"Sing, sit, and leave": Engagement and Disillusionment in a High School Chorus

Frank Martignetti[1]

Abstract

This study provides insight into why students leave voluntary school choral experiences, through an analysis of interviews with four high school students at a single New York City high school who left, or were considering leaving, their high school choral program. This study provides a voice often unheard in the research literature, since many research subjects are people who have had positive feelings about their ensemble experience. Analysis through a lens of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and student engagement theory (Deakin Crick, 2012; Reeve & Tseng, 2011) revealed strong feelings of engagement and disillusionment, providing insight into individuals' choices and motives. Principal themes included the perceived quality of the subject's relationship with the teacher/conductor and with other students; subject's perceptions regarding the focus and commitment level of the other students; and subjects' perceptions of rigor and the value gained from participation. These align with two of the elements of self-determination theory: belonging and competence. Implications for practitioners and for future research are suggested.

Keywords: Choral music education; ensemble participation; recruitment and retention; motivation; engagement; disillusionment; self-determination theory; student engagement theory.

---

[1] Farrington College of Education and Human Development, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, USA

Corresponding author: Frank Martignetti, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, USA.
Email: frankmartignetti@gmail.com

At a time when media reports in the United States report the need to rebuild school ensembles post-pandemic (Bryan & Velez, 2023; Burke, 2020; LaGuarda, 2023; Mortenson-Spokes, 2023; Paulson, 2022; Weller, 2021) and directors continue to make our ensembles more inclusive, it is valuable to gain insight into why singers may choose to remain in or leave a choral program. This study analyzed interviews with four high school students who left, or were considering leaving, their high school choral program, to examine what the lack of engagement might look like within a vibrant coeducational high school choral program in one large public school in a major United States city. The interviews were drawn from a larger data set in the author's dissertation (Martignetti, 2017), which was a large-scale ethnographic study of a vibrant music program in a diverse comprehensive New York City public high school.

Interviews with four young women, three of whom identified as BIPOC, demonstrated a variety of perspectives, including strong feelings of both engagement and disillusionment, as they reflected on the quality and meaning of their high school choral experience. One of the four subjects had left the program before the interview, and the others were considering whether to do so at the end of the school year. As choral conductors look for the best way to engage and retain singers, their perspectives and voices suggest effective strategies for chorister retention.

This study is among relatively few that focus on urban public schools, as opposed to suburban schools. Few studies have examined music education within the unique and diverse context of New York City—the largest public school system in the United States, although Elpus (2012) examined arts education within charter schools in New York City.

Literature Review

The robust literature regarding student participation in ensembles, students' motivation to join and remain in ensembles, and on student perspectives regarding the benefits and drawbacks of ensemble membership framed this study. It focuses on why people leave, or consider leaving, secondary school choral programs, when most studies discuss why people stay. This review is limited to literature examining the school choral experience in North American schools, among which the scheduling and recruitment models are very similar. It focuses first on who is represented and who is not; who perseveres and who does not; students' perspectives on the ensemble experience, the perceived value added and perceived cost of participation; and analyses of the ensemble experience in light of psychological factors, including motivation and self-concept.

Representation: Enrollment and Persistence

Who enrolls in secondary school music in the United States? Who does not? Who perseveres? Large-scale quantitative studies of enrollment in high school music courses within the United States in the twenty-first century provide helpful context, notably including Elpus and Abril (2011, 2019, 2024) and Elpus (2014). Elpus and Abril (2019) demonstrated

that the demographic makeup of US high school music classes significantly differed from the demographic makeup of US high school students as a whole, since Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) tended to take these courses less frequently than did white students. Martignetti (2017), the study from which these interviews were drawn, had findings that were both similar and divergent: female students and white students were overenrolled in music courses at the site, relative to their representation in the school and community; Asian and Hispanic students were likewise relatively underenrolled. However, Black students were represented almost equally when compared to the student body as a whole (23.7% vs. 23%). These realities make the diversity of voices found in this study matter.

In terms of who continues to take music courses, Elpus and Abril (2024) found that higher socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and engagement in the arts outside of school were significant factors positively affecting students' persistence in music courses, whereas students from lower socioeconomic groups and BIPOC students were less likely to continue enrollment. Students who were born female were significantly more likely to persevere in choral ensembles. Parental influence, a positive assessment of personal musical skill, and peer influence positively affected choral recruitment and retention for Demorest et al. (2017). Similarly, Warnock (2009) found that parental encouragement, being female, and future aspirations in music correlated with ensemble membership, and Miksza (2007) found that academic achievement and socioeconomic status were strong predictors of music enrollment. Additionally, Kinney (2019) found that, in a single midwestern school district, academic high achievers were more likely to enroll and persist in elective coursework in instrumental music, also finding that choral students scored significantly higher on reading tests compared to non-music students in 6th, 8th, and 10th grades. Kinney also pointed out that choir had a more proportional representation of students from lower socioeconomic statuses than did instrumental ensembles, a finding supported by Elpus and Abril (2019), who found choral students were similar to the overall student population in terms of race, ethnicity, first language, or socioeconomic status.

Culp and Clauhs (2020) pointed out that "financial constraints, parental involvement, course/ensemble structure and offerings, repertoire selection, and scheduling may all affect a student's interest or ability to participate in a program" (p. 44). Baker (2007) found that 37% of subjects cited significant scheduling challenges as an obstacle to scheduling ensembles for all four years of high school.

