Developing Student Agency in the Choral Classroom: A Case Study

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DEVELOPING STUDENT AGENCY IN THE CHORAL CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in The School of Music

by

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ABSTRACT

This multiple-case study sought to describe how student agency is cultivated within two high school choir programs. Research questions were: (a) In what ways did participating teachers incorporate student agency?  (b) How did their students describe their experience?  (c) What opportunities/difficulties emerged when students assumed leadership and decision-making roles?  (d) Why do participating teachers offer these to students?  (e) How do opportunities for student agency serve student learning and program goals?  Data collection included semi-structured teacher interviews in two stages, as well as a student questionnaire. Other data included choir handbooks, student leadership information, social media presence, and classroom signs.

Emergent themes were examined through Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) temporal-relational view of agency, in which actors make choices within a “temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, but oriented towards the future and… present” (p. 963). Iterative agency was exercised as students took actions based on their previous choir and leadership experiences. Opportunities for practical-evaluative agency included student-led sectionals, planning and executing choir events, and making interpretive musical decisions. Teachers considered students’ projective agency through intentional music literacy instruction (“literate, thinking musicians”) and promoting virtues (“better people”). A culture of strong relationships and a safe environment promoted agency.

Implications for teaching practice include incorporating student-centered instructional activities into rehearsal: student-led sectionals, discussions about musical interpretation, and questioning techniques. Teachers could choose student conductors or allowing students to rehearse the entire ensemble when directors are absent. Student leadership structures that allow students to participate throughout high school were beneficial, including regular opportunities for
director guidance and communication. While directors still retain primary authority, students can be given more agency and autonomy in certain areas, such as culturally relevant performances and social aspects of choir life.

All data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, observations were not possible. Gatekeepers in one district did not allow student interviews. As a result, implications for future research include multiple periodic observations over the course of a school year, and incorporation of student interviews. Future studies could investigate the presence of student agency in urban schools, and those lacking strong feeder programs.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I attended a public magnet high school, known for the high academic achievement of its students. My school focused on a college preparatory curriculum, along with the extra-curricular offerings of the fine arts, academic competition, peripheral sports, and even its own radio station. Perhaps to balance our dominance in the field of academic and fine arts competition, our school was not allowed to have baseball, basketball, football, or the activities that tend to accompany football, such as dance team, cheerleading, and marching band. My experience in choir class correlated with the academic and competitive nature of the school culture at large. Activities included high-level performance of musical gems from the Western art tradition, trips and competitions, musicals, and All-State choir weekends. Aural skills and music theory were topics my teacher rightfully considered essential knowledge. My experience did not, for the most part, include student agency. The choral teacher chose all the repertoire, told us exactly how to perform it, and held us to extremely high standards – with one exception: Solo & Ensemble festival during my freshman year. Our teacher allowed us to choose and rehearse our own repertoire for the small ensemble portion of the contest. My treble trio and I rehearsed our piece with gusto, solving difficult spots with trial and error and the few rehearsal techniques we knew. We triumphed at the contest and were encouraged and praised by our teacher. Two of us have even pursued careers in music education, and the third pursued music as an avocation. As I remember it, this opportunity to self-direct only occurred during my freshman year. Though the experience was memorable and motivating, this episode of autonomy and self-governance within my high school experience was largely an isolated one.

At first glance, it may seem that our program empowered students. We had leadership positions within the choir: President, Vice President, Secretary, but they were teacher appointed,
and entirely “in name only.” These students tended to be the apt and active choir members, but I cannot remember them having any duties or responsibilities. The only student leadership position that seemed to function was the “logistics crew” – the boys who moved the risers for concerts. I enjoyed the beautiful and interesting music my teacher chose, and the high level of musical performance he led us to achieve. But as I entered my undergraduate years at a large state university to be a music education major, I felt unprepared to be an independent musician. My ensemble directors and voice professor expected me to learn music on my own, making decisions about phrasing, dynamics, and how best to practice. I felt unequipped at times, unsure of where to begin. One professor taught me as a preservice teacher that we should equip students with rules for choral music that could serve as a guide for them to make their own musical decisions (Bowers, 2012). The Rule of Punctuation, for instance, directs singers to breathe when there is punctuation in the text (comma, period, etc.), and to carry through without a breath if there was no punctuation. The Rule of the Slur gave students guidance on how to approach two slurred notes. The rule dictates one should sing with a bit of tenuto on the first note, and less emphasis on the second note of the slur. I carried these rules into my own teaching, though I was not terribly intentional about communicating them as written “Rules” to my students.

As I began my teaching career in a large suburban school district, I observed varied models of choir programs, nearly all of which achieved success in assessments and performance. Though each director brought their own expertise and personality to the goals and implementation of their choir program, I observed components of a choir program that were very different from my native experience. In many of these programs, I encountered elected student leaders who planned events and programming to strengthen the social/community aspect of their choirs. Some choir programs even had student directors who were taught to rehearse and
conduct their fellow students. I met excellent teachers and clinicians who used questioning
techniques to guide students to discover their own overarching “musical rules,” interpretation of
text, and even to diagnose issues of technique or tuning. In my own teaching, I looked for
opportunities to empower students, and help them to navigate musical performance and
interpretation with confidence. Often, the pressure of the looming performance made this
difficult – my students needed to learn the music in order to perform well on the concert! I built
relationships with students, sharing stories and poetry with students to make the music more
meaningful. I felt great reward both when leading students to success through traditional
rehearsal techniques and performance, and when seeing student leaders (both musical and social)
emerge and begin to create music on their own.

I also observed, as an assistant choir director, that giving students agency, decision-
making and leadership opportunities often seemed to be in tension with the traditional structure
of the head director retaining control and final arbitration in all decisions. The teachers I worked
with wanted to give students a place in the program, but they were always conscious to keep
their “hands on the wheel” lest students make poor decisions and cause choir events to go poorly.
After all, these teachers had spent years honing their musical skills, vocal and rehearsal
 technique, and what worked well in their choir program – to many it seemed fitting that they
 have primary teaching and decision-making authority. In my role as assistant, I felt that students
could handle more responsibility and autonomy, but the head director’s greater experience in this
area trumped my optimistic ideas.

The amount of agency a musician has differs depending on the musical style and setting;
jazz, rock, and many folk traditions are intrinsically more collaborative and improvisational,
while music from the Western tradition often implies a single guiding voice in both the
composition and performance practice (Allsup, 2003). In school music ensembles, the relationship between directors and singers/players always involves balancing teacher prerogatives and student agency. With this study, I sought to understand how teachers in successful choral programs cultivate student agency, what the experience is like for their students, and how agentic perspectives on teaching promotes (or hinders) musical achievement. I defined agency as the extent to which students were enabled to make musical decisions, engage in discussion, and participate in leadership within the choir program.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I review extant literature on agency in music education. I begin by exploring how agency has been conceptualized in education and music education research. I then review the literature on agency as it has been examined in elementary, instrumental, and choral music teaching settings. While some strategies for introducing agency have been identified in the elementary and instrumental classroom, there is a dearth of research on how agency manifests in the choral classroom.

