explained the choral voicing in a pragmatic way of not having enough lower voices to fill two choirs, his choice to include only upper-class treble singers in the mixed ensemble reflects common practices to situate SATB choirs at the top of the choral hierarchy (O'Toole, 1998, 2005). Simultaneously, students appeared to experience greater group identity in the auditioned, acappella groups reflecting Parker's (2014) positive social identity emphasis on "being chosen." This led us to wonder if group identity necessitated non-auditioned ensembles or ensembles at all levels with unique and distinct identities (Dakon & Major, 2017), even if that might include auditioned elements.

Beyond group identity, our data analysis highlighted another issue – striving to abolish choral class systems may not be an answer to combat out-group perceptions of choral programs. Researchers proposed that secondary school music can be seen as only for the talented (McPherson & Hendricks, 2010), and that even when teachers valued effort, students believed effort was not enough (Covington, 1984). In the case of Eisenhower High School, Mr. A took painstaking measures to rid his program of these perceptions. He strove to communicate that every student had a place in the program and that all students could improve musically from wherever they started. But researchers argue that making one's choir open to every student may have little to do with perceptions of singing ability (Demorest et al., 2017; Sichivista, 2004). Thus even without enrollment barriers, non-musical leadership positions, and the promise of self-growth, Mr. A's program drew less than 10% of the high school population. If a non-auditioned curricular program is meant to boost enrollment and make choir more accessible, our findings indicate that auditions may have little role in determining the attractiveness of a program. We therefore wonder what might happen if Mr. A flipped the program to build a curricular non-auditioned acappella model. Acappella programs, based on informal music practices, may represent one place where Mr. A, with his students, could facilitate deeper understandings of music-making as a space to connect, create, perform, and respond (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). Furthermore, acappella programs offered as curricular ensembles might build student agency as musical learners, value multiple creativities, and encourage differentiated instruction, further challenging traditional choral models.

As with other single case studies, we note limitations in generalizing one teacher's program to all teachers who might be looking to implement new approaches as a means to

help students develop identity, attract more students to participate in the program, or give students more agency over their learning outcomes. We acknowledge the considerable financial resources used to support each student's musicianship and racial homogeneity of the school, which limit the transferability of this case study to other contexts. Even with these limitations, we hope the case of Eisenhower High School may stimulate a number of questions and considerations. First, even though the literature suggests that a collaborative approach can diffuse power and remove hierarchies (Bres & Raufflet, 2013; Raelin, 2016), our data indicated that perhaps Mr. A put too much responsibility on his singers and needed to take different steps to empower their voice. Second, moving away from choral class systems brings power relationships to the surface and traditions that fight to be preserved (O'Toole, 1994). Students within Mr. A's program looked for musical advancement in the curricular choirs, and when they could not find advancement, they shaped the acappella program to fit their needs. Constant questioning and heightened awareness of reproducing hierarchies in choral music remain critical to transforming traditional choral spaces. Finally, while teachers would do well to focus on individual progress in choral programs, such as Mr. A, they must also consider the progress of the group to build strong social identity rooted in music-making interactions.

In conclusion, in studying Eisenhower High School, we reflected on the inevitability of choral class systems. In the United States, choral music publishers often prioritize SATB voicing in their catalogs and national associations emphasize auditioned choirs in conference offerings. Even with these established norms, Mr. A worked to disrupt choral class systems and influence his students to think differently about choral music and its possibilities. We wondered, if Mr. A and his students sought examples outside of their program to support their aims, what might they have found? These complexities signaled to us that abolishing a choral class system is not possible as long as prominent ensembles and national organizations continue to embrace this model.

We acknowledge that programs embracing choral class systems may also foster tensions within music classrooms. Music teachers must study and listen critically to student perspectives to address issues of power and facilitate places where all feel welcome to connect, create, perform, and respond. We recommend further study looking at choral teachers that mediate students' motivations to "move up" to the next ensemble with choral offerings that include and resonantly address students' needs. We also encourage further exploration into the overall role that choral class systems play in defining choral spaces and institutions.

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