A DESCRIPTION OF A GENDER SEPARATE MIDDLE SCHOOL CHORAL PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to identify the advantages and disadvantages of single gender vocal ensembles at the middle school level by examining one exemplary middle school choral program through qualitative case study methods including interview, observation, and survey.

The setting of this study was a middle school with an established and exemplary choral music program in which all choral ensembles are separated by gender. The director of the boys’ choir has 11 years of public school teaching experience. The girls’ choir director has one year of public school teaching experience. Student participants were those voluntarily enrolled in seventh and eighth grade choir. Data were gathered by means of (a) students’ written responses to open-ended questions, (b) interviews with the teachers of the gender separate choirs, (c) a school administrator’s written responses to questions, and (d) classroom observations and field notes.

Both the boys’ and girls’ choir teachers and the administrator agreed that single gender choral ensembles are beneficial at the middle school level because of the developmental appropriateness, positive social interactions, decreased behavioral problems, and increased participation. Both male and female students enjoyed participating in these ensembles because of the non-threatening classroom environment, accessibility of music regarding vocal range, and repertoire selection. However, the
majority of female students preferred participating in a mixed gender choral ensemble citing social reasons and overall mixed choral sound for their preference.

Future research possibilities may include the implications of same or opposite gender teachers instructing each gender separate choir. Also of potential interest are studies comparing gender separate and mixed gender ensembles in the same school under the instruction of the same teacher. Finally, further investigation of different instructional approaches and their effectiveness in guiding male and female students through the voice change process is needed.
This thesis is dedicated to the glory of God and to my husband Eric Nycz, parents John Demangos (1944-2001) and Karen Demangos, and grandparents Erich (1920-2003) and Ida Jane Kohntopp (1924-2006), for their support, encouragement, and prayers throughout my life.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Middle school is an extremely uncertain stage of an adolescent’s development for both male and female students. Changes occur during this crucial period, and the adolescent body develops both vocally and physically. The developmental changes of an adolescent male and female are considerably different and should be treated as such. Ignoring these changes could result in the permanent loss of both male and female students from a choral program (May & Williams, 1989), potentially having detrimental effects on school and community choral music programs. Consequently, the way in which a choral music educator approaches these students during this time can have serious implications on how a child regards singing and his or her decision to continue participating in the choral experience.

Various academic disciplines have explored the concept of gender separate classrooms at the middle school level and experienced considerable success. Studies in the areas of math, English, and physical education support gender separate classrooms for various reasons. Gender separate classrooms provide (a) a supportive learning environment (Whitlock, 2006); (b) sustained engagement in and enjoyment of activities (Davis, 2005); and (c) increased confidence, motivation, and higher commitment to schoolwork (Wills, Kilpatrick, & Hutton, 2006). It seems that because of the vocal mutation process and differentiation of voices occurring at this age, choral music educators should consider gender separate classrooms as well. However, the evidence from which informed decisions can be made regarding the appropriateness, feasibility, or educational merit of gender separate choral classrooms for adolescents is insufficient.
Statement of the Problem

Every day, middle school choral directors must meet the challenge of teaching adolescent male and female students who are changing psychologically, physically, and vocally. Emotional dilemmas facing adolescent students include: (a) emotional volatility, (b) low self-esteem, and (c) high self-consciousness (Biehler and Snowman, 1997; National Middle School Association, 1995). As adolescents grow physically and mature, the vocal mechanism is impacted. Vocally, these students will likely experience: (a) diminished and/or limited range, (b) changing vocal quality, and (c) inconsistent pitch accuracy (Gackle, 1991; Phillips, 1996). Every adolescent singer deserves a quality choral music education in which the psychological, physical, and vocal needs of the individual student are addressed on a daily basis. Unfortunately, very little substantiated research exists on what type of choral environment best addresses the various needs of the adolescent singer. Some music educators and researchers have suggested the best way to encourage and engage both male and female singers is to separate them by gender (Brinson, 1996; Carp, 2005; Demorest, 2000; Freer, 1998; Kennedy, 2004). The current study is designed to investigate in depth one such exemplary choral music environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the advantages and disadvantages of single gender vocal ensembles at the middle school level by examining one exemplary middle school choral program through qualitative case study methods including interview, observation, and survey. Data was gathered by means of (a) students’ written responses to open-ended questions, (b) interviews with the teachers of the gender
separate choirs, (c) a school administrator’s written response to questions, and (d) classroom observations and fieldnotes.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Much research has examined the specific needs of and teaching techniques for both the adolescent boy’s and adolescent girl’s changing voice. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative research has been completed in gender separate classrooms with the goal of identifying the type of learning environment in which children have the most success. This review of literature is divided into four sections pertaining to research that addresses (a) the adolescent boy’s changing voice, (b) the adolescent girl’s changing voice, (c) gender separate non-music classrooms, and (d) gender separate music classrooms.

The Adolescent Boy’s Changing Voice

Working with the adolescent boy’s changing voice is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of a middle school choral director’s job. Because of its complexity, the changing voice should be treated with special care and attention. Consequently, every director should possess a basic knowledge of the voice-change process and the physiological, psychological, and social challenges which can result (Collins, 1999).

During the time a boy’s voice is changing, approximately ages 12 to 16, the voice sounds neither like a child’s nor an adult’s, creating potential vocal dilemmas for both student and teacher (Collins, 1999). During this transition, physiologically, the boy experiences significant increases in the length and thickness of the larynx (Collins, 1999). Some of the difficulties of singing during the changing voice process include breathiness of sound, limitations of vocal range, complete inability to phonate specific notes within the singer’s range, vocal cracking, lack of vocal stamina, and limited control of vocal loudness (Collins, 1999).
Killian (1999) found that voice change was definitely occurring among many fifth and sixth grade boys, which indicated an earlier change than in previous research. She noted that repertoire selection continues to be a problem. Further research is needed in the area of content and appropriateness of current fifth and sixth grade music texts, as well as appropriate and available literature for this age group. The researcher stated that ignoring the needs of this age group may result in the loss of these students from our choral programs.

Many accounts of the physiological aspects of the voice change exist; however, few include the voice change process from the perspective of the participants themselves. Killian (1997) examined the perceptions of the voice change among changing voice boys ages 12 to 14 and adult males over the age of 23. Singers and non-singers were asked a series of open-ended questions during the interview. Results indicated that the boys remembered significantly more about their voice change than did the men. Eighty-seven percent of boys remembered their voice change as a positive or neutral experience. Of those adult men who recalled their voice change, 81% remembered it as a positive or neutral experience. However, negative comments concerning the voice change process (251) substantially outweighed the positive comments (29). Some men became visibly shaken while simply relating their story years after the fact. The author suggested choral directors should develop the sensitivity and knowledge necessary to instruct adolescent boys to deal with their voice change more effectively.

Keating (2004) described an organizational model that would enable a community boys’ choir organization to provide a continuous curriculum of vocal instruction for the male singer at all stages of his vocal development. The author suggested that a choir
tending to the needs of the adolescent male is essential for the success of a comprehensive choral curriculum for the male singer. In the changing voice ensemble, the director could better address the unique physiological, psychological, and social challenges of the adolescent male within a homogeneous ensemble. The study supported the conclusion that the adolescent singer benefits from the changing voice ensemble by gaining a sense of self-worth and accomplishment that is difficult to gain in an ensemble with treble or mature voices. In addition, a single gender changing voice ensemble allowed the conductor to better select repertoire that addressed the vocal capabilities of the changing voice singer.