Conceptualizing Agency

Agency in the field of sociology is defined as the ability of individuals to make their own choices and act autonomously (Barker, 2005). Agency is dependent upon an individual actor’s background, environment, and their position within it. Ideas on how much agency an individual actor should have may differ depending on the role and perspective of the actor versus their environment.

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984, 1990) concept of agency has often been applied to the field of education. Bourdieu, who along with Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) conceived of the concept of cultural capital, also put forward the concept of habitus, the physical embodiment of cultural capital. When we are acculturated to an environment, and a way of life, Bourdieu argued, we have agency to behave in many ways, but more likely we act as our environment has prepared us to act. The concept of habitus relies heavily on interaction between the present and the past. In the field of education, researchers have used the concept of habitus to investigate cultural capital and schooling (Dumais, 2002), and to understand secondary students who have rejected schooling, and their relationship with the habitus of their school environment (Nash,
Structuration (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1991) is another prominent sociological theory of agency, which posits that just as an individual actor’s agency is affected by the structure surrounding it, the structures themselves are perpetuated by agency. Researchers have applied this theory to educational structures and actors, placing the structure of schools and the agency of students and teachers in opposition to yet dependent upon one another (Naidoo, 1989; Shilling, 1992). Reeve (2006) explored the practices and classroom environments of “autonomy-supportive teachers” (p. 225), and the quality of their relationships with their students. Lindgren and McDaniel (2011) investigated the use of student agency and narrative in the structuring of online courses, concluding that student choice and storytelling elements aided student learning and engagement.

Researchers and philosophers in music education have called for more student agency in classroom settings. Jorgensen (2001) explored a dialectical approach to music education, involving dialogue between theory and practice. She emphasized dialogue between musicians in “jamming sessions,” (p. 353) but also dialogue with one’s colleagues and students as being important sources for pedagogical decisions. Allsup and Benedict (2008) criticized the “hegemony” (p. 161) and unbalanced power sharing of the traditional band education model and suggested that an alternative model of music education may be needed. Allsup and Benedict do not, however, make many suggestions of how to solve the “problems of band,” although they do allude to teacher–student collaboration, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Student agency is a feature of teaching strategies such as student-centered learning and constructivism. Practitioners of music education have offered strategies for constructivism and student-centered learning in the music classroom (Brown, 2008; Kindall-Smith, 2010; Shively, 2015). Researchers advocate the use of student-led composition learning activities (Allsup,
Master teachers also advocate using Socratic questioning in rehearsal to help students achieve the National Standards (Tutt, 2007). Researchers have called for a reconsidering of the conductor’s role in rehearsal as a collaborator with students to solve problems (Morrison & Demorest, 2012).

Agency can be an important part of what students are seeking in music education. Davis (2009) surveyed the meaning of music education to middle school general music students, finding that choice was a positive element of students’ experience of music class. Davis found agency to be among four main factors contributing to music students’ enjoying and valuing their music education experience, the other factors being vocational goals, academic/musical goals, and belongingness. Students can learn through making choices, leading others, and working collaboratively with their instructor and other students.

Philip Jackson (1986) in his book *The Practice of Teaching* describes two traditions of teaching, the *mimetic* and the *transformative*, and insists that these two traditions are not diametrically opposed, nor should either one be scorned or dismissed. While evidence shows that music teachers are well acquainted with the *mimetic* tradition (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Morrison & Demorest, 2012), the *transformative* tradition provides ample opportunity for student agency, and would benefit both teachers and students. The *mimetic* tradition (taken from the Greek *mimesis*, meaning to imitate) has as its foundation “the transmission of factual and procedural knowledge from one person to another” (p. 117). In this tradition, the learner is offered knowledge from a teacher with expertise. The *transformative tradition* has as its goal the transformation of the student, “a metamorphosis” (p. 120), and may include goals of improving character, habits, or attitudes. In this tradition, a student is led to discover knowledge rather than it being presented to them. Their guide on the journey to discovery is a teacher whose
knowledge and expertise is not absolute, but who acknowledges that student views could differ, and still be valid. Students who are given agency through transformative music teaching techniques, are given freedom to seek their own solutions to musical and social problems. This autonomy can enable students to become stronger leaders, independent musicians, and caring community members.

Agency in Instrumental Classrooms

Instrumental music education researchers have explored how directors might alter the balance of power within the band classroom, allowing students to be composers, leaders, and musical decision-makers. Allsup (2003) studied strategies for how democratic and collaborative techniques can be employed by ceding most creative decisions to students. Two groups of students worked independently to create their own musical compositions, with Allsup acting as a facilitator but not directly teaching them. Allsup acknowledged this learning environment to be exceptional and experimental. However, he encouraged band directors to nevertheless provide space within their rehearsals for students “to explore freely, to work democratically” (p. 35). Allsup argued that students should have the agency to create music within “a world they understand, a world that defines who they are.” (p. 35). Shieh & Allsup (2016) later wrote of the value of musical independence and allowing students to make “musical decisions that matter” (p. 30).

Berg (2008) offered strategies for instrumental music teachers to assist their young musicians in peer-led, peer-rehearsed chamber ensembles. These included (1) leading students in discussion about the musical attributes and features of a new piece, including composer intention and possible musical interpretations, (2) teaching students basic rehearsal strategies (clapping rhythm, tuning unison pitches, rehearsing short sections) to employ in their peer-led ensemble
rehearsals (3) modeling effective peer correction and decision making while always striving for a culture of “mutual respect” (p. 8). These strategies, Berg argued, can guide teachers to empower students by giving them framework and opportunities to set goals, choose leadership positions, and understand how to rehearse, improve, and correct peer performance appropriately.

Tan (2014) proposed a theoretical framework for understanding how democratic ideas and techniques translate to secondary band settings. Tan viewed music education in light of “the people, participation, equality, cooperation, and conflict” (p. 61). As Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, a democratic power consists of “Men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed” (1776), and the democracy cannot function without such assent. This is also true in music education, Tan maintained; students unhappy with authoritarian leadership can choose to “vote with their feet” (p. 63) and leave the group. Although Allsup & Benedict (2008) have framed the traditional large ensemble model as oppressive and hegemonic, Tan (2014) does not go as far. He explained the perspective of the Eastern philosopher Xunzi, who described the relationship between the governor and the governed this way: “The lord is the boat, his subjects the water. It is the water that sustains the boat, and it is the water that capsizes the boat” (p. 63). The music director is only able to lead the ensemble with the tacit permission of ensemble members. Tan described two band directors that employ democratic techniques and foster student agency within their programs. “Mr. Chen” sends students to practice rooms to begin a new piece, adding their own style and interpretation which they bring back to the larger ensemble for discussion. “Ms. Livingston” endeavors to choose performance literature and classroom activities that “represent the voice of every student” (p. 62). While Tan describes these directors as having authority and expertise, they also welcome student input on phrasing, style, and technique.
Scherer (2021) surveyed a large sample (N=216) of high school band directors on the topic of democratic rehearsal procedures. Results showed that band directors surveyed deemed student feedback on ensemble and individual performance and “student-led sectionals” (p. 4) as the most important and frequently used democratic rehearsal procedures. Respondents also indicated that “student ownership, engagement, and student growth as musicians and leaders” (p.1) were advantages to democratic rehearsal methods. Practices that rated highly were relatively easy to implement in a traditional large ensemble setting and did not require directors to cede control over repertoire or direction of the ensemble as a whole. Responses seemed to indicate a certain fear of allowing students too much voice in program-related decisions, and therefore directors espoused a fairly narrow concept of democracy in the classroom, far narrower than Allsup and Tan.