Student Perspectives

What meaning and value do students attribute to secondary school ensemble membership? Adderley et al. (2003), Rohwer and Rohwer (2009), Sweet (2010), and Parker (2010) all highlighted subjects' perceptions regarding the social, musical, and recreational benefits of secondary school choral ensembles. Baker (2008) identified the value students placed on music participation as the strongest predictor that they would continue, and scheduling issues as the major factor negatively affecting continuation. Subjects reported both intrinsic

and extrinsic values.

Freer (2009) found that subjects identified experiences best described as the flow state identified by Csikszentmihalyi and others. Silveira (2013) found that honor ensemble participants valued musical factors above all, but most secondary music students reported extrinsic benefits. Findings in Parker's (2010) action research study of an urban high school chorus were grouped into five themes: students reported valuing the noncompetitive nature of the choral experience, social bonding within voice parts, singing as a shared experience, bonding through trips, and chorus as a safe space. Kennedy (2002) cited "love of singing, influence of the teacher, and the company of friends" as the experiences choral students reported valuing (p. 29). Major and Parker (2023) found that deep relationships, chances to lead, and a push for more autonomy characterized participants in one high school program. Much earlier, Cusick (1973) identified deep social connections between school ensemble members as an outcome characteristic of ensembles. Morrison (2001) posited that ensembles, somewhat uniquely among courses, have their own culture.

More specifically, in Adderley et al. (2003), students reported value in multiple aspects, organized by the researchers into "personal qualities, personal growth, emotional outlet, and atmosphere" (p. 199). Students valued the process of music-making, the improvement in their skills and knowledge, the ability to produce such a powerful emotional force, working towards a common goal, skills useful in other academic situations, and skills useful in careers. Students also found value in the social benefits of ensemble membership, such as strong friendships that continued outside the class, a long-term relationship with a teacher, the experience of travel, and the atmosphere of the ensemble classroom, which they described as "supportive, relaxing, and fun" (p. 199).

All of these studies featured the voices of participants, not those who have chosen to quit ensembles, or who were making that decision at the time of the study. Thus, the perspective found in these student voices is both rare and valuable. It is interesting to see how congruent the voices heard in this study are with the findings of previous studies, particularly in terms of the importance of interpersonal connections among ensemble members and with the director. However, sometimes the importance of these connections is noted by their presence, and sometimes by their absence. Holster (2023) observed:

> Perspectives on music student retention typically ignore the fundamental role of motivation in determining whether student interest in music ensemble participation will strengthen or wane as they mature and are presented with other options (McPherson & Hendricks, 2010). One consequence of this blind spot is an incomplete understanding of the factors contributing to school music ensemble participation.

Studies that have examined ensemble participation in light of various theories of motivation or engagement form a final layer informing this study and lead to the interpretive framework used here.

Adams (2021) explored self-concept and mindset as motivational factors. Hash (2022) pointed out that students will leave if their needs are not being met, and that teachers must think carefully about motivation. Holster (2023) examined existing studies of middle school ensemble members in terms of needs satisfaction and task values, concluding that teachers should examine student behaviors and choices through these two interpretive frameworks, one of which (needs satisfaction) shapes this analysis. Pendergast (2020) connected recruitment and retention to meeting students' basic needs, as found in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000): autonomy, belonging, and competence. Gurgel (2023) examined engagement and disengagement behaviors in a pluralistic middle school choral classroom, analyzed through the frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy and student engagement theory. She found that positive student perceptions of the teacher and their practice allied with the extent to which teachers implemented elements of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladsen-Billings, 1995) and supported student autonomy needs. Self Determination Theory and student engagement theory provide the framework for this analysis.

Framing the Study

Purpose Statement

This study explored how four young women in a diverse, urban public high school choral program weighted the perceived benefits and costs of school choral participation as they decided whether to stay or leave the program, documenting their feelings of both engagement and disillusionment. Their experiences resonated with much of the research literature but were notable for the ways in which they diverged from past work. Their voices have implications for directors' recruitment and retention efforts.

Research Questions

This study examined the following: What benefits did subjects report deriving from choral participation? Were there other benefits that they hoped to gain, but did not? What factors informed their decision process to stay or leave? How did the nature of the relationship with other students or the teacher affect their views on the experience? Had they experienced the benefits reported by the many studies above? Why? Why not? Which words or actions by the subject provided evidence of disengagement?

Context

The interviews analyzed here were drawn from 44 interviews with students and staff, carried out in the 2014-2015 academic year as part of the author's dissertation, a much broader, IRB-approved ethnographic study of a high school music program (Martignetti, 2017). The research site, a comprehensive high school of 4000 students in an outer borough of New York City, included an auditioned arts magnet program within the building, which enrolled almost a third of the student body. During 2014-2015, the student body

consisted of 27% Asian, 23% Black, 22% Hispanic, and 27% White students. Further, 17% of the student body had a disability, 7% of the student body were English language learners, and, according to New York State, 63% of the student body were considered economically disadvantaged (New York State Department of Education, 2015). For more details, see Martignetti (2017).

The research site was one of a relatively small number of large comprehensive high schools within the New York City Department of Education (DOE) that boasted a robust music program. The school included an auditioned arts magnet program within the building, which enrolled almost a third of the student body. During fieldwork, there were eight full-time music teachers employed at the school, one of whom taught and served as an administrator. Choral offerings included two sections of Beginning Chorus, Junior Chorus, Senior Chorus, Gospel Choir, and Madrigal Choir, as well as related courses: Voice Class, beginning piano and music theory, and AP Music Theory.