Kennedy (2004) employed ethnographic research to describe and interpret a particular culture of boys with changing voices at the American Boychoir School. Themes emerging from this study revealed the boys’ own perceptions of the voice change process, healthy strategies for singing through the change, and psychological issues. There were five primary results. First, each boy’s voice change experience was different. Second, frequent monitoring of the individual voice and small-group lessons were essential. Third, a young man should sing during the voice change using the full range of notes available to him. Fourth, working with boys in a single gender environment was beneficial during the voice change. Fifth, students should be knowledgeable of good vocal technique and the workings of their vocal mechanisms.

The Adolescent Girl’s Changing Voice

The adolescent female also experiences a voice change. However, less research has been undertaken to study this occurrence. Effectively moving through this transition is as important to the adolescent female as to the adolescent male.
Girls usually experience a voice change between the ages of 10 and 14. This change is not considered to be as radical as the male’s. The larynx of the female thickens and grows resulting in a slight lowering of the speaking voice and lower extension of the singing range (Phillips, 1996). Gackle (1991), as a result of her extensive work with the female voice, has indicated the following as potential problems of the female voice change: insecurity of pitch, development of noticeable register breaks, increased huskiness in the voice, decreased and inconsistent range capabilities, voice cracking, hoarseness, and uncomfortable singing or difficulty in phonation.

May and Williams (1989) suggested that choral directors who concentrate solely on an adolescent female’s physical needs during the voice change process run the risk of alienating or discouraging the student, resulting in the discontinuation of the female’s participation in choral singing. Instead, the teacher must attend to psychological concerns such as self image, self esteem, and peer acceptance, in addition to the physiological challenges experienced by the child.

Gender Separate Non-music Classrooms

Much research exists on gender separate educational environments. The following studies focus specifically on middle school students in a variety of subject areas.

Derry and Phillips (2004) compared the differences between selected student and teacher variables for female students and teachers in coeducation and single gender physical education classes. They found that female students in gender separate classes spent more time engaged in learning skills or actively participating than did girls in coeducation physical education environments. In addition, female students in single gender classes initiated interactions and talked with their female physical education
teachers more often than girls in coeducation physical education classes. The teachers in
the single gender groups seemed to perform better when compared to the coeducation
teachers. They used significantly less management time in their teaching routines,
initiated more positive verbal interactions with their students, and provided more
motivational feedback than the coeducation teachers.

Whitlock (2006) examined the effects of single gender and coeducational
environments on the self-efficacy of middle school girls in a unit of volleyball. She found
that girls’ self-efficacy for learning volleyball was higher in the single gender
environments than in gender mixed settings. A post-intervention questionnaire and
student and teacher interviews provided insight into student preferences for these
groupings. Whitlock concluded that single gender classes have a more supportive
learning environment and better student conduct than coeducational classes.

Wills, Kilpatrick, and Hutton (2006) investigated social and academic outcomes
from single gender third and fourth grade classrooms in a Tasmanian coeducational
government primary school. Interviews, observations, and surveys formed the basis of the
evidence. Positive benefits from the class organization were supported by teachers,
parents, and children, but these benefits differed according to gender. Teachers identified
increased confidence and higher self esteem among girls, whereas boys developed
increased motivation and more commitment to schoolwork. Teachers and parents noted
that boys’ accountability and self-discipline improved. Teachers implemented different
teaching strategies from those used with mixed-gender classes and gained higher levels of
satisfaction from teaching, which was attributable to students’ increased “time on task.”
Davis (2005) identified school and classroom factors that contributed to the success of a single gender mathematics program. Teachers in the study found they could engage and motivate boys by using teaching strategies that work for boys and by building relationships with their students. Such teaching strategies included games and competition, drama and jokes, the scaffolding of activities and tasks, and assistance in developing organizational skills. Teachers reported that boys sustained their engagement in mathematics activities and problems throughout the class period. All boys reported that they enjoyed mathematics and perceived it as useful for current and future pursuits.

Groves (2005) examined the experience of participants in single gender math and English classes within a coeducational middle school in British Columbia, Canada. Interviews provided insight into the attitude, behavior, and achievement of ninth grade male students. Students and teachers documented gains in achievement. The greatest improvement in achievement occurred with below average students. Conversation, comfort, support, participation, joking around, and physical interactions increased, yet bullying behaviors decreased. The researcher concluded that classroom management with boundaries and lessons that reflect the boys’ need for physical and verbal interactions leads to a classroom that better serves the academic and social needs of the boys.

Gender Separate Music Classrooms

The amount of substantiated research on gender separate music classrooms is scarce. In addition, the available research differs in nature from other academic areas, in that it does not directly compare single gender music classrooms to mixed gender music classrooms.
Hall (2005) studied a group of Australian boys, age five, in their first year of school at an all male institution. She found that children with negative attitudes toward singing are not necessarily those with the least developed singing voices and that other factors, like gender and sociocultural contexts, may be influencing their singing behavior and attitudes. Gender stereotypes were evident in their beliefs that boys are supposed to engage in certain activities and not others and in their attitudes about the inappropriateness of singing as an adult male behavior. Peer modeling achieved increased levels of vocal participation, and as a result, was highlighted for its importance as a strategy to improve male participation in the music classroom. The findings of this study showed the role that gender stereotypes can play in boys’ construction of musical identities at a young age. Hall suggests that further research is needed to address how negative attitudes toward singing develop in some boys before five years of age, and consider how to deconstruct male stereotypes in the music classroom.

Carp (2004) investigated the observations, practices, and attitudes of choral directors with regard to behavior and teaching techniques in single gender and mixed voice ensembles. Responses indicated that student behavior was unquestionably more manageable in a single gender environment in the choral classroom. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that (a) students are visibly less focused when members of the opposite gender are present and (b) vocal technique methods can be tailored more effectively in single gender groups. Some concerns and barriers to offering single gender choirs were (a) the lack of enough boys, (b) the lack of quality literature for SSA and TTB choirs, and (c) the lack of administrative support. When asked to design the ideal curriculum for choral students, 100% of choral directors listed a combination of men’s,
women’s, and mixed ensembles with single gender ensembles being used as the training ground for advanced mixed groups. Directors indicated that as students become older and more musically advanced, disciplinary issues decrease. Based upon these observations, Carp suggested a choral curriculum offering more single gender choirs in secondary schools and the development of gender based teaching materials and choral literature.

Summary

Compared to other educational disciplines, gender separate music classrooms have not received the necessary attention from researchers to assist teachers in better addressing the issues of adolescent vocal development and learning environments. Research suggests that males and females are affected physiologically, psychologically, and socially by the vocal development that occurs during adolescence. Studies of several academic disciplines show that gender separate classrooms meet the diverse needs of adolescent males and females. One academic area missing from the research of gender separate classrooms is music; specifically, adolescent vocal development and its effects on behavior, participation, and overall classroom environment.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research seeks to understand a situation from the perspectives of those living in their natural environments rather than in the controlled or manipulated environments of experimental research (Hatch, 2002). The primary sources of data collection for this qualitative study were the interview, classroom observation and video taping, and survey. Within the interviewing process, guiding questions serve as the basis for constructing questions and enabling participants to talk about the phenomena under investigation (Hatch, 2002). Observation of students and teachers in their natural environments must occur in order to identify problems, recommend solutions, and establish pedagogy (Bresler & Stake, 1992; Radocy, 1994). Videotape can be used to capture facial expressions, nonverbal communications, and emotions that are often missed in fieldnotes (Hatch, 2002). When information is needed from large numbers of people (i.e., the students in this study), a written survey is more efficient than a traditional interview (Bresler & Stake, 1992). Utilizing various qualitative methods such as these allows for multiple sources of confirming or disconfirming evidence.