Weidner (2015) described a secondary program led by a director who valued musical independence as a goal for his students. He found that “Mr. Guss” asked students to engage in critical thinking, diagnose and solve musical errors, and interpret musicality in an individual way. Weidner (2020) then theorized the process by which musical independence was cultivated in three secondary band programs. He identified student agency as one of the main themes, using the term to describe “students’ sense of autonomy within the music rehearsal” (p. 12). The teachers in Weidner’s study spoke of wanting students to have “100% ownership” in their musical skills and education (p. 12), including a shared sense of responsibility for their musical learning. Classroom activities demonstrating this shared responsibility include students generating a list of problematic passages to address in future rehearsals, students working independently in small ensembles, and both students and directors providing feedback in rehearsals. Student feedback was often followed up with questioning techniques from the
director “Why would you suggest we make that change?” (p.14), allowing students to learn by pondering and defending their position.

Agency in Elementary Music Classrooms

Researchers have encouraged elementary music teachers to incorporate teaching techniques that foster greater student agency within classroom activities, as a way of challenging norms and learning from peers. In a similar vein to Allsup (2003), Shieh (2016), and Tan (2014), Hess (2017) examined the use of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968) in music education, a teaching approach that helps students identify “inequitable power relations” (p.178), examine and question their world and work to change it. Hess encouraged teachers in four elementary music education settings to create “unconventional programs” (p. 174) that challenged the standard Western art tradition and traditional power structures. She investigated directors who chose to diverge from norms by emphasizing oral and aural transmission of musical concepts and notation over traditional teaching methods, putting popular and non-Western music choices ahead of the Western canon. Directors also provided students choice of instrument or classroom activity to account for differences in student backgrounds, interest, and preparation. Wiggins (2000), in a study of collaborative composition, examined the concept of shared musical understanding and how it aids elementary students to learn from each other. Students created new musical compositions in a collaborative group, in which the teacher served as facilitator, moving between student groups.

Agency in Choral Classrooms
Scholars in choral music education have found that student agency is related to increased enjoyment and community within the choir. In a grounded theory study on social identity development, Parker (2014) found that when choral teachers provided students the chance to have a voice, leadership roles, and learn as a team, they experienced greater enjoyment and ownership of their experience. Parker also confirmed that the democratic music making process within the choir at one participant school helped to shape students’ identity as music makers. In another study exploring the creation of choir community, Parker (2016) found that when teachers cared for each individual student, rather than the choir as a unit, it created a space “for co-construction, cooperation, and agency, leading to communitas” (p.234). Communitas, introduced by V.W. Turner (1969), has been examined in community music practices as being associated with relationships, belonging to a group, and shared experience (Veblen & Waldron, 2012). Parker (2016) stated that though competition may inhibit community within a choir, cultivating student agency through dialogue and negotiation may create a space for community and music making to flourish.

Haning (2020), conducting an intrinsic case study investigating collaborative learning methods within his own program, had his beginning high school choir to choose and rehearse a song entirely on their own. He answered their questions, and complied with student requests, but would not give direct instruction or play entire sections of the piece. Struggling with tempo changes, and feeling that a conductor was necessary, the choir asked Haning to conduct them in the final concert. He agreed, but only consented to show tempo changes, ceding all musicality and expressive direction to the choir. The choir learned and performed the piece successfully in a public concert. Though students and teacher agreed that the project was successful, Haning observed much off-task behavior and social conflict during the process. While this exercise
shows evidence that through the agency relinquished by Haning, students could use their 
knowledge and leadership skills to produce a satisfactory performance, this model may be far too 
messy and experimental than is practical for many choir directors.

Sweet (2008) investigated an exemplary middle school choir teacher who achieved 
positive results for her students through democratic and collaborative pedagogies. The teacher 
emphasized acceptance of each student and respectful and positive relationships, as well as 
strong musicianship. Ultimately, Sweet found that although “Deb” achieved democratic 
outcomes with her students, her “classroom function[ed] as an autocracy, [though] it [was] also 
extremely student-focused” (p. 2). To date, there are no in-depth descriptions of the ways 
teachers offer opportunities for agency in secondary choral settings.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

While research has been done on related topics in choral music education (e.g., social 
identity, community, democratic teaching; Parker, 2014, 2016; Sweet, 2008), agency has not 
been directly investigated. Researchers have uncovered that agency contributes to a stronger 
student identity (Parker, 2014), and highly student-focused teaching was beneficial for students, 
even if activities are entirely teacher led (Sweet, 2008). Teachers may lack ideas for practical 
pedagogy that could promote student agency in the choral classroom. Student-centered, 
transformative teaching techniques used alongside more traditional mimetic teaching techniques 
can give choir students a well-rounded music education (Jackson, 1986) enabling students to 
become independent musicians, lifelong music makers, and experienced leaders (Weidner, 
2020). Music educators continually return to the idea that giving students agency in the 
classroom is beneficial to their wellbeing (Hess, 2017; Sweet, 2008; Tan, 2014), identity 
formation (Allsup, 2016; Parker, 2014; Wiggins, 2000), and growth in knowledge and skills
There is a gap in the literature in describing how to foster more agency for choir students. When music educators must always be ready to defend their programs, student-centered techniques that call for synthesis of academic information are a valuable asset for choral music educators.

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to describe how student agency is cultivated within two large, successful high school choir programs. Research questions were: (a) In what ways did participants incorporate student agency into their choral programs? (b) How did their students describe their experience within these programs? (c) What opportunities/difficulties emerged when students assumed leadership and decision-making roles? (d) Why do participating teachers offer these to students? (e) How do opportunities for student agency serve student learning and program goals?

**Theoretical Framework**

I used Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) temporal-relational concept of agency as a theoretical lens. They define agency as

a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (p. 963)

Emirbayer and Mische call these domains the chordal triads: *iterative, practical-evaluative, projective*, situated within the *relational* context.

