

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
(2026) Vol. 14 108-127

A Case Study of Herriman High School's Advanced Treble Choir, *Vivace*

Emily M. Mercado¹ and Andrew W. Howden²

Abstract

The ensemble structure within a choral program can influence singers' musical identities, motivation, and self-worth. The hierarchical organization of a choral program can also influence students' experiences in choir. For example, students in treble choirs may develop musical skills, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and group cohesion. However, traditional choral structures that position mixed choirs as the top-level ensemble can also diminish the importance of treble choir experiences. Due to a lack of top-level treble choirs in U.S. high schools, research on singers' experiences in these ensembles remains limited. Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of an Advanced Treble Choir, *Vivace*, through the lens of Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT). We examined the experiences of twenty-four student participants using multiple data sources, including focus groups, twenty-four individual interviews, and fourteen weeks of researchers' observation notes. Using the SEVT framework, we report on singers' perceptions of *Vivace*'s attainment value, intrinsic value, and cost of participation. An additional salient theme—*Vivace* in relation to mixed-voice choirs—emerged outside of the SEVT framework. Based on these findings, conductors might consider the musical and social needs of their singers when designing ensemble structures and hierarchies within their choral programs to maximize benefits for singers.

Keywords: *case study, choral hierarchies, situated expectancy-value theory, treble choir, women's choir*

¹ Associate Professor of Music Education, The University of Utah, School of Music Emily.Mercado@utah.edu

² Director of Choirs, Herriman High School andrew.howden@jordandistrict.org

A Case Study of Herriman High School's Advanced Treble Choir, *Vivace*

Sopranos and altos significantly outnumber tenors and basses in high school choral programs in the United States (Elpus & Abril, 2019), a trend that has remained mostly unchanged for the last 30 years (Stewart, 1991). To address this imbalance, directors might place beginning singers in like-voiced choirs (i.e., soprano/alto and tenor/bass) and advanced students in mixed-voice choirs. However, researchers have suggested that tiered choral structures with high-stakes auditions into a top mixed choir may not serve treble singers' best interests (Abril, 2007; Koza, 1993; Major, 2017; Major & Parker, 2023; Palkki, 2015; Parker, 2018; Pope, 2015; Rubinstein, 2020). For example, these structures can create a culture where students view mixed choirs as superior to treble choirs (Major & Dakon, 2016; Parker, 2018). In addition, Adams (2022) found that sopranos and altos reported an anticipated loss of self-worth at twice the rate as tenors and basses when not selected for the top mixed-voice choir. In other words, a structural model that places the mixed choir as the elite ensemble may exclude qualified sopranos and altos, require the director to accept unqualified tenors and basses, and/or create classroom environments in which sopranos and altos are undervalued. The ensemble structure of a choral program can influence singers' musical identities, motivation, and self-worth, and should be carefully considered.

Aside from the challenges associated with tiered choral structures, placing students in like-voice choirs offers benefits. For example, grouping singers by voice type can support changes that occur during adolescence (Cooksey, 1977; Gackle, 2014). During this period, students experience persistent and audible changes in vocal production, such as a husky tone and temporary loss of certain notes (Abitbol, 2019; Cooksey, 1977; Kennedy, 2002, 2004; Lee et al., 1999). In addition, adolescents have reported feelings of discomfort and humiliation during the voice change (Kennedy, 2004; Mercado & Draut, 2024; Sweet, 2018; Sweet & Parker, 2019). Separating choirs into soprano/alto and tenor/bass voices, especially during adolescence, may help directors provide nuanced instructions that are specific to singers' physical and emotional needs.

Researchers have also found that participation in treble choirs can foster singers' musical development (Bartolome, 2013; Major & Dakon, 2016; Mercado & Draut, 2024; Parker, 2018), promote a sense of belonging (Parker, 2018; Southcott & Joseph, 2015), and result in higher perceived singing ability compared to participation in mixed-voice ensembles (Adams, 2022). For example, singers have reported that treble choirs can promote friendships and combat social isolation (Bartolome, 2013; Southcott & Joseph, 2015). Further, Adams (2022) noted that singers in treble choirs reported a higher growth mindset than singers in tenor-bass choirs. Despite these benefits, singers in both mid- and top-level collegiate ensembles within tiered choral programs expressed aversion towards participation in like-voiced choirs (Dakon & Major, 2017; Major & Dakon, 2016).

These benefits and challenges parallel findings in general education, although researchers have framed the outcomes in terms of gender identity rather than voice type. For example,

researchers have reported that female-identifying students performed better academically in female-identifying classrooms than in classrooms where students identified across genders (Cherney & Campbell, 2011; Smith & Andersen, 2022; Tully & Jacobs, 2010). Compared to classrooms where students identify across genders, student success in female-identifying classrooms may be attributed to increased competition (Laury et al., 2019), fewer behavioral problems (Lavy & Schlosser, 2011), higher self-esteem (Cherney & Campbell, 2011), and a sense of comfort stemming from long-term socialization in gendered peer groups (Martin et al., 2014). However, Martin et al. also problematized these findings, suggesting that students in same-gender identity learning environments may have fewer opportunities to interact with individuals who identify across genders. Therefore, the perceived benefits of same-gender identity learning environments—such as positive behavior, academic achievement, and high self-esteem—may reflect long-standing social conditioning rather than the effects of one experience in a same-gender identity classroom.