Description of the Study

Interviewing and classroom observation were essential to this study. The middle school choral directors in this study were asked a series of questions based on their experience teaching single gender choral ensembles. These questions focused on the single gender choral ensemble’s impact on the students’ behavior and attitude, the directors’ vocal instruction, and the overall classroom environment. The interviews were audio taped for transcription. In addition, I videotaped and took fieldnotes in both directors’ classrooms paying particular attention to the teachers’ instruction of vocal
technique, students’ behavior and attitude toward singing, and overall classroom environment.

Surveys were used to gain insight into the administrator’s and students’ perceptions and experiences. The administrator in this study was asked to complete a survey based on her experience leading a school with single gender choral ensembles. These questions focused on the single gender choral ensemble’s impact on enrollment in choir, the master schedule, students’ behavior and attitude, and parental support of the choral program. Answers to the survey were written verbatim.

The students in this study were asked to complete a survey based on their experience participating in a single gender choral ensemble. These questions focused on the students’ perceived behavior and effort, attitude toward participation in choir, and preference of ensemble composition. I synthesized all responses to the questions and reported the most frequent, and in some cases, most interesting responses.

Participants and Setting

The setting of this study was a middle school with an established and exemplary choral music program in which all 11 choral ensembles are separated by gender. Student participants are those voluntarily enrolled in seventh and eighth grade choir. The director of the boys’ choir has 11 years of public school teaching experience. The girls’ choral director has one year of public school teaching experience. This middle school was chosen on the basis of (a) the teachers’ active participation in the Ohio Music Education Association and the Ohio Choral Directors Association, (b) recommendations from their current and former colleagues and professors, and (c) my professional acquaintanceship with one of the teachers as an attendee of his presentation on working with the male
adolescent voice at the Ohio Music Education Association professional conference in 2004. In addition, this director’s choral groups consistently earn superior ratings at the Ohio Music Education Association Large Group Adjudicated Event. Boys’ ensembles from this school have performed at both the Ohio Music Education Association professional conference and the Ohio Choral Directors Association professional conference.

The middle school studied is part of a comprehensive preschool through twelfth grade public school district located in the southeastern suburbs of a metropolitan city in the Midwestern region of the United States. The district serves 7,750 students living in two communities. The combined population of these communities is approximately 45,000. The students attending this middle school are predominantly white-Caucasian. Although not located in the heart of a large city, the surrounding areas are culturally rich with many opportunities for extracurricular education. The school district has earned the state’s highest rating of “Excellent” for seven consecutive years. The middle school has one principal, three assistant principals, two full-time vocal music teachers, and one part-time vocal music teacher. The assistant principal who participated in this study has 12 years of public school teaching experience in Kentucky and Ohio. She has been the assistant principal of the middle school for two years.

The Research Question

As outlined in Chapter I, the purpose of this study was to identify the advantages and disadvantages of single gender vocal ensembles at the middle school level by observing, interviewing, and surveying students, administrators, and choral directors and
by examining one exemplary middle school choral program through qualitative case study methods. General areas of inquiry were as follows:

1. Is behavior influenced by class composition?
2. Are there differences within the gender separate classrooms related to vocal technique?
3. What are students’ attitudes and dispositions towards gender separate and mixed ensembles?
4. What, if any, are the psychological and emotional ramifications of gender separate choirs?

These areas of inquiry served as a guide for gaining insight into directors’, students’, and an administrator’s experiences and thoughts regarding the perceived advantages and disadvantages of single gender choral ensembles at the middle school level.

Data Collection

Description is the emphasis of qualitative research (Radocy, 1994). In order to accurately describe this middle school’s single gender choral music curriculum and the participants’ related experiential observations and perceptions, the researcher gathered data in four ways: (a) interviewing/surveying the adult participants; (b) videotaping both teachers during classroom instruction; (c) observing rehearsals and recording fieldnotes of both teachers during classroom instruction; and (d) surveying the student participants.

Qualitative researchers begin an interview with a general outline of open-ended questions. As the interview develops, the researcher asks questions based on the informants’ responses to previous questions (Hatch, 2002). I interviewed each director after having observed a typical rehearsal. The interview consisted of nine predetermined
guiding questions (See Appendix A). Several times during the interview, the directors were asked to elaborate on their answers or an event the researcher observed in the preceding class period. Due to the administrator’s illness during data collection, the interview with her was replaced with a survey (See Appendix B).

Every student enrolled in choir was given the survey (See Appendix C) by their respective director during a class period. The students were instructed that there were no right or wrong answers and their answers would not be graded. I then synthesized the responses and reported those occurring most frequently.

Fieldnotes are essential to observation in a qualitative study. These fieldnotes must be detailed and accurate, as they can be an important supplement to other data-collecting methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I observed, took fieldnotes, and videotaped both teachers in a typical teaching day. The videotaping included the teachers’ presentation of lessons, methods used, and the interaction between the teacher and the students.

Data Analysis

“Qualitative research becomes believable because of its coherence, insight, and instrumental utility” (Eisner, 1991, p. 39). Coherence can be defined as the tightness of the argument presented. Does the story make sense? Have multiple data sources been used? Are the observations compatible with the rest of the study? Affirmative responses to these questions create coherence in a study. He also suggests that the use of multiple data sources is one of the best ways in which conclusions are structurally corroborated or triangulated.
In this study, triangulation occurred through use of multiple data sources (i.e., two teachers, one administrator, 337 students, and one researcher). As data were collected from these sources, they were analyzed looking for themes and patterns. Frequency of occurrence of words, statements, types of events, and situations were noted.

“Consensus is the condition in which investigators or readers of a work concur that the findings and/or interpretations reported by the investigator are consistent with their own experience or with the evidence presented” (Eisner, 1991, p. 56). Readers must agree with what the researcher has concluded in order to create consensus. This study addressed the issues of consensual validation in several ways. In addition to the participants’ related experiences and the process of triangulation, I am a teacher who works with gender separate choirs in my classrooms everyday. This gives me a unique perspective on what I am learning and noticing about the data and how they relate to my classroom.

Instrumental utility is addressed in various ways. Eisner (1991) maintains that, “the most important test of any qualitative study is its usefulness” (p. 58). Usefulness can be of two different kinds—comprehension and anticipation. Usefulness of comprehension helps the reader understand an otherwise complex or confusing situation. Usefulness of anticipation extends beyond the study and can be used to predict or guide future educational matters. The usefulness of this study is potentially of both kinds. Based on contextual descriptions, and research findings, educators can better comprehend the operation and merit of this program and anticipate ways of implementing or further researching related curriculums and outcomes. In addition, this study serves as a “qualitative guide” (Eisner, 1991, p. 59) that is potentially useful. Through surveys,
interviews, observations, and fieldnotes, I have created a vivid portrait of an exemplary middle school single gender choral program that can be modeled by other school districts.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter is divided into four sections as follows: (a) interview responses from the teachers, (b) survey responses from an administrator, (c) a summary of responses from the students, and (d) non-participant observation notes. The non-participant observation notes contain a description of what I observed in a typical rehearsal.

Teacher Interview Responses

A half-hour interview was conducted to gather information from the boys’ and girls’ choir teacher. The sequence of some responses was not always the same as presented below because some of a teacher’s thoughts and ideas referred to questions that were asked earlier in the interview.

Boys’ Choir Director

1. _How have single gender vocal ensembles affected your master schedule?_

   They really haven’t affected it too much because it is built in to go with the middle school philosophy. I teach two eighth grade boys’ choirs and three seventh grade boys’ choirs. Twice a week, I teach a mixed eighth grade “instrumental” chorus for those students who participate in band or orchestra. One female teacher teaches the three eighth grade girls’ choirs. Three women team teach the three seventh grade girls’ choirs. Then, one of the women teaches a mixed seventh grade “instrumental” choir similar to the eighth grade “instrumental” choir that I teach.