High school choirs comprise complex social networks, and the temporal aspect of the actors is always in play. Students are ever growing, developing, orienting themselves towards distinct and possible futures. The choices they make while freshmen in high school will likely
be very different than the choices they make as seniors, precisely because their past experiences are now greater, and influence their decision-making, their future goals may have changed, or become sharper. Other theories of agency (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990; Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1991) focus mainly on the role of habit and routinized practices, while phenomenology and rational choice theory focus mostly on purpose and goal-oriented decision making. These theories show part of the picture, but not the reality of agency in all of its dimensions. While these are important aspects of agency, Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) conception takes into account all dimensions of agency: habitual, routinized practices (iterative agency), decisions oriented towards a goal (projective agency), as well as decisions in the moment (practical-evaluative agency). In investigating the relational context, it leads one to consider the myriad relationships embedded in a choir program. In order to describe the agency of so many actors (students) with differing positionalities, this multifaceted theory serves best. Tucker (2019) used this theory to describe agency of pre-service music teachers in their student teaching and early teaching. In what follows, I explain in more detail each of the three chords of agency.

*Iterative Agency*

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe iterative agency as made up of an individual choosing actions in a pattern that matches something they have experienced previously. It also involves the use of *schema* to understand situations and make decisions in new environments. In the secondary classroom, iterative agency would consider a student’s music education experiences before entering high school, as well as formative musical experiences in their family of origin. I wanted to investigate if students experience in their high school choir classroom matched what they had experienced previously. If their present experience did match their previous experience, then students would be building upon established *schema*. If their present
experience did not match their previous experience, students would be negotiating a new unanticipated environment. Whether a student would embrace opportunities for agency would be greatly affected by how much agency they have in other areas of their life – in other content areas, at home, or in extracurricular organizations.

**Practical-Evaluative Agency**

Within the practical-evaluative mode of agency are the actions of “problematization, decision, and execution” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 997): encountering problems, deciding how to act, and moving forward on that action. *Problematization* in the choral setting would be when the student encounters a difficulty: a musical challenge, a social conflict, or an undesirable classroom situation. Upon encountering this problem, the student may compare it to previous, similar situations, blending with iterative agency in a process the authors call *characterization*. Choosing what action to take in any given moment is done through *deliberation*. In a choral setting, a student may be choosing to mark in their music, audition for a solo, go to a choir social, or approach the teacher after class. This blends with the future aspect of agency, projective agency, as whatever action taken will affect this student’s journey through the choir program and their future life.

**Projective Agency**

The authors describe projective agency as comprising “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). In the choral environment, projective agency involves the student’s future goals within and beyond the choir program. Does the student want to be a music
major? Do they merely need a fine arts credit and enjoy the social aspects of the group? I would predict the daily choices and use of agency would be very different between students from these two extremes. Projective agency also concerns a student’s self-image. If a student sees themselves as successful and knowledgeable, they may exercise much more agency than a student who feels unsure and lacking in ability.

**Relational Context**

Finally, agency is *relational*, that is, inexorably linked to relationships with others. “[A]gency [is] always agency toward something, by means of which actors enter into relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events.” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 973). In these cases, students are exercising agency within a community – a class, a choir, a school. The teachers build within this community a structure that provides students some room for agency, within certain bounds. Students’ interactions with their teachers, their school, the choir as a whole, and their fellow students shape the agentic action they may take.
CHAPTER 3. METHOD

I used the multiple case study approach to examine student agency in the secondary choral classroom. Case study research is a type of qualitative design in which the researcher seeks to understand a case within a bounded setting using multiple data sources (Yin, 2014). I employed an instrumental case study approach, examining the case “in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because [it] helps the researcher to pursue the external interest” (Stake, 2003, p. 137). By seeking out specific programs that already successfully incorporate opportunities for student agency, I hoped to better understand the process, and yield helpful strategies for music educators. Data collection in case studies may include individual and group interviews, collection of artifacts, observation, reports, and documents. The findings of a multiple case study will present a description of each case, as well as themes that emerged from all cases during research. Researchers usually end a case study with conclusions arrived at through analyzation of the data. These may be called patterns or explanations (Yin, 2009), indicating what the reader can glean from the examination of the case or cases. Examining multiple cases employs the logic of replication (Yin, 2009), or attempting to examine each case as identically as is possible. If the themes uncovered in each case agree, the findings of the multiple-case study can be said to be more rigorous and robust (Yin, 2017). However, as each case and context are unique, findings are not generalizable. There is a gap in the literature describing pedagogical techniques that incorporate student agency into the choral classroom, and by observing and analyzing successful programs that include student agency, educators and students will profit.
Context and Participants

I identified possible cases—high school choral programs—by sending out a brief email survey. I employed opportunity sampling and maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015) by sending the survey to multiple high school choir programs in five regionally and demographically diverse school districts with the goal of choosing one participant from each school district. In the email, I used the same screening question Weidner (2020) did for his grounded theory study on musical independence in band: "What are the three to five most important student learning objectives for your curricular music large ensembles (including but not limited to [choirs and chamber groups] of any type)?" (p. 4). I sought choir directors who included leadership, agency, or musical independence among the top learning objectives of their choir program. Eleven teachers from 10 schools responded, and I deemed two schools, Oak Bluff HS and Gilbert HS, as sufficiently agency-focused to participate in this study (see Table 1 for summaries of responses). Teachers, students, and participating schools are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the study.

Table 1. Top Choir Program Learning Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School/Director</th>
<th>Goal 1</th>
<th>Goal 2</th>
<th>Goal 3</th>
<th>Goal 4</th>
<th>Goal 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert HS</td>
<td>&quot;Independent, well-rounded musician&quot; – interpret music on own</td>
<td>Musically Literate</td>
<td>Sing with &quot;proper tone and vowel formations&quot;</td>
<td>“Assess choir performances” acc. to state rubric – “develop a choral ear”</td>
<td>“Sing with proper technique”, with choreography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey Hayes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oak Bluff HS</td>
<td>“Be better humans”</td>
<td>“Be more creative.”</td>
<td>Be able to assess choir performances on own.</td>
<td>“Be better musicians.”</td>
<td>Brave, high performing students in safe choral atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyatt Jones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josie Anderson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrea Black</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Initial Email Questionnaire, complete responses can be found in Appendix III, All names pseudonyms
After identifying these two cases, I secured permission to conduct research from school administrators and district gatekeepers. These two districts represent small town and suburban populations, and a range of socioeconomic levels, and are made up of diverse groups of people (African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Latino). I e-mailed with each director to get to know their backgrounds, their programs, and their willingness to participate, and then received permission from the school districts to distribute questionnaires to students.

**Data Generation**

I collected data through interviews and artifacts in order to build a thick description of each choral program, focusing particularly on the incorporation of student agency. I conducted semi-structured formal interviews with the director(s) of each program in two stages: (a) describing their choir program and rehearsal dynamic (both in times of the pandemic, and pre-pandemic), and (b) surveying student agency through opportunities for student leadership and choice (See Appendix I: Interview Protocol for specific questions). I gathered data about the student experience within these programs through a 10 question Google Form questionnaire. To ensure a diverse sample, I asked directors to choose five to seven students from varying backgrounds to complete questionnaires (number of years in choir, racial/cultural background, age). Directors at Oak Bluff were able to secure parental consent and participation from four students, and the director from Gilbert collected consent and responses from seven students. I did not collect student demographic or experience data personally.