Participants

The sample of student interview subjects was purposeful, since all were present or former participants of the school's music program and were inherently self-selected since they chose to volunteer. Subjects were gradually recruited over the course of the school year. Written consent or assent for an interview was required by both student and parent, and teachers were unaware of who had volunteered, or not, for an interview. For more details, see Martignetti (2017). These four interviews (of 44) were utilized in this study because the theme of disengagement emerged inductively in the interview, and because one subject had left the program, and three were considering doing so at the end of the academic year. All subjects (or staff mentioned in interviews) were identified by a pseudonym, the school was not identified by name, and identifying details about the school were limited to those only directly relevant.

The four subjects are identified by pseudonyms: Carissa, Inez, Sami, and Elena. Carissa was a friendly, funny African American freshman in Beginning Chorus, notable for acting out during rehearsal and for the negative view she and her teacher shared of one another. She was the only interview subject of 32 students who spoke overwhelmingly negatively about her experiences in the music program. She had enjoyed a very positive relationship with her middle school chorus director and hoped for a similar relationship in high school. Her rapport with me was strong from the beginning. However, she brought to her high school chorus experience what seemed, to me, a fairly immature attitude, resulting in behaviors that antagonized her teacher on a regular basis: being late, wearing headphones, talking.

Inez was a Latinx senior who entered high school without a strong interest in music and a background in dance. Her mother strongly valued music but her maternal grandparents discouraged her from studying it. Inez' middle school experience, which she described as "artless," offered no music instruction at all—only visual art. Inez became active in the high

school choral program because of transformational experiences in her Beginning Chorus class, which she attributed to the teacher. Inez had a good deal to say about the program, and came across as enthusiastic but at the decision point where she would either stop singing or sing for life.

Sami, an Asian-American junior, described her social circle as "most of my friends were in the music program and dropped out. But I still have friends in the music program." She described her teachers as "amazing" but bewailed a lack of motivation on the part of some students as her main frustration, in addition to the amount of class time she felt involved simply waiting for error correction or rote teaching to happen. She also expressed a strong sense that deep interpersonal connections with other students were easier formed in other classes than they were in choir. She was very reflective, speaking at length about the strengths and weaknesses she saw in the program.

Elena was a White senior who had left the choral program but maintained close relationships with multiple music faculty. Her decision to leave was partly due to significant personal problems experienced as a sophomore, when she experienced influential support from her music teachers, but she felt ignored or undermined by her (now former) friends in the program. Her experience as a senior was marked by a strong sense of closeness to the music faculty and estrangement from other music students. She spoke at length about her relationships at school, positive and negative, about music, and her strained relationship with her mother.

Methodology

Quantitative studies of secondary music enrollment reveal representation, or lack thereof, and can demonstrate changes over time, but qualitative research can provide rich insight into individual's choices and motives. Both provide important insights. Creswell (2013) said that we use qualitative research when we:

> need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices… We also conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people… We conduct qualitative research when we want to *empower individuals* to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in the study (p. 48).

The interviews utilized a semi-structured protocol as a starting place and were audio recorded using a tablet, laptop, or handheld digital recorder. The interviews were then transcribed into Microsoft Word documents, as were field notes. The professional transcriptionists I engaged received only a number, not a name, and I reviewed the transcriptions before I sent them to the subject for verification or a sort of modified member checking.

Additionally, the school's principal and assistant principal in charge of music had the opportunity to review and comment on the entire study.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2013) data management spiral: reading and memoing; describing, classifying, and interpreting; and representing and visualizing (p. 183). Repeated readings built my familiarity with the data, and I employed memoing to begin processing the data. Data were also analyzed with the qualitative research software ATLAS-TI. The list of codes emerged from the analysis based on repeated readings, and the software allowed for collating different subjects' words regarding the same code, to determine which codes were most prevalent and identify patterns.

As an important strategy within qualitative research, interviewing centers the voices of subjects, allowing their experiences to emerge in great detail and for analysis to inductively emerge, rooted in participants' words (Lofland et al., 2006: Wolcott, 2008). An ethnographic approach enabled the researcher to "use the resources, skills, and privileges available… to make accessible—to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of—the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restricted and out of reach" (Madison, 2012, p. 6). Ethnographic methods provided a wonderful way to bring forth the stories of these disillusioned choristers. Additionally, ethnography was a useful lens when applied to topics familiar to the researcher, since ethnography can "make problematic what might otherwise be taken for granted" (Wolcott, 2008, p. 89). This approach provided a fresh lens examining the familiar context of an urban public school music program.

Positionality

As an American public school music teacher for ten years, including eight teaching high school chorus, and seven in an urban public school, the research site was, in many ways, familiar to me. In other ways, I was very much the outsider, having worked in small schools, which offer different challenges and opportunities than large schools. As a white, straight male, I had a different background from the majority of students. During fieldwork and analysis, it was necessary to reflect, being careful that past experience did not encourage me to only interpret things as a teacher would, or resist experiences that were different from my own education or previous professional practice.

More broadly, as a choral music educator, I believe chorus is extremely beneficial for many humans, at all stages of life, which made me work harder to understand why these four students found the experience disappointing.