2. _Do you see a difference in the enrollment or recruitment of single gender choirs versus mixed gender choirs?_

   I do. With the single gender choirs, you have a lot more students in (my) classes and I attribute that solely to separating the girls from the boys. It’s really the only way to
do it. I don’t think the boys feel threatened. If I want to hear someone sing by himself, it’s fine. They don’t feel threatened to do that in front of someone they might have a crush on. They are all going through the same changes and we discuss that so they know what to expect and what everybody is dealing with. The retention rate of boys from seventh grade to eighth grade is about 75%.

3. Are there any differences in students’ participation and behavior in single gender choral ensembles versus mixed gender choral ensembles?

A lot of the kids in my first class don’t take choir as seriously as the kids in second period. However, it’s still like a team and I tell them that. I tell them, “I’m going to treat you guys like a team.” There is a real sense of camaraderie. They all understand how things are going to be run in the class. They all support each other and they know there isn’t anyone better than anyone else and I include myself in that. We just try and support each other here in dealing with this thing called the changing voice.

4. How do you approach adolescent singing technique and development in single gender choirs?

I don’t treat this age student any different than I do a high school age student or even a college age student. We learn what I believe is the correct approach to singing. I teach these guys to sing into the body so they get that mature sound. Now I don’t ever say to them, “I want you to sound like a 30 year-old man.” I will teach them how to shape the sound and where to place the sound. I will draw a silhouette of a head on the board. The “A” space is tucked back behind the uvula, right in the middle of your check bones. That’s the proper technique. That’s where I want the sound to spin, back up there. The “B” section is in the nose. The “C” section is in the chin. It is the real stiff, stretched out
sound that you sometimes hear when the guys sing higher. You don’t want that. You always want to tuck it back in the “A” section. The “D” section is in the throat. In the beginning of the year, we establish where these placements are and we are set for the rest of the year. I can say to them, “Mix a little of the ‘A’ and ‘B’ section together,” and they do it. That’s the sound I really like. It’s right in the middle of your head where you get the resonance, but you can still have the spin. They aren’t damaging their voices. It’s singing into the body. People are not used to hearing guys this age sing with a proper technique.

5. What do you see as the advantages of single gender choirs at the middle school level?

Like I said before, the camaraderie, the team building, the way everyone treats everyone as a team. You’ll see it with both the seventh grade and the eighth grade. Also, they are all experiencing vocal changes or will experience vocal changes. We can work with it when the kids are separate. Everyone recognizes that they have to learn how to sing with their changing voice. They have to learn how to sing in their head voice or chest voice. Sometimes the kids will have the absence of notes between the head and chest voice. I’m not going to force the changing baritones to sing the tenor part. I don’t have to when the music is written for the boys’ voices. Their vocal chords physically won’t phonate on certain notes. When I experience boys who have that absence of notes, I always tell them, “Don’t give up. Be patient. It will come.” The old school teacher would have told the child that he couldn’t sing and they carry that idea for life. A lot of the schools don’t separate the genders so they are singing SAB music or SATB music. If it’s SAB music, the baritone line is going to be too low for the tenors and it’s going to be
too high for some of the baritone/basses. A lot of those kids are told not to sing certain parts. Then again, you are telling middle school boys not to sing. That’s a problem.

6. What are the disadvantages of single gender choirs at the middle school level?

This is a hard one because I am such an advocate for single gender choirs. The only disadvantage I can see is that it may be a surprise to kids when they finally sing with members of the opposite gender. That’s really the only disadvantage I can find right now because I truly believe single gender choirs are the way to go.

7. Describe how you select music for your choirs.

I try to find music that motivates them. With seventh graders it’s sometimes more difficult to sing a slower, more lyrical piece. They want an upbeat, faster song. The eighth graders will sing a ballad type song. I don’t think it’s the message of the piece, but rather the music itself. The eighth graders will listen to the different harmonies and the overall line of the music. That’s what I look for when selecting music. I also go on the recommendations of other teachers and musicians. I look through catalogues of music and listen to the CDs that publishers send out. The important thing to keep in mind is that you always want to challenge the kids, or else they get bored. Every year I start the eighth grade boys with two or three part harmony and work my way into four part harmony. They love barbershop!

8. Do you notice any physiological or emotional differences in the students who participate in a single gender choirs?

Everyone has emotions and issues. All my students know that I am here to talk if they need to talk. They know we can’t do that during class. I tell them to leave it out in the hall unless, of course, it’s something huge that needs to be dealt with right away. I
think I have a good student-teacher relationship with my students. Just last week, I spent an hour after school with a kid who really needed to talk about some things that were going on at home. They know that I am here if they need me.

*Girls’ Choir Director*

1. **How have single gender vocal ensembles affected your master schedule?**

   Single gender choirs are already built into our schedule. I teach all of the eighth grade and one of the seventh grade choirs. I also teach the high school freshmen and women’s chorus.

2. **Do you see a difference in the enrollment or recruitment of single gender choirs versus mixed gender choirs?**

   The middle school kids prefer the single gender choirs because the girls aren’t necessarily scared to participate and sing out because there are no boys in the class and that is a big thing for them at this age. The retention rate of girls from seventh grade to eighth grade is somewhere between 90 to 95%. It’s pretty high.

3. **Do you notice any emotional differences in the students who participate in single gender ensembles?**

   I think the girls especially are more prone to being emotional during class since they are all girls. They sure do talk an awful lot because they are always with their friends. Some students come to me with their problems, but mostly they want to go to the counselor or the nurse, especially in the seventh grade. There is always someone wanting to go to the counselor for some reason or another. I’ve tried to make it a goal this year to develop good rapport among the whole classroom and to make it a positive environment for them. I obviously want them to enjoy coming to this class. It’s a break in their day, so
I want them to have fun, but I want to make sure that they learn a lot, as well. The environment is pretty laid back. We talk a little bit because they are middle school girls. I want them to feel comfortable.

4. Are there any differences in students’ behavior in single gender choral ensembles versus mixed gender choral ensembles?

Girls are way more likely to actually participate and be on task. Whereas, when boys are in the room they are either constantly trying to show off or exactly the opposite-they don’t do anything. So there is a huge difference and that’s why I like them separate, especially at this age. You can work more on things like breathing and vowels rather than correcting behavior.

5. Are there any differences in students’ participation in single gender choral ensembles versus mixed gender choral ensembles?

I think so. Most of the girls participate everyday without being prodded. There are a handful of girls that need to be reminded everyday about their posture and things like that. The freshmen at the high school have boys and girls together and participation is like pulling teeth to try and get them to do anything.

6. How do you approach adolescent singing technique and development in single gender choirs?

I have really tried to teach them proper vowels, making sure their soft palate is raised. I teach them about the “e” vowel since it’s a little strange with the tongue and everything. I really try to get them to stop using the breathy tone. It is such a huge step for them to actually put forth some effort and use their diaphragm. I even do a whole lesson on the voice and how it works. We watched videos of someone who was scoped so
they could see how the vocal folds work. After that it seemed to click with them about how much air they actually have to use in order to produce a good sound and a healthy sound. We talk about brining the sound forward and in the mask of the face. I have them point to their forehead and sing to their finger and that really helps with resonance. I also use “hand signs” in the shape of the vowel they are singing so they have something physical to go with what they are singing. If they are a learner like me, I’m not going to get it unless I’m doing something. I’m a firm believer in active participation or involving the whole body while singing. We work on breathing a lot in the beginning of the year. I have them stand and imagine a rubber band around their waste and trying to expand the rubber band all the way around instead of just in the front.

