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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

SECONDARY CHOIR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS
OF INTER-DISTRICT COLLABORATIVE
PERFORMANCE EXPERIENCES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Juliet Minard

College of Educational and Behavioral Sciences
School of Teacher Education
Educational Studies

August 2024

This Dissertation by: Juliet Minard

Entitled: *Secondary Choir Students' Perceptions of Inter-District Performance Experiences*

Has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Teacher Education, Educational Studies

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this case study was to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative off-campus choral performance experience. That purpose allowed me to empower students' voices as I interpreted why students took part in optional collaborative opportunities off-campus, what they took away from the experience, and how they described the individual and collective significance of their engagement with a new population of peers. Observations, semi-structured interviews, artifact collection in the form of concert programs, song literature, and other student-initiated material, and researcher memos were gathered and analyzed to answer the following research questions:

- Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district collaborative music performance experiences?
- Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?
- Q3 How can students' perspectives inform decisions for designing collaborative experiences even outside of music?

Coding led to the formation of four overarching themes. Theme 1: Fulfillment illustrated where students gained satisfaction in musical and social engagement. Theme 2: Challenges exposed the vulnerability felt by students as they encountered rigorous musical demands and social insecurities. Theme 3: Purpose demonstrated the deeper wiring within these student musicians for a passion for music and how experiences like the Festival fulfilled a purpose in

their lives. Theme 4: Process revealed how the structure of the festival and the director's approach were influential in determining the other themes and the outcomes of the day. This type of collaboration proved to be an accelerator and motivator for students from smaller choir programs or smaller communities. Findings revealed how student musicians found meaning in the freedom to create their own artistic interpretations; reflection; diversity of literature, peers, and application of singing; immersive learning in a one-day off-campus setting; and a relational connection to the director.

Keywords: students' perceptions, music education, inter-district collaborative performance, collaboration, community, off-campus learning, choir festival

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education philosopher Maxine Greene (2001) explained:

Engagement with works of art allow us to confront in our own experience that which we would not otherwise confront...it is a matter of creating dialogical situations in which persons...talk about what they are discovering together about themselves, about the world, about what is and what might be. For me, the moral concern begins with that kind of connectedness, with reciprocity, with the imagination needed to experience empathy. (p. 108)

She went on to describe Richard Kearney's call for a new emerging imagination as "an imagination schooled in the truth that the self cannot be 'centred' on itself; an imagination fully aware that meaning does not originate within the narrow chambers of its own subjectivity but emerges as a response to the other" (p. 108). This same collective discovery and response to the other brought us to this study of adolescents' collaborative choral singing experiences. Students found value in the aesthetic fulfillment of singing and the rhythmic and harmonic components that exercised their humanity in a way non-musical learning did not.

I participated in collaborative music performance experiences as a student performer and director including routine school rehearsals and concerts with a bounded enrollment from the local student body. Those events were made up of dozens to hundreds of students from various school districts with guest conductors. As an educator, I was attracted to the way these events repeatedly accelerated students' understanding and fostered motivation more than what was

gained in the routine classroom. My fellow teachers and I sought out these supplemental learning platforms because we had witnessed how they provided an extended duration of engagement while collaborating with highly dedicated peers who they would otherwise not have exposure to. However, what formal evidence do we have that such settings were meeting the needs of students in ways we assumed they were?

This first chapter informs readers with a brief inventory of the issues further explained in the remainder of the dissertation project. I address the problem, the purpose of the study, and justify the methodology. I also show an overview of related existing literature and the connecting theoretical frameworks adopted. The chapter ends with a preview of how details were organized in the remaining four chapters.

Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study

Rural communities and their schools value a well-rounded education that includes music access and career exploration coursework (Bannerman, 2019). However, master schedule and financial limitations spread resources thin, forcing students to choose between electives and teachers assigned a teaching load beyond high school choir (Isbell, 2005; Williams, 2011). Families' situations often cannot make room for private lesson coaching or the commute to where extra training would be accessible. The problems in small choir programs were brought to the forefront of my reflection on teaching and learning when more productive processes were observed in my previous experience of collaborative cases. This study paid close attention to the responses from students who relied on their school music department as their sole provider of music training. Over the years, I learned what students from smaller choir programs including those who did not study with private vocal coaches would be missing without these supplemental opportunities helping them to reach their full potential. Research on differentiation in educational

settings showed that a lack of appropriate rigor and delivery of instruction could lead to possible underachievement (Bailey, 2023; Dzaldov & Mandelker, 2023; Ezeh, 2023). Many smaller choir programs must cater to learners from beginner non-literate levels to advanced performers and all those in-between within the same class or ensemble. The pacing is challenging and too often students are not fulfilled as the material is too difficult or too easy, and the rigor never sits just right. Such differentiation challenges led to other problems such as classroom management problems or students not continuing choir pursuits. Inter-district collaborative performance experiences often provided a strength in numbers that promoted a process with higher rigor, and more focus and immediate gratification than what was found in single classroom ensembles. Existing research described students' music performance experience (Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2011; Yau, 2008) and educational collaborations (Allsup, 2003; Ford, 2020; Gregory, 1995; Sutherland, 2017, 2018) but had a lack of understanding for isolated students' perspectives on that unique process of music-making in a collective choir festival, an atmosphere made by intermixing students from varied backgrounds.

Field trip outings are generally regarded as positive supplemental learning experiences across all grade levels and content areas. Previous research centered around benefits such as greater student autonomy, enduring engagement, transferable socio-cognitive and decision-making skills (Guilherme et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2019; Malbrecht et al., 2016; Nadelson & Jordan, 2012), or more cultural benefits from collaboration in place of competition (Craddock & Pettit, 2023). Other empowering findings addressed the “needs of students who otherwise would refrain from engaging” off campus due to various barriers (Chouhan et al., 2020, p. 101). Finally, Flennegård and Mattsson (2023) and Kim and Tan (2013) found evidence that a tangible culturally relevant model, only available in a field-trip structure, deepened understanding by

integrating content and relationships. Those focused in the music education field were saturated with teachers' perspectives instead of students' perspectives or involved a privileged population that could access the funds for engaging in supplemental cultural capital (Helsel, 2019).

Literature on using student data encouraged an ethical standard of listening to children (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000). "Children and young people are 'creators' and social actors who are active in creating themselves in different social contexts" (France et al., 2000, p. 12). Mayall (1996) explained that the research method should keep the student at the center of focus. As a researcher, I have accepted these adolescents as competent reporters of their own experience, recognizing they are reflective beings, and I have worked for them rather than on them by describing their social worlds with a view of influencing change.

By using qualitative research methods, I had the platform to expand on this case of participants' unique personal interpretations, sentiments, and value statements in rich narrative detail regarding their large off-campus collaboration, which I could not capture within a quantitative methodology (Stake, 1995). While inter-district collaborative music performances are a priority to music educators and practitioners, research on this unique field trip practice was limited to what repertoire was performed (Lynch, 2020; Ramsay et al., 2024) or takeaways for higher education hosts and education undergraduates (Gregory, 1995). Other reports gave a glimpse of historical records of guest conductor lists or recording that the event took place without exploring through systematic studies how and why they were best practice for choral music education. The lack of literature surrounding student input and inter-district collaborations amongst school choir programs instigated this research project. Observation and student interviews revealed answers to the following research questions:

- Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district collaborative music performance experiences?

- Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?
- Q3 How can students' perspectives inform decisions for designing collaborative experiences even outside of music?

The purpose of this case study was to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative off-campus choral performance experience. That purpose allowed me to empower students' voices as I interpreted why students took part in optional collaborative opportunities off-campus, what they took away from the experience, and how they described the individual and collective significance of their engagement with a new population of peers.

The experiential education philosophy of John Dewey (1938/1998) and aesthetic education philosophies of Elliott Eisner (1994) and Bennett Reimer (1989) overlapped to inform my approach of investigating student perceptions and collaborative learning in the music field and I expand more in the Theoretical Framework section later in this chapter. Specifically, effective music education includes authentic music making. Singing in a choral context is an “intentional action” and “to sing musically is to act thoughtfully and knowingly” (Elliott et al., 1993, p. 11). This ‘knowing in action’ is not known in isolation but accomplished in cooperation with other choir members and the director. All singers contribute an interpretation and simultaneously promote storytelling on a community level. Eisner showed how the deliberation of artistic process yielded greater depth of critical thinking as the learner is always reflecting and contemplating aesthetic choices in the process of crafting their work and, in this case, contemplating their individual work in balance with their collective work.

By immersing students in supplemental musicking events where outsiders model a value for music making, schools foster a mindset and attitude we can grow and develop as musicians when we surrender to the vulnerability of getting out of the confines of our routine and

contributing to the greater good. Student growth depends on the community's valuing of the content (Dismore & Bailey, 2005; Ruddock & Leong, 2005). Students' negative self-judgment could lead to a deprivation of future participation (Lamont, 2012; Ruddock & Leong, 2005). Exposing students to field trips with like-minded people who value music could normalize the acceptance of music making (Lamont, 2012). When music is recognized as an intrinsic human activity and properly incorporated into the school curriculum, it leads to "open expression" of students' musical nature (Ruddock & Leong, 2005, p. 20).

Madsen (2000) explained, "Students cannot learn what is not taught" (p. 85). One teacher cannot model the timbres required for all students from soprano to bass; her stylistic tendencies also cannot span the diverse backgrounds and needs of her students. By escorting my students around the region to work with a larger population, we gained models of diverse ranges and timbres. My students gained more holistic input, a more holistic learning and understanding of their own instrument, and (hopefully) came to value others' voices and unique contributions. The school provided a collective investment when they sought out and fostered collaborative work. Sutherland's (2017) participant said we have a "community responsibility" (p. 457). We can invest in and support other music programs rather than being rivals when we become co-creators of musical products.

Despite the plethora of quantitative studies correlating music engagement with high academic achievement, more empirical studies have shown the causation lies in the repetition and excitement during the learning process (LeDoux, 2002; McGaugh, 2004; Phelps, 2006). Because of the phenomenon of music's almost universal attraction for most people, it becomes a hook to add meaning to repetition and enjoyment even for the youngest student performers.

Because of this emotional component, and sometimes even spiritual, it is essential that we examine qualitative research that contributes to a deeper understanding of communal musicking.

The review of the literature magnified in Chapter II establishes the social and emotional benefits found in choral performance but was limited to a smaller community of a single classroom or building-bound and district-bound cases. Much of that research referred to a collaboration accomplished amongst fellow classmates through experiences ranging from ensemble competition to non-musical team building such as amusement park field trips. Other literature that branched out to mixing of members was limited to intergenerational community groups, which also seemed to be generated outside the United States, or focused on collaboration with perceptions from higher-education institutions focusing on benefits to college recruiting or pre-service teachers' experiences. Another strong line of research focused on collaboration between students and agencies sending guest teachers or volunteers to fill a financial gap. This new study focused on inter-district collaboration, meaning a mixing of students from multiple schools outside of the confines of one curricular choir, and aimed to describe the perceptions of student-musician members who made up the community of the inter-district collaborations.

I have long thought that music education provided an exemplar model to other contexts and subject matters for our organization of collaborative applied-skill field trips. In my experience as an educator, I saw great community-building in a music performance environment. Choral ensembles are a place where singers seek relationships with fellow singers, the director, the music itself, and the characters in the lyrics figuratively and literally. The reciprocal sense of community celebrates the unique individuality of one coupled with the value of others' contributions and a recognition of shared experiences.

The review of the literature showed a need for more collaborative field trip-related research presented in the students' voice telling of their perceptions and an exploration of intermixing a wider community beyond the single classroom. This study was an inquiry about what contributions were manifested from the specific experience of collaborative performances and expansive communal endeavors. Teachers understand that supplemental experiences bring growth or inspiration; however, this student input would allow them to expand models including technique, literature, and community.

Methodology and Rationale

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative case study is for researchers exploring modern, real-life examples from a bounded system using multiple forms of data collection (p. 97). It is popular for social sciences including educational platforms. Qualitative case study was a logical choice for this research as it describes in-depth a unique one-day, short-term case using observations, interviews, artifacts, song literature, program notes, and researcher memos for a triangulation of data collection. This was an intrinsic case study as it focused on one event with one regional group of students (Creswell, 2013, p. 98) rather than on a comparison of multiple events or a larger issue such as choral education in general. I was the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and used inductive strategy to learn how they described their intentions for engaging in collaborations and how it informed their larger understanding of music and collaborative work. Thematic analysis occurred throughout the data-gathering process and included additional researcher memos and analysis of final codes and themes.

The bounded case was a one-day, inter district Midwest Choir Festival. As the sole researcher, I attended the field trip event in real time and observed participants in the group setting. My presence and videorecording allowed me to observe the actions and comments made

by the participants and understood the context as I observed other members and circumstances throughout the event. I witnessed first-hand this case of collaboration, the way they interacted with others, and the way they contributed and received verbal, musical, and other cues and exchanges made amongst the ensemble. After observing the festival, I conducted a series of individual interviews.

The Midwest Choir Festival was made up of 220 students from approximately 40 participating schools within 90 minutes of the performance site: a large centrally located high school. Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013, p. 156) was done to understand more specifically how the use of collaborative performance influenced the experience of students who attended schools with smaller choir programs and/or did not receive other input from any regular private studio coaching. Purposive sampling allowed me to go into greater depth with one specific regional participant sample to gain deeper understanding of the experience of students from smaller choir programs (school choir enrollment consisted of less than 5% of their total school enrollment), and/or who had not studied privately, or did not participate in choir before high school. Boundaries for this case were specific and likely would not be generalizable outside of this collaboration (Creswell, 2013, p. 101). Eligible students included those who secured a placement into the Midwest Choir Festival based on an external audition (the researcher was not involved in the audition process). Following the festival day, I reached out to the 16 students who submitted interest forms (see Appendix A for recruitment letter and Appendix B for a Google form) and 10 of them followed through with scheduled interviews. Interviews were essential since student voice was a primary goal of the research (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 414). Assent and consent forms were collected from all parties involved (see Appendices C and D for forms). I audio recorded each interview to produce transcriptions used in data analysis. I

allowed member checking of the transcriptions, codes and themes to arrive at a true and agreed upon interpretation.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to address the same core questions regarding student descriptions of their purposes for involvement, leaving flexibility for individual feelings and perspectives (Patton, 2002). Students gave further explanations of the circumstances I observed and expressed meaning and significance in their opinions and conclusions as they reflected on their individual and collective engagement. Finally, the interview process yielded implications about how their experiences could possibly inform and influence future collaborations in education and music.

Students' sharing of artifacts was significant as it communicated what they valued and felt was important to preserve and cherish. Some students shared their photos, attire, concert programs, or souvenirs such as plaques and apparel to express the emotional and personal interpretations not captured in observations or interviews.

Various stakeholders such as teachers (of music or other subjects), administrators, or hosts of collaborative educational events might benefit from understanding students' developmental processes and their perceptions of this collaborative experience. Additionally, stakeholders might consider how that might influence the organization and management of future collaborations and field trips.

Theoretical Framework

My research framework was informed by the overlapping theories of experiential education and aesthetic education. I was interested in understanding deeper how this experiential case supported students to reach their full potential and the significance they placed on it, not just as musicians but as well-rounded students. John Dewey's (1938/1998) main tenets pointed to a

hands-on experience in a social process stating, “The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process” (p. 65). Within the social setting, each member feels a sense of purpose. In aesthetic education, specifically in choir, each member might feel a sense of purpose as they contribute a part of the harmonic depth that is richer with each contributing voice. I saw both experiential and aesthetic manners of learning and doing as a metaphor for effective community and democracy. Overall, the goal in approaching education in a robust experiential manner of discovering and trying to accomplish things as they are found outside of school is that students would build a skillset that could be applied to learning and living outside of school. In the arts, there is no single correct answer (Eisner, 1998, p. 82); just as in society, there is a plurality of what’s best for different groups or regions of people. Extending learning experiences beyond the confines of the classroom utilizes the supplemental and realistic “surroundings, physical and social,” that provide worthwhile experiences (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 35). That unique new social setting serves as evidence that not only do positive things happen when we work together, but it also fosters a practice of listening to others, considering other points of view, and growing to appreciate the differences and similarities amongst human beings.

My research perspective was comprehensively influenced by these coinciding theorists that inter-district collaborative performance experiences had potential to provide a broader reach of social and physical enhancements from the daily routine classroom experience, allowing students to engage with unfamiliar settings and people, which is a practical training for life outside of school. Experiential learning and music education through performance are both social and require interacting with others. They provide a platform for developing purpose and exercising communal exchange and respect. The unique case of inter-district collaboration

transported learners from an otherwise limited environment to one that modeled the broader global world they would engage in as adults as well as provided an enhanced musical experience.

The largest umbrella that informed my approach to this study was the theory of experiential learning as described by prominent education philosopher John Dewey. Dewey (1938/1998) argued that with reflection and deliberate connection, “every experience lives on in further experience” (p. 16) with democratic social arrangements promoting superior quality for the greatest access and enjoyment. Elliott Eisner (1998) encouraged using aesthetic education as a tool to instill a desire to frame the world with perceived enjoyment. According to Dewey and more recent experiential approaches like the project-based work of Tobias et al. (2015), curriculum could be brought to life with collaborative interaction and cooperative educational communities. This could be done by adjusting the social and physical environments of the learners. Dewey argued that education needed to utilize surroundings; the very nature of field trips is to offer a different experience in a different environment and, in this case, additionally interacting with different peers and partners.

Eisner (1994) framed similar notions to Dewey (1938/1998) and Tobias et al. (2015) in his discussions of this reciprocal contribution of others influencing our own experience. He illustrated it is not the individual student alone making gains in development but the broader culture in which we live develops and reaps benefits, thereby impacting our experiences as well. What made this case unique was the combination of students, guest conductor, and literature; each component uniquely impacted the results. Eisner worked for learning through problem centered tasks where there is a problem to solve, one which students care about and find meaning in; they become stakeholders and actively hold some control rather than executing the purposes

of another (Plato's slave definition). He also sought out sensory-related learning in which students would engage their whole body, using imagination and refining sensibilities.

The problems dealt with in this case revolved around music execution as well as creating and fulfilling imaginative expressive choices. The musicians were immersed in an atmosphere where they were asked to express, feel, listen, intone, and sing as they created their own versions of the literature they were charged with performing. They were given an occasion to reflect on their musicianship and relatedness to the music with new fellow musicians. They solved musical problems as well as logistical and situational obstacles.

Music educators support the learning standards of performing alone and with others. For this case study, I focused on performing with others. Here was where it was important to consider a deeper look into how communities work and why we need them. Dewey (1938/1998) believed that "society is an organic union of individuals" (p. 78). Rather than schooling for individual achievement alone, which we have seen all too often in the trends of standardized testing, schooling could be a place for uniting for the greater good. My lens on society and schooling valued a priority on community. My definition of community is deeper than just a group of citizens bound by neighborhood or city boundaries. When I discuss community, I mean to imply collectivism, a connotation of engagement and contribution and compromise. Turner (2012) also described community as "pleasure in sharing common experiences with one's fellows" (p. 2). Beyond the pleasure enjoyed from the music, another layer of social bonding and personal fulfillment is enjoyed from the camaraderie of the unison experience. Similar frameworks present a more global community framework that is relational and interdependent (Parker, 2016), where all experience is seen as relational to other living beings and even inanimate objects (Zank & Braiterman, 2020). These base ideas of coming into relationship with

one's surroundings parallels what it takes for members of a music ensemble to submit to the composer's direction and the physical performance space, and act with give and take amongst other performers and layers in the music. Findings from this study depended upon relationships amongst student performers with each other, their conductors, the concert literature and composers, and even the performance venue. All these elements informed the student participants' experiences. This set the stage to guide understanding of the direction of this research.

Researcher Statement

As a veteran teacher of music, I witnessed this multi-district collaborative vibe of universal commitment to doing one's best work and it was repeatedly unique and impressive. It cannot be duplicated in the routine school rehearsal because students bring to class other distractions and burdens; smaller class size limits voice part balance, physical volume, and power; or shortened bell schedules limit time on task. However, at a one-day off-campus collaborative performance, students set those distractions aside before entering the rehearsal hall and are given ample time to immerse themselves in the music making process. There is attention to working at an appropriate pace but nothing is rushed as no bell is going to ring and interrupt the flow of the day. My students left such field trips more musically confident, more socially connected, and more invested in their personal musicianship.

I feel better knowing I provided such opportunities for a more fulfilling music experience through collaboration that I could not do alone in my classroom. Music ensembles are the perfect model for proving we can make beautiful music when we work in harmony with others, different from what we accomplish individually. This has potential implications for further collaboration in other educational settings.

I knew when I began narrowing down my dissertation topic that it would have something to do with community. I have long been enamored with the way music education, especially at the secondary level, works to provide learning experiences outside of the classroom. We perform off campus at nursing homes, community gatherings, holiday celebrations; we seek out fresh input from local college/university personnel; and we send students to contests, camps, and honor festivals where they share their progress with like-minded peers and reciprocate by listening and supporting the others. I believe we do a disservice when we lock the front door of the school and pretend as if learning only occurs in the classrooms or pretend students have nothing valuable to take out and share with their world. I believe if our goal is to prepare young people to be wise consumers and advocates of music, to work well with others, and become productive contributors to society, then we must provide opportunities for them to contribute well before graduation and instill in them a confident active voice. That was what led me to turn what I first saw only as a message of advocacy into a worthy research study. In my initial search for literature regarding collaboration, I realized there was a lack of discussion regarding inter-district performance models. It appeared that we as a profession, music education researchers and practitioners, have taken for granted this valuable learning forum.

I am hoping that findings from student responses would help music educators find value in student voice. I assume other choir programs struggle from similar problems I have laid out here, especially smaller schools and ensembles. It is important to me to ask for students' input and make sure I am meeting their needs for they are our primary stakeholders before administration and taxpayers. With a rise in the application of project-based learning and student voice and choice, I call on music educators to reflect on how much they dictate from the podium vs. how much students are initiating expressive choices and even choice of literature for that

matter; and how much directors incorporate an invitation to consider larger takeaways and understandings of lyrics, or whatever the context of the music setting may be. In a collaborative music performance experience, the routine is taken away and students must stay attuned to fellow members and guest conductors and be an active decisive part of music making. No one really knew what to expect as this group on site had never worked together before; in an organic way, the music making was authentically being established as it was happening in real time. Previous research provided a foundation for my inquiry into the very specific inter-district format. I hope this study helps to inform future inter-district work.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter II addresses the literature reviewed that informed this study and enlightens the reader about necessary background and gaps in existing research for students' perceptions of music education, collaboration in music education, and theories for experiential and aesthetic education. Chapter III expands in detail my research design and rationale for choosing case study to carry out this research. Chapter IV includes detailed summaries of findings including each participant's experience illustrated through highlights from observations, research memos, and interview responses. Chapter V includes a description of themes as they related to students' perspectives and the body of literature for music education and collaboration. Chapter V concludes with a discussion of the implications for teaching and learning and future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This case study was primarily designed to explore high school students' perspectives of choir performance bound to their regional inter-district field trip experiences and the purposes for which they participated related to present and future value. Secondly, this study sought out revelations for future collaboration design based on collected interpretations. Therefore, the literature reviewed in this chapter was chosen to inform my research and readers about what has already been established in the literature regarding student perspectives in music education and collaboration in music education. Finally, I also included literature that stimulated an understanding of the sociology-related community issues and the issues tied to working and learning away from the traditional classroom, i.e., the transfer of learning into future whole group experiences rather than an isolated focus on individual learners.

Using case study through observations, interviews, artifact collection, and research memos, I examined and analyzed 10 students' collaborative performance experiences in secondary choral settings seeking answers to the following research questions:

- Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district collaborative performance experiences?
- Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?
- Q3 How can students' perceptions inform teachers' decisions for designing collaborative experiences even outside of music?

In this chapter, I first explored studies that have described students' perceptions of their choral performance experiences (Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2011; Pitts, 2017; Ramsey, 2016). It was useful for me to understand how other researchers had approached adolescent students in the content area of music education to describe their personal perceptions. The primary focus of this study was the case of high school students; what differed from previous studies was the environment and make-up of personnel in the inter-district choirs. Secondly, I explored collaborative education research and specifically music education collaborations. This background informed my experience and guided me to know what might be typical and what stood out as unique within this combination of students from different school districts. There was limited research on the unique practice of multiple district interaction and communal collaborations in music education. The literature explored through the section on collaboration included engagement limited to the classroom community (Allsup, 2003; Ford, 2020), benefits to higher education institutions (Gregory, 1995), or intergenerational choral groups (Sutherland, 2018). The last theme of literature reviewed included sociology-related community issues that seemed often to be credited to music education platforms (Jones, 2020; Parker, 2016; Schmidt, 2008; Turner, 2012). As I sought implications for future design of collaborative educational experiences and asked students to share what they valued or attributed a purpose to, I sought out theories on community building and the more philosophical viewpoints related to engaged collaboration—not just individuals carrying out a common goal but a deliberate dependence on one another's contributions.

In an era where standardized education is the rule by means of rigid interpretation (Allsup, 2003; Madsen, 2000; Parker, 2016), I believed our students were missing out on their specialized local culture and sense of belonging, and neglected the chance to experience a unique

decision-making and knowledge-building process only found in the spontaneity of field trip learning. In the novel collaborative field trip event that was the focus of this research, certain pieces of the puzzle sat somewhat out of the students' or teachers' control, leaving broader flexibility as the ensemble members practiced a vulnerability to the group dynamic (Allsup, 2003; Curtis & Fallin, 2014; Ford, 2020; Parker, 2016; Sutherland, 2017).

Off-campus collaborations capture something missing from our daily confined classroom rehearsals and routine performances. I was interested in finding out how students identified that missing link and how they described its purpose for their personal situations. Teaching and learning depend on relationships to be successful (Noddings, 2005). In my experience over the years, I have been drawn to how one-day collaborative music performances can be so successful even though the particular ensemble and director have only spent one day together and have no prior relationship. In other words, I am seeking answers to how this community of strangers becomes a larger yet intimate entity in limited time, and how they unite to form one voice and purpose; and how participants carry those impressions with them into the future.