Theoretical Framework: Situated Expectancy-Value Theory

In the research literature on treble choirs, scholars have examined singers' perceptions of musical skills, self-confidence/self-worth, interpersonal skills, group cohesion, and choral hierarchies (Adams, 2022; Bartolome, 2013; Major, 2017; Major & Parker, 2023; Parker, 2018; Southcott & Joseph, 2015; Sweet & Parker, 2019). These reported benefits and challenges reflect tenets of Expectancy-Value Theory, which researchers have used to explore how students choose tasks based on enjoyment (value) and perceived competence (expectancy) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Eccles (1984) developed this theory to examine how male- and female-identifying students' beliefs about their mathematical abilities influenced curricular choices. To further examine student motivation in schools, Wigfield and Eccles (2020) modified the theory to Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT) for performance-based activities. SEVT consists of four parts: (a) intrinsic value (i.e., enjoyment), (b) attainment value (i.e., personal importance), (c) utility value (i.e., usefulness), and (d) perceived cost (i.e., sacrifice). Using this framework, music education researchers have studied students' motivation to compose with technology (Chen, 2019), learn an instrument (McPherson, 2001), and study music (Juvonen, 2011; Kingsford-Smith & Evans, 2019; Mota, 1999). The SEVT model provides a unique lens to examine treble choir participation, particularly, singers' perceptions of enjoyment, usefulness, success, and perceived cost of participation, which may influence how directors choose to structure their choral programs.

Research Questions and Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of an Advanced Treble Choir, *Vivace*, through the lens of Situated Expectancy-Value Theory (SEVT). The following research questions guided our study: (a) How do the participants describe enjoyable and unenjoyable experiences in *Vivace*? (b) How do the participants define success and failure in *Vivace*? (c) How do participants perceive the usefulness of *Vivace*? (d) How do participants

describe the perceived cost of participation in *Vivace*?

Method

Researchers have primarily examined treble choirs at the beginning or intermediate levels, perhaps due to the scarcity of advanced treble choirs in the U.S. There is a dearth of research on high school singers' experiences in a treble choir positioned as a top-level ensemble within a tiered choral program. Therefore, we chose to examine *Vivace* because it is positioned as one of the top ensembles at Herriman High School in Utah. We conducted an intrinsic case study to understand the participants' experiences and bounded *Vivace* as our case (Barrett, 2014; Stake, 2005). The specific boundaries were as follows: (a) time: one semester; (b) place: *Vivace* rehearsal and performance spaces; (c) participants: students enrolled in *Vivace* during the semester of data collection; (d) data: observations, interviews, and focus groups; and (e) theoretical lens: SEVT. We purposefully chose these boundaries to align with our research questions and method. Herriman is an urban public high school in Herriman, UT that enrolls approximately 2,800 students in 10th–12th grade (see Table 1). At the time of this study, Herriman High School's student population was 84% White, with 11% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. *Vivace*'s student demographics were 95% White, with 4% of participants eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Table 1

Demographics of Herriman High School and Vivace

Name	Enrollment	Graduation Rate	Free/Reduced Lunch	Ethnic Distribution
Herriman High School	2,800 in the 10 th –12 th grade	94%	11%	84% White 10% Hispanic 1% Asian or Pacific Islander 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 1% Black or African American 3% Two or more races
<i>Vivace</i>	24	100%	5%	95% White 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Positionality

Andrew is the director of *Vivace*, and his role as a co-researcher allowed us to examine the participants' experiences within the context of the community and choral program (Kinch-

eloe, 2012; Patton, 2015). Involving teachers in design, data collection, and analysis positions “teachers as researchers rather than researched teachers” (O’Mara & Gutierrez, 2010, p. 45) to provide a “nuanced and complete set of data” (p. 52). Andrew’s engagement strengthened our understanding of the complex phenomena. Emily’s involvement included developing the research design, the IRB process, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and final write-up. Andrew’s involvement included assisting with the research design, data collection, analysis, and assisting with the final write-up.

To avoid coercion, Andrew did not participate in recruitment efforts, and we made it clear to students that participation was not tied to their grade. In addition, only Emily conducted the individual interviews and then de-identified the transcripts for Andrew to analyze. We de-identified the interview transcripts to determine if Andrew’s role as their teacher influenced the participants’ responses, and we communicated this process to the participants. Our intent was to minimize pressure to provide what they might perceive as desirable responses, and in our analysis, we found consistent themes across data sources. Finally, we both completed observation notes during and after each rehearsal; however, Andrew led the rehearsals, therefore, his observations were post-hoc. In the following paragraphs, we describe how our position as researchers and teachers contributed to our understanding and interpretation of the case.

Emily

At the time of this study, I was in my fourth year as a university professor, where I conducted a non-auditioned treble choir. As a high school teacher, I conducted beginner and advanced treble choirs for nine years. When I began teaching in high school, the advanced treble choir was the top ensemble in the program. I adopted the previous teacher’s policy, which required students to enroll in two choral ensembles to participate in the advanced treble choir. However, when the school moved from an eight-period to a seven-period schedule, I was forced to drop this requirement. I merged both treble choirs into one and positioned the mixed choir as the top ensemble. I perceived that my choral program had never fully recovered from this structural change.