7. What do you see as the advantages of single gender choirs at the middle school level?

There are a couple of things. Advantages are their excellent participation and their willingness to try things. They are all girls. They don’t feel embarrassed to ask questions. The learning environment is really comfortable. Also, I give them harder music because I don’t have male voices to worry about. They are challenged more than when you have boys in the choir.

8. What do you see as the disadvantages of single gender choirs at the middle school level?

The only disadvantage that I can think of is that they don’t get the experience of singing with male voices. They are used to just treble voices and that’s it. When they get to the high school, the choirs are mixed and it is their first experience with mixed voices.

9. Describe how you select music for your choirs.
I used to go to a music store and pull out stuff and play through it. Now I know about jwpepper.com, which I think is the best thing in the world. They have recordings of the music and a couple pages of the actual music right online. It’s a big help. I look at range and difficulty, obviously. I also look at the harmonic structure to decide whether they are going to be able to hear what is going on in the piece. I really try to increase the difficulty of the pieces as the year progresses.

10. Describe your overall experience in a school with single gender choral ensembles.

My experience is good for all the reasons I mentioned before, but there is one thing that is bad. The girls all know me when I’m walking down the hall, but not one male student knows who I am. It creates a problem when I need to be an authority figure and the boys don’t respond to me. I wish I got to know the boys more, but I think what we have is probably best for the students.

Administrator Survey Responses

An administrator was asked a total six questions based on her experience working in a school with single gender choral ensembles. Her answers are written verbatim below:

1. How have single gender vocal ensembles affected your master schedule?

At (our school), the girls’ choir classes are larger in number than the boys’ choir. We have to have three sections of both eighth grade girls’ choir and seventh grade girls’ choir. The average class size is 50. We only have two sections of eighth grade boys’ choir and three sections of seventh grade boys’ choir. The average class size of the eighth grade boys’ choir is 35 and the average of the seventh grade boys’ choir is much smaller at 25. All of this affects the master schedule by having to have more staff (a separate male and
female choir teacher) and balancing the numbers of not only the music classes but other special classes that occur during the same periods (art, P.E., foreign language, etc.).

2. *Do you see a difference in the enrollment of single gender choirs versus mixed gender choirs?*

   We have always had single gender choirs at (our school) but I would imagine that the boys participating in choir at the middle level would be much lower if the classes were mixed gender.

3. *Do you notice any psychological or emotional differences in the students who participate in these ensembles?*

   The positive emotional differences occur in the single gender boys’ choirs. Our male choir teacher is exceptional and a great role model for our boys. They develop a healthy camaraderie and it is a healthy environment that promotes positive social developments for our young adolescents. Our female choir teachers also do an excellent job with the girls’ choirs; however, if the wrong combination of girls is in the same class it has the potential of turning into “drama city.”

4. *Are there any differences in students’ behavior in single gender choral ensembles versus mixed gender choral ensembles?*

   Both boys and girls tend to participate much more in the single gender classes. Most middle school girls and boys, especially, are much too embarrassed to sing out, participate in vocal warm-ups that involve movement and diction exercises, and just participate overall, if the classes are mixed.

5. *Do you perceive a difference in parental support or involvement with single gender choirs?*
Our parents have never experienced mixed choirs at our school but they are highly supportive of our single gender groups because their children are happy and enjoy being in choir. Parents tend to be much more supportive if their child is involved in an activity they enjoy.

6. Describe the overall experience as an administrator in a school with single gender choral ensembles versus a school with mixed gender choral ensembles.

For all of the reasons that I have listed within my answers, I firmly believe that at the middle school level, single gender choir classes are developmentally appropriate. Students tend to participate more, enjoy the class, perform on a higher level, and enrollment is increased overall in both girls’ and boys’ choirs. The only limitations are that the school system would has to be committed to financially supporting the program and/or working out the master schedule so that it supports the single gender musical ensembles.

Student Survey Responses

In order to gain insight from actual participants in a single gender choir, 151 seventh and eighth grade male choir students and 186 seventh and eighth grade female choir students were given a brief, anonymous survey regarding their participation in a single gender choir.

Male Respondents

Male respondents included 82 seventh graders and 69 eighth graders. Range of participation in choir was 0-6 years, with participation according to the number of years as follows: (a) 0-1 year: 16, (b) 2 years: 31, (c) 3 years: 55, (d) 4 years: 38, (e) 5 years: 8, (f) 6 years: 1, (g) did not respond: 2.
When asked if participation in an all-boy choir was enjoyable, 125 reported that it was enjoyable, 22 reported that it was not enjoyable, and four had no answer. The male students who enjoyed participating in single gender choirs indicated several reasons why they responded in such a manner; however, the majority of comments fell into two categories: (a) accessibility of vocal range and (b) non-threatening classroom environment. Below are some of the more complete and interesting responses:

1. It’s easier to sing with same gender students because voices are similar and the social environment is less threatening.
2. There are no “distractions” and I am not embarrassed to sing like I am in front of the girls.
3. You don’t need to try and impress the women by not doing something. You don’t have to try and look cool.
4. The girls don’t understand how hard it is to sing when your voice is changing.
5. Everyone’s voices are going through the same changes.
6. No one laughs and says you have a girly voice.
7. When I sing high and I’m matching the girls’ voices it makes me feel bad.
8. It feels good to be called a tenor instead of an alto.
9. We sing notes more accustomed to our voices and are divided into sections by what pitches we can sing.
10. The music is made just for boys and there aren’t any notes that are hard to hit. The notes are in our voice range.
Most of the students who did not enjoy participating in an all boy choir indicated it was because they enjoyed associating with members of the opposite gender. Other responses included:

1. Last year there were too many people and it was hard to fit on the risers.
2. I don’t enjoy singing.
3. Voices get mixed up in an all boy choir.

Question 4 asked the respondents whether or not they noticed differences in their behavior or effort in choir versus their other classes. They were asked to explain how and why they thought their behavior or effort was different. Of the 151 male students who completed the survey, 81 did not see a difference in their behavior or effort, 69 students noticed a difference, and one did not respond to the question. Of the 69 students who saw a difference, 51 thought that single gender choirs had a positive effect, while 18 thought that the single gender choir affected their behavior and effort in a negative manner. Most of the 18 students attributed their poor behavior and effort to class composition, while others noted that the type of class made the difference. Specific negative comments include:

1. I goof off more when I’m with my male friends. When I’m with girls I’m more laid back.
2. I think my behavior is a little more talkative because my friends are in my class. I also think that boys talk more or act sillier with one another than if they are with girls.
3. I think my behavior and effort is different because it’s not an academic class.
Interestingly, class composition and type of class were also the reasons that students thought single gender choirs had a positive affect on their behavior and effort. Specific positive comments include:

1. I’m trying harder to improve myself because I’m not embarrassed.
2. I am happier because in an all boys chorus I feel more comfortable because my friends are in my class.
3. There are no persons of the opposite gender so there won’t be people trying to impress the other gender.
4. When you see other people trying hard, it makes you want to try harder.
5. I put a lot of effort into choir versus other classes because I enjoy studying music more that other classes.
6. I seem more focused and ready because I actually want to learn about singing.
7. I try harder. It’s more fun because we don’t do class work, we just sing.

Question 5 asked the students if they had ever participated in a mixed gender choir. If the student had participated in a mixed gender choir, they were asked which choir they enjoyed more and why. Twenty-four participants had never participated in a mixed gender choir. Of the 127 students who had participated in a mixed gender choir, 22 preferred a mixed gender choir, 92 preferred a single gender choir, and 13 students had no preference. The students who preferred participating in a mixed gender choir enjoyed associating with the opposite gender and favored the overall choral sound to that of the single gender choir. Below are comments from students who preferred a mixed gender choir:
1. I like hearing the girls sing the melody. Also, I like girls and I like being around them.