Review of Definitions

For purposes of this research, I provide the following definitions:

Collaborative Performances. Field trip music making experiences. More specifically, they are collaborative as they entail a combination of student choristers coming from separate schools bound together by region; performances are student musicians gathering for the purpose of full ensemble singing and learning including rehearsal training and final product performance.

Field Trips. I borrowed Sorrentino and Bell's (1970) definition of field trips as "any journey taken under the auspices of the school for educational purposes" (p. 233). Field trips are a

prime environment for experiential learning, which is described as the cyclical process of learning, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Kolb, 2015). The field trip is experiential where students are actively participating, not just learning history or theory or general technique but with musical skills applied through choral singing to a pre-determined selection of literature. As Gillett (2011) pointed out, “Experience gained in Experiential Education activities is dependent on many factors, which is why it is challenging to document its value” (p. 174). The best way to capture this wide array of variables and uniqueness in participants’ responses is through a qualitative design, where there is no expectation of generalization, and more than one story can be illuminated.

Music Education Standards. National and state-initiated music education standards always include a standard for performance, expecting students to learn through performing alone and with others (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016). The issue here concerned collaborative music-making, specifically choral singing. This did not pertain to within-class performance on or off-campus, nor did it specialize any soloistic performance experiences. It was bound to the Midwestern Choir Festival that was accessible to the given local schools and all choir members within those schools. The performance event included a mix of singers from dozens of school districts, a unique population that existed only at the given festival. This exact grouping did not perform together beyond the given one-day event.

Student Experience in Music Education

For the purpose of this dissertation, my research design was based on theorists and authors who have advocated for music education through performance as an active application of musicianship (Blair, 2009; Elliott et al., 1993; Gruenhagen, 2017; Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2011;

Pitts, 2017; Ramsey, 2016; Reimer, 1989). Elliott et al. (1993) called for a music education that included authentic music-making, a move away from a singular consumer or listener-dominant philosophy; singing in a choral context is an “intentional action” and “to sing musically is to act thoughtfully and knowingly” (p. 11). The act is not known through a deliberation of words but of the very act of singing as musicianship is applied for a sincere expressive delivery. In a choral context, this ‘knowing-in-action’ is not known alone in isolation but accomplished in cooperation with other choir members and the director. All singers contribute an aesthetic interpretation and simultaneously promote storytelling on a community level. Elliott (2012) pointed out that John Dewey even discouraged separating art and life. Elliot called for an “artistic citizenship” with access to and application of music by all types of people for all types of purposes as a citizen with a commitment to a larger community (p. 23). Blair (2009) and Gruenhagen (2017) both advocated music making for the intellectual benefits of developing musical thinking rather than on the quantitative products correlated to academic achievement in math or reading. Pitts (2017) pointed to the shaping of a “creatively engaged society” through consistent encouragement and opportunities offered at school and home (p. 166). Hylton (1981) referred to aesthetic education as “aesthetic interaction” (p. 288). This dissertation captured novice student musicians using music in a larger communal setting and promoting multiple perceptions through a communal lens in the storytelling.

Music is a “multi-dimensional challenge to our power of consciousness – our power of attention, cognition, emotion, intention, and memory” (Elliott et al., 1993, p. 13). This multi-dimensional learning manifests as deep and thorough connections to other areas of life and school such as culture, language, respect, and discipline (Ramsey, 2016). Blair (2009) asked music educators, “To whom or what are students responding?” in the problem-solving necessary

in performance (p. 44). Anyone can join in a musical experience led by the teacher; however, the hands-on problem solving and mindful engagement that is demanded in a performance setting shifts the focus from mimicking the teacher to trusting, enabling, and empowering students (Blair, 2009; Ramsey, 2016). Such integrated experiences also result in student fulfillment (Parker, 2011).

Students reported being involved in choir ensembles because of the attractive meaning it brings to their lives (Elliott et al., 1993; Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2011; Pitts, 2017; Ramsey, 2016). Rogers (1969) claimed “without meaning there is no learning” (p. 3). Parker (2011) used qualitative inquiry to investigate adolescent choral singers’ philosophical beliefs regarding music making with students reporting four themes of music-making as feelingful and enlightening, musical knowing as interpersonal knowing, and expressed music as expressed feeling. Pitts (2017) concluded in her extensive literature review that music education is for fostering a creatively engaged society built through developing and sustaining children’s musical identities. Hylton (1981) determined a multidimensional conceptualization of high school students’ perceptions of meaning of choral singing that included achievement, spiritualistic, musical-artistic, communicative, psychological, and integrative components through a quantitative study. Ramsey (2016) reported in her active research from junior high choir that participants found meaning coded into eight themes: expression, enjoyment, unifying, inspirational, social value, understanding, rewarding work, and identity; she related those findings to teaching pedagogy. Learning wholly through performance (Elliott et al., 1993) has led students to value the meaning they find through emotional expression, interpersonal exchange, development of self, existential growth, inclusivity and social ties, inspirational or spiritual transformation, goal setting, and overcoming obstacles (Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2011; Ramsey, 2016).

Collaboration Practice in Music Education

The concept of ‘artistic citizenship’ (Elliott, 2012) was the unifying factor through which I connected the literature describing the process of music education through performance to the literature on collaboration in music education. While maintaining paramount importance on active music making and hands-on aesthetic engagement, artistic citizenship adds the layer of social experiential behavior so consequential to the manner in which humans engage in music. Because this study sought to find student perspectives bound to their inter-district collaboration experiences, it was essential that I explore what the current research suggested about social, communal, and relational learning that framed the musicianship discussed earlier in this chapter.

Music is often used as a medium to learn about the student’s world and the world around them (Patchen, 1996). Researchers have positioned collaborative music education by situating it within other disciplines beyond performing alone. Patchen also recommended combining music into other subjects using the music teacher’s expertise to facilitate work with classroom teachers. Other authors explored collaboration within reflection activities with fellow classmates (Gruenhagen, 2017). These authors modulated a short distance from the classroom into other departmental subjects; yet, all were located within the school. Blair (2009) and Gruenhagen (2017) both centered their studies in collaboration; however, they were also limited to the viewpoint and culture of the building’s population. Blair summarized her work on learner-agency and personal engagement where general music students were given control in decision-making and given opportunities to improvise and arrange music as a collaborative group. Gruenhagen’s active research with intermediate elementary general music students revealed that students showed a natural inclination to conversation and reflection as they helped each other

solve problems, create new questions, and established criteria for quality; overall, the collaborative work empowered students' thinking and creativity.

Madsen (2000) seemed to remain intentionally vague when advocating for collaboration and left open the possibility of off-campus and inter-district structures. I found support of my broader claims that there is a unique value in collaborations made up of multiple schools in Madsen's statement, "Students cannot learn what is not taught" (p. 85). Students' learning is limited to their experience. The larger structure of music education collaborative festivals serves a great purpose of filling a social and experiential gap for students from smaller choir programs and limited access to training outside of school. By escorting students around the region to work with a larger population, they gain both expert director and competent student peer models of diverse range and timbres; students gain more holistic input, more holistic learning and understanding of their own instrument, and (hopefully) come to value other's voices and unique contributions. "Instead of social capital being a byproduct of musicing, music educators and community musicians should make it an implied goal" (Jones, 2008, p. 131). The development of social capital is unique to the settings in which people are enriched—in this case, aesthetically (Jones, 2008, p. 139). Therefore, this present study filled the essential need to research the unique places where social capital could be built; the Midwestern Choir Festival provided greater social breadth.

Elliott (2012) aligned himself with John Dewey, Richard Shusterman, Wayne Bowman, Thomas Regelski, and Tia DeNora when he declared,

Music and other arts should *not* be placed on an aesthetic pedestal, above the everyday world...the values of music are to be found in the dynamic social-experiential activities through and in which music is made, experienced, and put to work for a variety of

overlapping and interweaving human purposes and benefits – practical, democratic, social, cultural, ethical, and so forth. (p. 25)

Looking at the literature that moved away from the academic classroom into real-world collaborative settings that included the greater community, studies revealed partnerships with agencies outside of the school, a concentration on intergenerational memberships (Sutherland, 2018), and affiliations with higher-educational institutions (Gregory, 1995). When searching key terms such as music festivals, all-state, honor festivals, conference music, collaboration, the database results listed historical reports of festivals and guest conductor names or percentages of genres performed at festivals, but there was a lack of formal investigation and understanding of students' perceptions regarding a large group inter-district performance experience.

If the value of music is in real-time experience, then that value is significant when shared in a social-experiential manner. Relationship is central to the human experience (Buber, 2000), yet much of traditional education is individualized (Allsup, 2003). As I sought students' perceptions of present and future purpose grounded in their collaborative experience, I asked how relationships played a role in the ensemble and what influence relationships had on participants' individual and group experiences. Findings from previous research showed relationships as a key factor in setting collaborative music education apart from less poignant music engagement (Allsup, 2003; Ford, 2020; Parker, 2016; Sutherland, 2017, 2018). Such relationships were described as impacting musical and non-musical factors. Music-making becomes a means of achieving quality relationships in terms of matters of respect (Ford, 2020), communication (Allsup, 2003; Sutherland, 2017), and social and interpersonal behavior (Ford, 2020; Parker, 2016). In my experience, I was drawn to how one-day collaborative music performances could be so successful even though the particular ensemble and director had only

spent one day together and had no prior relationship. In other words, I was seeking answers to how this community of strangers became a larger, yet intimate entity in limited time; how they united to form one voice and purpose; and how participants carried those impressions with them into the future.

The process of building relationships while making music in a collaborative setting is a model for democratic learning (Allsup, 2003). The social nature of collectively working toward the same goals and depending on others to reach those goals breaks down chances for competing viewpoints; students work in cooperation rather than competition (Allsup, 2003; Ford, 2020; Sutherland, 2017). School reform in the way of providing innovative experiences in a more diverse setting could foster deeper global music understanding (Madsen, 2000). Students find connections to their own world and the world of others through such connections to more complex music (Ford, 2020; Madsen, 2000; Parker, 2016; Patchen, 1996). There was a need for further investigation on how musicians viewed the contribution of others in collaborative performance experiences (Sutherland, 2018, p. 2670). After all, students go to school for a richer life outside of school; not just to get better at school (Eisner, 2001, p. 369). Collaborating for musical endeavors opens doors for dialogue without judgement (Ford, 2020). Slavin (1991) determined that diverse groupings of people gathered in neutral spaces could positively alter attitudes toward oneself, toward learning, and instill feelings of altruism or goodwill (Allsup, 2003, p. 28).

Gathering in fresh spaces and working together to create aesthetic products takes learners out of their routine ensemble sound, routine levels of accessible literature, and routine expectations (Sutherland, 2017) and the extended all day timeframe ignites an energy and flow (Allsup, 2003; Yau, 2008) that does not happen within the limited space and membership in the

music classroom. Musical practice is “highly context specific” supporting the need for this case study on inter-district collaborative performance settings (Lamont, 2012, p. 589). The inter-district collaborative settings for this study were dependent on the members present (Sutherland, 2017) and provided an experience for students to get outside of their personal backgrounds (Madsen, 2000). Madsen (2000) borrowed the concept from Hartsell that “teachers cannot teach what they do not know”; similarly, “students cannot learn what is not taught” (p. 85). I asked student participants to share what assets they found in their larger inter-district performances that were missing from their daily routines at their own schools. ‘Arbitrary barriers’ (Sutherland, 2017) might be stifling aspects only discovered through the collaborative work with new and diverse directors and students (Curtis & Fallin, 2014).

Off Campus Issues

Kolb’s (2015) experiential learning theory stated that “knowledge is created through transformation of experience” and that process results in “the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 51). This was significant to my case of inter-district choral experiences as students were exposed to an infrequent type of music-making experience and the process of reflection would help in the process of transformation. Freire (1993) and Bailey et al. (2014) also found experience to be a key component in learning and development. Just as an abundance of general education research and initiatives focus on the individual learner, much of the experiential research focus has been on the individual application rather than the group. In this study, I aimed to keep the issue of fellow peer performers in the choir a part of the conversation, being sure to address the participants’ experiences as they saw them as a whole choir besides as an individual piece of the ensemble.

Closely related, the theory of transfer of learning proposes that “previous learning influences current and future learning, and how past or current learning is applied or adapted to similar or novel situations” (Haskell, 2001, p. 23). This theory helped drive this study that sought to learn about students’ perceptions and awareness of their collaborative performance experiences as they approached learning in a broader community and context outside of the classroom. Outside of the classroom, students’ routine support systems are not there and the prediction practice in the decision-making process of experiential learning in a specific setting requires different critical thinking responsibilities on the part of the student. Practicing more independence and experience away from routine social and learning structures might lead to grasping and transforming such skills and experiences (O’Sullivan & Tsangaridou, 1992; Selznick et al., 2021).

What was unique about field trip learning and what I aimed to delineate and explore in this case of Midwestern inter-district collaborative performance were the layers of unknowns that required the students to initiate a transfer of learning linking prior knowledge and skills to personal experience (Selznick et al., 2021). Such transfer, also termed ‘hinging’ or ‘bridging,’ builds ‘habits of mind’ for students to take ownership and awareness carried on into further learning and further impact on their community (Selznick et al., 2021).

In this case study, I did not anticipate any conflict or challenge that would harm students; however, I did foresee students navigating unknowns with new people and places that could be accompanied with a certain struggle or anxiousness. Bailey et al. (2014) focused on teachers’ experiential learning using the Growing Edge framework with the use of interviews, where participants were pushed to emotional ‘edges’ by reflecting on their experience and their understanding of the world around them. Reflecting on ethical matters with a critical lens

allowed participants to navigate issues in a cyclical way, discover and recognize an edge, grapple with personal development, and then build firm ground at the new edge (Bailey et al., 2014, p. 248). While much of the research on experiential learning emphasized the importance of conflict or significant challenge, I was curious if a deliberate struggle would add or detract from a younger student's learning experience. Perhaps they would welcome the meaningful application or perhaps they did not have the maturity or skills to handle such adversity. Or perhaps such a struggle would positively prepare them to handle more of life's surprises and disappointments in a healthy manner. In this study, struggle was evident in students' consideration of ethical meanings in lyrics, personal vulnerability in nuanced performance behavior, and trepidation situated in social exchanges with new peers.

In this case study, there was potential for better understanding students' habits of mind. In other words, in an inter-district collaborative environment where musicians were striving for blend and balance, did those applications carry over into a social mindset that influenced an awareness or inclusion of diverse contributions from a diverse body of people? As I inquired about students' experiences, I wondered if there was a creation of cultural capital by leaving the classroom and being wholly present in a public space and practicing a mindfulness and awareness of new experiences. I elaborate more on this concept in Chapters IV and V where I report how students described the yin and yang between individual and collective accountability. Many students discussed the opportunity to contribute while also being transformed by others' contributions. I examined the literature on experiential learning and field trips because such processes of consciousness might unfold changes of agency and possibility (Bourdieu, 2002; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) differently than district-bound cases. I believe my study of inter-district collaborative performance experiences that include informal and spontaneous music-

making, conversations, and happenings is valuable for contributing to the more realistic informal environment people are used to for making music. I hope my interpretation of the participants in this study could add to the literature advocating for satisfying our students' educational experience, which is more diverse when we open doors to bigger stages.

Conclusion

Clearly, there was favorable evidence for experiential music education and collaboration between students. However, neither the quantitative research nor the research on collaborations gave sufficient presence to engaging students outside of the classroom with age-matched peers and non-district experts where they would find the unique cooperation within broader communal endeavors. I believe I provided sufficient support for promoting the unique exposure to collective communal learning and development found in this specific Midwestern Choir Festival involving multiple school districts gathering for extended day festival-style performances. A detailed description of the methodology and study design follows in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study was to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative off-campus choral performance experience. That purpose allowed me to empower students' voices as I interpreted why students took part in optional collaborative opportunities off-campus, what they took away from the experience, and how they described the individual and collective significance of their engagement with a new population of peers. This study explored why secondary choir students chose to take part in optional collaborative opportunities off-campus and what they took away from the experience. Based on previous informal feedback, my students were attracted to performance experiences for a variety of reasons. Some sought out the music in general by taking advantage of any chance to sing; some sought out the social aspects and made their choice based on the chances for making new friends and working with like-minded people; others chose the intrinsic and aesthetic value that contributed positively to their current and future music making.

As shown in Chapter II through the review of the literature, I found similar perceptions as other researchers for the purpose of music making being grounded in social or emotional gratification (Elliott et al., 1993; Hylton, 1981; Parker, 2011; Pitts, 2017; Ramsey, 2016). Most importantly, the literature established that experiential learning could lead to powerful educational and developmental transformations. The gap that remained was the lack of research regarding inter-district collaborative performance experiences and qualitative data collected

directly from student participants rather than their teachers. In the following overarching research questions, I explored how students perceived their personal connection to applied music performance and whether there were deeper understandings they found in an inter-district collaborative atmosphere:

- Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district music performance experiences?
- Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?
- Q3 How can students' perceptions inform decisions for designing collaborative educational experiences even outside of music?

This chapter is organized by first addressing a summary of the research questions, definitions, and the theoretical background that framed how student perceptions and cognition were tied to experience. Then, I establish the rationale for why this study was a prime fit for qualitative case study and how the design best suited the research questions. I give context to the site and participant selection followed by description and order of the data collection, data analysis, and potential implications. I conclude with a statement supporting trustworthiness and positionality as an expert in music education.

Throughout this study, I referred to collaborative performances to be understood as field trip music making experiences made up of a combination of student choristers coming from separate schools bound together by region gathering for the purpose of singing and learning. I borrowed Gillett's (2011) definition of field trips as "guided activities for students that offer experiences interacting with materials and in situations that were not normally found in the school setting. Most field trips involve taking students away from the school setting and visiting the unique experiences" (p. 174).

Student Perceptions and Ways of Knowing

This study was informed by the social constructionist approach—specifically, how “we depend on culture to direct our behaviour and organise our experience” (Crotty, 1998, p. 53). Within the social constructionist approach, the means by which understanding is made are “social and conventional” (Crotty, 1998, p. 52). In this case, I explored the individual and collective meaning-making students found through their social experience of collaborative performance in the context of the Midwest Choir Festival. The social setting for this learning and music-making experience was especially pertinent to this case of students. They lived in smaller towns with smaller choir programs and often self-reported narrower community perspectives or lack of access to other supplemental vocal training. They described some aspects of their festival experience that filled a gap when compared to their daily experience. They gave attention to the same idea as Crotty—that the culture we are immersed in “brings things into view for us and endows them with meaning and by the same token, leads us to ignore other things” (p. 54). Student accounts in Chapter IV reveal how they felt their community or student body valued or hindered their musical experience and how that informed their subsequent experiences.

Geertz (1973) expanded on the idea that we exercise human thought within a social and public realm, saying, “Thinking consists not of happenings of the head but of a traffic in...significant symbols”, stating music as one such symbol (p. 45). We must be trafficking, that is interacting, with the public to create a deeper understanding through hands-on experiential learning.

In this case study, I used the experiences of inter-district collaborations where students were surrounded with others in communal choral practice to ask about the engaged process of singing and how that might enhance feelings of normalizing performance behaviors. I sought to

know how students' perceptions of making music in this environment were supported by their perceptions of their regional culture's value of choir singing. By placing students in authentic settings outside of the classroom, we heighten opportunities for deeper understanding and engage with the world to avoid propagating the posited experience of neglecting aesthetic education.

There was a wealth of literature on the benefits of music education. Much of the quantitative work cited utilitarian or external benefits such as higher academic achievement. The most well-known (and now controversial) study was the Mozart Effect (Waterhouse, 2006), which was tied to early research in passive listening where researchers claimed that by listening to music or engaging in music practices subjects scored higher on academic tasks, learned faster, or retained more than those who had not engaged with music either by listening or practice. In other words, they claimed through quantitative measures that music made people smarter. However, more empirical studies on cognitive psychology have proven that the causation lies in repetition (Squire & Kandel, 2000; Wickelgren, 1981) and excitement (LeDoux, 2002; McGaugh, 2004; Phelps, 2006) during the learning process. Prominent studies like Hylton's (1981) pressed the outcomes away from utilitarian and external conclusions to that of students' perceptions of the meaning of choral singing including personal satisfaction, reaching out to others, expressing ideas and feelings, and integrating with the group but it was still limited to quantitative measures. Because music holds an almost universal attraction for most people rather than primarily using it for utilitarian uses, it becomes a hook to add meaning to repetition and enjoyment even for the youngest student performers. Because of this emotional, social, and even spiritual component, it is essential that we examine qualitative research. Additionally, ways of knowing are not isolated to quantitative measures (Eisner, 1994; Reimer, 1989). To holistically

capture this phenomenon, we must understand qualitative research that contributes to a deeper understanding of broader communal performance.

Rationale for Methodology

This research was carried out through a qualitative, intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995, p. 3). My goals were to better understand students' perspectives of their collaborative music performances, add more student voice to the existing literature, and explore implications for future collaborations. Therefore, the focus was on the bounded case of students rather than an instrumental case trying to generalize a broader issue or a collective case comparing different cases (Stake, 1995, p.4). This case of participants was selected from the annual Midwest Choir Festival, an inter-district collaboration I had access to as a public school music teacher in the Midwest. Focus was given to the students involved and their responses rather than the larger generalized issue of choir performance. This case was of prime interest to me because it involved a body of students within my region, which had a direct influence on the choral culture of nearby schools and my students' reach.

Data based on participant meaning belong in a qualitative design (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p.444). I invited participants to interpret deeper meanings from their experiences, which were specific to a locally bounded group of high school choristers from a specific inter-district collaboration, the Midwest Choir Festival. I had witnessed similar previous events; however, now I was looking more closely and documenting findings to understand deeper how students described their intentions for engaging in these collaborations and how it informed their larger understanding of music and collaborative community work. Through inductive analysis, final themes were drawn from all data sources including observations, interviews, artifact collection, and research memos to focus on the case overall.

I used purposive sampling of students from Midwest-area high schools choir programs, which I was directly involved in as a choir director employed in a neighboring high school. Participant selection is explained in more detail later in this chapter. The case included 10 participants; each was invited to take part in one interview following their participation in the given collaborative off-campus performance experience in November 2023. My observation took place during the November event and interviews occurred within two weeks of observing. I had originally planned to meet with students sooner but adjusted due to the major Thanksgiving holiday. As the sole researcher, I used observation, interviews, collection of artifacts, and researcher memos for a triangulation of data collection. Artifacts included the music literature performed because it affected the mood and expressive requirements for performance; concert program for title, composer, program notes, participating personnel, and location reference; and students' artifact choices (pictures and choice of dress) for more vivid immediate reflection since the time between performance and interview could be up to 15 days. Observation, interview questions, artifact collection, and researcher memo analysis centered around the main research questions regarding what students found meaningful about collaborative performance and how they explained or justified their perceived experience and its impact on their present and future thoughts and behaviors.

I chose intrinsic case study as the superior method to carry out the research questions where the exceptional inter-district case was of prime importance over the issue of choral performance in general (Stake, 1995, p. 3). This sample was purposive in that the event and student population highlighted a typically normal case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Case studies are used to maximize what we can learn from the data. The final report included rich description of my own interpretation of student input. Therefore, it was essential

that I maintained an objective lens where I bracketed “or temporarily set aside” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27) my assumptions and biases. I worked to preserve the multiple realities the student responses generated with a designated section for each participant in Chapter IV’s narrative matching the individual’s data to the themes arrived at including quotations, description of observed behavior, connections to song lyrics, program notes, conductor feedback and direction, and student artifact testimony.

As a veteran teacher of music and performer myself, my interpretations and evaluations of the data were informed by my professional stance and maintained the highest standards. At the same time, I brought assumptions and routines I had established that I set aside as I analyzed participants’ input and remained open to their personal recounting, which was influenced by their experience and understanding. My understanding was also rooted in collaboration and community. I needed to remain open to honest interpretation in my observations and record students’ responses at face value, not leaning on my expectations built on prior experience. My personal experience was influenced by a pre-driven purpose for those actions or statements that identified with an acknowledgement of submission to a group effort or care that individual agendas were kept in check and flexible to foster an attitude of cooperation and collectivism for the greater good. As a student musician and now teacher, I have been a part of countless collaborations that I perceived filled a social need and opened my own understanding of people and music I would not have otherwise had a chance to learn from. To fully bracket (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 113) my personal conceptions, I used research memos to record and synthesize my thought process as I inductively gleaned themes from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17). I wrote my research memos, or analytic memos, in the form of journal entries or recorded thoughts regarding the elements of the study (Saldana, 2021, p. 58). I kept a notebook of memos

to log thoughts that happened during observations, interviews, and further synthesize ideas that evolved and connected to larger themes. Appendix E provides themes by individual participants.

Setting and Context

Inter-district collaborative performances are quite prevalent around the United States. This type of music performance typically occurs annually with a given host. Often, they are hosted by school directors on their own initiative, music education associations, or designated regional and state high school conferences. These hosts choose the guest director or clinician. Together, they choose song literature according to the goals of the collaboration and membership ability. Typically, schools are invited to nominate students or require participants to submit an audition, and they may pay fees up to \$20/student or one collective school fee. Most events require students to prepare the music literature before arriving, expecting it to be memorized at the final performance. After membership has been established, students travel, usually by school bus, and spend one full day rehearsing and learning with their fellow peers. The day might also include voice part sectionals, meals, break-out sessions, or private lessons. The final performance is then open to the public where students showcase their growth and development for their family and friends.

As a director, I found interdistrict collaborative performance events to be useful tools for development of musicianship and motivation. My students consistently reported that such events were a social and musical highlight. As mentioned in Chapter I, excitement and enjoyment were main components of learning that contributed to deeper meaning and understanding (Waterhouse, 2006). The day-long immersion with appropriate challenge often provided an acceleration to students' discovery and comprehension.