Andrew

At the time of this study, I was in my fifth year at Herriman and had six years’ experience teaching choirs in public schools. I had little experience working with treble choirs before starting my position; however, I applied for the job because I witnessed a stunning performance by Vivace at a state music conference. I program repertoire for Vivace before other choirs and prioritize my work to help them succeed. Although Vivace sings challenging repertoire and receives high ratings at festivals, I work to create equal opportunities for all choirs in my program, including the advanced tenor-bass choir and the advanced mixed choirs I conduct.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data included individual interviews, focus groups, and researcher observation notes across 14 weeks. Upon invitation, 24 of 25 *Vivace* members volunteered to participate in the study (see Table 2 on the next page). We received Institutional Review Board approval and collected participant assent and guardian permission forms. The participants and guardians agreed to the use of *Vivace* and Herriman; however, we replaced the names of the individual participants with pseudonyms.

We began with a full group meeting at the end of a 3-day choir retreat with all 24 participants that lasted for 46 minutes. We asked participants to share their expectations for *Vivace* that year. During week four, we conducted three focus groups. Each focus group consisted of seven to nine participants and lasted between 24 and 28 minutes. We scheduled the groups based on their availability (two during lunch breaks and one after school). We asked participants to describe the social and musical experiences that occurred within *Vivace*.

During week eight, Emily conducted 24 individual interviews that lasted between 20 and 40 minutes each and occurred in a music practice room at Herriman. Emily led participants through a series of open-ended questions regarding the perceived usefulness and cost of *Vivace*. At this point, Emily transcribed the data, and sent the focus group and de-identified interview transcripts plus the combined observation notes to Andrew. We separately coded the data using values coding to examine the “interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 132). During this cycle, we examined what the participants valued in the choir (i.e., musical and social experiences), how they described their experiences in the choir (i.e., choir is fun, stressful, challenging, and cliquy), and their attitudes toward the choir (i.e., bad attitude, excited to sing, relaxed, and social pressure).

During week fourteen, we conducted the second set of focus groups and split the participants into two groups based on their assigned lunch periods. We printed a list of emerging themes, and these focus groups also served as member checks. For example, we discussed each emerging theme with the participants, and they agreed, disagreed, and/or expanded on the themes verbally and/or in writing. Then, we organized the data through the SEVT framework into thematic statements. Finally, we used code weaving to summarize our interpretations of the data through salient themes. To address trustworthiness, we used multiple data sources to validate our findings and the participants engaged in member checking during the final focus groups. In the following case profile, we offer a description of *Vivace* (Geertz, 1973).

Case Profile

Walking through the Herriman hallways toward the choir room feels like a typical suburban U.S. high school in Utah. Students talk with friends, walk alone, engage with their phones, and a few are yelling and running. This social energy extends into the choir room. As *Vivace* students enter the room, some greet each other with hugs and smiles, whereas others remain reserved or isolated.

Table 2
Student participants

Pseudonym	Years in Choir	Gender Identity	Grade	Enrolled Choirs at Herriman High
Addison	1 year	Woman	11	A Cappella, Vivace
Aiden	3 years	Man	12	A Cappella, Camerata, Cantique, Chamber, Opus, Vivace
Amelia	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Amy	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Vivace
Aria	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Aurora	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Vivace
Ava	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Cantique, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Avery	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Vivace
Bailey	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Camila	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Cora	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Vivace
Gena	2 years	Woman	11	Chamber Choir, Vivace
Kari	1 year	Woman	11	A Cappella, Vivace
Kennedy	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Kinsley	3 years	Woman	12	Chamber Choir, Vivace
Kirstin	2 years	Woman	11	Chamber Choir, Vivace
Maddie	3 years	Woman	12	Chamber Choir, Vivace
Mia	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Cantique, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Miriam	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Cantique, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Parker	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Vivace
Sadie	2 years	Woman	12	Chamber Choir, Vivace
Skylar	3 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Cantique, Chamber Choir, Vivace
Sophia	2 years	Woman	11	A Cappella, Vivace
Taylor	2 years	Woman	12	A Cappella, Chamber Choir, Vivace

Vivace rehearsals begin promptly at 9:05 a.m. Andrew leads exercises on focus, breath support, alignment, blend, tone, intonation, and range extension. Participants demonstrate advanced vocal techniques and musical independence. They perform advanced repertoire compared to most treble choirs in Utah. For example, they sing four- to eight-part divisi music with extended vocal ranges, advanced polyphony, and chromatic harmonies. A sense of ownership, accomplishment, and dedication is evident throughout rehearsals. During rehearsals, the participants express frustration when mistakes occur, respond with smiles to beautiful phrases, and react with eye rolls and occasional resistance when corrected.

After rehearsals, participants describe feeling tired, fulfilled, frustrated, and motivated. Vivace is a top-level choral ensemble comprised of advanced 11th and 12th grade treble singers. Although the ensemble functions like other advanced high school choirs in terms of rigor, it differs in its exclusive treble voicing, which may shape the participants' musical and social experiences. In the following section, we frame the experiences of Vivace through SEVT to illuminate how participants' perceptions of value and cost intersect in an advanced treble choir.

Findings and Discussion

We identified salient themes in the data through the lens of SEVT and organized them according to perceived attainment value, perceived intrinsic value, and perceived costs associated with singing in Vivace. Perceived utility value did not emerge as a salient theme in the data set. Without prompting from us, participants frequently compared their experiences in Vivace to those in mixed-voice choirs. Although outside the SEVT framework, we included this salient theme.