2. The girls add a whole new sound to the choir, which make the music sound better.

3. I like the opposite sex and it sounds better with a diverse choir.

4. There is more diversity in pitch when both males and females are singing and when we get over the nervousness of singing with the opposite sex, the overall sound is better.

The students who preferred participating in a single gender choir expressed almost identical sentiments as in Question 3. Most of the students preferred a less threatening classroom environment and accessibility of music regarding vocal range.

Comments of students preferring single gender choirs are below:

1. I was one of the only boys in my mixed choir.

2. When I sing high it makes me feel like a girl in a mixed choir.

3. I can actually sing without worrying about being made fun of or people laughing.

4. The music is made for all boys without parts that are hard to sing.

5. The all boy choir fits my voice better most of the time.

6. We know what everyone is going through and can have more fun. It saves you from embarrassment.

7. It’s a lot easier to sing if there are no girls around that you have to impress.

8. The humor is different so we think something is funny when the girls do not.

9. The songs are in my vocal range and the notes aren’t all over the place.
10. We sing notes we can hit and are divided by how high or deep our voices are instead of lumped into one.

Female Respondents

Female respondents included 53 seventh graders and 133 eighth graders. Range of participation in choir was 0-6 years, with participation according to the number of years as follows: (a) 0-1 year: 9, (b) 2 years: 20, (c) 3 years, 56, (d) 4 years: 91, (e) 5 years: 6, (f) 6 years: 2, (g) 7 years: 1, (h) 11 years: 1.

When asked if participation in an all-girl choir was enjoyable, 124 reported that it was enjoyable, 32 reported that it was not enjoyable, 28 reported both yes and no, and two had no answer.

The female students who enjoyed participating in single gender choirs indicated several reasons why they responded in such a manner. Similar to the male respondents, the majority of comments fell into two categories: (a) repertoire selection and (b) non-threatening classroom environment. Below are some of the more complete and interesting responses:

1. You can be more open with your voices and with answering questions. With boys in the room, girls sometimes act different and vice versa.

2. We sing songs just for girls’ voices that boys probably wouldn’t like.

3. The boys can be distracting in class and disrupt things a lot.

4. You can relate to one another more and it’s more comfortable. You can also focus more.

5. I don’t have to worry about the guys listening to me and feeling embarrassed or afraid to sing out when I am with all girls.
6. It’s easier to ask questions about the music and there are less people who purposely make distractions.

7. I love the music we sing. There are a lot of songs you can’t sing with guys.

8. I like feeling comfortable around just girls. Guys can make me feel awkward when I sing. I tend to clam up and be quiet when singing.

9. When girls sing with guys, they feel pressured to impress them. Then they are so scared, they don’t sing at all.

10. We have fun girl talks and I love the songs we sing.

Most of the students who did not enjoy participating in an all girl choir preferred a mixed ensemble sound and the harmonies produced by this type of choir to an all female choral sound. Other responses included:

1. I am not interested in singing.

2. I don’t like the concert attire.

The female students who answered both yes and no to whether or not they enjoyed participating in an all girl choir, preferred the class environment created by a single gender choir, but favored the sound of a mixed choir.

Question 4 asked the respondents whether or not they noticed differences in their behavior or effort in choir versus their other classes. They were asked to explain how and why they thought their behavior or effort was different. Of the 186 female students who completed the survey, 66 did not see a difference in their behavior or effort and 120 students noticed a difference. Of the 120 students who saw a difference, 79 thought that single gender choirs had a positive affect, while 41 thought that the single gender choir affected their behavior and effort in a negative manner. Most of the 41 students attributed
their poor behavior and effort to class composition, while others noted that the type of
class made the difference. Specific negative comments include:

1. In chorus I tend not to pay as much attention because it is not a main class like
   math or science.
2. I give less effort in choir because I know it is an easy A.
3. People talk more because it’s all girls and they get distracted easily.
4. In chorus I talk more than I do in other classes because I’m with my friends. I
   stop when the teacher tells us to.

Similar to the male respondents, class composition and type of class were also the
reasons that students thought single gender choirs had a positive affect on their behavior
and effort. Specific positive comments include:

1. I see more effort because you are only with girls. Boys in chorus make you
   laugh and you don’t try as hard.
2. I am not afraid to speak up or say what I feel because there is no one to impress
   in an all girls class.
3. I am more outgoing in choir because when it’s all girls you don’t have to
   worry about boys being there and wonder what they are thinking.
4. I feel like I am more open to make comments or ask questions than in other
   classes.
5. I don’t always sleep in chorus like I usually do in other classes.
6. I enjoy singing and my other classes are not something I want to be in so they
   aren’t as enjoyable or fun to me.
7. Boys tend to “goof off” more than girls, so in an all girl class, there aren’t a lot of interruptions.

8. When you sing with all girls, you are more comfortable. With guys in the room they could make fun of you.

9. You can be yourself in chorus and it’s a very fun class. I behave better in chorus because I chose to take this class and was not forced to.

10. Guys make you distracted, so when I am with only girls, I am more focused on singing.

Question 5 asked the students if they had ever participated in a mixed gender choir. If the student had participated in a mixed gender choir, they were asked which choir they enjoyed more and why. Only 13 participants had never participated in a mixed gender choir. Of the 143 students who had participated in a mixed gender choir, 75 preferred a mixed gender choir, 49 preferred a single gender choir, and 32 students liked both choirs equally. Like the male respondents, the female respondents who preferred participating in a mixed gender choir enjoyed associating with the opposite gender and favored the overall choral sound to that of the single gender choir. Below are comments from students who preferred a mixed gender choir:

1. Both voices together sounds better than all girls’ voices.

2. I like the diversity of voices and I enjoyed the boys being in the choir.

3. I liked mixed choir the most because we were able to sing a wider range of songs.

4. Boys make class fun because they just do whatever and it also gives you something to look at.
5. You get a bigger variation in tone quality.

6. It gives more depth to the choir and sounds better with the low boys’ voices blending with the girls’ higher voices.

7. I like singing and just being with the boys.

8. Sometimes the songs sound better with male voices added. Also, boys can make the class more exciting.

9. I think the songs are more fun and challenging. The more parts (SATB), the more challenging.

10. I like the sound of the different parts. Not to mention, a class with 50+ girls is just a headache.

The female students who preferred participating in a single gender choir expressed similar reasons to Question 3. Most of the students preferred a less threatening classroom environment. Comments of female students preferring single gender choirs are below:

1. I’d rather be in an all girls choir because I’m not as shy.

2. It is easier to sing when you know guys aren’t going to be making fun of you or screwing around.

3. I’m not afraid to embarrass myself in front of all the girls.

4. You have a chance to be with your friends. You don’t have the distraction of the boys. You get to sing songs that girls like.

5. People behave better.

6. We have less distraction, so we get more work done.

7. I hear the guys don’t do anything but goof off in chorus.
8. I like being able to ask questions and make comments without being judged.