The event I observed, the one in which this study's participants performed, and which operated as the main source of information for the interviews was a typical interdistrict collaborative mass choir. After Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix F), I observed and reported on what I refer to here as the Midwest Choir Festival. The Midwest Choir Festival allowed teachers to sit-in and observe. As described in the context above, it was somewhat competitive as students auditioned for placement; however, rankings were unknown on the day of collaboration, keeping all students on equal ground. The audition consisted of excerpts from prepared literature and basic tonal and music literacy skills. Students earned points toward accuracy, musicality, and tone quality. The Midwest Choir Festival included an average of 30 schools annually and approximately 230 singers with a voice part ratio of two parts treble to one part bass. As of 2023, this event has lasted approximately 60 years (Illinois Music Education Association, n.d.). It has taken place at various locations, sitting at its current centrally-located suburban high school building for over 10 years. Each year, the association is responsible for choosing the guest directors with whom they work collaboratively to choose desired and appropriate literature for the students.

This case took place directly at the site of the inter-district performance, which included one auditorium as the rehearsal hall, various other large gym and common spaces for the other performance groups (junior high choirs and band, and high school band), and one gymnasium as the performance hall. The event chosen is an annual event and the schools from which I recruited participants had a history of involvement. There was a sense of stability, even though the guest conductors and student membership changed from year to year, because the host had an established schedule and routine. I did not manipulate any environment but collected data from the natural environment of the music event (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

Site and Participant Selection

I chose to use purposive sampling, researcher-chosen population that fit the specific characteristics to be studied (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). The students chosen for the study from the Midwest Choir Festival included those not studying privately with a paid vocal coach and who came from schools with smaller choir programs determined by less than 5% of the school population enrolled in choir. Also, students might not have had choir experience before ninth grade.

First, I sought permission from the event host's administrative leaders and neighboring school district choir directors to extend invitations to students for this research (see Appendix G). Administrators informed me that because my research institution was not affiliated with their state, there was no formal protocol to proceed and they approved. I emailed and spoke to the guest conductor and participating schools' choir directors and obtained permission to use the event and invite the students. Students had been notified of their acceptance into the ensemble weeks prior to the event. Second, on the morning of the event after students were seated and before the event began, I addressed the entire 220-member choir and explained my research and how they could be involved. I directed them to a flyer with a QR code that I had displayed at both ends of the rehearsal space and in the hallway near drinking fountains and restrooms. Interested students scanned the flyer that led them to a survey I used to follow up in the week following the Midwestern Choir Festival event.

I used Google Forms for the survey, collecting students' names and contact information plus parent/guardian name(s) and contact information. Information concerning the specifics such as no private lesson access, small program, and less formal experience were collected to ensure inclusion of the purposive characteristics chosen for this study. Sixteen interested students

completed the Google Form and 10 followed through with scheduled interviews. Table 1 provides a detailed picture of participants with sampling criteria.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Sampling Criteria

Pseudonym	Grade	School	School Size	Choir Size* <i>n</i> (%)	Private Lessons	Other
Harper	10	Public 9-12	1,954	105 (5)	no	
Reese	12	Public 9-12	1,154	64 (5)	no	
Ramone	11	Private Catholic 9-12	600	17 (3)	no	
Carmen	12	Public 9-12	1,155	92* (7)	no	Mom present
Ellington	12	Public 9-12	486	34* (6)	no	
Reed	12	Public 9-12	436	60* (13)	no	
Chantal	10	Public 9-12	453	52* (11)	no	Mom present
Jo	11	Public 9-12	192	0	yes	Opposite of purposive sample, no school program and only private lesson access
Ariah	12	Public 9-12	1,100	64 (5)	no	
Lark	11	Public 9-12	251	30* (11)	no	Mom present

Note. *More than 5% of total school enrollment.

I contacted all 16 interested students and their parents/guardians via email and included the formal invitation letter, assent/consent forms (see Appendices C and D), and a request for interview date availability. Ten responded affirmatively to the projected interview dates. I invited students to choose where the interviews would take place to accommodate convenience since

many of them might not drive or have access to their own vehicle. In the original proposal, I suggested their school commons area or music room being ideal as it might influence them to stay in their student-musician mindset; however, to establish a respectful and trusting relationship, I was open to allowing them to choose the interview space where they felt most comfortable sharing their personal takeaways. All students chose a coffee shop or restaurant.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to treat relationships with great care.

Uhrmacher et al. (2017) emphasized the relational framework obligates the researcher to an ethical duty to fellow beings (Finding participants and accessing sites, para. 5), therefore treating the relationships they have with participants in a most caring manner while engaging in honorable reciprocal and receptive exchange. I pointed out to participants my intentions to collaborate with them, just as the very concept I design my research around is collaboration. I did my best to foster a welcoming and comfortable setting in the interviews and general communication so they felt safe to share their personal takeaways with me. There was no incentive to participate beyond sharing a drink or meal during our interviews.

Uhrmacher et al. (2017) went beyond researcher-participant relationships in their connection of observations, interviews, and artifacts. They explained that there are relationships between these tangible elements and not just between the people involved. Johnson and Christensen (2020) also urged that it was important that I, the sole researcher, constantly checked my interpretations and recognized the overlap and influence contained in all elements of the study (p. 541). Different aspects of the data, the people, the setting, and perhaps other factors would have relationships to each other. It was my job to think creatively and find where they influenced one another.

Data Collection Procedures

During the collaborative performance observation, I took extensive written notes including details about the physical space, the demeanor and actions of students, others present but not directly involved in this research, the guest conductor, the actual music, and the various rhythms of the room. I kept a chronological record of moment-to-moment happenings in the form of written notes in a notebook including timestamp marks at each transition. I aligned memos on the right side of the pages in the form of questions and ponderings. I had copies of the music to follow along. While present, I also sketched out my observations in non-verbal ways such as notes with musical symbols, drew the physical set up, and I took video and pictures when possible for interpretation and connection for further analysis and reflection later.

Interviews took place at a public location of student participants' choosing, such as a restaurant or coffee shop, and were audio recorded with participants' permission and transcribed. I used an interview guideline (see Appendix H) for semi-structured interviews which allowed flexibility for unique direction depending on the students' experiences and responses. Table 2 shows how I connected interview questions to the three main research questions. Since I was capturing every statement in audio recordings, I took only limited notes during interviews so I could give my attention to the students and then recorded highlights and reflective ideas in writing immediately following the meetings. I asked for member checking and invited respondents to request changes or make clarifications before finalizing the findings. Member checks occurred by sharing interview transcripts through email. Member checks regarding final themes were also offered through email or phone calls. If participants had changes or suggested further conclusions, I asked them to support their changes with an explanation of their new

reasoning (thinking it would have revealed their process or specific thoughts or events that instigated their change or growth).

All participants were invited to provide further evidence and input into the study, and to support what was seen in observations and said in interviews. During interview scheduling conversations, I encouraged students to consider an artifact they could bring with them to the interview that symbolized a special moment or takeaway from the day. This was not something premeditated and students did not know I would be asking for that until after their participation in the festival day. Student-generated artifacts could demonstrate what they found meaningful and how they expressed value and purpose in their participation; ultimately informing research questions for vivid description, present or future purpose, and designing future collaborations. Chapter IV connects student-generated artifacts to the participants. Some students shared digital pictures, referred to special dress, or souvenirs such as a teacher's commemorative picture hanging in their classroom or purchased t-shirts or plaques, all representative of the value they equated with the festival. Students maintained possession of all such artifacts. I described in writing each contribution within my interview notes. Other artifacts collected on festival day included the music literature referred to for lyrics and musical notation, and the concert program with information regarding personnel, participating schools, and concert repertoire. All of the data collected, observational, interview, and artifacts worked together to triangulate findings and themes formed along the way.

Table 2*Interview Questions Related to Research Questions*

Interview Question	Alignment to Research Question
Tell me about the general vibe of the group. Did students appear to be excited and happy to be engaged? Was one school or section dominating? How did students behave during breaks; were they on their phones or playing physical games outside? How did students behave during meals?	Establishes context (RQ1); gets interviewee alert to thinking of the group
Who did you meet or talk with throughout the day? Students? Other directors or staff? Host helpers, college students? Your guest conductor? Bus driver?	Continues to establish context (RQ1); gets interviewee alert to thinking of their place amongst the group
If you could do the day all over again, what would you do differently? And why? (Alternatives: Did anything not go as well as you expected? If so, what happened or why do you think it could have been better?)	Reconstructs the experience (RQ1), allows sharing of concerns that overlap into purpose (RQ2)
What can you take back home (to your classroom choir) to infuse into that routine?	Allows identification of intriguing moments from present experience (RQ1, RQ2); provides insight to future use and purpose (RQ2, RQ3)
Were there any fellow performers that stood out to you? If yes, how so? What about their performance quality or mindset/approach to (the) music making made you notice them? What did that mean to you? How will that influence your actions or attitudes for your own performance from here on out?	Portrays perceptions of others (RQ1); Demonstrates judgement of perceptions, could show what and why something holds value (RQ2, RQ3)
As you notice other performers/technique, what do you suppose fellow singers are noticing about you?	Generates self-reflection and consideration of their place amongst the group (RQ1)
Your conductor was (name/fill in the blank). What did you especially like about their approach?	Reconstructs the experience, identifies what they value and how they learn (RQ1, RQ3)
When he gave you permission to use more “belt” technique in <i>You Are Enough</i> , how did that make you feel?	Reflects on feelings (RQ1)
When giving his perspective on <i>You Are Enough</i> , the director said, “this is for the audience”. How much of that was for you? How much was for the audience? (Alternatively, when is it for you, and when is it for the audience?)	Reflects on purpose, informs reasoning for who they sing for and why (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

Table 2 Continued

Interview Question	Alignment to Research Question
(TB; but SA may have a response, too) Shortly before lunch, a baritone asked about a divisi note and who should sing which pitch. The director answered, “pick your favorite”. How did that make you feel?	Reflects on feelings (RQ1)
(SA; but TB may have a response from what they witnessed) Around 1:30pm, SA was rehearsing, <i>By Night</i> . The director asked students to “sing through page 11 with your neighbor”. What did you and the people around you do? And what was that like?	Reconstructs experience, reflects on feelings and more intimate engagement with new peers (RQ1)
Earlier in the first <i>By Night</i> rehearsal around 9:45am, the director read a letter from the composer. What did you think of that?	Reconstructs experience, consideration of relationship with composer (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
I observed you doing (fill in the blank). Can you help me understand that/ expand on how that felt?	Reconstructs experience, reflects on feelings (RQ1)
Tell me about the structure of the day. How did this compare to your routine daily rehearsals at your school choir? How did the extended (full-day) time help or hinder the process?	Reconstructs experience, identifies intriguing perceptions, likes, dislikes, generates value statements on difference of experiences (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
How much larger was this choir than your classroom choir? What was that size difference like for you?	Establishes context (RQ1), generates value statements on difference of experiences (RQ2, RQ3)
What did you think about the chosen literature for this event? Did you like the music (melody, harmony, style) or the lyrics? Was there something that challenged you in a specific musical way?	Reconstructs experience (RQ1), identifies intriguing perceptions, likes, dislikes (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
What did you expect to happen at the inter-district performance? Were your expectations met? Exceeded? Not met?	Establishes context, background (RQ1, RQ2), identifies intriguing perceptions/concerns (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

I used all recordings (written, video, and audio) to review and make connections of how they related to each other and relate to the participants as I interpreted and formed themes that informed my research questions (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Participants were invited to choose their pseudonyms to maintain anonymity; however, most deferred that choice to me. They also were given the choice to decline sharing at any time but all were responsive and participatory throughout the process.

Data Analysis

I, the researcher, was the primary instrument of data collection in this qualitative research using case study, searching for meaning and understanding in multiple students' collaborative performance experiences. I used inductive investigation strategies throughout the process, connecting my notes and memos from what I observed to student input and interview memos. When coding interviews, I used a combination of splitter coding—line by line analysis open to future sub-coding (Saldana, 2021, p. 34), in vivo coding—participants' own phrasing (Saldana, 2021, p. 365), and values coding—representing participants' attitudes and perspectives of their experience bound to this case of performance events (Saldana, 2021, p. 369).

After each interview, I converted my audio files into digital document transcriptions. Splitter coding was used during my first reading of each transcript as I combed through, searching for the most compulsory information. During a second reading, I analyzed more thoroughly, highlighting students' comments and using margins to note the main ideas. I felt I was losing context as I extracted words so I moved to a handwritten format, focusing on the values coding. This third approach proved to be more fruitful for me to process as I drew boxes around statements with strong connotation and expanded on the initial codes. I rewrote and organized the value codes onto large index cards. From there, I began linking similar feelings and statements and adding memos as to how students' statements were similar and how their judgements or perceptions were influenced by their personal background experience as I examined each piece through the lens of a smaller choir program or smaller community. I worked through all 10 transcripts at each stage of coding before returning for a second reading. I took deliberate time to reflect on each student and record developing themes and conclusions through written researcher memos in between coding sessions. My researcher memos included

the practice of bracketing as I remained alert to value judgements that arose based on my tenure in the field of music education.

The final findings revealed in-depth description and analysis of the bounded student group in their off-campus collaboration. I relied on my own coding and memoing, which evolved into overarching themes from the collective input of narrative accounts. I drew my interpretations into four final themes. Theme 1: Fulfillment illustrated where students gained satisfaction in musical and social engagement. Theme 2: Challenges exposed the vulnerability felt by students as they encountered rigorous musical demands and social insecurities. Theme 3: Purpose demonstrated the deeper wiring within these student musicians for a passion for music and how experiences like the Midwest Choir Festival fulfilled a purpose in their lives. Theme 4: Process revealed how the structure of the festival and the director's approach were influential in determining the other themes and the outcomes of the day.

The following description of subthemes is given to help the reader understand my analysis and categorization of final themes. As I compared and looked for links across index cards, the first obvious theme was that of satisfactions. All students were describing similar positive experiences and as I analyzed, I determined the deeper theme of Fulfillment more adequately identified the patterns of both socially and musically fulfilling outcomes. Additionally, I noticed the same for the Challenges theme. Students gave universally common confessions of struggling with new and unfamiliar experiences that stretched their temporal social and musical boundaries. Fulfillments and Challenges shared this subtheme that I divided into social and musical realms.

The Purpose theme was woven amongst three subthemes. First, students identified personal motives for improving their own personal musicianship alongside statements of

collective obligations to contribute to a communal endeavor where there was a collective effort and purpose. Students spoke of individual motives but could not separate them from the responsibility to contribute to a greater whole. Second, students gave purposes, or reasons, for participating within the subthemes of identity and significance. Purpose was being used in the sense of an identity or calling. These adolescents were wired for music and choral singing; it was a part of the fabric of their life so there was a nature, or spirit, of purpose in that regard. The next purpose was to serve a personal purpose not being met within their home districts. This collaboration was significantly different and superior compared to their home experience. Student-generated artifacts added support of their verbal evidence for value and significance for participation. The third and final subtheme was a mutual passion for music and doing their best work. This passion also overlapped with the individual and collective obligation because it was reinforced across the group of 220 members.

The Process theme consisted of two subthemes: one-day immersive structure and the director's approach. The students noticed a sense of flow and group dedication. The lack of distractions and interruptions was illuminated by experiencing this other structure. They pointed out how they had one duty for that day as opposed to their concert unit in their district where they could extend their duties over weeks and months without any sense of immediacy and lack of tangibility. During data analysis, I found patterns of students crediting Dr. Kinney with much of their personal and collective success. They agreed and gave multiple examples each of how he fostered a sweet spot of rigor and support. They were universally attracted to the way he fostered inquiry, reflection, reading of subtexts and emotions. The director's approach was an incredible example of focus, relationship, charisma and care. Appendix I shows how I aligned the theoretical/conceptual frameworks to my methodology to answer the three research questions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the quality of reaching the trust, or sense of the reader, through the explication and detailed account of the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 238) that it reasonably represents the reality of the case. Through honest and thorough collection and account of observation, semi-structured interviews, artifact collection, and researcher memos, data triangulate to validate final themes and findings. Member checking added to the trustworthiness of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). In Chapter IV, references to students' quotations especially expressed the authenticity of students' impressions. Also, the context given to illustrate each student's background experience helped to support the meaning this case held for them as musicians and people eager to be in community with their fellow peers. Finally, references to the guest conductor's approach and the lyrical messages showed an impact on students and how that influenced what they valued from the experience.

Positionality

Positionality concerned my "insider/outsider status," my relationship with the participants, and with the case being studied including recognition of my place amongst the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 63). My expertise allowed me to notice things the average observer might miss; however, I worked to remain neutral and cognizant of any judgmental assertions or opinions in order to suppress them from my final findings. I practiced inductive analysis and reexamined those places I felt were susceptible to my bias and position as a music educator and researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64).

I had my own takeaways from decades of participation in inter-district collaborations and addressed my assumptions through research memos during my collection and analysis of data. Assumptions included my passion for community-building, expressive musicianship, or even my

life as a White Midwestern female, married with children. While I hold a piece of collaborative music-making responsible for those self-characteristics with high regard for community engagement and musicianship, I could not expect all musicians to find the same conclusions. My views are a part of final interpretations but I maintained a balance with students' perceptions, which were the main focus of this research project. I used my position and experience as a student and musician to relate to the participants but not overstate my presence.

Limitations

This qualitative case study was designed to describe the perceptions of student participants in this bounded case present at the Midwest Choir Festival only. Additional research should be done with other collaborative choirs made up of members from multiple school districts. It was also advised that more research be completed amongst choir collaborations like this one of non-auditioned members. This study used a purposive sample of students who were relying on their school district to provide the performance opportunity. I support further research with similar populations. It is essential that we study best practice for all students, not just those with access who can afford the camps or excursions outside of school or seek out supplemental performance training through paid private lessons.

Summary

I aimed to add more student voice to the existing literature and share the discoveries of students' perceptions. Findings might glean suggestions for designing future educational collaborations based on themes discovered. Bennett Reimer (1989) pointed out how music education philosophies of the 20th century focused on dictating formal music performance rather than allowing some space for students to have some ownership of their application and learning. In a collaborative music performance experience, the routine is taken away and students must

stay attuned to fellow members and guest conductors and be an active decisive part of music making. No one really knew what to expect as the group on site had never worked together before so in real time in an organic way, the music making was authentically being established as it was happening.

I was interested in the community experience. To add to the body of research regarding non-traditional learning and field trip learning, I used collaborative performance experience to display students' perceptions of this new setting and new combination of learners. This process of interviews and data analysis led to a heightened sense of awareness for what students were learning and how they were consuming and digesting their learning, which shaped their future conclusions and decisions. Participant responses led to summative themes that might influence teacher practice or engagement in future off-campus opportunities.

In the following pages, Chapter IV expounds on findings and brings each participant's story to life with description of observations, interview responses, and artifact collection. Chapter V identifies resonant themes and synthesizes students' overall perceptions. Chapter V also addresses findings in the context of implications for music education and collaborative and communal structures in education.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative off-campus choral performance experience. That purpose allowed me to empower students' voices as I interpreted why students took part in optional collaborative opportunities off-campus, what they took away from the experience, and how they described the individual and collective significance of their engagement with a new population of peers. This study pays close attention to the responses from students who relied on their school music department as their sole provider of music training. Without supplemental opportunities such as the Midwest Choir Festival, many students in smaller choir programs would not be able to explore beyond the basics and reach their full potential. Interdistrict collaborative performance experiences often promote a process with higher rigor than the home district classroom where students' focus and gratification is matched by their same-aged peers who share the same passions for singing and musical expression.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from the qualitative case study involving 10 high school students who participated in the inter-district Midwest Choir Festival in November 2023. Students were asked to share their personal perceptions of the inter-district collaborative performance experience. Their interview responses along with researcher observations and memos and artifact collection revealed responses to the following research questions:

- Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district collaborative music performance experiences?

- Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?
- Q3 How can students' perspectives inform decisions for designing collaborative experiences even outside of music?

Each participant's input was coded and themes were drawn from individual takeaways and what they shared. Then, broader themes of musical and social fulfillment, challenges, larger purposes, and the procedural and structural components of the festival emerged from the study at large. In the following pages, I outline how the answers to the research questions emerged. Then, I describe the observation of the Midwest Choir Festival and elaborate on individual case analysis from individual interviews and artifacts. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of overlapping themes found in the qualitative data.

Obtaining Results

Three overarching research questions were the foundation to this inquiry, bringing to light high school choir students' perceptions of collaborative performance experiences. Data were collected from observing the all-day Midwest Choir Festival and conducting 10 individual semi-structured interviews, which were supported by artifacts and researcher memos. Research Question 1 was meant to give presence to student voice and provide the unique perspective of student participants in the common and widely used collaborative format of inter-district choir festivals. Rich description and quotation excerpts are provided to allow those voices to be heard. Research Question 2 was intended to gain insight into why students chose to take part in such collaborations, what they were taking away from the experience, and how they described the significance of the experience. Student reflections and motivations are recorded here to articulate their purposes for participating and new perspectives they carried away from the festival.

Research Question 3 was designed to explore how future teachers and stakeholders could design relevant inter-district collaborative learning opportunities based on the themes discovered. Common themes as well as outlier themes are explained for others to consider for further implementation.

Inductive investigation strategies were employed throughout my data analysis. I read and re-read transcripts of interviews and ensured accuracy through member checks after edits were made through email correspondence with participants. Then, I used line by line analysis, taking note of in vivo coding, participants' own phrasing (Saldana, 2021, p. 365), and values coding (p. 369) representing participants' attitudes and opinions. My coding and memoing resolved into overarching themes from the collective input as I found similar themes but also documented outlier themes when they came from intense language or uniquely rare circumstances. Themes were placed into four categories. Theme 1: Fulfillment illustrated where students gained satisfaction in musical and social engagement. Theme 2: Challenges exposed the vulnerability felt by students as they encountered rigorous musical demands and social insecurities. Theme 3: Purpose demonstrated the deeper wiring within these student musicians for a passion for music and how experiences like the Midwest Choir Festival fulfilled a purpose in their lives. Theme 4: Process revealed how the structure of the festival and the director's approach were influential in determining the other themes and the outcomes of the day.

In the following pages, I describe the observation of the Midwest Choir Festival. Then, I elaborate on individual case analysis, showing how each theme was derived from specific students' responses. Finally, I conclude with the overlapping themes found in the qualitative data.

The Observation

This section is a description of the chronological happenings of festival day. I describe the setting and the people present and focus on the exchanges between the conductor and the choristers and their body language.

The Midwest Choir Festival took place on a sunny Saturday in November. Forty-three schools gathered from approximately a 90-minute radius at a large centrally located high school. The mass choir of 220 students, grades 9-12, was assigned to rehearse in the main auditorium. Students were arranged in blocks by vocal part in cushioned house seats. Students had qualified through an audition process and now sat ready to rehearse all day and present a grand finale concert to the public the same evening. I sat behind them and observed and took video recordings to refer to later. The guest conductor, Dr. Kinney, and piano accompanist were centered on stage. Dr. Kinney worked with a body mic so he could easily move across the stage to address the wide span of choristers in front of him.

Before the 9:00 am rehearsal began, students were settling into their seats, checking out copies of the music by signing for each title if they did not bring their own copies, and talking to neighbors. I was pleasantly surprised that all students heeded the direction to put their phones away and projected attitudes of attentiveness to the people around them. Messages of congratulations and introductions were made on stage from the host who explained the expectations for the day regarding engagement, breaks, meals, and personnel. Dr. Kinney began with a succinct message encouraging the students to listen and explore with energy and to recognize the special gift they had been given to be fortunate enough to perform with one another that day. He immediately moved into guiding vocal warm-ups.

After about 40 minutes of warming up, they ran through the baritone piece, *Tuba* (Bennett, 2018), focusing on projected singing and avoiding any tension in their technique. While the baritones rehearsed, the treble singers were encouraged to use their break to get up out of their seats and hang out away from the rehearsal space. Most chose to leave their seats and take restroom and drink breaks and hang out in the hallway. Some chose to stay and listen. Next, the baritones traded places with the treble singers while they worked the treble piece, *By Night* (Hagenberg, 2022). I noticed several students keeping meter with their bodies as they gestured and bobbed to the beat. Students sang with full voices and appeared prepared. Dr. Kinney emphasized the storytelling in the lyrics and used physical gesture and acting in character to draw out more expression from the sopranos and altos. He had previously contacted the composer and surprised the singers by reading a personal letter from her to the singers. Students showed excitement that the composer cared about their performance and they had the opportunity to bring her song to life and make her proud even though she was not present.

While the sopranos and altos rehearsed the treble piece, the baritones took full advantage of their break and some were playing ping pong in the hallway. The story later relayed to me by the participants of how this began was that one of the students from the hosting school brought the portable game from their car. This was a magnet for these adolescent students. They showed interest in each other and wanted to engage in a playful way to break from their singing duties. This was a unique way to break the ice and socially engage with each other that could have only happened in a full-day structure such as this.

After a short break, all students filled the rehearsal hall and began working on the most contemporary of their six pieces: *You Are Enough: A Mental Health Suite* (Accurso, 2021). Instead of singing right away, the director invited students to ponder the lyrics as he read them

and emphasized the message of the piece: “You are up to you. Figure that out for yourself. Write your life in bold. That should be painted everywhere. There’s no reason to hide...Let the light come in and shine a home in you, let the light multiply with everything you do, you are enough.” He spoke sincerely, explaining that students need to figure out for themselves what it means to them and then boldly express that to the audience and pass it on so the audience would also consider how the lyric could be meaningful to them. He urged them that this song in particular was “for the audience” and challenged singers with the job of convincing listeners they mattered and could feel the relevance in the message being delivered. Sopranos and altos especially reciprocated his energy and watched intently. Singers’ faces smiled and body language was strong as they belted out and exuded this message of strength and solidarity.