Theoretical Framework

Beyond students' choices to participate, or not, in a voluntary commitment such as a school chorus, engagement or disengagement is evident in the degree of participation, observed connection to the ensemble as a whole, and the nature of interactions between the subject and others in the choral setting. I had originally planned to present here a new anal-

ysis rooted in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) but also discovered student engagement theory (Deakin Crick, 2012; Reeve & Tseng, 2011), which builds on self-determination theory, another useful theoretical framework for interpretation and analysis, first applied to school choirs by Gurgel (2023).

Ryan and Deci's (2000) concept of self-determination theory evaluated experiences by how well they met a subject's basic psychological needs for autonomy (feeling authentic, having agency), belonging or relatedness (feeling connected, and cared about), and competence (able to complete needed tasks well).

Reeve and Tseng (2011) built, in part, on self-determination theory, and in part on the consensus regarding the three-part structure of student engagement—which could be behavioral (what students did), emotional (how students felt), and cognitive (how students thought)—by adding a fourth concept—agentic engagement (students taking independent action to improve themselves or their situation), the presence of which correlated with the other types of engagement as well as the elements of self-determination theory. Pointing out that engagement is not a one-way process, since teacher actions influence student attitudes and actions, which in turn can affect teacher actions, Reeve and Tseng proposed the concept of agentic engagement, which they defined as "the process in which students intentionally and somewhat proactively try to personalize and otherwise enrich both what is to be learned and the conditions and circumstances under which it is to be learned" (p. 258). Agentic engagement is a student attempt to "enrich the learning opportunity (by making it more personal, interesting, challenging, or valued)" (p. 265).

Observable student behaviors are a clear mark of engagement in any performance-based experience like a choral ensemble, but the typical structure of many choral programs, where the entire class works on the same task in real time (choral rehearsal and performance) may provide limited space for agentic engagement, as may neoliberal educational systems writ large. Deakin Crick (2012) reminded us that the current policy climate fosters an education largely limited to the presentation of predetermined knowledge in the most engaging way possible:

> Engagement in the form of compliance…may yield learning that is fragile and dependent, with a passive acceptance and memorisation… In contrast to this, deep engagement in learning requires personal investment and commitment—learning has to be meaningful and purposeful in the life of the learner (p. 676).

The author posited a definition of engagement involving multiple related factors, including identity, agency, learning power, and competence, as well as how students co-construct knowledge, which is also a key part of Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally responsive pedagogy. Learning power was defined as skills and traits that enable students to conquer learning challenges, both inside and outside of traditional educational spaces. Behavioral engagement or disengagement is clearly evident when observing a choral rehearsal and

performance; looking more deeply, students' senses of autonomy, belonging, and competence form a major rationale for singers joining, remaining, or leaving a chorus. In this study, subjects' words provided a window into their engagement level as well as their senses of autonomy, belonging and competence within the choral program.

Findings

Analysis of all four interviews revealed strong common themes: the perceived quality of the relationship with the teacher/conductor, the perceived focus and commitment of other students, the perception of rigor; and the perception of value added. What lasting benefit did subjects perceive themselves as deriving from the experience? Are they accomplishing anything of lasting benefit, or do they just "sit, sing, and leave," as one subject stated?

Additional themes found in one or more, but not all, interviews included perceptions of the presence or absence of culturally relevant repertoire, a sense that autonomy needs were not being met, and a feeling of estrangement from the teacher or from classmates.

Discussion

An exploration of these themes provides the deep description that is a major attribute of qualitative research, connects to related literature, and provides implications for practice.

Belonging

Relatedness or belonging is a second aspect of Self-Determination Theory. Being part of a community has been a primary benefit of ensemble membership, as reported by Cusick (1973), Adderley et al. (2003), Rohwer and Rohwer (2009), Sweet (2010), and Parker (2010), among others. Adderley et al. (2003) expressed it memorably:

> According to many of these teenagers, the description of their participation in each ensemble varied from being viewed as a class like any other classroom, a home away from home, a club, a family, or something unlike anything else at this school… Many of the findings support earlier research, providing a stronger case for the claim that students are intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and musically nurtured by membership in performing ensembles (pp. 203–204).

The connections that produce a feeling of belonging come from both peers and the student–teacher relationship. All four subjects identified a personal connection with a teacher as a major reason for joining or, initially, remaining in a school choral program. Sami expressed this less strongly than the other subjects, but identified loyalty to the current and retiring senior chorus teacher as a major factor in her and others' retention. Inez and Elena identified transformational experiences with one high school chorus teacher. As Elena said:

And I did not expect to like it, but everyone was extremely nice and very welcoming…really, really started to love the music program and the first music teacher I met was Mr. Rosen, and I thought he was amazing… I think, honestly, my favorite part of the school is the music program. I come to the music hall all the time, so that's the reason I fell in love with this school.

Carissa identified such a deep connection, as well as a sense of being challenged, as a large part of her middle school choral experience, though not her high school experience:

He believed in us. There was the group of kids that did not do anything. And he would take us on a lunch break and work with us. He even said he believed in us and that we had so much potential. The potential to do so many things in life. And if I did not sing, he would make/force me to sing because he would say, I know you can. I respect him for making me push myself.

This strong bond with the music faculty sustained Elena even after leaving the choral program: "I mean, honestly, when I walk into this school, I'm not in the best mood. But once I walk into the music hall, I just like—my mood gets uplifted… I always come here because all the teachers really have a great spirit. And they understand."