I also requested documents to better understand the culture of each choir program as well as the way opportunities for agency are communicated to parents and students. I collected choir handbooks, information about student officer roles and the leadership application process and
choir website information and public-facing social media presence. I also collected images of posters and signs posted on choir classroom walls that reinforce the choir culture.

**Analysis and Representation**

Teacher interview transcripts yielded 223 pages of double-spaced text. I received 11 student questionnaires, four from Oak Bluff, seven from Gilbert, each about one page long. I received four representative documents from Audrey (teacher recommendation form, Leadership Team letter of intent form, and choir handbooks from 2019-2020 and 2020-2021), and nine representative documents from Wyatt and Josie (Choir Council Application Packet, four images from signs posted in the choir classroom, and the handbooks from 2019-2020 and 2020-2021). I also collected information from the choir website or social media presence, noting any posts that added to the description of the case.

Pattern matching in a descriptive case study involves creating a pattern of data one would expect to find in a given case before data collection, and then verifying if the data collected matched the expected pattern. In this study, the pattern I expected to find in a choir program that prioritized student agency would include, but not be limited to evidence of student-centered learning, independent musicianship, leadership, questioning techniques, and increased student choice and input. Data analysis commenced in two stages.
First-cycle Analysis

I engaged in the first cycle of analysis, immersing myself in the data as I corrected the transcripts. I combed through the data line by line, drawing out the most salient ideas or topics of each statement and data point. In my initial coding, I coded transcripts and data for each case separately, coding all of Oak Bluff’s data first, and then moving on to the data from the Gilbert case. My first cycle of coding resulted in 29 codes.

As I analyzed the data, I continually compared the patterns I uncovered to those I had identified as being correlated with student agency before collecting data, looking for areas where the patterns matched, and when they diverged. Following interviews, and during coding, I processed my thoughts and synthesized ideas through memoing. In my memos, I wanted to capture my immediate thought processes after each interview, including my impressions of the agentic structures and opportunities in each program, the roles of the directors within them, and any nonverbal cues interviewees showed that could add to the interpretation of the data.

Between interviews, as I thought about what I had heard from each director, I recorded my initial synthesis of ideas in these memos as well.

Second-cycle Analysis

In the second cycle of analysis, I began looking for commonalities between codes, collapsing them where appropriate, which resulted in nine major themes. I then examined these themes through the lens of Emirbayer and Mische’s temporal chordal triad and relational context. The themes contributed to understanding each school case more deeply (formative teacher experiences) or to allow the theory to translate the agentic actions present in the program (iterative, practical-evaluative, projective, relational). Understanding the themes uncovered in
data collection helped me to scrutinize what conditions must be present in order for student agency to be put forward, strategies for including student agency in classroom activities and leadership structures, and difficulties that arise when students are given more agency. My goal was to provide a description of how student agency is incorporated into a choral program, and an account of successful teachers who include student agency as part of their main goals for students.

I grounded this case study in theory—from conceptualization to methods and analysis (Yin, 2003). In so doing, I was able to focus on the data that was pertinent to my research questions and theoretical lens. My theoretical proposition is Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) conception of agency as both temporal (linking past, present, and future), and relational (affected by relationships within the environment).

Trustworthiness and Validation

I triangulated my data by consulting multiple sources to understand each case. I interviewed teachers, collected multiple documents and photos from each choir program, and interrogated the student experience through questionnaires. I looked for evidence of agentic opportunities for students that teachers mentioned in interviews to be corroborated in what students shared about their experience, and in the documents teachers distributed to parents and students and posted in their classroom or to the public via social media.

I also employed Kidder’s (1982) idea of face validation during teacher interviews. At times, I would restate my understanding of their account of student agency, or clarify my understanding of teacher motivations or experience, and pay close attention to their reactions, looking for a “click of recognition”, and a “yes, of course” (p. 56). When I used this technique, teachers’
response was “Yes” or “Exactly”, and they often elaborated on the episode or point being discussed further.

I employed member checking by providing participants with transcripts of our interviews with codes embedded, requesting “If you see anything that needs to be corrected, or clarified, let me know”. I also sent a summary of my findings to participating teachers, asking them to “let me know if you have any questions, changes, or further explanations.” In both respects, participants who responded were enthusiastic, gave positive feedback, and had no revisions or alterations to interview transcripts, codes, or findings.

I made efforts to engage in reflexivity during data collection and analysis, attempting to be aware of my bias towards the use of agency in the choral program and its positive effects on students. I have tried to report the reality of each case I investigated, including details that may not align with what I was hoping to find, or may have motivations that lie outside goals for student learning.

Positionality

Qualitative research is inherently “value-laden” (Creswell, p. 39), and so here I acknowledge my positionality as related to the context and setting of my research, to uncover any biases. I have taught previously as a high school choir director in the public schools, and I have taught voice privately. Over 10 years ago, I was employed in one of the participant school districts, though not at the participant school. Wyatt, Josie, and I were colleagues at that time, though we had not spoken in 10 years.

As a student, I was often frustrated by a perceived lack of agency in my choral experiences. As a teacher, I enjoyed discussion with my choir students, and wanted to give
students more choice, but was unsure on how to do this while retaining authority. In order to examine each case fairly and uniformly, I asked the same questions of each participating teacher, in the same sequence. I tried to be open to whatever story the data told, even if they revealed messiness and even failure relating to student agency in these programs. At times, participating teachers wondered aloud if their answers were good answers, and I always assured them that there were no right answers, I only wanted to know the story of their program, their experience. Though I have tried to remain un-biased in my investigation of these choir programs, I recognize that it is impossible to remove myself completely from the context.

**Limitations**

My ability to understand the student experience of agency was limited, as district gatekeepers in one of the participant districts did not allow me to interview students. I thus had to alter my data collection plan to include only student questionnaires, (n = 11), and responses were brief. As with all case studies, this study is an in-depth investigation of two particular cases and is therefore not generalizable to all similar cases.

In April 2020, the spread of COVID-19 caused school campuses worldwide to close, and many teachers began virtual teaching with very little warning or preparation. Due to concerns for contagion, observing classes on campus was out of the question. Thus, I was unable to personally observe the classroom occurrences teachers and students described. Participants’ classroom activities during this time sometimes looked very different to the agentic classroom activities they used before the pandemic. Choir procedures and rules changed significantly for the school year 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When school resumed in August/September 2020, many campuses were still distance learning via the internet, some were
using a hybrid model with students on campus two days a week, and some campuses resumed in-person instruction with new safety protocols.

Oak Bluff had largely returned to in-person instruction, though a small percentage of students still joined the choir class daily via Zoom (a videoconferencing platform widely used at this time). Teachers acknowledged significant challenges in having students sing via Zoom due to latency issues. Students who participated in in-person instruction were always masked and distanced, and they were unable to use practice rooms for student-led sectionals. This created challenges for teachers, including how to ensure quality participation and learning outcomes for all students, and how to help remote-learning students still feel connected to the ensemble.