Next, the choir worked on *Daniel, Daniel, Servant of the Lord*, a spiritual style piece (Moore, 1953). There was strong muscle memory as participants dragged the tempo a bit behind the conductor. They used too much legato for an authentic gospel style. He humorously scolded them twice for sounding “too good.” First, he told them, “You are not allowed to sound that good on that part and not sound that good on the *You Are Enough!*” They took it as a compliment and responded with laughter. He continued with drill work on short passages by isolating every syllable. The choir finally executed it with the finesse he was pulling for and he shouted, “Have mercy! If you can do that do you know what’s possible? That’s stupid! You just told me what you can do.” Again, the choristers responded with laughter, showing modesty that they had not been showing off yet, and pride that he praised their work. The piece included heavy use of rubato and required singers to give greater concentration to a group sense of timing that came from eye contact. The director was boisterous with his gestures and students were figuring out that he would show them what he wanted and they began to learn to trust his judgement as they

seemed proud of what they were producing. He ended with the comment, “You showed me what you can do; good luck.” I interpreted this to mean he had evidence of their potential and would push them on the timing and commitment to an authentic delivery at the concert. He did not waste any time and rather than dictating pitches and rhythms, his approach invited students to self-reflection on what they could do with their technique and how they married their feelings to the lyrical message to bring the music to life.

He paused for more self-reflection, asking students to share something they learned so far. Dozens of volunteers shared technique tricks for expression, rhythm, and confidence: “expanded ribs,” “changing recipe, not doing it the same way for every song,” “space in back of the throat,” “how quiet I can be,” and “confidence.” The host gave announcements before a 15-minute break including a message challenging students to “take back” their learning to their own schools “so others can learn from your expertise,” and reminders about respect and timeliness in this setting where we were guests. During the longer break, students slowly walked to the restroom and to their belongings parked in the back of the room, checked in with their own directors, talked to the guest conductor, or squealed as they connected with friends and acquaintances.

Upon resuming rehearsal, Dr. Kinney emphasized how bold their singing must be and gave a hypothetical thought as if he were a student “but my neighbor is gonna think I’m, who cares?” He directed them to say “hi” to their neighbor and tell them “you’re an amazing singer.” He continued such encouragement by complimenting the alto section on something they did differently from before; they responded by blowing kisses. He asked them “what do you like that you’re doing?” Answers varied from “blending,” “phrasing,” “full sound,” “braver,” etc. I was intrigued by the high-quality musical expression and accuracy and simultaneously reminded of

how young and playful these students were. He tuned them in to the sub-text, the thoughts behind what's explicitly being expressed, and then coached them to reference a "Disney"-like style rather than rock. The juxtaposition between rigorous musical demand and playful age-appropriate approach recurred with every page turn and title they rehearsed. He had captured their attention and students were quick to understand and experiment with his direction. His flexibility seemed to feed their confidence. At one point, a tenor asked for clarification on a divisi section to which the director replied, "pick your favorite." After a couple of tries, the tenors and basses seemed pleased with how they each chose the note they felt was their best contribution. This was the best example of his commitment to student ownership individually and collectively. After praising a trio of basses and using them as a model, the director wound things down and asked the whole group, "What are you proud of?" Answers included "scared at first, but then figured it out," "being loud and not being afraid," "being able to hit range," "Soprano II independent harmony," "breath support," complimenting a specific peer's "preparedness," "energy," and "authenticity for different styles." The host made some announcements, including the assigned soloists, and they dismissed for lunch. As they left, students were happy and eager to eat, teachers were corralling students, students were calling out to friends across the room. I overheard a conversation; the director asked, "Are you having fun?" and the student responded, "Now I am" with further statements about listening first, then singing. Perhaps they were under-prepared but now felt confident; I did not want to speculate on the reason but I noted their overall acknowledgement of growth and satisfaction. Lunch was served in the main cafeteria area and students ate, mixed with other ensemble students (there were similar groups for band and younger choirs and bands in the building at the same time), and shared in conversation.

After lunch, rehearsal resumed with count-singing on a more modern polyphonic piece, *The Sun Never Says* (Forrest, 2019). Then they added conducting gesture and students gestured along with the director (“down, in, out, up”) and continued to count sing. Something was not synching and the director asked, “Do you agree that some of you are starting not where we’re starting?” This was a clever way of affirming what they did without saying they were wrong. As they reset and continued to gesture and sing, he invited them to “talk about what that feels like.” Students’ answers included “effortless,” “open throat,” and “nasal.” Responses were focused on tone quality and effort rather than on the mechanics of the kinesthetic gesture tools. He continued to use gesture and imagery as he pointed out, “We don’t speak as slow as we sing.”

The next pause for reflection was focused on what they were proud of. Students were proud of having “no doubt,” “showing emotion,” “stress/unstress,” and “respect, focus, control.” As they worked to evoke the most emotion possible, the director asked, “Can you cry instead of sing?” and begged them to “Milk it for all it’s worth.” Students were open and experimenting, singing softly and sensitively. He ended that section with the statement, “It takes a real vulnerability.”

When they worked on the baritone-only piece again, the students were quite comfortable and playful as they imitated a 1930s movie star voice and spoke the Bantu, South African language. They were encouraged to speak and sing “with their ribs instead of their voice,” which was a visual and kinesthetic way to place the effort. This was the first time they rehearsed with the performance soloists and drummer accompaniment, and choir students snapped their fingers to show encouragement to the soloists. One last tweak of tone was done by singling out three tenors. After some drill and experimentation, the director exclaimed, “That’s what the day is about! It was worth it for that right there! What did that feel like?” The students answered,

“easy.” The director and singers were proud of their persistence and success. As they initiated the beginning of the song for the last time, the tenors were rushing. The director just started over with no verbal redirections or scolding; in fact, he smiled and the second time was more cohesive.

Next, they switched places and rehearsed the treble-only piece, *By Night* (Hagenberg, 2022). Dr. Kinney instructed them to use a bright tone plus an opera tone. He repeatedly cheered for them to “expand, expand” to get the volume, depth, and color this song necessitated. He referred again to a slow-motion analogy he used earlier in the day to demonstrate every fine detail and nuance. Students penciled in breath marks and then he turned them loose to rehearse for five minutes without him, but with their closest neighbors. I observed some groups locking into the same tempo. In other words, many sopranos were singing unison but were attending to their smaller circles as they corralled together and listened closely. The director reminded them softer portions could be expressive and did not have to slow down; he warned them of the tendency to not be expressive when singing softly and the tendency to drag the tempo. For the most part, altos were not as visibly explicitly sharing. I wondered if they were inhibited because of a lack of preparation or if they were just singing softer and using this break-out section as a little vocal rest moment. The treble piece seemed the weakest as they approached the last hour of rehearsal but it was also one of the more complex and advanced numbers. Those students who were really prepared were bold and leading but they were not singletons or sticking out in a negative way with regard to blend and balance.

In the final pre-concert run-through, the director included heavy emphasis on tongue placement and tone color as they worked for authentic qualities for the diverse styles required from the six different titles to be performed. The conductor’s coaching focused on muscle

memory and control without tension. They continued to experiment as they distinguished between emotions and tone qualities. One imagery suggestion that stood out to me was a reference to Tina Turner and the difference between anger and sadness. Labeling with these conceptual approaches led students to connect quickly to a specific quality or mood carried into the musical expression.

Before students were dismissed, the director pointed out that the room was a safer space now, even more than this morning. He counseled them to trust the process, giving their all even when tired. He encouraged them to continue singing after high school. Finally, he told them sincerely, “I enjoy you, this age, thank you.” The host and students reciprocated their gratitude. Directions were given for concert time and the host ended with, “Great job today, way to work through it. Peace.”

As they cleared out, students were literally yipping and jumping with excitement. Some were chanting mantras about “energy” or singing in falsetto. There was a lot of commotion as they dispersed to the bathrooms and drinking fountains and moved into the performance space. Two students got scolded for climbing over seats instead of using aisles. A group near me told their director, “I appreciate you, Ms. K.”

The final concert was held in the main gymnasium where the senior high school festival choir and band were set up at opposing ends of the floor. Audience members sat in the bleachers on three sides. Approximately 30 minutes before concert time, the doors opened and families were purchasing plaques and shirts and finding seats in the bleachers. Surprisingly, the choir students began an impromptu singalong singing popular tunes such as *Country Roads*, *Sweet Caroline*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, and *I Want it That Way*. A group of boys were spearheading the singalong and other students and even audience members joined in. Like the ping pong game,

this appeared to be another way of socially uniting with each other; a deliberate space for a relational moment as they passed the time with their new friends.

The festival hosts addressed the audience and led the band in the National Anthem. The choir and audience sang along. The choir performed first. They were set up on multiple risers; students were packed closely with shoulders turned so everyone would fit. The backdrop was a row of acoustical shells spanning the whole width of the floor and the piano was positioned close to the center near the conductor.

Both beginning tunes were not in English and no translation was provided to the audience. After performing all six songs, they were applauded with a standing ovation and the concert transitioned to the festival band.

Themes

This section includes my interpretation of the observation and each student's interview. I provide rich descriptions of each participant and their experiences to help the readers understand the conclusions and how four major themes were manifested. Theme 1: Fulfillment illustrates where students gained satisfaction in musical and social engagement. Theme 2: Challenges expose the vulnerability felt by students as they encountered rigorous musical demands and social insecurities. Theme 3: Purpose demonstrates the deeper wiring within these student musicians for a passion for music and how experiences like the Midwest Choir Festival fulfilled a purpose in their lives. Theme 4: Process reveals how the structure of the festival and the director's approach were influential in determining the other themes and the outcomes of the day.

Dr. Kinney often referenced acting and being dramatic to fully express the stories and emotions in the concert literature and charged the young singers with the task of being

vulnerable and expressive. His supportive coach-like approach embodied inclusivity, ownership, and a mission to deliver a concert where they evoked emotion and also remained alert to the audience's experience and perspective. Choir students have a reputation for being very outgoing and dramatic. The director seemed to really understand their developmental spirit and catered to what appealed to them.

Overall, the students were very prepared. They also seemed mentally invested. Many students seemed comfortable giving verbal statements or answers but were more inhibited to sing or experiment with their voice unless all were doing it with them. When they were able to explore vocal techniques and apply new practices into the literature as a group, they were eager and playful. Dr. Kinney's supportive approach and the students' drive and purpose for being there made for a coachable group who developed great individual gains in musicianship and created something more beautiful than they could have done alone.

Individual Case Analysis

I addressed all 220 Choir members on the morning of the choir festival shortly before rehearsals began. I explained that through purposive sampling, I would give priority to students who solely depended on their school for their choir experiences and might not have the resources to pursue vocal training outside of school. The desired qualities included being involved in a small choir program (defined as a choir program consisting of 5% or less of total school enrollment), not studying privately with a paid vocal coach, and perhaps not much formal choir experience before high school. Ultimately, 10 completed semi-structured interviews held at a public coffeehouse or restaurant two weeks after the Midwest Choir Festival. The next section expands each participant's input in detail, expounding on individual highlights and themes.

Harper's Themes

Harper is a 10th grader, sings Soprano II, and is from the large hosting school where she sings in their auditioned treble choir. She had some experience with this festival in eighth grade and had recently been accepted into another esteemed regional collaborative choir. She had not taken private voice lessons. Harper appeared to be a strong musician and what I would consider a typical teenager who is very social and feels more secure when surrounded by her friends.

Fulfillment

One Voice, Whole Group. Overall, Harper felt the Midwest Choir Festival was a welcoming environment. She thought it was “cool” to be with such “different” members but also reassuring to have friends from home. She “loved” the big group and was surprised to learn that some of her soprano section mates went to schools smaller than hers that included more than one town as a consolidated district. She described her bonding with fellow sopranos as “easier to get a group” when you’re relying on each other for musical support because “it’s harder to talk in rehearsals.” Harper’s training has taught her to avoid side conversations during rehearsals so the on-task music-making time was how she learned about fellow members. When asked to break out and turn to practice with just the handful of people around them, Harper felt unprepared and relied on the person next to her to initiate the practice. She said that person was helpful and led her small group.

Harper also was motivated by the newness of the atmosphere, especially by fellow choir members. When asked about the size difference between her 30-member choir from home and the 220-member mass choir, she said,

Yeah, I like the mass choir because it’s strangers for starters. So it’s a lot of like, you don’t know the people so I like getting to know them. It’s more interesting, you don’t

know anything about them, so it's cool. And then it's like even though you don't know them, you're all singing together. So it's kind of brought together in a weird way. It's like one voice, whole group.

She went on to describe one friend in particular who was always together with her: "We probably wouldn't be as close if we hadn't had music all together." She joked about how they had a bit of separation anxiety away from their tight-knit family-like school choir: "It was really funny. So it's like we're always together which is great, it's just really sometimes you need something different like this. So it's a good balance."

Being Seen. Harper was especially flattered with the letter from the composer, one whose music she had performed frequently. She said the letter "was cool, because we sing a lot of her songs." She was scrolling through her playlist on her phone as she searched for the most recent one they had performed. I shared in her joy saying, "How cool that she just reaches out and is like 'here's my song; good for you for doing this.'" She responded, "Literally; when he read that letter I was like, 'yep,'" implying a deep satisfaction and acknowledgment of being 'seen' by a living composer.

Fun People, Fun Learning. Harper experienced this same festival last year but mentioned, "I think I never know what to expect with the director. That's the only one where I'm like, yeah, you never know." But with fellow singers, she explained,

I expect to at least get to know one person next to me, that's always fun. And I know I'm in high school I expect to hang out with my people. It's always so fun. So I expect a lot of fun and I expect to at least learn something new each time, which I did. So all my expectations were pretty much met.

Challenge

More Fun Once You Get It. Some specific challenges for Harper were timing issues due to the complexities of rhythms and the polyphonic setting where she felt her soprano II part “jumped” around. Elements she liked most about the music included challenging “octave” leaps that were “more fun once you finally get it” and other “catchy” melodies. She found the treble-only piece to be challenging with long phrases that stretched her breathing skills but added it had fun notes (melodic and harmonic): “So it’s like a combination of so many catchy timing fun things, interesting.”

Scheduling Stress. She also noted the challenge of the season of auditions. This event took place at the same time of other major auditions for major festivals and wondered why they competed against each other, which created overlapping stress.

Process

Worth It in the End. When asked about the structure of the long day, Harper admitted it was tiring. She explained she had braces tightened and did not feel 100% but “was willing to put it [the work] in... And the second half was brutal...going over it 500 times, which can be like, ‘come on’, but it makes it worth it in the end, of course. That’s just in the moment.” She went on to describe others’ behavior as “really zoned.” All through our conversation, I got the idea that Harper was very socially motivated, which was common for her developmental age, and their supported actions helped her to buy in and lean on their energy when she needed some motivation.

Mindset Shift. Harper felt the director was easygoing and mentioned more than once how working with him forced her to have a “mindset switch.” When discussing the idea of ‘music for the audience’ from the beginning of the day, Harper said, “I think you need someone

to guide you to listen sometimes. So it was good. He [director] got me thinking about it. I'm sure we got more people in line." She felt he got her to switch from thinking about performing to guiding someone else through their listening experience. Another instance of mindset switch for her was thinking about lifted ribs: "Especially with the ribs, like don't fall. That's been kind of a theme this year. Because we had a college professor, singer, she came and she told us that too for madrigals. Yeah, I was like, Oh, this is like repeating and needs to be done. It was helpful."

Reese's Themes

Reese is in 12th grade, sings Bass II, and attends a large high school. He is very bright, passionate, and mature. He described himself as an introvert compared to more extroverted peers present for festival day. During breaks, he described how he

navigated towards people that I already knew from my school, my friends who were in my choir. But anytime we were in doing any performance I made plenty of friends with people in the section. It was really a fun time. And it was interesting for me to be forced to be with people that I wouldn't normally be with, because I don't move outside of my friend groups much unless I have to. So it was an interesting feeling to be put in the middle of a bunch of people I didn't know. But I ended up making friends with quite a few of them.

Fulfillment

Lifted, Less Tension. Specifically, Reese seemed to benefit from the technique work that was instilled that day. He said,

The director talked a lot about lifting, opening everything up, not tensing anything...before I would stick my chest out, but I would pull in a lot, and I would tense everything up and with him telling us to do the exact opposite of that and seeing the

effect...I could be so much louder and so much better than I was previously doing. I immediately started changing everything I was doing to match what he was getting at. And it started sounding better than the first time.

He summarized how it seemed obvious the lifted posture and less tense technique were “easier on the vocals and definitely easier on the breath...made us a bit louder. But the thing that I noticed most is it improves my range.” A few of the songs required the basses to sing in higher-than-normal ranges, which really stretched Reese’s comfort level:

I don’t play with my upper register as much, but when opening everything up, for a few of the songs I was carrying the high part of the bass section, just through belting because I opened everything up. And it was a big difference that I hadn’t felt or seen before, and it just felt so much better and easier to do it, just, it didn’t only sound brighter, but it felt better; felt brighter and more open. Whereas before when I was practicing with poor technique; it was just a hell of a song, just sayin.

Reese was satisfied with the sound and the feel of his musical contributions. He found a way to be less scared and more successful.

Bold Literature. The music literature allowed experimentation, discovery, and growth. We were talking about how the festival music differed from some of the traditional motets and madrigals he was currently studying in class when he said, “I hear far too many of those in Choir, so many classical pieces or singing pianissimo, or choir almost in a whisper. And he picked things that allowed us to be loud and vocal and open and bright, and I honestly love that because those are the pieces that I like doing.”

Student Choice. I asked him about the moment when the fellow baritone asked about a divisi chord and was unsure of what he wanted the group to do, the guest director replied, “Pick

your favorite.” Reese responded, “I think it bettered the piece altogether. People that could sing it [high note] powerfully and with richness were singing it.” He said that was a new experience for him to not have the divisi dictated from the podium: “It wasn’t him making the piece with our voices, it was the choir coming together, conductor included, to create a piece. Yeah, it was a very, very nice experience.”

Improv Fun. As we discussed the extroverted choir students, he talked about their “own smaller improv choir before” the evening concert started. He was referring to the student-initiated impromptu singing during the pre-concert time referenced in the observation section above. He explained how he hopped in when he knew the song: “Just being in the middle of it...people in the audience clapping...students lined up in the bleachers. It was a really fun time.”

Give It Your All. When asked about what he noticed in others, he referred to the physicality as singers’ bodies moved to the music and he could tell they were giving it “their all.” When asked what others noticed about him, he said a few singers in his section said “thank you so much” for taking the lead on the higher belting portions of the musical theater piece. He said, “I might screw it up horribly, or might do it perfectly, let’s find out and it ended up working, thank God.”

More Personal. When discussing his favorite songs, Reese chose the treble-only song as his top favorite. This surprised me because he did not sing it. He said, “I got goosebumps every time I heard it.” He continued referencing the letter from the composer:

It’s such a cool thing to know that you were singing to the person who wrote it like it’s like having J.R. Tolkien read “Lord of the Rings” to you. It’s just such a new fun experience. It’s this person who I could get in contact with right now. It makes it more personal and more human. Like, it’s a person, it’s not a name. It’s a person.

Feel the Right Way. Reese said, “When he [director] focused on getting us to feel it, it was very interesting and very different. Instead of sing the right note, look the right way, he was *feel* the right way.” By prioritizing the feeling over a technical accuracy, “we opened ourselves up and it did come out well, and it was such a cool experience. Because I never felt that before, just feeling the right way.” I think this spoke to a certain over-thinking process that sometimes happens in rehearsal. He really understood that if we focus on the emotion, the aesthetic qualities, it will take care of itself.

Process

Less is More. When Reese spoke on the energy of the day and the vibe in the room, he said it was a mix of ‘not again’ and ‘I didn’t know that was there, let’s do it again’ attitudes: “Every time he explained it, he would do something new with it. It opened me up because I was like, I can do so much more with such less. I can do a lot with this one word versus doing one single thing with an entire line.” This ‘less is more’ idea also fit in with his earlier comments on less tension, bringing fuller tone or greater efficiency.

Actor’s Mindset. Reese approached everything through an actor’s mindset. As we talked, he used a lot of imagery and even referenced how that visual storytelling in his mind influenced how well he memorized and invested emotionally into the songs. He equated the melodic lines to “waves” and the visual story in his mind’s eye to a “treasure map.”

Director’s Model. Reese noted that the guest conductor was “one of the best directors I’ve had when it comes to anything performance related.” He liked that the director was “in control” and described how “it was very cool to see him projecting throughout the entire room” and his vocal model “sounded pure and raw.”

Reflection as Preparation. The structure of the day influenced the energy and overall attitudes. By going through this intensely packed day, Reese and his peers were able to put the rest of their choir plans into perspective. They had been feeling overwhelmed with the demand of their local madrigal unit but he noted, “If we can do that in one day, then we can do this over the course of four months, we’re fine. We’ve opened these today for the first time for some of us, and now we’re about to perform it like we’ve been working on it for weeks”. He admitted that other commitments did not allow him to prep much in advance:

We reflect after every concert on the individual pieces, but having him reflect on every line as soon as we finished it, it drilled it home and also helped us to feel the song better and understand the song better. He reflected on every single piece of the moving process like looking at every gear inside of a clock, like reflecting on every single piece to see what makes the magic happen. I almost see like a treasure map. It’s very fun to visualize what we’re singing.

It was personal in each student’s head and heart but it came out as one congruent masterpiece: “We go from the small to the entire picture and revealing the whole thing.”

Domino Effect, Not a Competition, But Want to be Best. Overall, Reese’s expectations were surpassed. He was not exactly looking forward to going to the site of the performance as it was a local rival of his high school and it felt competitive. Also, he shared, “I was expecting to be bored out of my mind halfway through. But by the end of the day, I wished we could have done it again. I was like, Oh, this was so much fun! It was a great time.” Many had a stereotype of collaborations with local schools as being competitive or they just judged the people based on where they were from. But Reese understood, “We all are fighting for the same team. So we are our own home team. Fighting against ourselves, working with as much peace

and serenity as we can.” When he said “against ourselves,” I heard him giving himself some accountability like he wanted to reach his full potential. He used the domino effect metaphor that when you mess up you might mess up another person, which could mess up something else: “You need to stay on top of your game, you’re doing the best you possibly can. And again, that domino effect can start a chain reaction leading to “a masterpiece, versus a dumpster fire.” He was accepting the charge for a vulnerability that he put out, hoping others would follow suit. He repeated over and over again how important it was to tell yourself “I can do this, I’ve got this.” I commented that it must have been an environment he felt safe in to take those risks and he commented that those opportunities allowed him to practice his confidence and you cannot always depend on others to get the job done. And having an engaged part in that brought about more satisfaction when you came out on top: “I want to be on top, I want to be the best I possibly can” be.

Purpose: Evokes Emotion

When he reflected on what it meant for the music to be “for the audience,” he equated the connection with the lyrics. He referenced the traditional Latin text piece saying that was more for the conductor and the choir to say “they did that piece.” Whereas songs like the one labeled as empowering where “for the audience.” Reese felt:

It gives the audience a feeling, it immediately evokes an emotion in everybody that enhances the piece tenfold. It’s a message directly to them. This is to *you*. Because not only does the audience get to enjoy it, but the choir gets to enjoy knowing that they just produced emotion that produced magic in that moment. It turns from singing a song to *giving* a song. Yeah, it’s a very special and great feeling.

I commented that I liked his use of the word “evoke” because nobody got on the microphone and explicitly explained that to the audience. He replied,

The music does the talking, I don't; I like it when they do introductions before songs that are like more obscure. An introduction almost does it an injustice because the song needs to speak for itself; they should feel what they're going to feel...And that's my favorite part about choir is just sending out emotions and messages and giving people these feelings and these different messages and signs in any way that they need. Like, they might not need that message right now, but in a year from now, they might think back to that song and it might mean the entire world to them.

Ramone's Themes

Ramone is in 11th grade, sings Bass I, and attends a Catholic high school. He has not studied privately. He chose to bring the necktie he wore to the performance for his artifact: “I got this tie for Homecoming and I just really like the tie a lot and ended up going with everything.” It was grey with white, pink, and maroon plaid. He continued to share that he liked to dress up for special occasions and it showed the value he put on the festival. He also referred to “papers” he left in the back of his choir binder from all of his memories in choir. This showed the way he cherished his choir experiences and how he would look at and remember them as he reminisced in the future: “I might just print like a little cover for it and then like if I ever feel like I kind of miss choir I can just go over there and look at it.”

When asked about the general vibe, Ramone said everyone seemed familiar. I asked if familiar meant confident and he noted that was the first time in a collaborative environment where the altos did “not get targeted for not being loud. Because they were very dominant and knew what they were doing.” Then we talked about the mixed ages represented from 9th grade to

12th grade. He liked that all four years were grouped together and everyone should feel deserving and a sense of belonging. During breaks, Ramone said the baritones were especially social and playful. One student had set up a portable ping pong game in the hallway where they were all hanging out and playing and watching. Reflecting after the event, he wished he had been more socially engaged instead of an on-looker.

Fulfillment

Take the Lead with Fellow Bass. Ramone had experience with this annual event and similar collaborations including vocal jazz. He said this event was more advanced than previous experiences based on the stronger preparation of fellow choir members. As far as leadership, he noted, “As I got louder, I ended up hearing other people get louder.” He felt good about taking the lead by projecting along with another friend from his school. He explained that the confidence came from preparation. Overall, he felt his bass section was prepared, “chill and mellow,” and described how it was more satisfying with the bigger bass section: “So it was nice having that big big group of men because in my high school there was only like four basses that are splitting the Bass II and Bass I. So, having two people with me compared to I think it was 13, it was very nice.” He shared that in his first two years in high school, he was the only Bass in choir.

Like the other participants, Ramone noticed another example of confidence in the large number of students who were physically emoting while they sang. He mentioned he also exuded emotion and often walked around the house singing full voice.