Perceived Attainment Value

Aligning with SEVT, perceived competence and attainment value can motivate music participation (Juvonen, 2011). For example, if an activity has a high attainment value, an individual might feel proud of their effort when they accomplish a difficult task. The participants described Vivace rehearsals as “stressful” (Mia, focus group 1c), but “helpful” (Mia, interview) because “it makes us want to do better” (Addison, focus group 2a), and “if you don’t push yourself, you don’t improve” (Amy, interview). Further, Amelia perceived that participating in Vivace motivated her as follows:

It’s really beneficial for us as teenagers to be pushed because that’s how it is in the real world...if I’m like, working a job, driving, doing all these responsibilities...I can kind of be treated more like an adult. I don’t need to be an entire adult...but like, somewhat...so it’s really nice...that extra little shove to be able to get everything done.
(interview)

Researchers have found that music students value challenging repertoire and ensemble

experiences that advance their musicianship (Adderley et al., 2003; Bartolome, 2013; Major & Dakon, 2016). In this study, the participants demonstrated motivation to practice music outside of class. For instance, Avery stated, “It makes [me] feel proud...makes me wanna work harder for that feeling” (focus group 1c). Similarly, Aria stated that *Vivace* “helps me as a musician...to sound good, and I want...the whole choir to succeed” (interview). The participants described how their work in and out of class led to successful musical experiences and a sense of accomplishment, which aligns with previous research on treble choirs (Bartolome, 2013; Major & Dakon, 2016; Mercado & Draut, 2024; Parker, 2018; Southcott & Joseph, 2015). These findings reflect the high attainment value of advanced treble choirs, which may create unique spaces to strengthen singers’ musicianship.

The participants perceived that singing in *Vivace* developed their vocal technique. We observed advanced sight-singing skills, which allowed Andrew and the participants time to focus on vocal skills. For instance, Kennedy explained, “[we] learn the part, and then we can skip to technique...and get to like the little details, so we [can] be the best that we can be” (focus group 1a). The participants also described how they persisted through challenges in *Vivace*. For instance, Sadie remarked, “I take criticism or constructive feedback and then work on it...I used to take things so personally...but [*Vivace*] makes you learn how to spin things really positively, really fast” (focus group 2b). Likewise, Gena explained, “I’ve learned to take criticism a lot better...I see the positive in everybody’s comments...because it is coming from a good place” (focus group 2b). Challenging experiences can encourage “accountability, risk taking, and leadership” (Parker, 2014, p. 25). Participants perceived that challenges propelled their musical development, and the positive relationships formed in *Vivace* may have fostered resilience.

Participants also discussed the benefits of singing advanced four- to eight-part literature. In particular, Aiden stated, “I really like the opportunity to sing high in falsetto...I don’t get to do that as much in a tenor-bass choir...I’ve expanded my range a lot” (group meeting). Additionally, Taylor shared, “I sit right next to someone who can sing tenor, like she’s super talented at singing low...we can do so much more with those low voices” (interview). The participants reported that the focused treble environment allowed them to improve their vocal technique and range, aligning with previous research on treble choirs (Bartolome, 2013; Mercado & Draut, 2024; Parker, 2018; Southcott & Joseph, 2015). For example, Parker (2018) described that “when choral teachers expected and consistently worked on the highest levels of music-making with the choir, participants broadened their personal musicianship and listening practices, engaging more expressively in their lives as a whole” (p. 455). In this study, the participants reported that high expectations and perceived challenges propelled their musical development. These findings may reflect an advantage of working solely with soprano and alto voices, affording the director the time to provide nuanced feedback. Therefore, advanced treble ensembles that perform challenging repertoire may create unique spaces for members to develop their musicianship.

Perceived Intrinsic Value

Researchers have found that students may enroll in music ensembles to develop friendships (Adderley et al., 2003; Major & Dakon, 2016). In this study, positive social experiences manifested as intrinsic value. Some participants shared positive experiences in Vivace that stemmed from a sense of belonging, such as in the following conversation:

Miriam: These are my people...the one place that I'm always safe, we're always going to do well...It's just like another home...

Aiden: This is a safe space...the choir is close to each other...

Gena: When I'm here, I can just like let my freak flag fly...I love choir so much; it just makes me so happy to be here. (focus group 1b)

Similarly, Amelia shared, "Anytime I'm coming into the choir room, I'm like, okay, this is my safe space... If I screw up, it's fine, everybody does, and if I kill it, then everybody around me is like, 'you killed it!'" When discussing their positive relationships with one another, Kennedy shared, "The music is what brings us together...you come to sing and then you stay because of the relationships you make" (interview). In our observations, we noted that the participants greeted each other with hugs, cheers, and smiles. For instance, Amelia elaborated on interactions with other members and said, "When I come into Vivace...Mia gives me a hug, and so I'm immediately like...now I can relax, this is nice, I'm with the people that I know and love the most." Other participants described "a sense of companionship" (Kinsley, interview), "because it's, like, [a] group of girls" (Kari, interview), and they "feel more comfortable around just women" (Avery, interview). Some participants perceived that singing in Vivace facilitated friendships and inclusion into a peer group.

In music classes, peer groups can bridge social gaps, encourage belonging, and promote empowerment (Parker, 2018; Rawlings & Young, 2021). Specifically, treble choirs can provide positive social experiences (Bartolome, 2013; Major & Dakon, 2016; Southcott & Joseph, 2015) and "fortify emerging social identities" (Parker, 2018, p. 454). In addition, intrinsic value may be especially important for select choirs, as McPherson (2001) reported advanced students more often cited intrinsic motivators when learning to play an instrument than beginning students. In this study, participants overwhelmingly reported positive social experiences as a perceived intrinsic value of Vivace.