Gilbert HS students came in alternating groups each day, and therefore the choir never met as a whole. Students were not allowed to sing indoors, and weather often prevented outdoor rehearsal. Additionally, all special events, trips, fundraisers, and concerts were cancelled by administration. Audrey, their teacher, was challenged by how to structure choral instruction given these limitations. She also found it difficult to offer as many opportunities for leadership, and to keep student leaders motivated. Though it was a challenge, these teachers still strove to incorporate opportunities for student agency into distance learning and compromised rehearsal settings.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Overview

In this study, I sought to understand how two high school choral directors incorporated student agency into their programs, how their students described the experience, what opportunities/difficulties emerged when students were given greater agency, and why the teachers chose to offer these opportunities. In this chapter, I will first review the empirical methods I used to gather my data about each case. I will then describe each school and choir program (within-case analysis). Next, I will report the answers to my research questions, organized through my theoretical lens: Emirbayer & Mische’s (1998) temporal-relational view of agency (cross-case analysis). I will address difficulties stemming from increased agency within a choir program. I will conclude by summarizing my overall findings.

Summary of Empirical Methods

I investigated student agency in the secondary choral classroom through the use of a multiple instrumental case study design. I used a one-question e-mail survey “What are the three to five most important student learning objectives for your curricular music large ensembles (including but not limited to [choirs and chamber groups] of any type)?” (Weidner, 2020, p. 4). I was seeking choir directors who included leadership, agency, or musical independence among the top learning objectives of their choir program. I deemed two schools, Oak Bluff HS and Gilbert HS, as sufficiently agency-focused to participate in this study (see Table 1 for summaries of responses, and Appendix III for full responses). Teachers, students, and schools are referred to throughout this study by pseudonyms.
I conducted semi-structured interviews in two stages with directors from both schools: three full-time directors at Oak Bluff, and one at Gilbert. In the first stage of interviews I asked directors to describe their choir program and rehearsal dynamic (both in times of the pandemic, and pre-pandemic). In the second stage I examined how teachers provided student agency through opportunities for student leadership and choice (See Appendix I: Interview Protocol for specific questions). After each interview, I memoed to capture first impressions of each teacher’s experience and how it related to student agency, as well as non-verbal impressions that are difficult to glean from transcripts. I gathered data about the student experience within these programs through a 10 question Google Form student questionnaire. Teachers asked a diverse sampling of students to complete the questionnaire (Gilbert N=7, Oak Bluff N=5), and submit it electronically to me. Other data included choir handbooks, information about student leadership roles and the application process to become a student leader, choir website information and public-facing social media presence, as well as images of poster and signs posted in the choir classrooms that reinforce the culture. I combed through these documents looking for evidence of student agency.

I engaged in the coding process in two cycles. In the first cycle, I coded each line of interview transcripts and data from other documents, continuing to memo as I coded. In the second cycle, I looked for commonalities between codes, collapsing them into nine major themes. I then examined these themes in light of my theoretical lens: Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) temporal-relational view of agency.

**Oak Bluff HS – “Sing, Serve, Lead”**

Oak Bluff HS (Oak Bluff) is a large, comprehensive high school located in the suburbs of a major city in the southern United States. It is positioned within a large school district that is
known for its support for the arts and excellent schools. The total enrollment at Oak Bluff is
approximately 3,400 students, and the choir enrollment is about 215 students (this number
includes students enrolled in Music Theory). In the past, as many as 300 students have been
enrolled in choir, but re-structuring of middle school feeder patterns has affected enrollment.
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018-2019 data) the students
at Oak Bluff are 51% white/Caucasian, 25% Hispanic, about 10% Asian, and 10% African
American. The choir directors described the socioeconomic level of the students served as being
mostly affluent, or upper-middle class, but participants acknowledged a growing number of
students in need of assistance. The NCES reports that in the school year 2018-2019, 17% of Oak
Bluff students are eligible for free lunch, and 4% are eligible for reduced-price lunch. The Oak
Bluff choir consistently receives the highest performance and sight-reading ratings at the annual
large ensemble assessment.

Oak Bluff has three full-time choir directors. The head choir director is Wyatt Jones,
who has taught for 14 years, all of them at Oak Bluff. He has served as the head director for 10
years. Assisting him are Josie Anderson, with 14 years of experience (six of them at Oak Bluff)
and Andrea Black who is in her third year of teaching, the second year at Oak Bluff. Andrea’s
experience at Oak Bluff has been largely overshadowed by the effects of the COVID-19
pandemic, which shut down schools in April of 2020 (during her first year). As a result, she has
yet to see a typical year of choir activities. While Josie and Andrea’s experience aided in
building a thick description of Oak Bluff by way of triangulation, Wyatt’s voice was the
dominant one in understanding the structure, culture, and goals of the program.

The school district offers private lessons through the music programs, and Oak Bluff has
one teacher currently operating a voice studio within their program. Despite the convenience of
lessons, and available scholarships, Wyatt estimates that only 25 students are enrolled in private voice lessons through the school. Some pursue voice coaching, especially in musical theatre techniques, outside of school. All three directors acknowledged the excellent musical foundation their students received in middle school choir programs. By far, the majority of their students were in choir in middle school, and are able to read music, understand rehearsal procedures, and have a good foundation in vocal technique when they begin at Oak Bluff.

The motto of Oak Bluff Choir is “Sing, Serve, Lead”. Wyatt emphasizes that the music is what the students are there to do, the medium in which they work. He explained “we start with singing, but if we learn to serve, if we learn to pour into something that’s not [only] about us, then we naturally become leaders, and people are drawn to that.” This motto is posted on the choir room wall and is continually referred to by directors. It is a guiding principle for this choir program.

Wyatt arrived at a career in choral music education by a more circuitous path than most. His first musical experiences were singing tenor in the church choir and as a guitarist and singer in “garage bands,” leading him to an appreciation and validation for diverse musical styles and practices. Originally, Wyatt was an architecture major, happening upon music studies almost by chance:

…the campus the way it’s laid out…I drove by the School of Music every day to get to the architecture school, and…really on a whim, just ran into the music office one day and said, “What would I have to do if I was interested in pursuing a music degree?”….I finished out my degree in music theory.

Wyatt became certified to teach through an alternative certification program after graduating college, and Oak Bluff was his first teaching position. He sees his role in students’ musical development primarily as “Coach & Guide:” “I’m just there to support them…to give them things
that [are] going to make them better. I think…my job is to give them the tools to explore and to figure out who they are musically.” Andrea observed this about Wyatt as well, saying “[Wyatt] is not the type of person to get hung up on whether everything goes perfectly…he’s not the type of person to micromanage. He’ll [tell them], you know, go figure it out.”