Blend, Matching. Overall, Ramone was most impressed with the blending of the group’s tone qualities and the strength of the alto section, which had been weaker in previous collaborations he had taken part in. He found the explanation of lowering one’s Adam’s Apple

and larynx impressive and “very useful.” He had not thought of that before and he was now very alert to not escape lighter on his low notes but stay present and feel the resonance a little lower.

He laughed as he told me about the impromptu jam session before the concert began. He described it by saying, “It was very cool. It was very cool, because like, I was doing it with people who had done those pieces. I did notice some of the kids were trying to harmonize it. It was very cool.” He mentioned one student warned them to save their voices but they knew proper technique, especially after the day’s work, so they proceeded in a healthy manner. He had the same feelings about the National Anthem. The band led the song and the choir and audience sang along; he thought it was cool that the choir was loud enough to sing over the band and add harmonies without any printed sheet music but he figured they had done it at home because the harmonies were matching like they had all learned the same arrangement. Concepts he and his school mates brought back to their class choir included attention to dynamic contrast and “changing your voice to match that specific style of music.”

Purpose

Beyond Harmonic Supporting Role. As Ramone shared with me, I caught a theme of developing purpose. I believe he experienced some mindset shifts as he listened to the expert conductor treat him not like a (bass) harmonic supportive role but an important worthy contributor whose voice was just as important as the melody. He laughed as he explained: “It was funny to me that I saw a musical theatre piece on there! Because that’s something you don’t think about. Why is a choir doing musical theater? Why are we belting? Like that’s not a thing. That’s not something we do.” Like Harper, this was a mindset shift for Ramone as he needed to have permission to get out of the dutiful box in which he had placed himself and fellow basses as

harmonic support and never the lead main idea that could take up more presence. Ramone had only explored belt technique minimally in his school theater experience:

It was a nice thing about taking theatre, because it's a completely different style that I can like integrate some parts into choir and when he [guest director] asks to belt, like, okay, I can try doing this. It's also those high notes, I have had to hit those high notes before, but never like consistently.

Aspire to Same Things. When asked about especially meaningful last thoughts, Ramone believed the real value was the lasting relationships that continued back at school: "It was getting to hang out with like that group. Like that group of people from my school. We all tried to aspire to like the same things in choir, so it's cool hanging out with them." The inter-district piece allowed strength in numbers where perhaps being in a larger section allowed students to not feel like they were burdened with doing the heavy lifting. They felt supported with more people and more advanced singers so it was less stressful and more satisfying.

Process

Attracted to Differences. Ramone liked that the conductor fostered an environment of exploration and play through modeling and the diverse selection of literature: "I liked how different everything was, which is the biggest enjoyment factor of the concert." Ramone got positive feedback from the concert goers. His friend's parents enjoyed the drumming accompaniment and the different languages: "They just thought it was really cool like it's not just like English, it's a bunch of different languages."

Experiment During Longer Sessions. When putting the one-day, intensely focused structure into context compared to his daily rehearsal routine, Ramone said of his own school: "It's a little draining, I've had four other classes before then" (they were AP and honors level

courses). The stress of the other classes made for a demanding morning: “What’s nice about having choir then, is that it’s very refreshing.” When reflecting on the longer sessions of rehearsals at festival, he said it was “a little draining, it did help me understand the music”; it became habit and memorization was almost inevitable. Ramone took the initiative to experiment: “There’s like obviously something we’re not getting that he wants, so I’m gonna try to do this instead.”

Director Not Standard. When I asked Ramone what he especially liked about the guest conductor, he said,

The energy, because it wasn’t like a standard choir director that’s like, ‘all right, turn to page two, measure 11. He was very involved in everything. You could see him always trying to help everybody. Any mistakes, he never pointed out directly; he said, “Why don’t you try this instead? Try doing this.” He never openly said, “You made a mistake.””

Ramone echoed similar sentiments from other participants that the conductor was helpful, not blaming or labeling mistakes. Later he tried to explain the connection he felt with the conductor: “It’s really cool because you felt that connection. You know when he wants you to move.” He hesitated to assign words to it but it seemed almost an intuitive connection that happened in a musical way as students watched his gestures and felt the music and agreed on what to do. For technique and modeling, Ramone said, “I like how he showed us his own experimentation.” He proceeded to walk me through some specific placements of the tongue and roof of the mouth they worked on, even describing how the conductor noticed the mic was not helping, at which point he turned it off to give an authentic example of what he was after. Ramone was impressed that the expert conductor could model for all ranges and all voice parts compared to his home district where the director was a bass and used the piano to show treble singers where their notes

were. Like Reed, Ramone said he “saw it as an opportunity to learn from somebody new. It’s nice to hear from somebody else, because like they have their own style of teaching, they have their different ways of teaching, and it’s really cool seeing how that works.” This festival went beyond just working for a quality concert. They achieved skill-building and new directions and perspectives. The director was from a college and Ramone felt like he was treated like a mature college student and was grateful that “he saw the potential that we have.”

Carmen’s Themes

Carmen is in 12th grade, sings Bass I, and attends a larger high school. He does not study privately. He has the dream senior schedule for a music student as he is involved in multiple choirs as a chorister and as a student director. He was accepted to this festival last year; however, due to illness, he did not attend. He had performed two of the six songs from the festival within the past year. As far as rigor of the literature, he felt it was comparable to his school experience.

Fulfillment

Embodying the Piece. Carmen prepared for the festival with practice tracks provided by his own choir director. He confirmed his comfort level as getting to be his “normal self.” When asked about what he noticed about other singers, he said, “I feel like they put a lot of body movement into it, like really getting into the piece, which I like to see, like you feel like you’re embodying the piece and I really like that.”

Expanded Range and Technique. Carmen found much satisfaction in the technique work of the whole day. He said he felt his range expanded as he noticed he was carrying over the day’s work into other titles, not just what was programmed for the festival. This showed real validation of skill development. Like other students, he felt less tension and instilled habits of full and lifted ribs: “When I tried it I kind of didn’t understand it at first, but then I picked it up.”

His persistence and the director's approach to cycle the same concepts through all portions of the rehearsal helped Carmen and all students to focus on individual and group technique and artistry, not just the nuts and bolts of notes and rhythms: "I thought he was a great conductor and I was so happy I got to work with him." When ranked in order of attractiveness, Carmen credited the "social and collaborative" components as number one, then the energy and wisdom of the guest conductor as second, and third choice was the lyrical message in the literature performed.

Cohesive. As for the new acquaintances met at festival, Carmen described the bass section as "cohesive" and said it "felt like one big group" with no individuals dominating.

Purpose

Make It the Best. When asked who the music was for, Carmen said he sang for the listener when "the final product" was "ready" and "they get to listen to that"; and sang for himself and fellow performers during the "practice" or "rehearsal process when you're trying to make it the best" it could ever sound. He fulfilled that purpose, explaining that afterwards he "heard a lot of applause, lots of cheers."

Put Life into the Music. Carmen had a unique purpose in closely observing the guest conductor because of his rare opportunity to conduct the beginner choir at his own school. He learned from his gestures and interactions with the student performers and picked up ideas he wanted to try with his own school's choir: "I love how he puts life and expression into like his conducting pattern, his gestures, and looking at his cues and like decrescendos, crescendos, he just like puts life into it, and gets more people excited I feel like."

Lyrical Message of Tradition and Care. Carmen also described a purpose found in the lyrical message of each piece categorizing themes of "tradition" and "care. I see like tradition in

some of the pieces, and then like a nice care-ful feeling, like people that care for other people. That's what I kind of feel."

Brought Students "More Close." Carmen came with half of a dozen fellow singers from his school. He used the phrase "bought in" when describing how the group caught on to what was taught and what they brought home to share with their home choirs. He also described his relationship with those festival-goers from his school as "more close" after attending and experiencing the Midwest Choir Festival. Upon returning to school, he reflected: "I felt I was able to use what I learned from there, and I feel like I've become a better singer since then." He explained that he improved at projecting, not straining, and singing vowels better.

Process

One Day Appeal. Carmen equated the longer more in-depth rehearsals to music theater rehearsals, which last a couple hours, and also to another very large regional festival with fellow high school students from a multi-state region that he participated in the prior year. When asked about the long one-day commitment, Carmen felt

from just one day we get all these bunch of people to get there from different parts of [our region] to get together and sing. I feel like that like gives it the appeal and charm. I feel like if it's an everyday thing, it'll still be fun, but more people I feel wouldn't do it, because they have to think about like the commitment and like the drive, the commute, it would take to get there. But just having a one-day thing I feel like it gives it a nice charm.

To Carmen, the one-day structure was appealing and even a reason the day was so popular and successful.

Ownership. One unique part of the process was the conductor's flexibility. Carmen commented how the director did not dictate but "gave the students more options and made them feel like they could have ownership and do what they like to do."

Desire to Collaborate with Peers. When asked about the impromptu singalong on the gym floor right before the concert began, he said, "It happened out of nowhere; I was like, I guess I'll go with it." I heard his desire to share collaborative singing experiences with his peers when he had to speak of the accomplishments felt at the end of the day. He referenced that "a couple first-timers really had a fun time"; I remembered that he got to act as student conductor and there was an undertone of mentorship as he experienced the day through the eyes of the younger ninth graders as well.

Overall, Carmen's expectations were met regarding what he learned throughout the day and the final product delivered at the festival concert. He summarized by saying, "I feel like if I was able to do it over again, I would keep it the same experience because I felt like I had lots of fun and just doing it again would be really nice."

Chantal's Themes

Chantal is in 10th grade, sings Soprano II, and attends a fairly small high school. She has not studied voice privately. She attended the festival with seven fellow school choir members. When asked about artifacts, Chantal pointed to medals she had earned at a separate contest event. To her, the medals showed how she valued singing, excelled at it, and was just getting started in collaborative inter-district experiences. She came from a musical family where her sisters and mom had extensive singing experience and her dad played drums in their church's worship team where she sometimes joined in leading the singing.

Fulfillment: Blown Away, Cohesive

Chantal explained that this year's festival exceeded her expectations. Her previous experience included the Midwest Choir Festival at junior level in eighth grade and this same festival as a freshman last year. But both were developmentally inferior or lacked a significant number of baritone singers and she said it felt unbalanced. She explained,

But then we came into this and I heard the entire choir together, I was like blown away.

So cool! And I've never been in a choir that balanced, never been in a choir that cohesive and together, just awesome! Everyone understood the music really well, they understood how the director told us to "convey emotion with your singing."

Chantal used the word "Boom" to describe the treble piece. She appreciated the opportunity to sing boldly and express a dramatic story as she described the juxtaposition between the verses and chorus. Like, Reese, she was attracted to the vivid story and journey on which she got to take the listener.

Challenges: Scared of Messing Up

When asked about the quick five-minute sectional where the conductor asked the sopranos and altos to turn to their neighbors and work on a section of music, Chantal expressed a musical vulnerability even though she was comfortable chatting with nearby members:

I turned to the soprano on my right...I think it was good that we talked beforehand because I was a little bit more comfortable with her...I could hear other people behind me and people in front of me and altos on the other side doing it and it's interesting because you know, you're with people *you don't know*. And if you're singing by *yourself*, it's a little scary because as a choir you sing *together*, you're not alone. So I thought it was pretty interesting; it caught me off-guard.

They essentially signed up to sing with the choir and felt exposed when asked to sing apart from the whole group, but personal conversations put them at ease.

Overall, Chantal expressed a flow in the rigorous process: “It wasn’t easy, but it wasn’t extremely difficult.” She found a certain challenge in different spots in the music regarding range, foreign language, dynamic contrast demands, and changes in time signature. She added,

If you don’t look at the conductor, you won’t know that the time is slowing down so you might personally mess up, which could also be a challenge...it’s a little more challenging given that the parts are really close together. So harmonies, your part is difficult to get out because you might confuse it for another part, which I did often.

If Chantal could do the day over again, she said she wished she was a little more prepared: “I am so scared of messing up during performances. I did not want to mess that up one bit. I didn’t, thankfully. But I wish I was a little bit more confident [during that song] because I was so focused on not messing up I was not paying attention” to other things.”

When the conductor gave the students permission to belt in the music theater song, Chantal revealed she “was terrified, in all honesty I was very scared...And I was very confused. But when we tried it, I was impressed.” She was grateful for the chance to explore a weakness with the director’s guidance and to learn new tools of the trade.

Purpose

Common Ground, Passion for Music. Overheard small talk around the room put her at ease as she felt they were all in the same boat of not knowing the people around them. It seemed that during her previous two years of experience in this Midwest Choir Festival, there was more competition; however, this year, schools were spread out amongst the seating arrangement and students seemed to be “getting along with each other even though we didn’t really know anyone

else.” She summarized conversations centered around “*the* music...and it was really cool.” This implied that elsewhere, students might be inclined to discuss topics unrelated to this special event. However, here, she felt the strong dedication and focus given by the whole group.

Give it My All, One Chance. When discussing the letter from the composer of the treble piece, Chantal

felt very honored...someone that wrote this song is honored that we’re singing it so I don’t want to like ruin it by not giving it my all, so I’m gonna give it my all... I like the difference between school choir and [festival] choir because with [festival] you’re there all day and this is the only thing you’re doing that day...you don’t have any more time after [festival]...They want to actually learn rather than just be there for the credits. So I think there’s a very big difference in *quality*.

She compared the festival to the “rut pattern” of daily choir saying, “You do the same thing, rather than this one day that you only get to do once a year, really, even if you manage to get in it’s *one* thing, *one* chance, *one* day, *one* concert.” I liked the way she recognized perhaps the 40 or more chances in daily choir negated the motivation to improve and develop at a faster rate. She also pointed out the wider public audience they were held accountable to saying, “There’s a massive crowd. And there’s people from other schools there. There’s parents from other schools, not only watching their own kid, but watching you.”

Evoke Feeling. Chantal brought up the purpose of what she was there to do again when she described the literature: “It evoked a lot of feeling which is really good. That’s what you want as a performer. As a performer, it’s good that you made people cry, because that means you got the message.”

Choir Nerds Want to Learn. Chantal noticed the attentive student presence with the absence of cell phones. She described the vibe of the room:

The energy of the group was awesome. Everyone seemed like they wanted to be there and wanted to learn because we are all indeed choir nerds. Being in a big choir like that kinda made me feel a bit more confident because you couldn't necessarily hear me but you could hear my part. You couldn't hear my *voice* but you could hear my *song*. It was really cool because in a choir you're not supposed to hear one person, right You're supposed to hear every person.

Process

Director's Approach Led to More Fitting Style. Chantal shared that the festival was different than school choir because she previously thought of music on a surface-level as softer and louder. She had not thought of things in terms of physical behavior and vocal techniques that really locked in those expressive changes with deeper understanding and execution. She said she thought the way the director described things "helped a lot more in getting better controlled sound out and better sounding sound out, and more fitting sound for the piece or a certain part." The focus of conveying a message combined with deliberate and nuanced technique choices really developed Chantal's musical growth.

Details of the Puzzle. We discussed how the longer rehearsal time allowed for extensive time spent on detail; they might spend 30-40 minutes on only a couple of pages of a song.

Chantal relayed her excitement on this issue:

I really enjoyed it. I like getting into detail on things I'm passionate about (looking at her mom, laughing), she knows this very well. I really liked the way [the director] was also very much into getting everything perfect. I like the way that he would describe things to

us and not just fix *our* way of doing it but fixing our *perception* of it. Because if you give someone a song, and you don't show them the way that it sounds, you don't show them the way that they're supposed to sing, it won't *sound* like the way it's supposed to...you get to work out those details and everyone understands, Oh, that's how that goes...it's like putting a puzzle together (joyful laughter).

Upbeat, Focused Choir Nerds. Chantal described Dr. Kinney's energy, pointing out like Ramone that he was not boring but brought an "energy" and "talked to each section like individuals." She noted his regular job was a collegiate choir director and she knew he could have been condescending to the younger age group or perhaps talked over them in an elevated manner but she said, "I liked that he treated us like we were just on the same level. We're just, we're just choir nerds." She said she fed off of his energy: "Him being really like upbeat and wanting to be there made *me* more upbeat, and more focused in the music, even though that's what I'm there to do."

Mindset Shift. When preparing *You Are Enough*, Chantal spoke of her initial complaints: "The song did annoy me quite a bit because it was just so repetitive." However, after listening to the conductor's interpretation of how they should imagine they were "singing to a friend" and empowering someone who needed uplifting, she said, "That song kind of shifted a little bit and I wanted to try a bit harder on it." She said after that shift, "I think that's kind of the point, it's repetitive to drill it into your head" for someone to really understand it and hear their message. Chantal's mom was present in the interview and interjected, "From my perspective in hearing how she talked about that song prior to listening to them sing it, I think I could just tell by watching her that it meant something different."

Another factor that influenced Chantal to shift was studying the lyrics from a different perspective. She explained she liked to “focus on the words...understand the story. Maybe think of the perspective of the writer...what they were trying to convey to the audience.” She described how a song could have one meaning when interpreting it as a third party and a different meaning when taking on the character's perspective. She was intrigued by the director's reference of grammar use in *The Sun Never Says*, pointing out poetic use of capitalizations and noticing how the composer chose to express something in writing, which could allude to a deeper meaning than she originally considered. She described a revelation: “It's crazy how *one word* can change an entire story.”

Reed's Themes

Reed is in 12th grade, sings tenor, and attends a small high school where he is in his first year of choir class. This was his first year in the Midwest Choir Festival and just discovered his talent and joy for singing last year when he was cast as the lead in his school musical. He has not studied privately.

Fulfillment: Incredible Power of Sound

The Midwest Choir Festival stretched this beginner's natural talent. Reed said the baritone soloists especially stood out to him: “You could definitely see that they were excellent singers...You want to get to that point in your ability to sing like that.” He noticed he was doing things at festival that could not happen in class: “In class, we're going in a quieter volume...Yeah, it was crazy big and like the power of the sound that we were able to make was incredible.” He noticed he could use a lighter tone for faster paced songs and sink into a strong bolder tone for the powerful points, like the powerful last verse.

Challenges

Branching Out. Specific issues Reed felt challenged by included social and musical circumstances. Socially, he regretted not “branching out” and talking to more people. If he could do the day over again, he might have made a better effort to engage with peers in his section and in the choir overall.

Strange Music. Musically, there were two specific places he pointed to in the music that stretched his range and musicianship. On one of the auditioned titles, he pointed to a challenging section with leaps and no support from the accompaniment or other voice parts. He felt exposed and vulnerable. The second challenge came with the musical theater style piece that he described as “weird” and “strange compared to everything else we were doing that day.” He really noticed that different styles required different approaches and deliveries not achieved by the composer alone but as the performer, he had to be ready and willing to sell what was on the page, which to him felt unpredictable.

Purpose

Have Fun. “We’re here to have fun.” This statement from Reed summed up his purpose for the day but also how he approached the newness of the experience. At the beginning of the day, his purpose was to just go with the flow as he was taking it all in with no prior experience for this sort of performance setting: “I don’t know much about singing in like a large group like that. I just know how it goes with like a smaller group.” He prepared as his district director instructed and said, “I knew the gist for the songs, but going through everything was a whole different experience,” implying it was more immersive and intense than he could have imagined.

He was the only one that reported disagreement on the spontaneous jam session that happened during the pre-concert seating time. One half of the people “were in on it, but then the

left half were like, why are we doing this? It's not professional. I was like it's alright, go for it, we're here to have fun...We're here to sing and why not do it now?"

Declaration for Audience. In the discussion regarding when the music was for the audience or the choir, Reed believed there was more purpose for the audience when the lyrics were a "declaration" for them. In the case of *You Are Enough*, it was empowering the listener and instilling a sense of self-worth. He categorized other titles as "narrative" and an overcoming.

Best Sound Possible. Reed was really engaged and brought a coachable spirit to festival day: "The only thing you have to do in that entire day is make a good sound." He expanded on that primary goal through the theme of individual and collective accountability: "I feel like everyone at Midwest Choir Festival was much more focused than what a typical rehearsal would be like, everyone there wanted to make the best sound they could possibly make and they took it very seriously" and were putting their whole selves into it. He continued later,

It [four hours] felt more like a couple of hours...fully enveloped in the music, paying attention, *full focus* on everything. It felt like it was faster than it was... People aren't just talking like whispering to each other while we're on the risers, like, people at the festival are *focused* on what they're doing and want to make a great sound with what they have.

Reed left with the final thought, "Everyone was excited and supported to be there. Everyone was like, yeah I made it here; I'm part of a large group of people who have the talent to be here, and I'm singing this music". He was expressing the pride he felt in having achieved something he worked hard at attaining and the acknowledgement that he was surrounded by the best. In his view, there was an excitement and commitment to make beautiful music.

Balance of Guidance and Ownership. As a less experienced singer, Reed was eager to fill his toolbox with new tricks and tools of the trade. He felt his expectations were met with the process of the day and the literature programmed. When it came to the guest conductor,

He exceeded my expectations. I didn't expect him to be so good at his job, he's a very good teacher in how he showed us what we should change in performance and how we can make it sound better...He explained how we should look at music and how we can complement the music itself, we can make it more powerful. It made me feel like I was better at singing than I started the day off with...Having like a new take on a certain thing makes it easier to understand sometimes.

It seemed enlightening to him to get to spend concentrated time on musical expression rather than musical accuracy of the notes and rhythms, or drilling a certain section or voice part. Reed especially appreciated the way the conductor devoted equal time and attention to all students and voice sections: "I feel like he gave every group or every session time to where he focused on them specifically. He allowed us to do what we felt would be best for this music. He would give us guidance to what we would be doing, I guess, what our music capabilities were." Reed still felt like he had ownership, like it was the students' music. Reed reported positive feedback from the audience after the concert. His parents "thought it was a great sound" and his mom exclaimed, "We finally have a singer."

Jo's Themes

Jo is in 11th grade, sings Soprano II, and does study voice through paid private coaching. She held a unique perspective for this study because she attends a very small high school that does not offer choir as a curricular class or extra-curricular activity. She fit the purposive sample in the way she depended on her school for the opportunity to participate in the Midwest Choir

Festival. However, I made an exception for her access to private lessons since those lessons were not supplemental to her school practice since school practice did not exist in her case. She qualified by fitting the sample aimed at school choir programs with less than 5% of their overall school enrollment. She had previous experience with this festival and had participated annually since seventh grade. Her district did offer choir when she was in middle school. She described it as more participatory rather than academic and focused on skill development. They met during homeroom so the time devoted to it was shorter than regular classes and included travel time for her to walk back and forth across the street to the high school where the music room was. Jo did not bring any artifacts but upon arrival at the interview, she wished she had brought her music to show all the markings and notes she wrote in for everything she soaked up on festival day.

Fulfillment

Sharing with Others. Jo described several moments during festival day that motivated her, inspired her, or were simply aesthetically satisfying. Overall, there were several recurrences of a social theme present in Jo's account, which might seem obvious knowing she did not participate in daily ensemble music making. She was pleased to get a model from her peers and the guest conductor, "That's how I learn is by hearing other people do it and then like mirroring that, so it was really nice to have him actually *show* how it's done." She also liked the atmosphere where she could practice "getting to meet new people." Through mutual friends from community theater, she met a new friend: "So we were sharing our experiences and it was really nice to just, kind of like, take a chance and talk to someone new and find some things we had in common." She could not share choir with anyone at school. There are less than 200 students at her school and she lives in a rural area; she depended on this in-person collaboration to share and

learn about people and the world around her and to feel like she belonged to something that had value.

BOOM. The second major satisfying element of Jo's experience was found in the music literature. She "was starstruck" when the conductor read the composer's letter to the festival choir and it happened to be her favorite song on the program, *By Night*. It was the treble-only piece and while it was demanding, it was dramatic. She pointed out that treble festival pieces are often lyrical and pretty, and the baritones typically get the "fun" pieces. She could not put into words how dramatic it was and demonstrated with her hands and face as she labeled it, "BOOM." She described it as meaningful to her and musically powerful.

I Didn't Even Know I Could Do That. When it came to technique, Jo was most proud of achieving an efficient belt tone. She has only formally studied classical music and she said, "I'll give it a shot, and I tried it and I'm like, Oh my gosh, I didn't even know I could do that. It was cool. I enjoyed being able to kind of step out of my comfort zone a little bit and kind of try that more expressive style".

Flush Out New Technique. Overall, she liked the consistent reflection of exploring technique while simultaneously working the written music: "We did so many vocal exercises that I've never done before. And that kind of let me use like a different register than I normally do and kind of flush those out a little bit more. So that was very nice." The conductor worked technique through vocalizing unrelated to the printed application in the music. They explored sounds and parts of their core, throat, mouth, and posture to apply back on the page rather than being solely limited to the chosen titles as written. To Jo, the scientific vocabulary the conductor used to talk of mechanisms in the throat was too advanced but she used the context of his vocal modeling to interpret the directions.

Magical, Really Felt Like a Community. The last favorite moment she shared was the conversation around the musical theater piece. Musical theater in general has strong undertones of addressing social issues and validating self-worth and self-confidence. This song was no different. As they discussed how this song might “be for the audience,” at first she did not understand. In prior preparation, she sang through the song and it seemed simple and repetitive:

I’ve heard a million pieces like this. But then we got in there and you sang it together and I’m like, Okay, I see it now like this is magical! And I loved the conversation of like, how different people interpret it because I think for some people it was more for the audience, but I think some people it was probably more for themselves. And I just felt like that was the part of the day where we really felt like a community and we were all like on the same wavelength with each other. It was really cool.

She expanded about the choir’s purpose to find meaning and linger in their application: “It really creates like deeper meaning of that shared experience of figuring out what it means to you individually, but also what it means to us as a group and what we’re going to infuse into that piece when we perform it for the audience.”

Jo also found accountability to each individual and the group in the overall preparation prior to festival day: “I feel like everybody who’s at [festival] like they just, they earned it, because you really have to work hard to make it. So it’s always an environment of a lot of respect. And everybody who’s there is really nice, because they really had to earn their place there.”