Notably, the subjects' perceptions of warmth and care provided by the chorus teacher were an important motivation for their decisions to engage. In one instance, the lack of such feelings and the resulting disengagement were striking. Carissa identified a fraught relationship with her high school chorus teacher as a major obstacle, even as she failed to understand how her own behavior contributed to this dynamic. She described the teacher as feeling attacked and getting "mad about small things." Entering the classroom with headphones on one morning led to a verbal altercation:

Like, I remember this one day…it was raining; I forgot my umbrella. I had my headphones…and was getting ready to take them off. And she starts screaming at me. So I kind of walked out. Gave myself a minute… I walked back in. I had the headphones off. And she calmed down. But she said she still had to punish me, because I was rude… I told her I did not want to be rude, but I wanted to know how it would help. And she pulled me out of the classroom to tell me that I was being rude. So I told her I was not trying to be rude, so why was she stressing on me?

This set a pattern of disengagement and frustrated teacher response for the rest of the year:

CT (subject): She has a problem with my attitude. And it is just the way I come off… she is my first class every day. And I am, like, always tired. So when I am tired, I look

drained, and I don't want to do anything. So she is always talking about my attitude. It is just that I am tired; I don't have an attitude. It takes me a while to get up. And she just keeps yelling at me.

FM (Researcher): And what have you started doing differently?

CT: Nothing.

In addition to feeling a lack of care, it is clear that Carissa's autonomy needs were not being met in chorus. Despite this antagonistic relationship, Carissa felt she was more respectful to her chorus teacher than many of her peers, yet her respect was expressed partially through having as little contact as possible:

She is a nice teacher at heart… People take advantage of her. I don't do that. I don't think that is respectful… I would like her to talk to me better. I try to have the least amount of verbal contact with her. Because if you don't talk to her, there isn't a problem… When she starts yelling, it is kind of funny, but not really. Because then she preaches and says that she rebukes this and that and kids laugh. I try not to.

In terms of peer relationships, three subjects identified a lack of closeness to other students as an issue creating a lack of belonging—the inverse of the strong social bonds reported by participants in other studies mentioned previously. Inez mentioned multiple friends who had left the choral program, but they were friends she had made within the program. She was the exception. To Elena, her former friends and classmates in the choral program were, literally, almost invisible: "I don't even see them. I see them, but they move right past me…they were not there for me 'cause they just, they didn't care."

Sami said that she felt very close to people in the music program on trips, but most of her friends in the program had dropped out. She felt there was much more opportunity to get to know and bond with people in her visual art classes, "but when you are singing, you don't talk." It seems evident that none of these four subjects' need to belong were met through peer relationships in the choral program. Sami found limited opportunities to form or strengthen friendships. Their experiences indicate findings similar to Gurgel (2023)—that choir often offers limited opportunity for cooperative learning or small group work.

The subjects' words demonstrate the centrality of the connection between the chorus teacher and the student. Many students will become involved, and stay engaged, if a positive interpersonal connection is present; each of these subjects identified a strong student-teacher relationship as a reason for involvement. However, three of four expressed feelings of estrangement from their peers; chorus was not meeting their belonging or relatedness needs. Three of four participants' next reason for disillusionment also involved their peers.

Focus, Commitment, and Rigor

Inez identified a lack of commitment in her Beginning Chorus class freshman year, but perceived an increase in rigor or focus within the program overall, even though she had mixed feelings about this change:

> I feel like there's a lot more talented people coming in—a lot more determined people. Which is a little scary. It's like well, why are you so, like, determined? So, like, strong, like this? I came in here, I didn't even know what I wanted to do, and they're like, "No, I've been looking at this school for years. I know I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, and I want to audition for this." …And I'm, like, seeing it, and I feel like I don't fit in anymore. It's like I don't recognize people as much.

However, this was a minority view; Carissa cited her classmates in an especially challenging section of Beginning Chorus as quite disrespectful:

> She has taken a lot, and I respect her for that. Especially because they randomly yell at her when she is talking. That's rude… Again, it is the way she comes off, and some students don't like that. So they don't respect her. I respect her; she is my teacher…

Surprisingly, Elena felt that she had a similar experience as a junior in the upper-level ensembles:

> I've had a really, really tough time… I feel like a lot of them do not care, so most of the time they're talking and yelling and it's really, really hard to get work done when you're actually like the only person that wants to be singing… I realized that I have no control over it. They have to shut up themselves.

This lack of self-control seems to point to students not valuing the intrinsic attributes of the process that subjects in Adderley et al. (2003) reported valuing. In terms of Self-Determination Theory, the fellow students described by these subjects are exercising agency, may or may not feel like they belong, but may not feel they are growing in competence. In terms of Reeve and Tseng's (2011) theory of agentic engagement, the students described by the subjects were exercising the opposite of agentic engagement. The subjects were expressing a desire to exercise agentic engagement to make the learning environment "more personal, interesting, challenging, or valued" (p. 265).

Sami provided the most detailed view of her peers' disengagement, and a reason for it. She blamed a lack of self-discipline, but also the resulting pace of some rehearsals. She also felt that instrumental students had more discipline and self-sufficiency:

> Sitting in class for an hour every day, you have to be quiet. And, sometimes, kids

don't have the patience for that. It has to be something you really enjoy…this class is, like, be silent and listen to them learn their parts over and over and over again. And it's repetitive and very slow, especially with the kids that are in our class… I have thought about quitting for a really long time…it is hard to decide. I think I would miss it. At the same time, I don't know.