Perceived Cost

In SEVT, cost is what individuals perceive they endure to participate in and/or succeed at a task. Two salient themes emerged as perceived costs of participation in Vivace—pressure and social isolation. For instance, Gena explained, "It's a lot of pressure...choir in general is not the only thing I have going on in my life" (interview). Pressure stemmed from multiple

sources. For instance, Kennedy remarked, “We get critiqued by our own peers and teacher, and then we go to a competition and get critiqued by judges” (focus group 2b). For a few participants, the perceived cost stemmed from internal pressure, and Kennedy noted she did not want to be “the weak link” (interview). Gena also stated, “It’s, like, an internal doubt and fear because I personally hate screwing up...if I’m not good at what I’m doing, I feel really bad about myself...I love the high pressure, but some days it’s...a lot for me to handle” (focus group 2b). Likewise, Mia shared, “[you] like, compare yourself to the person sitting next to you and the one across the room...and then everybody kind of just gets scared” (focus group 2a). In *Vivace*, pressure from multiple sources to succeed came at a perceived cost.

In schools where most students identify as female, there exists higher levels of competition between students than in schools where most students identify across genders (Cherney & Campbell, 2011; Laury et al., 2019). In music classrooms, students can experience anxiety when placed in highly selective ensembles (Abril, 2007); and ensemble placement can negatively impact soprano and alto singers’ self-concepts at twice the rate of tenor and bass singers (Adams, 2022). Therefore, appropriately balancing task difficulty may be crucial for treble choir directors to consider as they work with students who experience varying degrees of perceived competence.

Participants also explained that social cliques existed within *Vivace*, which they described as isolating. For example, Bailey shared, “There’s definitely a handful of us that are...left out...they have their cliques and stuff...I try to like join in...but it’s kind of awkward. I’m like, I’m just gonna chill in the corner...such a vibe.” Descriptions of isolation varied between participants, and Kinsley explained that *Vivace* is, “inclusive but it’s also exclusive...we have these little cliques in *Vivace*, and I don’t think that’s intentional, but they still exist. At the same time, everyone is willing to help each other out...we just have this weird balance” (focus group 2a). Addison attributed feelings of social isolation to the age gap and stated, “There are a lot of seniors that I like, but I feel like they think I’m too young or something because they have these groups that they’ve been in for so long” (interview). Although treble ensembles can encourage responsibility (Parker, 2014), high levels of competition and pressure coupled with fear of failure and social isolation in treble ensembles may present unique challenges for directors.

Outside the SEVT Framework: *Vivace* in Relation to Mixed-voice Choirs

We did not set out to examine the participants’ perceptions of *Vivace* versus mixed-voice choirs. However, participation in *Vivace* requires students to sing in another choral group at Herriman, and all participants sang in the intermediate and/or advanced mixed-voice ensembles. Therefore, unprompted, the participants compared these experiences, and we included this salient theme in our findings.

Participants perceived a faster pace in *Vivace* than mixed-voice choir rehearsals. Kennedy explained, “the men slow us down” (group meeting). In response, Aiden stated,

Oh, no, big facts. There's no doubt...it takes so much longer for the guys to get some of the basic stuff down. I like singing with the girls more than with the guys. I like moving quickly, and I like being able to pick up on parts quickly.

In her interview, Ava stated, "I just feel like, the men kind of hold us back sometimes and they don't put in as much effort as some of the women do" (interview). Participants reported that the perceived slow pace in mixed-voice choirs stemmed from the presence of tenor and bass voices. In addition, participants perceived that Vivace promoted higher levels of musicianship than mixed-voice choirs, aligning with Parker (2018) and Adams (2022). However, these findings may be more reflective of long-standing choral traditions rather than stereotypical gendered traits. For example, adolescent tenors and basses experience voice change in ways that are developmentally distinct from sopranos and altos (Cooksey, 1977; Gackle, 2014). In addition, Palkki (2015) discussed the "constraining social prescriptions regarding gender and sexuality" that tenors and basses can experience (p. 26). Therefore, comments such as, "it takes the guys so much longer" could reflect cultural and structural dimensions of choir rather than the musical abilities or dispositions of tenor and bass singers.

Some participants described that "the environment is much more relaxed" in Vivace than in mixed-voice choirs (Avery, interview). For instance, Camila explained, "In Vivace, it kinda feels like...walking along a beach. It's nice and quiet, and you just hear the waves. But in Chamber, it kinda feels like you're in a bounce house like...oh my goodness, there's so many things happening" (interview). However, some participants indicated that Vivace's environment lacked excitement and spontaneity, when compared to mixed-voice choirs. Kennedy shared, "The guys lighten up the mood" (focus group 2a). Some participants suggested that they enjoyed singing with tenors and basses and would choose mixed choir over Vivace, which aligns with Major and Dakon (2016) and Parker (2018), who found that some singers perceived treble choirs as less valuable than mixed-voice choirs. For example, Parker (2018) noted that participants viewed "women's choirs as another step toward the top-tier ensemble and not an end goal" (p. 456). Although students can excel academically in classrooms with mostly female-identifying students (Cherney & Campbell, 2011; Tully & Jacobs, 2010), and treble singers have reported higher perceived singing ability than singers in tenor-bass or mixed-voice ensembles (Adams, 2022), prolonged engagement in single-gender identifying peer groups may limit students' ability to collaborate with peers of different gender identities (Martin et al., 2014). Therefore, singers can gain valuable experiences in both mixed-voice choirs and treble choirs. For some, participating in treble choirs may provide the ideal environment for focused learning and social connection, particularly for those who have previously experienced positive gendered socialization.