Non-participant Observation Notes

*Boys’ Choir*

In January, 2008, I observed two seventh grade boys’ choir classes. The following filednotes pertain to both classes. The teacher began each class with warm-ups. The first warm-up began in the middle part of the boys’ range and moved up by half steps into their falsetto (see Appendix D, Figure 1). Once the boys were in their falsetto, the teacher continued with the second warm-up, moving down through their range in half steps (see Appendix D, Figure 2). The third warm-up was designed to transition the boys from their falsetto into their full voice (see Appendix D, Figure 3). The boys were making a sound that was not acceptable to the teacher, so he stopped and demonstrated the sound he was looking for in this exercise. In the fourth, and final warm-up, the boys created a four part chord using the syllable, “bimbo.” During warm-ups, the teacher used phrases such as, “Into the body, guys,” and “Easy on the high notes.” He also told the boys to stay in their head voice as long as possible in upper registers and while descending. The teacher explained to the boys that they will extend their range by staying in their head voice as long as possible and “filling in the gaps” of the absent notes.

Following the warm-up period, the boys rehearsed a piece titled *Yellow Bird*, first by speaking certain sections in rhythm, then singing those sections. Voices were grouped into sections called tenors, baritones, and basses. *Shake, Rattle, and Roll* was the next piece the choir rehearsed. First tenors rehearsed their part with piano, followed by the basses, and finally the second tenors. Eventually, all three parts sang together a cappella. Then they sang through the piece from the beginning with the accompaniment. The
teacher talked about keeping energy throughout the piece. The final piece the boys rehearsed was called *The Drummer and the Cook*. At one point, the baritone part was too low for some of the boys, so the teacher told them to sing the tenor notes when their part was too low. Toward the end of the period, the teacher had to correct the posture of some of the students. At the end of the period, the teacher dismissed the students to put their folders away.

Overall, there was a real sense of camaraderie and teamwork. The teacher called the boys either guys or dudes. There were several moments of laughter and joking amongst the teacher and students, all while being productive. There was a sense of mutual respect between the teacher and the students. There were very few discipline issues in either class. Only one time did the teacher have to correct a student’s behavior in the middle of a song.

*Girls’ Choir*

In May, 2008, I observed two eighth grade girls’ choir classes. The following fieldnotes pertain to both classes. As the students entered the room, several students talked casually with the teacher. To set the tone for the class, the teacher clapped several rhythms that the students’ echoed; however, the teacher still had to tell a couple of girls, specifically, to put their belongings away. On the day I observed, there was a special eighth grade literature project to enhance the assigned reading of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Some of the students were not permitted to talk from 7:30 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. The teacher needed to figure out who those students were before starting class. The girls were very talkative the entire time the teacher was giving announcements.
Warm-ups began in the middle of the girls’ range (see Appendix D, Figure 4). The exercises ascended in half steps, taking the girls to the top part of their range. The teacher reminded several students to spit out their gum. The second warm-up also began in the middle of their range and extended to the top of their range (see Appendix D, Figure 5). Once the girls reached the top notes of their range, they changed to the third exercise which moved by half steps to the lower notes of their range (see Appendix D, Figure 6). The final warm-up focused on correct vowel pronunciation (see Appendix D, Figure 7). The teacher reminded the girls to sing with long tall vowels. The girls also used hand motions in the shape of the vowel they were singing. For example, the students circled their rounded lips with their index finger when singing an “ooo” vowel.

After warm-ups were over, the teacher asked the class which piece they would like to begin with. They quickly gave their opinions while talking over one another. At this point in the year, the choirs were already well rehearsed in preparation for their spring concert. The first piece, *Oh Yea!*, was sung from the beginning with the accompaniment. Between pieces, the teacher talked and laughed with the girls. The next piece, *Popular* from *Wicked*, was sung from beginning to end with more energy and excitement than the previous piece. The teacher made minor corrections throughout the song. While they were preparing to sing the next piece, *Mama, I’m a Big Girl Now* from *Hairspray*, the teacher reminded the girls to sit with good posture and try their best although it was the end of the year. The girls had a lot of fun with this piece as it had motions, soloists, and lyrics pertinent to teenage girls.

Overall, there were very few discipline issues. The girls were very talkative, but also got back on task easily when directed to do so by their teacher. It appeared that most
of the talking was a result of excitement about the music and the class in general. There was a great deal of laughing and smiling during the down time. It was obvious that the girls felt comfortable with their teacher and fellow classmates.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This chapter will address components of an exemplary middle school single gender choral program from the perspective of the teachers, administrator, and students. In addition, implications for music education of these findings and recommendations for future research are provided. I will also discuss my experiences as a teacher of gender separate choirs at the middle school level as they relate to this study.

Teacher and Administrator Responses

Both the boys’ and girls’ choir teachers agreed that, overall, single gender choral ensembles are beneficial at the middle school level. The boys’ choir director attributed his high retention rate (75%) “solely to separating the girls from the boys.” Both teachers mentioned class environment as one of the primary reasons for separating the genders in the middle school choral classroom. The teachers agreed that when the opposite gender was removed from the classroom, their students felt less threatened and were more likely to sing out and participate in class. Even though gender separate choirs are challenging to schedule, the administrator supported the approach because of the developmental appropriateness, positive social interactions, and increased participation.

In the boys’ classes I observed, there was a real sense of camaraderie. The boys supported one another and held each other accountable for the success of the group, while at the same time enjoying their time together. Throughout the class period, the teacher randomly called on students to sing solos, using the soloist as a model for the rest of the choir. The boys who performed solos did so without hesitation or nervousness. Obviously, the teacher has created an environment where the students feel confident in their musical abilities and are comfortable enough to share them with their peers.
While observing the girls’ classes, I noticed that every girl was truly enjoying their time in the class. They were engaged and putting forth their best effort to ensure the success of the entire group. The music was both exciting and challenging. The overall atmosphere was more relaxed than the boys’ choir, most likely due to the upbeat musical selections and approaching end of school year.

Male and female adolescent voices develop differently, and as a result, boys and girls confront diverse vocal dilemmas. The learning style and classroom environment in which these dilemmas are addressed can have a lasting impact on the adolescent singer. While the approaches of the two teachers varied, vowel placement and breath support were issues they both addressed throughout the year. The boys’ choir director taught students to place the sound in different “sections” of the head or face through visual association with a diagram, while the girls’ choir director instructed the students to use hand motions in the shape of the vowel they were trying to emulate. Although the teachers used different methods, both were able to achieve the desired sound almost immediately.

The boys’ choir director was adamant that adolescent boys be taught correct vocal technique during the voice change process. His students talked openly and vividly about the changes they experienced with their head and chest voice. They also learned about the absence of notes that can vary from day to day.

When selecting repertoire for their choirs, the teachers first looked for music with appropriate ranges for adolescent singers, followed by particular musical characteristics and challenges. As a result of this careful selection process, both teachers reinforced healthy vocal technique and developed musical skillfulness and expression.
Both teachers were mindful of the psychological and social benefits of gender separate choirs. The boys’ choir teacher created a safe environment in which the boys felt they were part of a team, supporting one another and working together to conquer the same quandary— the male changing voice. Although adolescent girls do not encounter the same vocal challenges as adolescent boys, the social ramifications of adolescence can sometimes be more problematic for females. The girls’ choir teacher made it a priority to develop excellent rapport with the entire class as well as with individual students. She talked casually with her students before and after class about non-musical topics and took a genuine interest in what they had to say. During class, the teacher and students laughed a great deal and talked about issues that were important to adolescent females.

Student Responses

An overwhelming number of boys and girls said that participating in a single gender choral ensemble was enjoyable for similar reasons; specifically, the repertoire and classroom environment. The girls seemed to enjoy music that was specific to female voices and aesthetically appealing to adolescent females. Boys enjoyed the music that was chosen because of the accessibility of the vocal parts. Both genders gave extremely poignant answers regarding classroom environment. Boys said it made them embarrassed and feel bad to be called an alto or sing the same notes as a girl. They preferred to be called tenors. During the boys’ choir rehearsal, one of the basses told the teacher that he could not reach some of the lower notes in his part. The teacher told him that he should sing the second tenor part in that particular section. If the student participated in a mixed choir, he would most likely be singing SAB music, with only one part for the boys. Some of the notes would be too high for the baritone/bass voices, while other parts would be
too low for the unchanged/tenor voices. Consequently, the boys would have two options: (a) stop singing, or (b) not match pitch. Neither option is desirable.