Sami partly attributed the lack of focus that frustrated her to a lack of accountability. All three of these subjects felt that their need for competence was not being met due to others' lack of seriousness. Yet Sami added another layer, voicing that people were not learning transferrable skills or growing in terms of individual musicianship: "It doesn't seem like you are special in this program. Like you're learning to manifest your abilities. It's like sit, sing, and leave." This quote was especially revealing, touching every aspect of self-determination theory: autonomy, belonging, and competence. Sami did not feel like an individual, like part of a community, or like her musical competence was growing as a result of her choral experience. The positive relationship that she felt she had with her chorus teacher was not enough; she felt aloof and had a sense that she is not growing. This points to our last theme: growing in competence, or a sense of challenge, competence, and added value.

Challenge, Competence, and Value Added

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) holds that people wish to feel competent. Competence comes from successfully completing tasks that are at an appropriate level of challenge. Those engaging in voluntary learning experiences like secondary choral programs would like to feel like they are gaining new knowledge or skills through the experience. What did these subjects believe about their own competence?

Perceptions of competence, challenge, or value added, as expressed by the other three subjects, were rather nuanced. When reflecting on her experience in Beginning Chorus, Carissa expressed a mixed view, feeling that she had learned a lot about how to sing but that her understanding of music had not grown:

FM: So, what have you learned in Beginning Chorus this year?

CT: Don't talk back to the teacher.

FM: Ok. What else?

CT: How to project my voice without straining my vocal cords.

FM: That is a big thing.

CT: I learned how to sing from my diaphragm, which made my voice better.

FM: Ok. That's good. What do you wish you had learned?

CT: How to read music…she stopped doing that… I want to learn.

Inez, who had entered high school with very little musical experience, felt that her knowledge and skills had significantly grown. She perceived herself to be behind her peers in music reading ability and she was nervous about recording herself singing for homework assignments. But she challenged herself and overcame these fears. Elena felt that the opportunities provided by the faculty were excellent but that the students did not take full advantage of them, thus requiring the teachers to ask less of the students:

> I've had so many great experiences performing in this school… I've performed with all the choruses. I've performed with the jazz band and…there was like a Marvin Hamlisch tribute, a memorial tribute at Julliard, and… I was one of the students chosen…she's one of the teachers that really believes in me.

At the same time, Elena felt that her choral teachers could have demanded more and provided more depth:

> I just feel like they go too easy on us…they really have to push us just a little bit more. Not just with how strict they are, but they have to just give us more work and give us more to learn about and don't make it too easy for us.

Although Elena appreciated the level of performance opportunities she had, her decision to drop out of the music program was partly due, coincidently to the challenges that she faced in her AP Music Theory course, which she found extremely demanding and stressful. This course was required of seniors in the auditioned magnet program. Elena experienced the stress of having to work after school, and felt, as a singer, ill-prepared, contrasting that with instrumentalists:

> I decided that the music theory class was just not something I wanted to fail at and that it would be too difficult for me because I did not learn a lot about theory; there were a lot of band students, and they know a lot more than I do, so I…felt left out.

Like the subjects in Adderly et al. (2003), Kennedy (2002), Rohwer and Rohwer (2009), Sweet (2010), and Parker (2010), these subjects value the musical learning that can happen in choir. They wished to demonstrate their competence, conquer challenges, and grow in musical knowledge and skills. Three of the four subjects identified specific, meaningful learning that resulted in an increase in their sense of competence as singers and/or musicians. Two of the four subjects identified specific challenges that resulted in an increase in their skills. One challenge was identified as both a reason to stay involved in the program and a reason to leave. All four subjects seemed to feel that the faculty were able to provide a challenging experience; three of four saw other students as an obstacle.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Subjects in this study clearly identified certain practices of their chorus teacher as reasons for enrolling in and remaining in (and, in Carissa's case, considering leaving) the choral program. These are practices identified by Ladsen-Billings (1995) as characteristic of culturally relevant pedagogy. As previously shown, the upperclassmen who had participated in chorus for multiple years clearly felt that their chorus teachers believed that all students had the ability to succeed, that they connected with their students, and that teachers were passionate about their subject and teaching it. Carissa, the freshman, had formed this impression of her middle school chorus teacher but not of her high school chorus teacher:

> We knew what chorus was like, but we did not know it was like this… He believed in us. There was the group of kids that did not do anything. And he would take us on a lunch break and work with us. He even said that he believed in us and that we had so much potential. The potential to do so many things in life. And if I did not sing, he would make/force me to sing because he would say, I know you can. I respect him for making me push myself.

However, culturally responsive pedagogy also involves several other elements not identified by the subjects, particularly teachers' conceptions of knowledge. Although they may have been a part of the teachers' practice, they are beyond the scope of this study. Further, the subjects identified other key elements of culturally responsive pedagogy by their absence: all four subjects identified a lack of community or connection and commitment to the work of the chorus, as shown by the above discussion.

This subject's statements allow one to conclude that the community of learners and encouragement of collaborative learning and mutual responsibility cited by Ladson-Billings may have not been present. Though the broader ethnographic study from which these data are drawn (Martignetti, 2017) identified many elements of culturally responsive pedagogy present within the music department, these seem likely to have been two challenges faced by the choral program. As Gurgel (2023) states of her subjects:

> They engaged when the music-making was interesting and challenging and when their teacher connected the musical learning to their lives…the teacher must convey a sense of purpose in musical activities resulting in musical achievement and excellence…for the student participants in this study, purpose and challenge supported deep engagement and formed the foundation for increased student learning, agentic engagement, affective engagement, and group unity (p. 16).