Gilbert HS – “Leaders Emerge”

Gilbert HS is a mid-sized suburban high school located in a small city, also in the southern United States. It is positioned within a culturally rich area, in a school district that provides education for those in rural areas as well as suburban settings. The total enrollment at Gilbert is approximately 2,000 students, and the choir enrollment is currently a little over 100 students, though at times it has swelled to 310 students. The NCES (2018-2019 data) reports that students at Gilbert are 51% white/Caucasian, 34% African American, about 15% Hispanic, Asian, and other racial/cultural groups. Though the demographics of Gilbert have changed over time, the choir director described the socio-economic level of the students served as being mostly middle class. According to the NCES (2018-2019 data), 37% of Gilbert students are eligible for free lunch, and 3% are eligible for reduced-price lunch. The Gilbert choir consistently receives the highest performance and sight-reading ratings at the annual large ensemble assessment.

Audrey Hayes, the sole choir director at Gilbert, has taught choir in the area for 26 years, and has been at Gilbert for 22 years. She has had enough students to have an assistant director at two different times during her tenure at Gilbert, but at present she is the sole director. Few, if any, students at Gilbert take private voice lessons. Audrey stated that her students receive excellent preparation in their middle school feeder choir program.
Audrey’s philosophy on leadership is a key principle for how she structures her choir program. She believes that “leaders emerge” from the choir, and she preaches this to her students: “If you think you want to be the leader, then you emerge as the leader…don’t wait for me to select you as the leader.” To this end, she does not always pre-select designated leaders from the group, but asks everyone to “step up,” giving all a chance to take the reins. Audrey looks for the particular talents of each student and finds opportunities for them to serve the choir program with their talents.

Audrey grew up in a small town in the Midwest, on a dairy farm where she suggests she learned the value of hard work. Her agricultural community provided her with many leadership opportunities through 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, Health), a national youth development program. A main theme that emerged in Audrey’s life is that of overcoming adversity to achieve her goals. Her home life was “dysfunctional,” while school experiences, specifically band and choir were an escape for her: “[C]hoir was like my number one thing…my choir director…took me under his wing and always gave me lessons.” She always impresses upon her students that they can succeed through hard work, despite adversity: poor facilities, lack of parental support or funds. “You can always achieve – look at our little crappy choir room and look what we accomplish!” She tells them “privilege does not equal quality.”

Through learning and working experiences in high school and college, Audrey was introduced to excellent musical examples and instruction, sometimes by happenstance.

I grew up right by Luther College…home of the Nordic Choir, [and] Weston Noble…that’s where we took piano lessons. While we were doing our homework [and waiting for our lesson], we would just listen to the rehearsal. I think back to how valuable that was. We didn’t even know at the time that our ears were being developed.
In college, Audrey worked multiple jobs, including accompanying for 14 student voice lessons every week. Through this she was exposed to many different ways to teach vocal technique and had the opportunity to practice her instruction with students during coaching sessions. She graduated with a degree in studio art, and a general music degree.

Audrey entered a national program that places teachers in areas of need throughout the United States. After a hasty few weeks of teaching classes and preparation, the program matched her up with a choir teaching job in the state where she currently teaches, a place she had never visited. She felt that she was “flying blind” with very little community, poor facilities and resources, and negative teacher mentors. Over the next 4 years, Audrey sought continuing education and eventually a master’s degree, honing her pedagogical knowledge until she felt that she was an effective teacher. She told me, “In my journey as a teacher, I’ve made the whole gamut…I started off screaming at everybody, and now…I have to hardly fuss at all. It’s always positive, praise, constant.”

Audrey moved into her current position at Gilbert and has experienced stressful staffing and administration issues over the years. She is happy with her current pedagogy and classroom affect, thought she considers herself to be always learning, especially from her students. She considers herself a “first among equals,” an idea taken from a former professor. “I just happen to be the chief. But of course, I’m older, more experienced and all…I try to be really open to their opinions.”

Since school music was an escape for Audrey as a student, she wants to create a positive, active, fun learning environment for her students at Gilbert. A self-proclaimed people-pleaser, she says “I want my students to love coming to school.” She consciously uses fun songs as warm-ups, programs popular music in the Fall to increase student buy-in, and often adds new
social and fundraising events to the choir calendar in order to keep students engaged. She is always concerned that this is necessary in order to keep enrollment high “[W]ill they sign up if I’m not doing all these things?” Audrey experiences a tension between this desire for an active, engaging program and over-scheduling herself, leading to health problems and burnout.

**Themes**

Here I will discuss the methods, reasons, and implementation of student agency within both Oak Bluff and Gilbert through the lens of Emirbayer & Mische’s temporal-relational view of agency. As discussed in previous chapters, Emirbayer & Mische describe this view of agency as a chordal triad of three temporal views: Iterative (Past), Practical-Evaluative (Present), and Projective (Future). The researchers also conceive of agency as inextricably relational, connected to and influenced by relationships with other people and institutions. For a summary of findings, refer to Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Summary of Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Agency</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iterative Agency (habitual, built on pre-existing schema)</td>
<td>Preparation in Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical-Evaluative Agency (in-the-moment decision making)</td>
<td>Student Leadership Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projective Agency (goal-oriented)</td>
<td>“Literate, Thinking Musician”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Context</td>
<td>Choir as Family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Emirbayer & Mische, 1998*
Iterative Agency

Iterative agency describes a person’s ability and capacity to act, given their formative experiences, and the schema they have formed as a result of these experiences (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Iterative agency was observed in these programs in two different ways: preparation for choir class in middle school, and student leadership opportunities extended to students throughout each year of their high school career.

Middle School Preparation

All participating teachers spoke very positively about the preparation their students received in middle school. Audrey extolled the teacher at the middle school that feeds Gilbert: She’s absolutely the best middle school teacher ever. We’re also like sisters and best friends.” Audrey didn’t share about specific musical skills or curricular knowledge gained in this program but mentioned joint concerts and workshops between the middle school and high school program, connoting a warm, beneficial relationship.

Oak Bluff teachers spoke extensively on the benefits of vertical curriculum alignment with feeder programs, and how it enabled greater student achievement. Wyatt acknowledges “they come [from middle school] knowing solfege, how to rehearse, knowing a lot of those things.” “We’re able to start in a different place than a lot of high school programs, because of that training that they get at the middle school level,” agreed Andrea. Josie described “A camaraderie of building from the ground up, like from elementary,” and went on to say, “whenever we get them [at Oak Bluff], they’re so ready for that next step.” The Oak Bluff directors confirmed that the vast majority of their students come to their high school choir programs with a solid foundation in music reading skills, vocal technique, and rehearsal routine.
Oak Bluff directors also acknowledged that each year they also have students that come into choir for the first time in high school. “We always have some kids who have never done choir before. So, we have to feel the pulse of the group, and there’s really no ‘one-size fits all’ for that.” explained Andrea. Josie explains to her classes: “We’re going to take a step back, and then we’re all going to move forward together.”