Implications

Within the SEVT framework, participants perceived that, while singing in Vivace, they developed musicianship and identified challenges as a catalyst for success—attainment value,

and they described feelings of belonging—intrinsic value. However, participation in *Vivace* also came at perceived cost—specifically pressure to succeed and social isolation. In addition, although participants acknowledged benefits of *Vivace*, some still expressed a preference for mixed-voice choirs.

Perceived utility value refers to how individuals view learning experiences as useful in areas outside the present context, in this case, *Vivace* (Mota, 1999; Wigfield & Eccles, 2020). We did not include utility value as a salient theme in our findings because broad goals and future-focused evidence (such as resume building, career preparation, and college admissions) was limited in our data set. To avoid leading questions and speculations, we did not specifically ask the participants how *Vivace* may have contributed to their future goals, but perhaps a revision of the interview protocol would have elicited data on utility value. However, the absence of utility is also interesting. Participants overwhelmingly discussed value and cost in terms of musical and social experiences rather than an activity tied to their future goals.

Vivace is a top-level treble choir, which is unique for high school choirs in Utah. Despite the perceived value of *Vivace*, some participants viewed singing in mixed-voice choirs as more elite than treble choirs. Researchers have found that students perceive treble choirs as inferior to mixed-voice choirs (Parker, 2018; Wilson, 2012) and have questioned tiered choral structures in which mixed-voice choirs are positioned as the top ensemble (Koza, 1993; Palkki, 2015; Parker, 2018; Pope, 2015; Rubinstein, 2020). For example, Koza (1993) suggested that “an absence of males is only a problem if mixed ensemble music is considered the most legitimate” (p. 227). Similarly, Pope (2015) problematized treble choirs that serve as a “dumping ground...for females who did not make it into the premier SATB ensemble” (p. 55). In this study, participants reported *Vivace* was more efficient and more challenging in terms of musical development than mixed-voice choirs. However, participants also indicated that they preferred singing in mixed-voice choirs, citing unique social experiences and lighthearted atmospheres as benefits. Assigning value to choral experiences based on ensemble structures and hierarchies can conflict with a program’s actual value and perceived value. The participants did not experience *Vivace* in isolation; instead, they compared the pace, rigor, and social dynamics to mixed-voice choirs. Therefore, students’ experiences in choral ensembles appear to be relational. Directors should carefully consider how they label ensembles, audition singers, and design rehearsal and performance experiences within their choral ensembles.

Researchers have reported that choral programs with mixed choirs as the top ensemble can come at a cost for soprano and alto singers (Koza, 1993; Palkki, 2015; Parker, 2018; Rubinstein, 2020). However, we found that singers in *Vivace* also experienced costs associated with participation. Perhaps the costs of participation are more associated with choral hierarchies than voicing. For instance, when removing auditions from a high school choral program, Major and Parker (2023) described that singers have experienced “positive social identity...and unique opportunities for leadership” (p. 55). Singers likely experience value and cost when participating in any ensemble, but if a choral program has a large majority of soprano and alto singers, an auditioned mixed choir positioned as the top ensemble may

come at a greater cost to sopranos and altos than to tenors and basses. Finally, Demorest et al. (2017) conducted a predictive correlational study and examined future predictors related to music participation in school. They included perceived costs in the survey, but it did not emerge as a strong predictor. Music self-concept, peer influence, and family musical experiences were strong predictors of participation in school music. When considering value and cost, these findings point to the need for choral directors to examine if and how ensemble hierarchies and voicings serve their students' musical and social needs.

Limitations and Future Research

Music programs in the U.S. already enroll a disproportionate percentage of students from high socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Elpus & Abril, 2019), and *Vivace* exceeds the national average with 4% of participants eligible for free and reduced lunch. In addition, participation depends on *Vivace* members enrolling in another choir at Herriman High, and most participants demonstrated advanced sight-singing skills. The participants' high SES backgrounds, sustained exposure to vocal training, and advanced sight-reading skills likely contributed to their perceived success in *Vivace*.

Participants in this study identified their gender as woman or man; none identified as transgender or nonbinary. Therefore, we cannot speak to the experiences of transgender or nonbinary singers. Researchers have suggested that choral programs organized by voicing or gender can create challenges for transgender and nonbinary singers (Carlson, 2025; Palkki, 2017; 2020). In a review of the literature on this topic, Carlson (2025) suggested that choral directors should consider how voice parts, ensemble names, and required attire can affect student belonging. Therefore, ensemble structures should ensure support for singers of all gender identities.

Future researchers might examine transgender and nonbinary singers' experiences in tiered choral programs, especially those with like-voiced choirs. We also suggest that future researchers examine ensemble hierarchy and structure across a variety of choral contexts. For example, researchers could design a comparative study of like- and mixed-voice choirs and/or choral programs with and without hierarchies to examine these issues in greater depth. In addition, researchers might engage in longitudinal research to determine the long-term effects of like-voiced choirs.