Conclusions and Implications

This study sought to understand why these subjects had left, or were strongly considering leaving, their high school choral program. Their voices provide clear evidence of both

engagement and lack of engagement across four common themes: their perception of a strong relationship with the teacher/conductor; their perception of the focus and commitment of the other students (or lack thereof); their perception of rigor; and the perception of value added.

In terms of belonging, these subjects expressed strong feelings of connection to a present or former choral music educator, and identified this as a major reason for joining, but exhibited a weak connection to other members of the ensemble. As they shared this, it was clear they yearned for the same connection experienced by subjects in studies including Adderley et al. (2003); Rohwer and Rohwer (2009); Parker (2010); and Sweet (2010). This is a notable gap in the literature, in that studies of ensemble participation tend to, overwhelmingly, focus on those involved, not those who are not involved, or used to be involved. I believe it is difficult for researchers to connect with students who have left the school's music program, given that our entrée to schools often goes through the music faculty, and since we are reliant on volunteer research subjects. Two of these four subjects had offered to introduce me to others who had left but did not follow through.

Since it is challenging for music education researchers to locate and engage with people who have chosen to stop participating in ensembles, these subjects provide a valuable perspective that is largely absent from the literature but that is useful to choral directors and researchers. A future study of students who have left school choral programs could combine perspectives of individual subjects, as gained through interviews with targeted observations seeking to identify and describe the sort of engagement and disengagement behaviors noted by Gurgel (2023) among the students who remain in the program. Such a perspective would add nuance to the sense that ensembles are often a welcoming place where participants experience community. An additional direction for future research would be to further examine approaches to choral music education that do foster opportunities for cooperative learning or small group work, and, through surveys or interviews, establish whether such approaches create strong bonds among singers, and whether they foster agentic engagement.

For practitioners, I believe strong, positive student-teacher relationships are vital; they form a primary aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladsen-Billings, 1995), can be helpful to all students, and are vital for school dependent students. The student voice in this study demonstrates the need for directors to foster a strong community in our ensembles that meets our students' needs for relatedness and belonging and genuinely includes all. This requires us to continually examine who is in the room, who is not, and do some action research to find out why.

Just as subjects identified a desire for belonging, and were frustrated by its absence, subjects identified both satisfaction with what they were learning, and a longing for more. Notably, two subjects identified the perceived lack of opportunities for personal growth in musical skills and knowledge as a reason to consider leaving, and two others cited major growth in those areas as a reason for staying. All were in the same program and, in three

of four cases, with the same teacher. For the two subjects who saw the glass half empty, the longing for challenging learning they saw as useful, and lament for a learning environment that seemed to foster a lower level of focus, commitment, and achievement contributed to their disillusionment. The lack of focus identified by Sami points to what I believe to be a destructive cycle that can manifest. I have seen it in my own time as a secondary school teacher. If students require a good deal of repetition to learn their parts, because they are not learning to audiate or sight sing effectively, and/or because of a lack of maturity or effort, the pace of rehearsal slows, the level of music making drops, and the group becomes even less engaged. A future line of research could examine how effective directors create challenge and growth at any level of ensemble. Another future line of research could explore how teachers enter and remain in the destructive cycle of low focus leading to a slower pace of learning which may lead to even lower focus. As practitioners, we must ensure that the experiences we are providing genuinely meet students' need to become more competent, to grow as singers and musicians, and to be aware that they are doing so. Nothing is more motivating than success. Creating growth from point A to point B, and helping your students develop the self-evaluation skills so they can see and celebrate their growth is a prerequisite for a highly engaged ensemble.

Students know when they are learning and when they are growing, and when they are not. High expectations, with appropriate scaffolding and realistic goals with the right degree of challenge will help directors create ensembles that retain singers. All in all, the subjects in this study, like the subjects in others, want the same benefits from their choral experience. They are just part of the silent many who do not receive those benefits and may vote with their feet. May we work to reach those singers before it is too late.

References

Adams, K. (2021). Research report: Mindset, self-concept, and long-term musical engagement. *Choral Journal, 61*(7), 63–73. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27035406

Adderley, C., Kennedy, M., & Berz, W. (2003). A home away from home: The world of the high school music classroom. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 51*(3), 190–205. https://doi.org/10.2307/3345373

Baker, V. C. (2007). Retention of membership in high school music ensembles. In M. Cavitt (Ed.), *Texas Music Education Research 2007* (p. 3–14). Texas Music Educators Association.

Baker, W. (2008). "Student retention in high school music programs." *Research Perspectives in Music Education, 12*(1), May 2008, 6-13.