Challenges: Jump Through More Hoops

Much of Jo’s challenges were related to her satisfactions. Part of the satisfaction was achieving things that were challenging that she did not think could be accomplished; and the

overcoming was that much more special. She said she “got tripped up a bit” on mostly timing issues. The complex music required much independence in polyphonic timing or faster tempos. She also said her harmonic and aural skills were stretched with all the dissonance present in the music. She said, “I’m sure it was so beautiful, but I was just trying to focus on what I’m doing.”

As I listened to her describe her preparation, she had an added hurdle of acting like the teacher and the student. She described registering and acquiring music like no other student had to consider:

It’s kind of tough just because like I have to jump through a lot more hoops than a lot of other people like they’re not as eager to, like my school isn’t quite as eager to just be like, oh, yeah, let me do all this stuff for you. I kind of have to be like, hey, have you been doing this?

She described her school’s priorities saying, “We have a really heavy emphasis on like, football, vocational stuff, and they just don’t really prioritize our music program.” She explained that elective choices and local public opinion focused on agriculture. She was the one communicating with the band director and school office to register and acquire the information rather than the school taking the initiative for her.

Purpose

Harmony, It’s My Favorite. This collaborative experience was more fulfilling than her limited experience at home. She found musical and social purpose in the harmonic structure of the music saying, “I love singing harmonies. I love singing parts where there’s a little bit of dissonance, like it’s my favorite thing, so.” She found purpose in sharing their work and a special lyrical message with the audience saying, “And now we leave you with this, like it was kind of our gift to the audience”.

Jo was purpose-driven in the devoted full day of music making in general: “I really like just being able to be there the whole day and sing the whole time.” Some students might find the length of the day too much but she said, “But for me that’s like kind of a treat because I don’t get to do that very often.”

Finding Meaning in the Universal. At one point, she was describing *The Sun Never Says*, a modern piece set to a poem about unconditional love, and the strong positive personal meaning it held for her. They reflected on the lyrics and the director was validating their feelings in the context of their young age and inexperience with romantic love:

It’s really refreshing in a space of young musicians to kind of have him flat out say, like, ‘you don’t need more life experience to understand this, like, this is universal for everybody’. Which to me, that’s what choir is, finding meaning in things that are universal to everybody.

She explained that to her the purpose of choir is to express emotions that are universally meaningful to all.

It’s the Little Moments. I heard Jo describe a significant purpose in the spontaneity of the day as well. When discussing the impromptu singalong that occurred just before the concert began, she was laughing and explaining, “That was so much fun.” She went on to reminisce about previous similar experiences, noting something from last year:

We were all hanging out in the choir room and one of the girls knew *Take Me to Church* on the piano. So, we all just huddled around the piano and had like a jam session and it was amazing! Like that’s one of the memories about festival that I just cherish to this day ‘cause that was just, it’s the little moments like that that make us feel like ‘okay, this is

why we're here. We're all here because we have something in common, and it's like this love for music.

Share Wisdom. Jo found herself as the influencer to younger students' futures when she was sitting next to some ninth graders and got to talk up how much fun they were going to have and praising them for being accepted at such a young age. In that moment, she remembered looking up to the upper classmen who showed her the way and now it was her turn to "get to share some wisdom with them."

Ariah's Themes

Ariah is in 12th grade, sings Alto II, and attends a fairly large high school with block scheduling. She is enrolled in two choirs, show choir and mixed choir, which were scheduled to allow her to have choir every day on the alternating AB block schedule. The artifact she chose to share was a picture of a record hanging in her choir classroom that was specially crafted by her director with a picture of her face in recognition of being chosen for the Midwest Choir Festival based on her stellar audition. It was their personal hall of fame of sorts.

Challenges: Tricky Rhythm

Like other students, Ariah pointed to rhythm as a major challenge at the festival. She referred to a piece that was in multimeter: "It took me a few times of listening to it to get it, so I think that was the trickiest thing. And then just finding the right blend with people around me since I was working with new voices."

Purpose: Cool to be Part of Something Bigger

Ariah is a bright student and high achieving musician. She had high regard for the Midwest Choir Festival and did not take for granted the special opportunity given to her as a part of this select inter-district collaborative choir. Her personal purpose seemed to be connected to

the greater purpose of the group. She identified herself as dedicated, curious, and emotionally invested when she said,

It was really nice being in a group of people who I'm assuming since they auditioned that they wanted to be there, and so not only was it with people who had a love for music who wanted to be there, but they were also talented. And I thought it was cool to see how soft everyone could get like, with such big numbers. It's tricky.

She added, "The excitement of performing at times can go away but even in rehearsals like it was still really cool." The excitement did not dwindle from her perspective: "It was cool to be a part of something bigger." Yet, a couple of things did not meet her expectations. She was understanding and gave the group some grace in her tone of voice when she said,

And then I know that performances can never be as good as rehearsals, like you work on it for so long, and then it kind of not everything gets put into the performance. So, it's a little disappointing to see some of the things that we worked really hard on not be, like the dynamics, not show as much in performance.

She explained that there was an alto part that had been really bold in rehearsal and "it didn't come out as much" at the concert. One other issue was tempo. On a different song, Ariaiah described that several students were not memorized and students were stuck with heads in the music, missing the direction from the podium for a very brisk tempo. She said, "Not everyone was together...and that was sort of disappointing." Ariaiah held very high standards for herself. As a senior, she had a lot of experience and strong work ethic. It was disappointing to her to experience those small idiosyncrasies that flawed the finale.

Process

Charismatic Conductor. When asked what were the required pieces of the recipe that made this festival work, Ariaah credited the guest conductor's approach:

I liked how he didn't say 'vowels' that was a really big one. I really liked the energy he brought. He seemed really kind and like charismatic and I think that helped a lot. I seen other students go down and talk to him. And so I did like his willingness to speak to others and if anyone had any questions he made it really nice.

She also thought his "fresh set of ears or eyes," different from the home director's voice they heard daily, "helped with most of the focus."

Out of Routine Atmosphere. The unique setting was an equally important ingredient for Ariaah:

And then it's more of like a special day so we're not doing routine things. And so I think just being in a new atmosphere helps majority of it. There are always a lot of distractions. And I think knowing that there's a whole day dedicated to one of the things that you really like helps a lot. And then we also had a thing to work towards, like in class, like we have concerts and stuff. And we know it's not going to be for another few months or weeks. But we know for that, like we were working towards a specific goal, which was the concert that was happening hours later.

Ellington's Themes

Ellington is in 12th grade, sang tenor, and attended a very small rural high school. Even though the school was small, the choir program was strong and they were able to offer multiple sections of choir. Ellington sings in the highest acapella choir and has not studied voice privately.

Challenges: Counting and Range

Ellington found counting issues to be challenging. One of the pieces was in 10/8 time signature and he explained how hard he had worked at that section prior to festival day and even related a transfer of rhythmic knowledge he accredited to band experience. He expressed a sense of pride as he recounted the experience of leading other tenors around him through the challenging section as he demonstrated to me, “123 123 1212.” Ellington also labeled range as a hurdle he and other tenors struggled with: “I have a higher pitched voice...it’s even exhausting for me.” They admired the few standouts who seemed to execute the highest parts effortlessly.

Purpose: Passion

Ellington described how special this Midwest Choir Festival was and how it worked. He was especially struck at how all these schools filled with such different people shared a passion for music and dedicated themselves to high caliber work. Ellington expressed frustration with students who did not take choir seriously and described a setting where no one was on their phone or lip-syncing: “Everyone was there to sing and it was so refreshing.” At one point, he admitted, “I just wish they had like as much passion for this as I do.” He went on to describe their school’s course offerings to paint a picture of what he saw as an artistic void:

Because we are where we are, there’s a lot of ag management and plant sciences and animal science...we have a lot of FFA, Future Farmers Association. And like, that is a huge deal. Like if you’re not a part of it, like, big deal, so I’m a little more ostracized...we have a welding and woodshop and all these farming things, it’s all very much farm and if you don’t do farm then what do you do? And it’s very, like it’s very frustrating...I don’t know a musician or like an art historian. Like I said, it’s so relieving to go to these places.

Ellington finally had people he identified with.

Process: Traveling

Much of Ellington's experience was informed by his small-town upbringing. As a 12th grader, he was excited and nervous to branch out to the larger unknown and pursue things he did not have access to in his school or hometown:

The traveling is so cool, too, because growing up here, there's nothing...it's quaint, it's so tiny, you literally blink and you miss it...There's just like nothing out here and to be able to go especially when it involves music is very, like it's so nice...It's a very quaint little town, everyone knows everyone. And then you go to these things you're like, I have no idea who these people are, but like, we're all here to sing and make music and it's so cool. And we're all so passionate about it.

Ellington reported that the only other field trips his school offered were college visits and one science field trip to a major aquarium. His music department had scheduled five gigs or collaborations just for that semester.

Lark's Themes

Lark is an 11th grader, sings Alto 2, and comes from a very small school with a strong choir program. Lark has never studied privately; she wished she had but did not have access. She and her mother expressed how finances were too tight to be able to invest in weekly lessons, and the closest source would be at least 35 minutes away from home. This year was Lark's second year participating in a Midwest Choir Festival. This was the first time she had ever performed in an auditorium. Rehearsals were in the auditorium space; at home, all of her rehearsals were in a classroom with concerts in a gymnasium. So, the setting alone elevated her performance experience. She said music was a "passion" of hers and had many positive things to share from her collaborative choir experience. Her artifacts consisted of a souvenir plaque and t-shirt and

memories on her phone in the form of photos: one of her ready to go on site at the start of the day, one of her and her closest friends from school, and one of the whole group of 10 qualifiers from her school. Lark described herself as a leader at her school, pointing to how she covered three different voice parts (soprano, alto, or tenor) as needed because there was a low number of baritones in her choir of about 30. She has always excelled in music and even held a lead role as a ninth grader in her school musical.

Fulfilment

Getting Into the Music. Like other participants, she noticed other students “getting into the music” through body movement and facial expressions. She said her own preparation leading up to festival was boring and repetitive but at festival day, she felt, “Oh, I like this song now, like this is good.” She heard others say, “Oh my god, I love this song, like this song is so cool now” or “you sounded so good on that part.” She said they “bonded” over one part. Seeing people “just getting into it” was “really impactful” being in this festival choir “because everybody is just like, themselves. And I don’t feel like; there’s not as much of a judgmental space.” Lark referred to the director’s approach “because he was being himself and like his true self; which in turn made us be like, oh, we can be comfortable around this guy like we can be super in tune with him and everything.” His model fostered a reciprocity of honest vulnerability and students were coachable.

Lark’s perspective was based on her daily experience having to be a leader in her home choir:

You don’t have to always depend on yourself because at home there’s not a lot of us or not a lot of the people sing that loud or some people are just in that class for like the easy A...so when I come back to Midwest Choir Festival, I’m like, oh I can just chill for a

little bit, because they (home) always have to depend on me; there's a balance (festival) because there's like 200 plus.

When others in her small rural school did not work to their full potential, she felt an obligation to the music, her choir, and her own satisfaction to pick up the slack.

In Tune with Others. At the point in rehearsal when the conductor invited the treble singers to turn to their neighbor and work it out for five minutes on their own, Lark explained that exercise “helps you get more in tune with how they sing and how your sing, because everybody sings differently. So it gave you like more of a perspective about how the person next to you sings and how you could like fit with their singing style and stuff like that.” The director never explicitly said the term ‘blend’ but Lark was eager to explore that for herself as were others in the choir.

Challenges: Put Myself Out There, No Matter How Scary

Lark described some challenges in the music literature. One song in particular had difficult “jumps” with extreme ranges and unexpected large intervals. She used the same terms as Harper as she described another song: “it tripped me up,” saying the “timing” was very complex. She admitted she “put myself out there,” which built “confidence, no matter how scary it was.” Lark also identified dissonance as challenging. Overall, she stated that she found satisfaction from accomplishing such complexities.

Purpose

I'm Here to Sing. Lark centered her responses around her fellow students and the shared commitment amongst them. She said she's an “experience-person” and commented that “it's just really nice to be actually able to hear a whole choir to like just experience that in general.” When she said that, I heard her confirming that she learned best by actively doing and experiencing the

material. She felt the general vibe was one of equality: “they all knew why they were there because they were good at what they do, and they took that very seriously.” She expressed some disappointment in a larger perception that the students from larger suburban schools, like the host school, got more “one on one work” and “a lot of the kids from smaller town schools...mostly do it on their own.” She explained that the director at her smaller rural school had duties expanded all through the K-12 grade levels, whereas the suburban school directors had one building high school duties only and also had access to a large university within their city for supplemental help in and out of school (professors would visit and help prepare auditions). She felt more prepared last year but said this year her new job took time away from preparation time.

When asked if expectations were met, she said, “Every year I expect less, and I get more, and the people...you look around and like barely anybody’s on their phone. They’re all paying attention...they’re like, I’m here to do this. I’m here to sing. I’m here to learn, and they just don’t do anything else.” She countered describing her home experience:

I would say at school, it’s a little bit more unhinged I guess because some will be buried in their phone, hiding behind their music, or someone not singing the right key...People knew their boundaries...people were five to ten minutes early in their seats...Everybody was just very focused and on time with what they had to do.

Overall, she felt seen like “young adults.”

Passion. Lark has “always loved music” and, like Ellington, said it’s a “passion” of hers. What was really special for her was they “get to do songs and change them,” which made it “ten times better.” Like other students, she was intrigued with the expression the director drew from

them. They had been preoccupied with proper musical execution but found greater satisfaction in the musical expression and the immersion into feelings that went beyond just proper execution.

Making It Our Own. Lark, along with other participants, found the guest conductor to be fun and “chill.” He relinquished a certain amount of control and the students felt empowered to take ownership. She felt the music was for her when she put her own style into it but the purpose was still to impact others. In another light, it was for the audience when they could “be ourselves and each section was uniquely showcased.” She added, “Our own twist made it impactful.” In fact, she ended the interview by saying “making it our own” was the most special piece she will take away and remember.

Chapter Summary

In summary, 10 high school students contributed their perspectives of their performance experience at the Midwest Choir Festival in November 2023. Data collection was obtained through observation, semi-structured interviews, artifacts in the form of students’ representations and song literature, and researcher memos. Themes were drawn and showcased using quotations from the observation and interviews.

Research Question 1 allowed investigation into how the students described their inter-district collaborative experiences. Students often cited how the inter-district festival provided musical and social fulfillment beyond their home district experience. They revealed challenges and vulnerabilities they safely navigated, finding some success on the other side. They explained the value and significance of their experiences as a purpose or a duty. Finally, students credited the process of the immersive one-day structure and director’s approach for the growth and success they achieved. Research Question 2 explored how students described a deeper purpose they might have found from being immersed in the unique setting of the festival experience or a

purpose they were seeking as motivation to audition for the festival in the first place. Most importantly, all students spoke of a mutual passion shared with fellow festival-goers. Several students had taken part in previous years and spoke of a mission to come back and learn and grow and be surrounded by peers who shared their passion for making beautiful music. For some, the purpose was articulated with vivid language connoting a calling to express feeling through song and bring that gift to their audience. Even those who were participating for the first time found significance in bonding with their peers from home and making connections with fellow singers as they created music together and hung out with people they strongly identified with. This was a meaningful gathering time where adolescents felt a sense of belonging and together with a mass group of 220 people, actively did what they loved to do, sing with emotion. Research Question 3 was meant to discover any students' perspectives that could inform the design of future collaborative learning experiences even outside of music. Students' wide range of responses within each theme of fulfillment, challenge, purpose, and process could provide other collaborators with a valid framework for designing future collaborative learning experiences. Chapter V elaborates on specific implications and recommendations using students' responses.

In Chapter V, I discuss the findings in relation to the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the existing body of literature associated with choir performance and collaborative learning environments. Chapter V shows how the given themes provided insight into how future research might additionally inform teacher and administrator practice and what we can learn from students. Implications for future use and research and limitations of this case are addressed.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative off-campus choral performance experience. That purpose allowed me to empower students' voices as I interpreted why students took part in optional collaborative opportunities off-campus, what they took away from the experience, and how they described the individual and collective significance of their engagement with a new population of peers. I was especially interested in the perspectives of students from smaller choir programs (consisting of 5% or less of their total school enrollment) and who did not study singing with additional private instruction outside of school. This intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995, p. 3) focused solely on the one-day Midwest Choir Festival held in November 2023 and not the general issue of choir education or performance. While inter-district music performances are a common outlet to supplement music educators' daily programs, research on this unique setting for learning was insufficient. The lack of student input in the literature and limited existing research on inter-district collaborations in school choir programs drove my investigation. This study began to fill that gap through observation, participant interviews, artifacts collection and researcher memos. The descriptions laid out here could aid other teachers and stakeholders in understanding students' perceptions of their inter-district collaborative performance experiences, leading to informed planning and teaching of future collaborations and supporting of students involved.

This chapter summarizes the study findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the existing body of literature associated with choir performance and collaborative learning environments. Implications for future use and research and limitations of this case are addressed for consideration by stakeholders and future researchers.

Summary of the Study

Ten student participants took part in the Midwest Choir Festival in November 2023, which I observed. They volunteered to take part in individual interviews and were invited to share artifacts such as their photos, apparel, and commemorative souvenirs to provide meaning to their experiences. Artifacts in the form of the concert program and song literature were also collected. Data gathered from observations, interviews, artifacts, and researcher memos were analyzed and coded. Data analysis revealed four broad themes consisting of (a) students' fulfillments, (b) challenges, (c) purposes for participating and performing, and (d) the impact of the Midwest Choir Festival immersive day-long process and unique director's approach. Each of those four themes was further delineated into subthemes. Both fulfillments and challenges centered on subthemes of musical and social elements. Purposes for participation combined personal pursuits and the purpose for sharing with the ensemble and audience. Finally, when discussing the process in which the festival was carried out, students credited the director, Dr. Kinney's approach and the one-day structure as the main facets responsible for the day's success.

Discussion of Research Questions

This section links the findings back to the research questions that drove the inquiry. Findings are organized by theme under each research question. Findings were considered significant when they related to the research topics supporting this investigation including music education, aesthetic education, experiential learning and off-campus field trip learning, and

collaboration in music education. Emerging themes led to further research in the area of rural environments.

Research Question 1

Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district collaborative performance experiences?

All four themes (Fulfillments, Challenges, Purposes, and Process) were integrated into students' descriptions of their inter-district collaborative perspectives.

Fulfillment

Students spoke highly of the musical and social fulfillment they gained on festival day. Often, Theme 1: Fulfillment was related to Theme 4: Process and Structure of the festival or the director's approach. I highlighted fulfillments here and did my best to also credit the other theme if and when it applied. This overlap was similar to Hylton's (1981) multidimensional conceptualization of high school perceptions of meanings of choral singing that included among other categories achievement, musical-artistic, communicative, psychological and integrative components. Many of these themes seemed to overlap categories.

Dr. Kinney's approach led students to experiment with new vocal techniques that created musical fulfillment in the form of more efficient and more expressive singing. Harper, Reese, Ramone, Carmen, Chantal, Reed, and Lark all noted the director's new tool of "lifted ribs" as allowing a more open and efficient sound. Also noted were universal comments about less tension and expanded range. Ramone remarked on the detail about lowering his Adam's apple as a tangible technique that allowed fuller tone in the lower range. Jo found the technique instruction to be more helpful than other trainings:

I also really liked how he modeled the kind of like tonalities and stuff that we're going to be using because that's really helpful for me, like that's how I learn is by hearing other

people do it and then like mirroring that, so it was really nice to have him actually *show* how it's done. Instead of being like, 'do this', and then it being kind of vague and not really knowing what to do.

Ellington also appreciated the tangible technique work:

It was such a different perspective, because everyone tells you like, 'this is your note and like, just sing it', and they don't tell you *how* to do it...So for him to kind of break it down and say, this is how you make the sounds, it's very cool, because being a senior in high school no one's told me about *any* of that. And it was like *mind blowing*. I loved it.

Overall, Dr. Kinney emphasized musical expression more than executing musical accuracy. He did so with a vocal coaching model where students felt he was guiding each individual or section directly rather than controlling the large mass choir. As students spoke of their musical fulfillment, they listed expression as an exciting driving force for their music making. Reese and Chantal both used the phrase "evoke emotion." Carmen and Lark were attracted to the way students "embodied the piece" in their physical manifestations of their expression. Ramone appreciated the way he was "free to express and enjoy" singing with everyone. Here we find overlap with Theme 4: Process as we consider Ramone's whole statement regarding his background. On a daily basis, he had been one of two to four other basses in his home district choir. To be given the opportunity to sing in a setting where there were more voices to blend with and he did not feel burdened with the responsibility of carrying an entire section was much more fulfilling for him.

Harper, Jo, and Lark all spoke of their individual performance in collaboration with the new group in satisfying and fulfilling ways. Harper called it "one voice, whole group." Jo called the "community" singing "magical." Lark spoke of it as being "in tune with others." When

expression went beyond explanation, Jo and Chantal both described their fulfillment as “BOOM.” They both also described an element of surprise at their musical output. Jo said, “I didn’t even know I could do that!” and Chantal described her reaction as being “blown away.”

The newness of certain experiences was the most socially fulfilling as described by students. There was overlap here with Theme 4: Process as well as the new environment was the ultimate factor responsible for where this fulfillment came from. Harper and Reese both described a social attraction to the new setting with “strangers.” Reed, Jo, and Aariah all credited the unknowns and newness of the experience as components to the recipe for musical and social fulfillment. Several students commented on fulfillment as comfort in numbers; there were more students singing so they did not feel as exposed as they did in their home choir. Higher numbers also provided bigger expressive moments where they all found joy.

Students described the impromptu singalong as one instance with heavy acclaim for a combined musical and social fulfillment. When describing this “fun” unexpected situation, Reese shared, “Somebody went ‘do we know that song? Let’s do it. It was very loud. Just being in the middle of it. Yeah, there were people in the audience that I saw clapping...It was just a really fun time.” Ramone shared,

I thought it was funny basically the men’s section started doing songs before hand...I did chime in. It was fun. I knew the songs. *Sweet Caroline*, *Country Roads*, Backstreet Boys. There’s more of it. There was some Billy Joel, some BonJovi. It was fun. It was funny. It was very cool because like, I was doing it with people who had like done those pieces. I had done *I Want it That Way* for pops concert last year, so like I did notice some of the kids trying to harmonize it. It was very cool.

Chantal described how she joined everyone singing, even Dr. Kinney and the band students on the other side of the gym, and said, “It was awesome because so many people started singing, and I was like, Wow!...I think someone started singing and knowing high school teenage boys it caught on and then just like wildfire with gasoline, just Boom, everywhere. It was cool. It was really funny.”

Jo related this singalong to another experience at a previous collaboration where the students gathered around the piano singing *Take Me To Church*: “Like that’s one of the memories about festival that I just like cherish to this day, ‘cause that was just, it’s the little moments like that that make us feel like ‘okay, this is why we’re here.’” This point of social value would help teachers realize that perhaps we should not reserve impromptu down time for separate social gatherings, like after school parties or picnics, but such relationship building and “little moments” have great value to students within the rehearsal space.

All of these comments supported the current literature on the attractive meaning choir brings to students’ lives and reminded directors and students that there is more to performing than correct notes and words. This evidence added dimension to previous research in the way it illuminated the students’ fulfillment gained through the inseparable music and social aspects of their performance experience. This present research showed how students gained success and fulfillment after they were given tangible useful technique training and the acceptable space and sufficient time in which to practice it. This collaborative environment is best practice for providing models for tone quality and encouraging students to reach their full potential.

Challenges

Ramsey (2016) reported her junior high student participants found meaning in rewarding work and identity. This present research presented a case of high school students with similar

findings of rewarding work as they gained fulfillment after working through challenging issues on festival day. Students identified challenges during festival day mostly within the music literature, which was rigorous mass choir material with much divisi. Adolescent singers struggled with staying independent on their part and this literature had polyphonic and dissonant moments that challenged their aural skills and ranges that challenged their performance skills. Their adolescent developmental stage helped them to tackle learning problems in a social manner. That was evidenced by them feeling secure in singing in groups but scared to make a mistake or sing alone. Chantal explained it in a balanced way:

If you don't look at the conductor, you won't know that the time is slowing down so you might personally mess up which could also be a challenge...*By Night* is a little more challenging given that the parts are really close together. So harmonies, your part is difficult to get out because you might confuse it for another part which I did often...I was scared of messing up.

She then described how she enjoyed being challenged when she could see it was advancing her skillset: "It's like putting a puzzle together (joyful laughter)". Jo also reported "it was gratifying to solve the puzzle."

Reed also described how his creative initiative was stretched in the unpredictable "weird, strange" musical theater style piece. Aariah found "it was a little disappointing to see some things not show up in performance".

It was important to not separate this theme of Challenge from the themes of Fulfillment and Process. In learning anything, struggle is part of the process, and when the problem is solved, the student feels gratification and they own their fulfillment. I believe these challenges in the context of the high level of students' musical passion and dedication showed us how intrinsic

motivation could be instilled. In this case, students witnessed their peers trying hard things, they felt supported by their director, they felt an obligation to share a high-quality product with the public; so they persevered and were proud of themselves for what they accomplished, whether it happened in rehearsal or made it to their final goal in concert performance. When students spoke of their challenges, they described their approach to problem solving. Each student pointed to the technique tools they gained when recounting the issues with range or stylistic tone quality issues that ‘tripped them up.’ Chantal and Harper described a “mindset shift” in their thinking for when they approached breath support with “lifted ribs” and when they considered a new interpretation of the lyrics. Barber and McConnell (2020) named hands-on experiences as “challenging in part because students can’t easily retreat...a student must persist in the experience even if it is difficult or challenges the students’ perspectives” (p. 93). This research exhibited Barber and McConnell’s point, showing how the overlap of challenges and process, the rigor of content, and structure of the one-day demand provided a learning opportunity unique to this collaborative field trip.