The findings from this case study cannot be generalized to all choral programs; however, transferability might apply to similar choral settings. For example, directors with tiered ensemble structures might consider how choral hierarchies influence student motivation, identity development, and the perceived values and costs associated with participation in advanced ensembles. Directors should consider the musical and social benefits of all choirs when designing choral programs (Bartolome, 2013; Parker, 2014, 2018; Southcott & Joseph, 2015). Enhancing the value of every ensemble and minimizing perceived costs may foster student motivation and engagement across all ensembles. However, if a choral program has a higher ratio of soprano and alto to tenor and bass singers, and the mixed-voice ensemble

is the premier group, a great deal of musical potential may be left untapped.

References

- Abitbol, J. (2019). *The female voice*. Plural Publishing.
- Abril, C. R. (2007). I have a voice but I just can't sing: A narrative investigation of singing and social anxiety. *Music Education Research*, 9(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800601127494>
- Adams, K. (2022). Adolescent self-theories of singing ability within a choral hierarchy. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 234, 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.5406/21627223.234.01>
- 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>
- Barrett, J. R. (2014). Case study in music education. In C. Conway (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research in American music education* (pp. 113–132). Oxford University Press.
- Bartolome, S. J. (2013). It's like a whole bunch of me!: The perceived values and benefits of the Seattle Girls' Choir. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 60(4), 395–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429412464054>
- Carlson, R. (2025). Transgender and gender-expansive singers in choir: A review of the literature. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 44(1), 57–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233241301797>
- Cherney, I. D., & Campbell, K. L. (2011). A league of their own: Do single-sex schools increase girls' participation in the physical sciences? *Sex Roles*, 65(9–10), 712–724. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0013-6>
- Chen, J. C. W. (2019). Mobile composing: Professional practices and impact on students' motivation in popular music. *International Journal of Music Education*, 38(1), 147–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761419855820>
- Cooksey, J. M. (1977). The development of a contemporary, eclectic theory for the training and cultivation of the junior high school male changing voice: Part I: Existing theories. *Choral Journal*, 18(2), 5–14.
- Dakon, J. M., & Major, M. L. (2017). Chorister perceptions of collegiate top-level choral experiences: Replication and extension. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 212, 27–55. <https://doi.org/10.5406/bulcouresmusedu.212.0027>
- 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>
- Eccles, J. (1984). Sex differences in achievement patterns. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, 32, 97–132.

- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 109–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135153>
- Elpus, K., & Abril, C. R. (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>
- Gackle, L. (2014). Adolescent girls' singing development. In D. M. Howard & J. Nix (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of singing*. Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.
- Juvonen, A. (2011). Students' motivation to study music: The Finnish context. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 33(1), 73–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X11400508>
- Kennedy, M. A. (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(1), 26–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X020180010401>
- Kennedy, M. C. (2004). It's a metamorphosis: Guiding the voice change at the American Boychoir School. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 52(3), 264–280.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3345859>
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2012). *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*. Routledge.
- Kingsford-Smith, A., & Evans, P. (2019). A longitudinal study of psychological needs satisfaction, value, achievement, and elective music intentions. *Psychology of Music*, 49(3), 382–398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735619868285>
- Koza, J. E. (1993). The missing males and other gender issues in music education: Evidence from the Music Supervisors' Journal, 1914–1924 [Journal]. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 41(3), 212–232. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3345326>
- Laury, S. K., Lee, D. J., & Schnier, K. E. (2019). Will girls be girls? Risk taking and competition in an all-girls' school. *Economic Inquiry*, 57(3), 1408–1420.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ecin.12765>
- Lavy, V., & Schlosser, A. (2011). Mechanisms and impacts of gender peer effects at school. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 3(2), 1–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1257/app.3.2.1>
- Lee, S., Potamianos, A., & Narayanan, S. (1999). Acoustics of children's speech: Developmental changes of temporal and spectral parameters. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 105(3), 1455–1468. <https://doi.org/10.1121/1.426686>
- Major, M. L., & Dakon, J. M. (2016). Singer perceptions of collegiate mid-level choral experiences: A descriptive study. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 64(1), 108–127.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429416639232>
- Major, M. L. (2017). Building identity in collegiate midlevel choral ensembles: The director's perspective. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 64(4), 435–453.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429416672891>

- Major, M. L., & Parker, E. C. (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>
- Martin, C. L., Fabes, R. A., & Hanish, L. D. (2014). Gendered-peer relationships in educational contexts. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, 47, 151–187.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2014.04.002>
- McPherson, G. E. (2001). Commitment and practice: Key ingredients for achievement during the early stages of learning a musical instrument. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 147, 122–127. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40319399>
- Mercado, E. M. & Draut, M. (2024). Eighth- and ninth-grade students' perceptions of a curriculum designed to support adolescent female vocal development: An action research study. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 46(1), 98–113.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X221149661>
- Mota, G. (1999). Young children's motivation in the context of classroom music: An exploratory study about the role of music content and teaching style. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 141, 119–123.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40318996>
- O'Mara, J., & Gutierrez, A. (2010). Classroom teachers as co-researchers: The affordances and challenges of collaboration. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 33(1), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03651820>
- Palkki, J. (2015). Gender trouble: Males, adolescence, and masculinity in the choral context. *Choral Journal*, 56(4), 24–35.
- Palkki, J. (2017). Inclusivity in action: Transgender students in the choral classroom. *Choral Journal*, 57(11), 20–35.
- Palkki, J. (2020). “My voice speaks for itself”: The experiences of three transgender students in American secondary school choral programs. *International Journal of Music Education*, 38(1), 126–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761419890946>
- Parker, E. C. (2014). The process of social identity development in adolescent high school choral singers: A grounded theory. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 62(1), 18–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429413520009>
- Parker, E. C. (2018). A grounded theory of adolescent high school women's choir singers' process of social identity development. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 65(4), 439–460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429417743478>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Pope, L. S. (2015). Sing out loud: Empowering women's choirs. *Choral Journal*, 56(5), 53–55.
- Rawlings, J. R., & Young, J. (2021). Relational aggression and youth empowerment within a high school instrumental music program. *Psychology of Music*, 49(5), 1102–1116.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735620923140>