Bryan, C., & Velez, M. (2023, April 21). "School closures, cuts to clubs and music possible as WA schools face 'cliff'". *Seattle Times.* www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/school-closures-cuts-to-clubs-and-music-possible-as-wa-schools-face-cliff/

Burke. C. (2020, December 6). "Pandemic causes decline in school music program en-

rollment." *Carteret County News-Times.* https://www.carolinacoastonline.com/news_times/article_dd79f5ec-34cc-11eb-a5b4-0f5adb57e405.html

Creswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Culp, M. E., & Clauhs, M. (2020). Factors that affect participation in secondary school music: Reducing barriers and increasing access. *Music Educators Journal, 106*(4), 43-49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432120918293

Cusick, P. (1973). *Inside high school: The student's world.* Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Deakin Crick, R. (2012). Deep engagement as a complex system: Identity, learning power, and authentic inquiry. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 675–694). Springer Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_32

Demorest, S. M., Kelley, J., & Pfordresher, P. Q. (2017). Singing ability, musical self-concept, and future music participation. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 64*(4), 405–420. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429416680096

Elpus, K. (2012). Music education and school choice reform: Music programs in New York City charter schools. In L. K. Thompson, & M. R. Campbell (Eds.), *Situating inquiry: Expanded venues for music education research* (pp. 79–98). Information Age.

Elpus, K. (2014). Evaluating the effect of No Child Left Behind on US music course enrollments. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 62*(3), 215–233. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429414530759

Elpus, K., & Abril, C. (2011). High school music ensemble students in the United States: a demographic profile. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 59*(2), 128–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429411405207

Elpus, K., and Abril, C. (2019). Who enrolls in high school music? A national profile of U.S. students 2009–2013. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 67*(3), 323-338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429419862837

Elpus, K., & Abril, C. R. (2024). Participation and persistence in high school elective music ensembles. *Journal of Research in Music Education,* (April 2024). https://doi.org/10.1177/00224294241247267

Freer, P. K. (2009). Boys' descriptions of their experiences in choral music. *Research Studies in Music Education, 31*(2), 142–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X09344382

Gurgel, R. (2023). Culturally relevant pedagogy and disengagement in the choral classroom: What can we learn from the students? *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing, 11*, 1–22. https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/IJRCSVol11Gurgel.pdf

Hash, P. M. (2022). Student retention in school bands and orchestras: A literature review. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education, 40*(3), 11-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233211042585

Holster, J. (2023). Adopting an organismic perspective on adolescent academic motivation

for instrumental ensemble participation. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education, 41*(3), 57–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233221087407

Kennedy, M. (2002). "It's cool because we like to sing": Junior high school boys' experience of choral music as an elective. *Research Studies in Music Education, 18*, 24–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X020180010401

Kinney, D. W. (2019). Selected nonmusic predictors of urban students' decisions to enroll and persist in middle and high school music ensemble electives. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 67*(1), 23-44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429418809972

LaGuarda, I. (2023, June 6). "COVID 'gutted' Stamford schools' music program. Can a 'visionary' effort by teachers revive it?" *Stamford Advocate*. www.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/covid-stamford-schools-music-program-teachers-18130687.php

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.2307/1163320

Lofland, J., Snow, D. A., Anderson, L. & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing social settings:a guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (Fourth). Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Madison, D. (2012). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance,* 2nd ed. Sage Publications.

Major, M., and Parker, E. (2023). Disrupting the choral class system: A journey of one high school choral program. *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing, 11*, 43-61.
    https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IJRCSVol11MajorParker.pdf

Martignetti, F. (2017). *In their own voices: An ethnographic study of a New York City public high school music program.* [Doctoral dissertation, New York University].

Miksza, P. (2007). Music participation and socioeconomic status as correlates of change: A longitudinal analysis of Academic achievement. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education, 172*, 41-58. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40319364

Morrison, S. J. (2001). The school ensemble: A culture of our own. *Music Educators Journal, 88*(2), 24–28. https://doi.org/10.2307/3399738

Mortenson-Spokes, S. R. (2023). Post pandemic band programs: The impact of COVID-19 on retention and attrition. [Masters thesis, University of Saskatchewan]. https://harvest.usask.ca/items/902eea06-2903-4773-9b7a-fbae37e21fcd

New York State Department of Education. (2015). *Student information repository system* (SIRS). https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2015&instid=800000043491

Parker, E. (2010). Exploring student experiences of belonging within an urban high school choral ensemble: An action research study. *Music Education Research, 12*(4), 339–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2010.519379

Paulson, P. (2022, April 20). "Choir numbers drop post-pandemic." *The Spartan Shield.* https://spartanshield.org/32803/arts-entertainment/choir-numbers-drop-post-pandemic/

Pendergast, S. (2020). Understanding participation in secondary music classes: A litera-

ture review. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education, 39*(1), 38-49. https://doi.org/10.1177/8755123320928479

Reeve, J., & Tseng, C. (2011). Agency as a fourth aspect of student engagement during learning activities. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 36*, 257–267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2011.05.002

Rohwer, D., & Rohwer, M. (2009). A content analysis of choral students' participation perceptions: Implications for lifelong learning. *International Journal of Community Music 2*, 2–3, 255–262. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.2.2-3.255_1

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist 55*, 68–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68

Silveira, J. (2013). Students' social and musical reasons for participating in honor music ensembles. *Research Perspectives in Music Education 15,*1.

Sweet, B. (2010). A case study: Middle school boys' perceptions of singing and participation in choir. *Update: Applications of research in music education, 28*(2), 5–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/8755123310361770.

Warnock, E. C. (2009). Gender and Attraction: Predicting Middle School Performance Ensemble Participation. *Contributions to Music Education, 36*(2), 59–78.

Weller, T. (2021, August 12). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Junior High and Middle School Band Programs.* https://travisjweller.com/2021/08/12/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-junior-high-and-middle-school-band-programs/

Wolcott, H. (2008). *Ethnography: A way of seeing* (2nd ed.). Alta Mira.