Purpose

Theme 3: Purpose discussed the overlapping purposes the festival served and the high school students’ purposes for performing. Overall, it demonstrated the deeper wiring of a passion for music and how experiences like the Midwest Choir Festival fulfilled a purpose in their lives. As mentioned earlier, we see overlaps with Theme 1 Fulfillment.

These adolescents were engaged with fellow passionate musicians all day and their descriptions of that shared experience were vivid. Students demonstrated their passion and accountability to self and others through a string of discussions identifying how they came to perform with “the best sound possible” (Reed), “give it their all” (Chantal), and “make it the

best” (Carmen) as they “aspire to the same things” (Ramone). Aariah said it was “cool to be part of something bigger.” Lark said, “I’m here to sing.”

Ellington spoke the most enthusiastically when describing the stark difference in dedication between festival performers compared to home district students: “I wish they were as passionate as I am...we’re all here to sing and make music and it’s so cool, and we’re all so passionate about it.” He went on to echo other students’ sentiments about the relief that no one was on their phone or off-task whispering to their neighbor. It was clear that everyone was there to take care of business and students were alert to the committed effort that was not present in their home choirs.

Beyond passion, students described perceptions of the significance this one day experience held for them. This festival filled a gap for these high achievers from smaller communities. They perceived higher numbers of singers, rigorous literature, witness of technique modeling, shifts in thinking and understanding as significantly impactful.

When asked about their perspectives on fellow performers within this case, students cited a universal respect for all performers present based on their acceptance after auditioning and witnessing their display of commitment and effort throughout festival day. Chantel said, “This is a big thing and you auditioned yourself to get into it, so I hoped people would, you know, want to be involved.” Carmen and Ramone referred to the strengths they brought home to their own district choirs and said they felt “closer” to their school choir peers after the festival experience.

Findings from previous research showed relationships are a key factor in collaborations (Allsup, 2003; Ford, 2020; Parker, 2016; Sutherland, 2017, 2018). Music performance is a means to respect (Ford, 2020), communication (Allsup, 2003; Sutherland, 2017), and social and

interpersonal behavior (Ford, 2020; Parker, 2016). Elliott (2012) aligned himself with John Dewey when he stated,

The values of music are to be found in the dynamic social-experiential activities through and in which music is made, experienced, and put to work for a variety of overlapping and interweaving human purposes and benefits – practical, democratic, social, cultural, ethical, and so forth. (p. 25)

It made sense that many of these findings showed overlapping themes. The strong personal value paired with the social dynamic and purpose of choral singing were obvious as they spoke about personal meanings. Ramone described his experience filling a purpose beyond the supporting bass role he felt in his home district. He felt he had presence and was invited to sing out rather than just the soprano melody getting to be of prime importance. Jo also spoke of the harmonic role she got to fulfill since her school did not offer daily choir. She was filling a purpose within the ensemble that added depth and harmony. That social dynamic and purpose extended beyond the ensemble to the audience as well. All participants spoke of the duty to create beauty and to evoke the emotions of the listeners at the concert. Reed was making a “declaration to the audience.” Reese and Jo were “giving a gift to the audience.” Lastly, in discussion of the letter from the composer (Elaine Hagenberg), many students felt as Jo “starstruck” or as Chantal “honored” to be recognized by a living composer. Students felt an accountability and purpose to perform for themselves, their fellow choristers, the composer, and their listeners. I expand on the influence the one-day immersive setting had on this high level of passion and focus in Theme 4 below.

Process

Theme 4: Process spotlighted how the structure of the immersive one-day inter-district collaborative setting and the guest director's approach to teaching and learning influenced the students' descriptions of their experiences. Anyone can join in a musical experience; however, the hands-on problem solving and mindful engagement demanded in this case shifted the focus to student ownership and empowerment. Gruenhagen (2017) established with elementary students how a natural inclination to conversation and reflection led to cooperative problem-solving, creating new questions, and established criteria for quality; overall, collaborative work empowered students' thinking and creativity. Within the present research, students were invited to consider new perspectives in lyrical and expressive interpretations, establish criteria for tone quality and stylistic nuance, and reflect on their learning and formative progress the whole way, all in a collaborative environment of 220 choristers.

I allude to the attraction of the one-day immersive setting in themes already discussed. As we consider the context of an uninterrupted process and cyclical structure of fulfillment, challenge, connection and reflection, it is obvious how this festival's success was dependent upon the immersive one-day structure. Students recognized the intense focus and length of time allowed extended experimentation and application for individual and collective musical development. They had not achieved such gains in their shorter daily rehearsals.

By bringing students out of their limited district environments to study music in a larger setting with new people, minds and souls were enriched through the communal and aesthetic exchanges that occurred. Instead of social capital being a byproduct of musicing, music educators and community musicians should make it an implied goal. Jones (2008) explained that development is dependent upon the "settings in which people are enriched" (p. 131). Ellington named travel as a main attraction to the event. He was speaking of home: "There's just like

nothing out here and to be able to go especially when it involves music is so nice.” Borrowing from his theme description in Chapter IV, Ellington felt “ostracized” and “frustrated” when he did not identify with the Future Farmers of America majority and said it was “so relieving to go to these places.” Carmen shared a desire to collaborate with peers and spoke of the one-day appeal.

The intense duration of time devoted to preparing the music was appreciated by all the students. Ramone said he liked experimenting within the longer sessions. Only Harper commented on feeling tired due to braces tightening and even then acknowledged she was motivated by the energy of her peers and the director. Ariaiah said,

I feel like a new environment helps a lot with most of the focus. And then it’s more of like a special day so we’re not doing routine things. And so I think just being in a new atmosphere helps majority of it. There’s always a lot of distractions. And I think knowing there’s a whole day dedicated to one of the things that you really like helps a lot.

She went on to describe working toward the concert the same day as opposed to working for weeks or months like at school. Students felt a sense of flow in their work and made accelerated gains within the all-day structure of this case. Gathering in new spaces with new peers got students out of their routine sound, accessible literature, and routine expectations (Sutherland, 2017). This present research describes how students accomplished a new stronger sound, sang more advanced literature, and tackled great expectations in their dedicated inter-district collaborative space. Yau (2008) and Allsup (2003) reported that energy and flow are ignited in the lesser known setting, which the present research described through students’ accounts.

The affective process of learning within the study of lyrics and different perspectives and interpretations led by Dr. Kinney were a major positive addition to the process. Blair (2009)

stated the importance of considering to whom or what the students were responding during their performance (p. 44). Dr. Kinney fostered consistent reflection on such affective components when he asked students questions throughout rehearsal: “What have you learned?”, “What can you do to it?” (experimenting with changing tone), “What do like that you’re doing?”, “What are you proud of?”, “Can you cry instead of speak?”, “Why does your voice like it?”, “What is the lyric really saying?” Students responded to the concert literature with a more open mindset after arriving at festival. Harper and Chantal spoke specifically about a “mindset shift” when considering a perspective other than their own and others reported a fresh interpretation of *You Are Enough* after discussing it with Dr. Kinney and being so expressive in their performance. Students credited the songs *You Are Enough*, *The Sun Never Says*, and *By Night* as having more meaning after incorporating a more moving expressivity and taking a closer look at the lyrics. Before discovering these fresh interpretations, students described the songs as “boring,” “repetitive,” or not holding any significant messages. They were positively influenced by the fresh perspectives of their peers and guest conductor and by an overwhelming emotional musical delivery they could not experience at home. Experience is a key component to learning and development (Bailey et al., 2014; Freire, 1993). In this case, students’ experiences were heightened as they felt a sense of “ownership” and directed their own learning as Dr. Kinney asked them to consider the meaning of lyrics and how the meaning of the song changed when they changed their tone.

Getting students to work cooperatively was an obvious goal of Dr. Kinney’s. Ramone depicted him as “not standard.” Lark called him “lively” and “fun.” Harper said he was “easy going” and it was “cool to get a different perspective.” Reese said, “Dr. Kinney allowed us to have free rein, allowed us to play.” He continued to point out,

Every repetition he would do something new with it. It opened me up because I was like I can do so much more with such less...Normally it's just sing the right note, look the right way, and you're good, but with him it was *feel* the right way. And we did and we opened ourselves up and it did come out well. And it was such a cool experience.

Reese's interpretation was articulated in others' responses as well. Students expected a dry rehearsal of being hounded to execute proper articulation, clean pitch accuracy and diction, but Dr. Kinney was on their "same wavelength" and nourished a personal intention and interpretation to their musical delivery. Students learned from him vocal technique with directions on how to finesse the sound in different resonant spaces, how to adjust muscles and posture, and then transferred that learning into the purposive accelerated concert literature. He repeatedly engaged them in the story and emotions in the lyrics and in doing so, they had a more confident grasp on the material. He challenged them to own their feelings and pass them on to the audience. This Midwest Choir Festival would not have been carried out as it was without this director's leadership. It was a model for incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices into rehearsals and executing rehearsals with care for students as valuable contributors to their own learning. This present literature using student voices as the main data source was a contribution to validating students' ownership of their learning and using that input to design future collaborations.

Research Question 2

Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?

Purposes for participating emerged as a theme within all students' responses. The rich narrative within the Purpose section above for Research Question 1 addressed how students perceived their purposes for participating. I expand on the rich narrative from Research Question

1 above as I sought for descriptions of purpose for both present and future, expecting to give students a chance to talk about how they might use this experience to influence or spur them to a next step or to describe how they would continue to use communal singing after high school graduation. Unexpectedly, most responses surrounded their present experience only. They recognized the opportunity given to them in that moment in November 2023 and immersed themselves in something that elevated their experience for that moment. They spoke of the near future and using new skill acquisition for stronger and more efficient technique for themselves and taking it back to their classroom to share and model to their home-district peers. Students showed that they understood a “transfer” or “hinging” of knowledge and skills just as Selznick et al. (2021) explained could happen in a hands-on learning experience. When asked what he would take home to their home district, Ramone said he and his peers “aspire to the same things” so he was looking forward to keeping the momentum going after they returned home and could hold each other accountable for their new growth and higher standard. Others spoke of how they were maintaining an open tone with lifted ribs—one of the first tools they learned on festival day.

There was no mention of this being a ticket to any esteem or superiority for college or scholarship resumes. This was not a box to check to get to the next rung on the ladder. Rather, they were present mentally and musically for what they could learn within that one-day collaboration. This spoke to the value of the aesthetic educational experience regardless of the extramusical advantages in line with Waterhouse’s (2006) denouncing of quantitative studies such as the Mozart Effect.

Students’ statements showed their eagerness to develop their individual skillset but also to share it with fellow choristers and the audience. This dual obligation was in line with Barber and McConnell’s (2020) revelation of the pressure present in this hands-on collaboration. Hands-

on learning experiences compel “a pressure in the moment to perform and the expectation of action” (Barber & McConnell, 2020, p. 94). Students relied on like-minded peers to fuel their passion, and simultaneously hold them accountable to perform in the given moment. The one-day structure of the Midwest Choir Festival yielded more immediacy in student obligations and actions to themselves and others, leading to this subtheme of individual and collective accountability.

Students responded repeatedly with another subtheme labeled as identity. This is an active example of Pitts’ (2017) recognition that music education exists to foster “a creatively engaged society” and is a “part of developing and sustaining” students’ “musical identities” (p. 166). These students were mirroring such aims of identity as they purposely sought out this kinship within this new group of peer musicians. Each of these students was ‘wired’ for singing and had purpose for attending the festival as a self-declared need. Even Harper was honest about showing up tired and a little under par due to a recent braces tightening; however, she stepped into the role with commitment, reminding herself she wanted this in her audition recording and this was the reward for her hard work. Other students also referred to the work given at auditions and how they felt themselves and every one of the 220 choristers deserved to be there by passing the rigorous audition. Purpose was found in collaborating with like-minded peers, fulfilling a musical desire in their heart and soul and experiencing an authentic and holistic choir performance where they were not burdened with carrying the load for a whole school choir, which was challenging for any high school student.

Artifacts symbolized the students’ passion and purpose for participation in the festival and strengthened their testimony. Artifacts were used to connect to the meanings of purpose and value students identified with this inter-district collaborative experience. Lark referenced the

souvenir t-shirt and plaque her mom purchased for her that she will wear and display the pride she found in her achievement. Ramone chose to bring the necktie he wore for the festival concert. This artifact showed the value he put on this special occasion, that he dressed up in a favorite tie worn to a recent Homecoming Dance. Just as he wanted to sound his best, he also wanted to look his best. He and others also referenced their concert programs and sheet music they held on to that was marked up. This showed the cherished nature in which they would remember this event in years to come. Many said they would save it in a scrapbook and look through it all when they wanted to remember their happy memories. Ariaiah referenced a picture memento to look like a record that hung in her teacher's classroom that was reserved for students who took part in this festival. This showed her pride in her accomplishment and how she treasured her teachers' support.

Students' passion and purpose for participating was often themed around a significance in relation to how this experience supplemented the narrow experience within their home districts. The similar themes of passion for music and unsatiated desire for more fulfilling choir experiences surprised me. I expected students at this auditioned event to be passionate about music. This event served a purpose for them or they would not have chosen to take part. I did not expect most of them to speak so definitively of their observations of their own communities' limited resources. They really found the Midwest Choir Festival to fill a gap for a deep desire and not just a fun extra event. When asked how the inter-district collaboration compared to their district structure, students were very honest and vocal about what was lacking in their home choir and how one universal purpose of this case filled the void of flow and rigor at home. This experience was unique to collaborations and could not happen at their own schools, especially for students like Jo who did not get to sing in a curricular choir at all or Ariaiah or Lark who were

forced to sing tenor instead of soprano or alto because they did not have a balance of voice parts in their small choirs with low numbers of tenor and bass voices.

I listened carefully when students spoke of what was most fulfilling to them during the collaboration and also heard what was missing from their daily experience. Both Ramone and Lark spoke of a “freedom” they felt as they “let it all go” and sang with power and expression. They felt confident on their respective voice parts because at least 13-25 people were singing their part. Ramone did not feel “burdened” and Lark didn’t feel like “everyone was depending on me.” In those comments, we found that these students in small programs were weighed down in their district choir with a responsibility and that was a lot to bear at their young age. This festival served a significant purpose for them that they could relax and “chill” a little bit and share the responsibility of a high caliber performance with other competent members.

Hunt (2009) collected perspectives on rural teaching and found that teachers felt a disadvantage with less resources, such as music stores, and more restrictive master schedules. This present research added to the body of literature showing how students felt a disadvantage, perhaps influencing rural teachers to use collaboration more frequently to provide a fuller musical sound and richer experience for students. Specifically, Ellington and Jo felt excluded from community norms where choir was not perceived on equal terms with “farms and football.” However, when they attended the Midwest Choir Festival, they felt a sense of belonging.

The unexpected ping pong game and preconcert singalong served a purpose of sharing impromptu social engagement. Ramone explained that while he was on break, one of his fellow baritone members brought a portable ping pong game inside from his car so students could play and have fun. Then at the end of the day, students led a singalong of songs they knew by heart by John Denver, Billy Joel, and Backstreet Boys in which practically the whole gym joined. It was

meaningful that students actively sought out interaction and did not just sit around and play on their phones in an isolated manner. Collaborative music performance relies on safe and mutual interpersonal connections. These students clearly were invested in every aspect, musically and socially to bond with their fellow choir peers and were alert to contributing to a positive experience. This echoed the work of Chouhan et al. (2020) who pointed out how providing supplemental engaging learning environments provided benefits of building self-confidence and empowered students in a fun manner. This is how we hope they will engage with their world beyond high school graduation. Events like the Midwest Choir Festival helped to provide practice and confidence in new social settings. Students relied on the ping pong game to open communication and relationship, which they carried into rehearsal where respect and care were further nurtured.

Research Question 3

Q3 How can students' perceptions inform decisions for designing collaborative experiences even outside of music?

Students proclaimed meaning and value in areas that pertained directly to those leaders and choral educators designing their collaborative learning experience. I found evidence in all four themes.

Fulfillment

Students described their vocal efforts, performance, and director and peer models as “impactful.” The holistic passion and dedication these participants committed to produced much fulfillment in their musical performance and interpersonal connection. Reese said the “emotion in everybody enhances the piece tenfold.” This choir created a high quality performance and felt validated by their peers and their audience. When students reach their full potential and have reason to be emotionally invested in their work, they persevere to new heights. When their peers

and community support that with value through verbal affirmations, applause, or physical presence, students become hooked to continue to seek excellence. I believe even in non-music contexts, when students have an opportunity to find relevance in their learning, they can pass on the value of learning and perhaps even a value for the content when shared with the community in a collaborative, not competitive setting.

Many responses tied to fulfillment stemmed from a sense of belonging by being supported by peers and a director who shared their passion for music. When teachers and education leaders are keen to what students are passionate about, they should make efforts to allow student ownership and exploration within that area. Furthermore, they should be creative in connecting students with similar passions.

I asked students what they noticed about their fellow performers. Students identified fulfillment in seeing other students physically emoting music expressively and admired that everyone remained on task. The Midwest Choir Festival collaboration provided an atmosphere where students felt supported and safe to take ownership of the music. The festival was fulfilling and held their attention so no idle moments stole their attention to selfishly hide in their cell phones or have disrupting off task discussions with their neighbors. Other collaborations could learn from this by ensuring they know their students and know what they value to hold their attention.

Challenges

Students expressed challenges in tandem with other themes of fulfillment and purpose. Challenges were also considered fulfilling when they were advanced musical issues that tested their skill level. Students found satisfaction in the challenging complexity of the music chosen for this collaboration. When asked about the literature, students explained that upon arrival, they

had poor perceptions of certain titles; they felt a challenge of enduring something they were not looking forward to. However, after approaching the literature with newly learned techniques and fresh interpretations and meanings, students felt positively charged to share and pass on that evolving idea. Rather than deliver a trite repetitive rendition of *You Are Enough*, they felt empowered to encourage the listeners that they were “enough” and they were valued. Rather than deliver a shallow performance of *The Sun Never Says*, they portrayed unconditional love and met Dr. Kinney’s request to “cry instead of speak,” “milk it for all it’s worth,” and use a “real vulnerability.” Overall, students valued the diversity of the literature. They were attracted to the challenging demands for music execution and expression. Designing collaborations with diverse content could be appealing for students to get their foot in the door and lead to a greater attraction as they conquer the complexities that at first seemed unattainable.

Students attended the festival to sing as a choir but when Dr. Kinney left them to their own devices to rehearse the treble piece for five minutes, students found themselves in a moment where they felt exposed. They identified that others felt exposed. They dug deep and remembered what he said at the beginning of the day: “All sounds are good sounds because they teach us something.” Jo enjoyed “stepping out of her comfort zone.” Lark said she felt she and other “people would put themselves out there no matter how scary.” Overall, students described more fulfillment from challenge rather than a feeling of inferiority due to the director’s approach. I believe this finding will be carried with students beyond this collaboration. They created habits of learning where it is okay to make mistakes “because they teach us something” and it is okay to approach problems with more than one right answer. Adolescents can handle and actually welcome the challenge to approach rigorous music and the meaning within it. They are attracted to conversations where they contemplate various perspectives on meanings and interpretations

while hoping to share that message while connecting with their audience. When designing collaborative experiences, directors and hosts need to consider ways to create suitable configurations that provide time and space for students to problem solve and tackle challenges with and sometimes without the director's help.

Purpose

Madsen (2000) showed that innovative experiences located in diverse settings could foster deeper global music understanding. Participants in the Midwest Choir Festival gained deeper understanding of their performance through their shared passion and mutual purpose for creating beauty in music. They approached learning in an innovative collaborative setting off-campus and incorporated new perspectives and interpretations in a setting of reciprocated work ethic. Working together with a mutual dependence to reach the same goals broke down the chance of competing viewpoints; students worked in cooperation, not competition (Allsup, 2003; Ford, 2020; Sutherland, 2017). Many collaborative learning settings are structured as contests. This present research showed outcomes in the form of student descriptions, showing the desire to collaborate with peers outside of the district to accomplish greater things and, more importantly, strengthen their skillset.

An important finding was addressing the needs of students who otherwise would refrain from engaging off campus due to various barriers (Chouhan et al., 2020). This was especially felt by the 10 student participants within this case study who dealt with inconsistencies and hurdles in their daily small choir or small-town experience. I expected to find an accelerated purpose or additional purpose for students in smaller choir programs; however, the findings exposing the hurdles they dealt with as young isolated leaders created a call for further more frequent collaborations for this population. As I look at the subtheme divided into individual and

collective efforts, I want to point out that designing collaborations with reflection components and asking students to consider why they are performing and for whom they are performing could deepen participants' understanding. These students reflected on the meanings they drew from the composers and the meanings they created for the audience. Students might not have performed outside of their district before. Without guidance, students might understand they are just performing to display their own work for a grade or for their own parents; however, students here demonstrated a larger purpose for the listener. Ariaiah said she worked to “amplify the feeling of the music” for “someone else who needs it.” Inviting them to act on their passion and calling them to authentically share a message and evoke emotion from the new and larger audience could help students synthesize their purposes for performing in general.

Process

In Chapter I, I referenced Maxine Greene's (2001) writing on how engaging in the arts “allows us to confront our own experience” and what people are “discovering together about themselves” and their world (p. 108). Greene spoke of a “connectedness, with reciprocity, with the imagination needed to experience empathy” (p. 108). This study involved a collective discovery and response to others through inter-district collaborative choral singing. Students sought connectedness with other festival choristers and used imaginative processes to immerse themselves in the stories and feelings they sang about in the festival literature. Students spoke of shifted mindsets as they considered others' influence on lyrical and stylistic interpretations and collective accountability that they wanted to support the other singers and contribute to making collective beauty.

The subtheme of the director's approach's influence could serve as an example for future collaboration design. Dr. Kinney demonstrated a supportive coach-like role as he encouraged

students to explore different techniques and validated their experiences and understandings even though they were of younger ages. This was a good example of positive relationships built in a short amount of time. When asked about the director's approach, students spoke of how Dr. Kinney's modeling of individual techniques elevated each students' skillset and how his frequent questioning allowed them to share their new discoveries about their own singing process and the emotional responses they were reflecting upon. He provided students with tangible tools as he communicated in terms of anatomy rather than general expressive terms. Instead of just asking students to sing darker or louder, he also gestured hand signs taught in the morning's preliminary warm-ups and targeted the formation of lips, tongue, throat, and posture for the proper mix of resonant space to achieve an otherwise illusive tone quality. Finally, they especially appreciated his encouragement without judgement and his charisma and passion for the music. His model of passion was undoubtedly also encouraging the students' passion for quality expressive singing.

The other subtheme, the one-day immersive structure, also influenced the process and students' success. When designing collaborations, I suggest staying mindful of students' developmental, musical, and social stages. The hosts' choices of music literature and time schedule were informed by the students' musicianship and social and developmental levels. Aariah said the day was "special" because "we're not doing routine things." Aariah, Ramone, Carmen, Chantal, and Ellington all mentioned how the devoted day was free of interruptions or distractions and they found more meaningful experimentation and exploration time for their vocal technique and literature interpretations. The one-day structure provided a unique state of flow that they reported gets interrupted in daily rehearsals in their district choirs. Students worked diligently during rehearsals, knowing they would be given down time and brain breaks at

reasonable intervals. The breaks, whether they included ping pong games or impromptu singalongs, refreshed their attitudes and stamina and provided opportunities to bond with peers.

Research in field trip learning showed benefits of greater student autonomy, enduring engagement, and transferable socio-cognitive and decision-making skills (Guilherme et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2019; Malbrecht et al., 2016; Nadelson & Jordan, 2012), or more cultural benefits from collaboration in place of competition (Craddock & Pettit, 2023). This was true for this case study as students were observed and quoted as being fully engaged, working in a state of flow, and navigating social and musical matters. Finally, Flenegård and Mattsson (2023) and Kim and Tan (2013) found evidence that a tangible culturally relevant model, only available in a field-trip structure, deepened understanding by integrating content and relationships. Students were exposed to such a model within the structure of the festival as they listened to the perspectives of students from different schools and communities and reflected on lyrical content that called them to consider deeper issues of self-worth, love, and inclusion. Dr. Kinney delivered a culturally responsive approach to the rehearsal environment as he invited individual interpretations and feedback during regular moments of exploration and reflection. He and the festival staff were also responsible for carefully choosing literature that would prompt students to consider others' perspectives and to reaffirm their value amongst the ensemble and community.

Implications

When I wove the themes together, I saw that through the process of a one-day immersive structure with an effective director's approach using modeling and reflection, students were challenged and fulfilled a larger purpose for choral performance. This case represented the unique value held by students for collaborative work with new peers in new settings. Through a small community lens, it showed what it took for those students to feel empowered. This case

showed being “on the same wavelength” with fellow passionate choristers and community involvement created relevance and meaning in their work. Students gained a sense of belonging in that collective effort and purpose. This collaborative case represented how students gained a sense of accomplishment from getting out of their comfort zones. Their initial pursuits of a musical experience not available to them in their own districts led to a quality experience in a musical and a social realm.

Individually, Ellington and Jo depended and thrived on the component of traveling to a new space for any opportunity of deeper choral value. They both had a void of larger communal value of choir in their hometowns where agriculture-related groups were the majority. Harper and Chantal both revealed deeper convictions of a mindset shift as they weighed new perspectives and interpretations for broader lyrical messages and unfamiliar vocal technique practices. Previous research supported the meaning found in music making and even a social value to it, but it lacked student perceptions on such experiences outside of the comfort of one’s classroom or school district.

The collaborative layer essential to the case was a model for the social experiential manner in which humans engage in music outside of school. Elliott’s (2012) ‘artistic citizenship’ explained in Chapter II cultivated access to and application of music by all types of people for all types of purposes as a citizen with a commitment to a larger community. Artistic citizenship was the very thing being manifested on this festival day. Musical obligations formed with a mindset of inclusion and respect were reciprocated with social circumstances that provided an avenue for getting to know one another. It was a revolving door of sorts that cyclically strengthened the intertwining of musical and social behaviors.