Girls reported that they felt more comfortable asking questions and less awkward while singing in single gender choral ensembles. When I observed the girls’ choir classes, they were preparing for a spring concert. Some of the musical selections required choreography. The girls appeared extremely confident when rehearsing the choreography, which in my experience, is not always the case.

I see similar trends in my own single gender middle school choral ensembles. My middle school boys’ and girls’ choirs performed for one another the day before the choirs participated in a large group, adjudicated event. The boys were very reluctant to sing their usual warm-ups in front of the girls, especially the warm-ups that involved their falsetto. They later told me that they were embarrassed to sing high notes with girls in the room. When the girls performed for the boys, I noticed slouched posture and lack of enthusiasm and focus, which I attributed to self-consciousness.

Both girls and boys in this study noticed that single gender choirs had a positive affect on their behavior. One boy responded, “When you see other people trying hard, it makes you want to try harder.” During one of the boys’ choir rehearsals, the teacher stopped in the middle of a song to correct a student’s behavior. When the students were dismissed to put their folders away, one boy said to the boy who was in trouble, “Why did you have to do that and make him stop? We were doing so good!” The boys held each other accountable for their actions. The same was true in the girls’ classes. Positive peer pressure played a role in the level of participation among the class.
Boys in this study preferred participating in a single gender choral ensemble over a mixed gender ensemble. Again, they cited music that suited their ranges, ability, and interest and non-threatening classroom environment as reasons for their preference. The girls expressed enjoyment in participating in a single gender choral ensemble. However, the majority preferred participating in a mixed gender choral ensemble citing social reasons and overall mixed choral sound for their preference.

Through informal conversations with my own students, I found similar trends. The boys in my choir program prefer participating in single gender choral ensembles, while the girls do not. Still, girls are more likely to continue to sing in choir than the boys in both the research setting and in my school. It appears that although girls prefer mixed gender choral ensembles, a single gender choral curriculum does not affect the retention rate of girls. Like the boys’ choir director, I believe that the high retention rate of males in this choral program and my own is ascribed to benefits of the single gender choral program noted in this study.

Implications for Music Education

The comments in the interviews, statements from students, and my own observations and experiences support the assertion that gender separate middle school choirs are developmentally appropriate, both vocally and physically, as well as beneficial for student discipline, participation, enjoyment, and effective adolescent vocal technique instruction. Unfortunately, very few middle schools structure their choral curriculum around gender separate choirs. When designing a middle school choral music curriculum, educators and administrators should be mindful of the educational benefits of this sort of program. If singing is to remain a part of the American educational and community
experience, it is imperative that we find ways to successfully engage youth in singing through adolescence.

A persistent concern in choral music is the lack of male participants. Many vocal music programs have considerably more female students participating than male students, some of which may be attributed to gender stereotyping and disregard for the importance of gender specific vocal technique. Choral music educators need to address the diverse vocal dilemmas facing adolescent males or lack of participation in choral programs is likely to continue.

Male and female students repeatedly expressed their preference for a non-threatening classroom environment created by single gender choral ensembles. Students credited their enjoyment and success in choir to a homogenous male or female ensemble. Vocal music teachers and administrators need to be mindful of the emotional volatility of adolescent students’ and their preferences concerning class composition when designing a middle school choral music curriculum.

Recommendations for Future Research

The school in this research study employs a male teacher for the boys’ choirs and a female teacher for the girls’ choirs. Future research may include studying the implications of same or opposite gender teachers instructing each gender separate choir. Is one teacher more effective than the other? What are the advantages and disadvantages of same gender instruction?

Although revealing and informative, research of this setting was limited by the particulars of context and community. Studies of similar programs are needed to further consider the process and outcomes of gender separate choral programs.
Also of potential interest are studies comparing gender separate and mixed gender ensembles in the same school under the instruction of the same teacher in order to control for teacher effect. Issues of interest within the two settings might include vocal instruction, repertoire choices and criteria, student behavior and participation, vocal development, musical development, and performance outcomes.

Because retention of singers is crucial to the success of community and public school music programs, studies are needed comparing the retention rate of singers in single gender choirs to the retention rate of singers in mixed gender choirs. In addition, future researchers might compare the ratings of single gender choirs and mixed gender choirs entered in state choral adjudications.

Music educators agree that the voice change is a crucial time in an adolescent’s development, and the way in which we approach this change can have a lasting impact on a student’s decision to continue singing. Future research might include different instructional approaches and their effectiveness in guiding male and female students through the voice change process. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the effectiveness of gender specific approaches to ongoing participation in choral or other musical settings.
REFERENCES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A:

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Teacher Interview Questions

1. How have single gender vocal ensembles affected your master schedule?

2. Do you see a difference in the enrollment or recruitment of single gender choirs versus mixed gender choirs?

3. Do you notice any psychological or emotional differences in the students who participate in these ensembles?

4. Are there any differences in students’ behavior in single gender choral ensembles versus mixed gender choral ensembles?

5. Are there any differences in students’ participation in single gender choral ensembles versus mixed gender choral ensembles?

6. How do you approach adolescent singing technique and development in single gender choirs?

7. What do you see as the advantages of single gender choirs at the middle school level?

8. What do you see as the disadvantages of single gender choirs at the middle school level?


10. Describe the overall experience as a teacher in a school with single gender choral ensembles versus a school with mixed gender choral ensembles.
APPENDIX B:

ADMINISTRATOR SURVEY
Administrator Survey

1. How have single gender vocal ensembles affected your master schedule?

2. Do you see a difference in the enrollment of single gender choirs versus mixed gender choirs?

3. Do you notice any psychological or emotional differences in the students who participate in these ensembles?

4. Are there any differences in students’ behavior in single gender choral ensembles verses mixed gender choral ensembles?

5. Do you perceived a difference in parental support or involvement with single gender choirs?

6. Describe the overall experience as an administrator in a school with single gender choral ensembles versus a school with mixed gender choral ensembles.
APPENDIX C:

STUDENT SURVEY
Student Survey

Please answer each question as completely and honestly as possible. Do not leave any questions blank. There is no right or wrong answer. Your answers will not be graded.

1. What is your current grade? ______________

2. How many years have you participated in choir? _____________

3. Do you like participating in an all boy/girl choir? _____________
   Why or why not?
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________

4. Do you notice any differences in your behavior or effort in choir versus your other classes? If so, in what way? If different, why do you think this is the case?
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________

5. Have you ever participated in a choir that has both boys and girls in it? ______
   If so, which choir do you like better? _________________________________
   Why do you like the above choir the most?
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX D:

BOYS’ AND GIRLS’ CHOIR WARM-UPS
Figure 1. Boys’ choir warm-up #1

Voice

\[\text{mee meh mah moh moo}\]

Figure 2. Boys’ choir warm-up #2

Voice

\[\text{oh ee oh ee oh}\]

Figure 3. Boys’ choir warm-up #3

Voice

\[\text{loo loo loo loo}\]
Figure 4. Girls’ choir warm-up #1

Figure 5. Girls’ choir warm-up #2
Figure 6. Girls’ choir warm-up #3

Voice

\[ \text{ha ha ha ha ha ha} \]

Figure 7. Girls’ choir warm-up #4

Voice

\[ \text{mee --- meh --- mah --- moh --- moo} \]