- Rubinstein, E. (2020). Professional notes: On the front lines of choral education reform. *Music Educators Journal*, 107(1), 13–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432120946276>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (fourth ed.). SAGE.
- Smith, E., & Andersen, I. G. (2022). Do same-gender peers in the classroom have heterogeneous impacts on male and female students? *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231221105378>
- Southcott, J. E., & Joseph, D. (2015). Singing in la Voce della Luna Italian women's choir in Melbourne, Australia. *International Journal of Music Education*, 33(1), 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761414546244>
- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 443–466). SAGE.
- Stewart, C. (1991). *Who takes music? Investigating access to high school music as a function of social and school factors*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Sweet, B. (2018). Voice change and singing experiences of adolescent females. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 66(2), 133–149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429418763790>
- Sweet, B., & Parker, E. C. (2019). *Female vocal identity development: A phenomenology*. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 67(1), 62–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429418809981>
- Tully, D., & Jacobs, B. (2010). Effects of single-gender mathematics classrooms on self-perception of mathematical ability and post secondary engineering paths: An Australian case study. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 35(4), 455–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2010.489940>
- Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2020). 35 years of research on students' subjective task values and motivation: A look back and a look forward. In Elliot A. J. (Ed.), *Advances in Motivation Science*, 7, (161–198). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2019.05.002>
- Wilson, J. M. (2012). Preferences of and attitudes toward treble choral ensembles. *Research and Issues in Music Education*, 10(1), 1–14. <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/rime/vol10/iss1/4/>

Appendix A

Interview and Focus Group Questions

Full Group Meeting (week one)

- Describe any expectations you have for Vivace this year.
- Describe any concerns you have for Vivace this year.
- What are your personal goals for Vivace this year?

Focus Group One (week four)

- Describe experiences in Vivace that you feel are the most helpful AND the least helpful to your vocal and musical development, and why.
- Describe experiences in Vivace that you feel are the most helpful AND the least helpful to your social and/or emotional vocal and musical development, and why.
- During the retreat, several students mentioned that they were nervous that cliques might form in choir this year. How do you think that is going so far?
- How do you see Vivace fitting into the overall structure of the choir program at Herriman?
- Describe your favorite memory from Vivace rehearsals and/or performances.
- Describe any experiences in Vivace that may or may not have contributed to a sense of accomplishment.
- Describe any negative experiences in Vivace.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions (week eight)

- Describe musical contributions that you make to Vivace.
- Describe how you interact with other members of Vivace.
- Describe how you feel about your singing voice during Vivace rehearsals.
- Do you identify with a particular voice part?
- Describe how you express your vocal development needs during rehearsal.
- What is the most important aspect of Vivace? What do you want to remember when you think back on your time in Vivace?
- How has the experience of being in Vivace affected you? Have you perceived any changes as a result of the experience?

- What feelings have been generated by being in *Vivace*?
- Andrew has programmed music for the year about finding your purpose, your inner power, and rising up. Describe how you feel about the music's meaning.
- When you walk into the choir room for a *Vivace* rehearsal, describe how you feel on a typical day.
- Describe why *Vivace* is or is not important to you.
- Pretend I'm a high school student who is on the fence about joining *Vivace*. If I said, should I join *Vivace*? What would you say to me and why?
- Avery-you mentioned that you are less timid this year in *Vivace* than in other choirs. Can you explain why?
- Ava-you mentioned that you are "more powerful" since being in choir. Do you mean vocally, personally, socially?
- Maddie-you mentioned that being in *Vivace* has helped your "confidence grow" Can you elaborate on that?
- Miriam-you mentioned that you don't have a lot of self-esteem, but that choir is a safe place where you feel like you belong. Can you elaborate on why you think that is? What happens in choir that makes it a safe place?

Focus Group Two (week fourteen)

- Some of you mentioned that you try to find a good schoolwork/life balance. Where does *Vivace* fall in that schoolwork/life balance?
 - Someone said that they feel pressured to look/act/dress a certain way. How does *Vivace* play into that?
 - Some of you mentioned that you sense pressure from other members in the choir to learn your music and perform at a high level. Can you elaborate on that?
 - For some of you, there existed this idea that the choir program "needs more men" Do you feel that way? Can you talk to us more about that?
 - Please see the attached handout for some of the themes that emerged during previous focus groups and interviews. Please read through this list and circle anything with which you agree and cross off anything with which you disagree. I just want to know your perceptions of these themes, not how you think the whole choir feels. There is no right or wrong answer. You can choose to write your name on this paper or leave it blank, and you are not required to turn in this form. On the back of this paper, please write anything else you want to share with me about *Vivace*.
-