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

Innovative structural settings like the inter-district collaborative choir festival act as an accelerator and motivator to learning. Stakeholders in education should seek out such opportunities for their students. This type of collaboration of resources for hiring a guest director, providing ample space for hundreds of students, and providing meals proved to be successful, not only in the single concert for this event but in the investment in student skill, intrinsic motivation, and building community. When we disrupt the typical seven-period high school daily routine or the quarterly home evening concert, it could be perceived as messy or extra or not possible due to other obligations on the school calendar or budget. However, we must remember that adolescent development is a part of education and see the social emotional and community building aspects that bring positive growth to the student body and the larger community. Also, the benefits to rural students and smaller communities are plentiful. School leaders could recognize the benefits of an increase in numbers of singers in a choir. Titze (2011) showed that the ideal number of singers to get the greatest dynamic gain was 60. When choirs are smaller than that, individual voices feel exposed. When they are larger than that, the decibel output does not increase substantially. We must get creative in how we provide more fulfilling opportunities to our musicians that they would be inspired and motivated to reach a higher potential. Much of human music making is informal and spontaneous. By providing these collaborative experiences, schools model a value for music that reinforces students' value for music and equips them with the tools, confidence, and convictions for future music making and relational exchanges in their communities.

Recommendations for Secondary School Teachers

Implications for future collaborations include sincere notation of the most prevalent student takeaways. Students found meaning in the freedom to create their own artistic interpretations; reflection; diversity of literature, peers, and application of singing (technique work vs. concert literature); immersive learning in a day-long off-campus setting; and a relational connection to the director. This research added dimension to Hylton (1981), Parker (2011), and Ramsey's (2016) examination of students' meaningfulness in their performance experiences. It expanded Parker's work as it examined students' perspectives on the intersection of meaning and values and the fulfillment brought through this specific setting of inter-district collaborative choral performance. Specifically, this case surpassed previous literature by explaining the way students found fulfillment in the contributions of their peers. The centering of student voices was significant in this research and stands out from previous research. Davidson and Bailey (2005) cited France et al. (2000), pointing out students used different social contexts to actively create their identity. Students' own words set in this inter-district collaborative experience filled a gap in the literature.

Reflection is a valuable key to long-lasting learning. It would be beneficial to add a deliberate reflective component for future collaborations with new directors. Dr. Kinney's questioning and constant check-ins prompting students to reflect on multiple aspects of their performance such as technique and execution, expressivity, or a deeper meaning of the stories and emotions gave students many physical, mental, and emotional connections, providing long-lasting learning and ownership. Students realized at the end of the day the multiple approaches to the context helped them memorize their parts. It also seemed to provide valuable closure and group agreement and awareness.

Adolescent learners are attracted to variety. Participants gave countless responses regarding their attraction to working and learning with new peers and new literature. This made me consider schools who perform the whole festival program at home before the festival concert. I believe they do it to help students feel prepared; however, students are given months to prepare for this event and these participants were satisfied by the freshness the new complex literature provided separate from their own district's program or unit concert. Students who performed this literature before festival day might lack the space for growth or not be flexible enough to match the given interpretation of a new setting. Also, given the possibility that students engage heavily in digital social exchanges, evidence from this study suggested that adolescents are attracted to meeting new peers in person who share their passion for music. Perhaps schools could produce their own collaborations with devoted literature and membership for occasional collaborations. Students noted this event would not have held the value it did if the structure included additional meeting commitments due to students' busy schedules. The last aspect of variety that beginner to intermediate adolescents were attracted to was the shift from individual technique work to full ensemble application to the concert literature. The findings from this study implied that students enjoyed mastering a technique and then applying it to specific literature. Overall, the newness this inter-district festival provided countered routines and taking things for granted.

During regular class rehearsals, pacing can be challenging due to short periods of time. One of the findings that made this festival so successful was the realization that this immersive all-day structure provided a sense of flow and eliminated distractions. Teachers need to be cognizant of what their students need to deeply understand their work.

Equally important to the structural process was the director's approach. Teachers must share their podium with fresh new faces, voices, and perspectives to enlighten students.

Participants realized sometimes a fresh perspective could really help you learn. The more diverse perspectives that value choral singing the better. When they connected with other singers and directors, students saw others value communal music making and it strengthened their understanding that creating music together was a valuable and worthwhile endeavor. This echoed Eisner's (1992) and Pitts' (2017) importance of communicating a value of the content. These students found personal relevance in their examination of song lyrics and dialogue of interpretations.

Choir directors should allow students voice and presence to create their own art. They should allow students space to create impromptu musical and social bonding, natural rhythms of life, rather than relying on external picnics, parties, or trips to the amusement park for social bonding. When we allow social bonding to take place within our rehearsal time, students associate this value for others. This is where they practice democracy and dialogue with a community with which they might not otherwise engage. Deliberately leaving space for student input and listening to their interpretations of lyrics and expressive nuances creates student ownership. In order for students to take ownership of their work, directors and educational leaders must give up some control.

Limitations and Future Research

Every collaborative music performance is dependent on the makeup of students and the character and goals of the director. In this case, students were high-achieving, self-motivated musicians who had the desire and stamina to complete an audition process successfully and devote a non-school Saturday to singing at a school-related function up to 90 minutes away. In the case of the director, Dr. Kinney's approach was related to practically every theme discussed by students. Other directors trying similar approaches might or might not work. One finding was

that students connected with him because he presented his authentic self. Someone else with a different demeanor could possibly have just as much success by being true to their own character but relationship and students feeling their contributions were valued were key.

This present research showed one way to explore helping students with limited resources develop their vocal technique and fulfill a deep passion for music performance. Student descriptions proved a high fulfillment value in adolescent collaborative music making with new peers. This high fulfillment value fostered an accelerated growth in musicianship as well as supporting more advanced performance experiences. Curricular choirs and mass choirs might focus on preparing harmonies and polishing parts, not necessarily individual vocal technique development. Future research examining inter-district collaborations that incorporate technique training is necessary for understanding choir students who rely solely on their school district for training. Rich messages of the intertwining of individual and collective accountability are a model for democratic learning this research began to suggest. Further research into the benefits of collaboration for community building needs to be explored.

Lessons Learned

I expected students to be thrilled at the chance to make beautiful music. I expected them to enjoy working with a guest conductor and take ownership of favorite songs from the program. I did not expect them to be so verbal about the reward they felt from the demanding vocal literature. They felt challenged working on very difficult music and felt pride knowing they were asked to do something hard. They were anticipating doing it well; after they mastered it, they found the intrinsic motivation accompanying that learning. Many teachers find difficulty in building students' motivation. The challenge and reward and sense of flow demonstrated here serves as a model for building intrinsic motivation.

As a novice researcher, I liked renaming the theme subtitles with descriptive phrases and even using exact words from student quotations. This mirrored Dr. Kinney's approach as he focused on expression and feeling, instead of technical jargon and music basics. This study strengthened my interviewing skills. I learned that sometimes I talked too much and other times my additional conversation prompted a memory or drew a clue for students to continue to elaborate on. Now I am a better judge of my interviewees and am comfortable giving them space to form their answers.

Originally, I had proposed to seek cultural capital components to collaborative experiences. This research was just a small piece of that as it brought to light evidence for positive student development in musical and social realms and the structure in which educators could enhance growth, understanding, and relationships.

Conclusion

Sutherland (2018) claimed there is a need for further investigation on how musicians view the contribution of others in collaborative performance experiences. This present research described how high school choristers viewed the contribution of others in collaborative performances. Students identified the unique contributions those peers and director contributed toward their growth and development. The findings in this study are significant as they provided more student voice to the literature and filled a gap for collaborative learning by showcasing an inter-district setting.

I was careful to consider the adolescent stage of development of these participants as well as their background in smaller communities. As we consider the purposes for schooling and music education on a grand scale, we must think of innovative ways to constantly adapt for the unique developmental needs of adolescents and the distinctive needs of smaller communities.

While I addressed the themes pertaining to 10 specific participants, it was my aim to keep the issue of other performers in the choir a part of the conversation. Musicians are consistently navigating their personal and individual accountability alongside a collective accountability. They bring their best work to the ensemble but make room and leave space for the inclusion of others' voices and creative contributions.

I shared at the beginning of Chapter I the quotation from Maxine Greene (2001) explaining how “works of art allow us to confront our own experience” and have dialogue where people “talk about what they are discovering together about themselves, about the world, about what is and what might be” (p. 108). It was my hope to inform readers of the significant needs of adolescents located in smaller communities when discovering themselves and their world and the potential available in choral performance. This involved a ‘connectedness’ with the ‘imagination’ to experience something with others. It is important that we experience new things with new people.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT LETTER



RECRUITMENT LETTER FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in my research exploring Inter-District Collaborations in the Music Education Community.

As a doctoral student in the Education Studies Department at the University of Northern Colorado, I am looking to contribute to the body of research on Inter-District Collaborative Performance and complete my dissertation, and I am seeking your involvement. You are eligible to be in this study because you are a high-school participant in at least one inter-district collaborative performance during the 2023-2024 school year.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete (via Google Forms) a short set of questions regarding your demographics and contact information prior to a 45-minute interview (in person at or near your school). This interview will be recorded and will be transcribed for further exploration. Then, upon permission from all necessary sources, I will observe your collaborative festival event. We will schedule an interview following the event. You have the option to supplement your interview responses with optional journal entries (journals will be supplied to participants). I may also contact you for a thirty-minute follow-up interview to clarify information and/or confirm transcript accuracy. As a participant, you will have access to read the final report of the study.



Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate, or have any questions about the study, please email or call me.

With Gratitude,
Juliet Minard
MME, NBCT, Doctoral Student
mina6128@bears.unco.edu

Proceed to the digital [Google Form](#) linked to this QR Code

APPENDIX B
GOOGLE FORM ACCOMPANYING
RECRUITMENT LETTER

This page is a copy of the Google Form. There is also an accompanying Excel spreadsheet showing response collection to accompany IRB submission.

Google Form link <https://forms.gle/DhMyDF5SG4oAbDTL9>

Secondary Choir Students' Perspectives on Collaborative Performance Experiences

Thank you for your interest in my research regarding inter-district collaborative choir performance. Please fill in all the information. I will contact you to let you know if you are chosen to participate.

When supplying your student email, use a personal email account because your school account does not accept outside addresses.

If you are unable to answer any of the questions, please respond with "NA", which stands for "not applicable"

-Juliet Minard

*** Indicates required question**

Student's First and Last Name *

Student's Grade *

11

10

9

Which collaborative event(s) have you been accepted to take part in? *

Check all that apply.

ILMEA District Festival Sr Choir (Nov. 4 at Augustana College)

ILMEA District Festival Sr Vocal Jazz Ensemble (Nov. 11 at Galesburg High School)

ILMEA All-State Festival (January 24-27 at Peoria, IL)

Student's Cell Number *

Parent/Guardian's First and Last Name *

Parent/Guardian's Email Address *

Parent/Guardian's Cell Number *

Comments

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

Google Forms

APPENDIX C

ASSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS
IN RESEARCH



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN
COLORADO

ASSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Study Title: Secondary choir students' perspectives on inter-district collaborative music experiences

Researchers: Juliet Minard, MME, Doctoral Student; mina6128@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Christy McConnell, Ph.D. Educational Studies

Phone: (970)351-2438

E-mail: christy.mcconnell@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative, off-campus choral performance experiences. Many schools provide opportunities beyond the routine classroom rehearsal and performance experiences, exposing students to new musical and social situations. I am interested in discovering students' perceptions regarding such experiences. Through this research, I will explore students' perceptions on music, lyrics, cooperative learning, and any larger relevance they might attribute to those experiences. I am seeking out how they perceive their personal connection to applied music performance and whether there are deeper understandings they find in this collaborative performance atmosphere.

Through participating in a series of one to three one-on-one 45-minute interviews, culminating focus group, and optional journaling, you will be invited to share your experiences, thoughts, and feelings around the experience of collaborative high school choirs. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to uncover and analyze themes around the process of participation with directors and singers outside of students' daily curricular experience. To maintain confidentiality, you will be assigned pseudonyms and interview transcripts will be kept in a password protected file in the researcher's office for three years, after which they will be deleted.

(Participant's Initials) _____

Page 1 of 2

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

You will be asked demographic information such as age, grade, previous years in chorus. You will be asked questions about your experience in off-campus choirs during up to three 45-minute interviews and focus group. You may also submit accounts of your experience through shared journal entries social media posts, or other artifacts. Mrs. Minard may contact you for a follow-up interview to clarify information and/or confirm transcript accuracy. You will have access to the final research report.

Risks or Discomforts: There are no foreseeable risks. If you feel any discomfort, you are more than welcome to not answer any questions or discontinue the interview if necessary.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefits to the participant. Participants' involvement will not be recorded in the gradebook. However, interviews may result in personal awareness of musical and/or social growth and understanding, as well as adding to the field of knowledge in this area.

Costs: The costs for this study will be the time given which will include: one to three 45-minute interviews spread out after public performances; journaling, focus group meeting, and a post-interview for transcript verification.

Questions: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by email. You may also contact the researcher's advisor, Dr. Christy McConnell, by phone or email.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. By signing, you give your permission to be included in this study as a participant. You may keep this form for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX D

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM FOR
HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN
COLORADO

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Study Title: Secondary choir students' perspectives on inter-district collaborative music experiences

Researchers: Juliet Minard, MME, Doctoral Student; mina6128@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Christy McConnell, Ph.D. Educational Studies

Phone: (970)351-2438

E-mail: christy.mcconnell@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative, off-campus choral performance experiences. Many schools provide opportunities beyond the routine classroom rehearsal and performance experiences, exposing students to new musical and social situations. I am interested in discovering students' perceptions regarding such experiences. Through this research, I will explore students' perceptions on music, lyrics, cooperative learning, and any larger relevance they might attribute to those experiences. I am seeking out how they perceive their personal connection to applied music performance and whether there are deeper understandings they find in this collaborative performance atmosphere.

Through participating in a series of one to three one-on-one 45-minute interviews, optional journaling and a culminating focus group, students will be invited to share your experiences, thoughts, and feelings around the experience of collaborative high school choirs. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to uncover and analyze themes around the process of participation with directors and singers outside of students' daily curricular experience. To maintain confidentiality, students will be assigned pseudonyms and interview transcripts will be kept in a password protected file in the researcher's office for three years, after which they will be deleted.

(Parent's Initials) _____

Page 1 of 2

If your student agrees to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

They will be asked demographic information such as age, grade, previous years in chorus. They will be asked questions about your experience in off-campus choirs during up to three 45-minute interviews and culminating focus group. They may also submit accounts of their experience through shared journal entries and social media posts, etc. Mrs. Minard may contact them for a follow-up interview to clarify information and/or confirm transcript accuracy. They will have access to the final research report.

Risks or Discomforts: There are no foreseeable risks. If the student feels any discomfort, they are more than welcome to not answer any questions or discontinue the interview if necessary.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefits to the participant. Participants' involvement will not be recorded in the gradebook. However, interviews may result in personal awareness of musical and/or social growth and understanding, as well as adding to the field of knowledge in this area.

Costs: The costs for this study will be the time given for the interviews, which will include: up to three 45-minute interviews spread out before and after public performances; and a post-interview for transcript verification.

Questions: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by email. You may also contact the researcher's advisor, Dr. Christy McConnell, by phone or email.

Participation is voluntary. Students may decide not to participate in this study and if they begin participation they may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Their decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like your student to participate in this research. By signing, you give your permission for your student to be included in this study as a participant. You may keep this form for future reference. If you have any concerns about their selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Student Participant's Name _____

Participant's Parent's Signature _____

Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX E

THEMES BY INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Theme 1: <i>Fulfillment</i>	Theme 2: <i>Challenges</i>	Theme 3: <i>Purpose</i>	Theme 4: <i>Process</i>
Harper	Fulfillment: One Voice, Whole Group Fulfillment: Being Seen	Challenges: More Fun Once You Get It Challenges: Scheduling Stress	Purpose: Fun People, Fun Learning Purpose: How Can I Connect to This?	Process: Worth it in the End Process: Mindset Shift
Reese	Fulfillment: Lifted, Less Tension Fulfillment: Bold Literature Fulfillment: Student Choice Fulfillment: Improv Fun Fulfillment: Give it Your All Fulfillment: More Personal Fulfillment: Feel the Right Way		Purpose: Evokes Emotion	Process: Less is More Process: Actor's Mindset Process: Director's Model Process: Reflection as Preparation Process Domino Effect: Masterpiece vs. Dumpster Fire
Ramone	Fulfillment: Lead with Fellow Bass Fulfillment: Blend, Match		Purpose: Aspire to the Same Things	Process: Attracted to Difference Process: Experiment with Longer Sessions Process: Director Not Standard

Carmen	<p>Fulfillment: Embody Piece</p> <p>Fulfillment: Expand Range and Technique</p> <p>Fulfillment: Cohesive (Blend)</p>		<p>Purpose: Make it the Best</p> <p>Purpose: Put Life Into Music</p> <p>Purpose: Lyrical Message of Tradition and Care</p> <p>Purpose: Brought Students “More Close”</p>	<p>Process: One Day Appeal</p> <p>Process: Ownership</p> <p>Process: Desire to Collaborate with Peers</p>
Chantal		<p>Challenges: Scared of Messing Up</p>	<p>Purpose: Common Ground, Passion for Music</p> <p>Purpose: Give it My All, One Chance</p> <p>Purpose: Evoke Feeling</p> <p>Purpose: Blown Away</p>	<p>Process: Hear Every Choir Nerd</p> <p>Process: Director’s Approach Led to More Fitting Style</p> <p>Process: Details of the Puzzle</p> <p>Process: Upbeat, Focused Choir Nerds</p> <p>Process: Mindset Shift</p>
Ellington		<p>Challenges: Counting, Range</p>	<p>Purpose: Passion</p>	<p>Process: Traveling</p>
Reed	<p>Fulfillment: Incredible Power of the Sound</p>	<p>Challenges: Branching Out Challenges: Strange Music</p>	<p>Purpose: Have Fun</p> <p>Purpose: Declaration for Audience</p> <p>Purpose: Best Sound Possible</p>	<p>Process: Balance of Guidance and Ownership</p>
Jo	<p>Fulfillment: Sharing with Others</p> <p>Fulfillment: BOOM</p>	<p>Challenges: Jump Through More Hoops</p>	<p>Purpose: Harmony, It’s My Favorite</p> <p>Purpose: Finding Meaning in the Universal</p>	

	<p>Fulfillment: I Didn't Even Know I Could Do That</p> <p>Fulfillment: Flush Out New Technique</p> <p>Fulfillment: Magical, Really Felt Like a Community</p>		<p>Purpose: It's the Little Moments</p> <p>Purpose: Share Wisdom</p>	
Ariah		<p>Challenges: Tricky Rhythm</p>	<p>Purpose: Cool to Be Part of Something Bigger</p> <p>Process: Charismatic Conductor</p> <p>Process: Out of Routine Atmosphere</p>	
Lark	<p>Fulfillment: Getting Into the Music</p> <p>Fulfillment: In Tune with Others</p>	<p>Challenges: Put Myself Out There, No Matter How Scary</p>	<p>Purpose: I'm Here to Sing</p> <p>Purpose: Passion</p> <p>Purpose: Making it Our Own</p>	

APPENDIX F
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Date: 11/07/2023
 Principal Investigator: Juliet Minard
 Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
 Action Date: 11/07/2023
 Protocol Number: 2310053756
 Protocol Title: Secondary Choral Students' Perceptions of Inter-District Collaborative Performance Experiences
 Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(701) (702) for research involving

Category 1 (2018): RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).



You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Interim IRB Administrator, Chris Saxton, at 970-702-5427 or via e-mail at chris.saxton@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,
Michael Aldridge
Interim IRB Administrator

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX G

HOST/GUEST CONDUCTOR PERMISSION FORM



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HOST/GUEST CONDUCTOR PERMISSION FORM

Study Title: Secondary choir students' perspectives on collaborative music experiences

Researchers: Juliet Minard, MME, Doctoral Student; mina6128@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Christy McConnell, Ph.D. Educational Studies

Phone: (970)351-2438

E-mail: christy.mcconnell@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to examine the way students perceive their inter-district collaborative, off-campus choral performance experiences. Many schools provide opportunities beyond the routine classroom rehearsal and performance experiences, exposing students to new musical and social situations. I am interested in discovering students' perceptions regarding such experiences. Through this research, I will explore students' perceptions on music, lyrics, cooperative learning, and any larger relevance they might attribute to those experiences. I am seeking out how they perceive their personal connection to applied music performance and whether there are deeper understandings they find in this collaborative performance atmosphere.

Through researcher observation, and student participation in a series of one to three one-on-one 45-minute interviews, optional journal entries and culminating focus group, students will be invited to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings around the experience of collaborative high school choirs. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to uncover and analyze themes around the process of participation with directors and singers outside of students' daily curricular experience. To maintain confidentiality, students will be assigned pseudonyms and interview transcripts will be kept in a password protected file in the researcher's office for three years, after which they will be deleted.

- As a representative of the inter-district collaboration affiliation below, I grant permission for the proposed research to be conducted once IRB approval has been obtained. The research will take place in the room indicated.

Hosting Association Name (printed) _____

Association Representative Signature _____

Guest Conductor Name (printed) _____

Guest Conductor Signature _____

Room where research will take place _____

Date _____

APPENDIX H
INTERVIEW GUIDE



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INTERVIEW GUIDE

Notes:

Opening welcome – Ask the student if they would like to discuss the other singers and the social context or the musical context first. This will help to dive into a dedicated conversation, because you may run out of time before answering all the questions.

1. Tell me about the general vibe of the group. Did students appear to be excited and happy to be engaged? Was one school or section dominating? How did students behave during breaks; were they on their phones or playing physical games outside? How did students behave during meals?
2. Who did you meet or talk with throughout the day? Students? Other directors or staff? Host helpers, college students? Your guest conductor? Bus driver?
3. If you could do the day all over again, what would you do differently? And why? (*Alternatives: Did anything not go as well as you expected? If so, what happened or why do you think it could have been better?*)
4. What can you take back home (to your classroom choir) to infuse into that routine?
5. Were there any fellow performers that stood out to you? If yes, how so? What about their performance quality or mindset/approach to (the) music making made you notice them? What did that mean to you? How will that influence your actions or attitudes for your own performance from here on out?
6. As you notice other performers/technique, what do you suppose fellow singers are noticing about you?
7. Your conductor was (name/fill in the blank). What did you especially like about their approach?
8. When he gave you permission to use more “belt” technique in *You Are Enough*, how did that make you feel?
9. When giving his perspective on *You Are Enough*, the director said, “this is for the audience”. How much of that was for you? How much was for the audience? (*Alternatively, when is it for you, and when is it for the audience?*)

10. (TB; but SA may have a response, too) Shortly before lunch, a baritone asked about a divisi note and who should sing which pitch. The director answered, “pick your favorite”. How did that make you feel?
11. (SA; but TB may have a response from what they witnessed) Around 1:30pm, SA was rehearsing, *By Night*. The director asked students to “sing through page 11 with your neighbor”. What did you and the people around you do? And what was that like?
12. Earlier in the first *By Night* rehearsal around 9:45am, the director read a letter from the composer. What did you think of that?
13. I observed you doing (*fill in the blank*). Can you help me understand that/ expand on how that felt?
14. Tell me about the structure of the day. How did this compare to your routine daily rehearsals at your school choir? How did the extended (full-day) time help or hinder the process?
15. How much larger was this choir than your classroom choir? What was that size difference like for you?
16. What did you think about the chosen literature for this event? Did you like the music (melody, harmony, style) or the lyrics? Was there something that challenged you in a specific musical way?
17. What did you expect to happen at the inter-district performance? Were your expectations met? Exceeded? Not met?

APPENDIX I

THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS
ALIGNED TO METHODOLOGY

- Q1 What are students' perspectives of their inter-district collaborative performance experience?
- Q2 How do students describe the purpose of their performance for the present and the future?
- Q3 How can students' perceptions inform decisions for designing collaborative experiences even outside of music?

Table II*Theoretical/Conceptual Frameworks Aligned to Methodology*

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	Data Collection Tools and Sources	Data Analysis Procedures
Social Constructivist Theory (Crotty, 2005, p. 75) Bourdieu's (2002) and Jones's (2008) Social Capital Theory	Purposive sample of students from small choir programs/communities, not taking private vocal lessons	Analyze <i>Interview</i> responses comparing district experience to inter-district experience
E. Turner's <i>Communitas</i> (2012) Social Constructivist Theory (Crotty, 2005, p. 75) Dewey's (1938/1998) and Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory	Researcher <i>Observation</i> at inter-district collaboration (including written field notes and video recordings)	Analyze <i>Observational field notes</i> on student behavior/discussion, rehearsal process, musicianship and performance, guest director's instruction, host's management of collaboration record, interpret, and code observations, consider in relation to <i>interviews, artifacts, and researcher memos</i>)
E. Turner's <i>Communitas</i> Social Constructivist Theory (Crotty, 2005, p. 75) Dewey's (1938/1998) and Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory	Individual <i>Interviews</i> following the inter-district performance (approximately 45-60 minutes each including audio recordings, limited written notes, expansive notes immediately following interview)	Analyze <i>Interview</i> responses (analyze transcripts, align with <i>artifacts</i> and <i>observational field notes</i>); code with splitter coding, in vivo coding, values coding
E. Turner's (2012) <i>Communitas</i> Elliot's (2012) Artistic Citizenship Bourdieu's (2002) and Jones's (2008) Social Capital Theory	<i>Artifact collection</i> (music literature, concert program, pictures, and student-generated materials the participants shared)	Analyze <i>Artifacts</i> in relation to event/experience and code
	<i>Researcher memos</i> (note-taking involving a consciousness of interpretations, personal expertise, bias, and judgement)	Analyze <i>Researcher memos</i> and code with awareness to bias or judgement

Note. N = 10