Through this extensive middle school choir experience, Oak Bluff students build schema of how a choir rehearsal should operate, what musical knowledge is valued, as well as working within a group of students for both musical and non-musical benefits. Because they possess this schema and the formative experiences of middle school choir that are well-aligned with their high school choir experiences, these students are able to speak out more confidently in class, try out for solos or All-State, and self-select for student leadership opportunities. “I was in choir throughout elementary and middle school and heard how amazing the [Oak Bluff] program is,” Lily, a student leader shared, enthusiastically declaring “I knew I had to continue my journey through music with [Oak Bluff] choir!” While well-aligned choir programs and solid musical foundations may not be present in every school’s feeder pattern, it is a common occurrence, and already well understood to be extremely beneficial for students.

Though Audrey at Gilbert has a beneficial relationship with the teacher at the middle school, it appeared that less intentional emphasis is placed on curricular alignment. Mentions of middle school choir experiences were absent in Gilbert student questionnaire responses. One could conclude that there may be less schema and iterative agency in the area of middle school choir foundations fostered for Gilbert students as compared to students at Oak Bluff.
**Sustained Leadership Experience**

Another type of iterative agency observed in both cases was gained as a result of leadership opportunities being offered to all students, including representatives from each grade level: freshman to senior. Students in these choir programs are all given the opportunity to self-select to join a leadership group. This group has a great deal of agency to plan and execute both musical and non-musical choir events (to be discussed in further sections). Representatives from each choir class or grade are sought in order to provide equal representation and voice from these different student groups to the directors and student leaders. As a result, students are able to use their formative experiences on leadership in their early high school years to inform the agentic choices they make when they are more senior leaders. Their reflections and observations on what actions were successful with students and directors, what techniques and strategies were employed to plan and execute events, and how to lead their peers all inform their actions as leaders when they are juniors or seniors. Commenting on Oak Bluff Choir Council meetings, Andrea remarked “Our younger kids in council are always a little bit more timid about sharing. They’re still trying to gauge the culture, and what’s OK, what’s not.” Wyatt acknowledges the dynamic, temporal aspect of agency as he explains to students: “You might have been a leader last year. You might be learning to lead differently this year…you might have been a follower last year, but this year you’re now the leader. The seniors are gone.”

Directors are then able to allow student leaders to be more autonomous because they have gained wisdom and knowledge through experience and director feedback over the previous years. Audrey acknowledges continually the investment over four years that she puts into students musical and non-musical leadership training. She observes “you don’t really see the
fruits of your labor until the next year,” she then laments “which kind of scares me for what we’re going to have next year [because of the effects of COVID-19]…”

All four directors also observed this type of iterative agency being manifested in the increased independence of their varsity groups. Singers in the entry-level choirs needed to be prodded and assisted in making decisions and forming opinions, while singers in varsity choirs, employing greater iterative agency, were able to act more autonomously and decisively. Josie shared, “For Varsity Women, I can move much faster, put more responsibility on them, which I love. If you give it to them, they will take it and go OK, I’m going to try. With the [beginner] groups, you have to foster that more.” Audrey at Gilbert concurred: “At the beginning, [students are] not making as many musical decisions as the kids who have had me for two or three years…after that [long] it’s almost like they can read your mind.”

**Practical-Evaluative Agency**

Practical-Evaluative agency is defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) as “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.” Emirbayer and Mische delineated “dominant tones” (p.997) of practical-evaluative agency to describe how actors encounter a situation and act: problematization, decision, and execution. Two secondary tones describe the process by which an actor judges which actions are best: characterization, and deliberation. For the purposes of this study, *problematization* is when students encounter a question, problem, or dilemma. The student then compares this situation to previous situations, blending with iterative agency in a process called *characterization*. The student then decides on what action to take, either with other students, or within their own mind, through *deliberation*. *Decision* describes the actual choice the student makes, be it a clear choice.
between multiple trajectories, or an action flowing in the company with many other small actions. Execution describes the concrete actions students take, based on the previous processes.

Participant teachers gave students many different opportunities to exercise practical-evaluative agency. I have broken these down into three main categories: Student Leadership Structures, Students as Secondary Actors, and Students as Primary Actors.

**Student Leadership Structures**

Directors at both campuses offer every student the potential for a great deal of agency as a part of the student leadership structure. Student leadership structures are groups of students, self-selected for consideration and chosen by teachers on the basis of leadership philosophy, positive personal qualities, service experience, and commitment to the program. An important commonality of student leadership structures between programs was the inclusion of students from all four grade levels in leadership, rather than solely 11th and 12th graders.

At Gilbert HS, the group is called Leadership Team and consists of 9th-12th grade students. From this group, Audrey selects three or four seniors to be the Executive Board, key leaders within the group. Audrey explains “I have four seniors for the top Executive Board, and if I have some really go-getter juniors, I might put them on that little board as well so they can see how to run things.”

To be considered for Leadership Team, students apply for consideration by writing a letter of intent explaining their philosophy of leadership, leadership style, and describing past experiences of leadership. Audrey also has students ask two other teachers for recommendations, assessing students on their “reliability, trustworthiness, respect/kindness to all, and willingness to assist teachers in their classroom.” Audrey said “the letter of intent weeds
out the kids right there…and if a teacher says that they’ve had a problem with the kid, well, I
don’t want them on my team either. So then, I’ll decline them.” She does acknowledge that
most students who go through the process are invited to join the team (“unless they’re just sort of
a knucklehead”, she adds). When Audrey began teaching, her student leaders were
democratically elected. She reflects “that was stupid because that was just a popularity thing,
and the president would never even do anything! So, I said we’re not having that. And then it
really grew to what works for me…it’s fluid…it just depends on the kids and their talents,
really.”

The Gilbert HS Leadership Team is in charge of planning many choir events. They plan
and execute fundraising events called Parents Night Out in which Gilbert choir students provide
a fun experience for children while their parents go out on a date. The leadership team develops
a theme, and then conceives of snacks, a movie, crafts, dance, and musical activities for kids to
fit within the theme. They form committees for each aspect of the event, including a committee
to lead content with the children. Audrey helps them think through all that needs to be done:
“for Parents Night Out, we’ll have seven categories, the food [committee], and the leader is the
committee chair…you have to think through every single thing that we might need, whether it’s
a crock pot, or a spoon, or whatever…you’re going to be the one that gets yelled at if it doesn’t
work out.” Audrey chooses her new Leadership Team in March, allowing the first project for the
new team to be planning the Choir Banquet honoring the outgoing seniors. “It’s all a surprise,
the whole theme and the awards, it’s all a surprise for the big banquet in April.” Gilbert’s
Leadership Team also provides publicity, decorations, and stage direction, for special concerts
including Fall Show (a pop-themed concert with choreography and solos), Holiday Concert, and
Seasons of Love (a Valentine coffeehouse). Anna, a Leadership Team member, reported “I
participated in stage managing for one of our shows and it felt super awesome to be backstage and onstage.” The team coordinates Junior High Live, a workshop experience for middle school students meant to serve as enrichment and recruitment. The Leadership Team plans all choir socials, including a back-to-school Field Night for the choir “they plan team building games…it is a ton of fun!” Audrey said. Lee, a Gilbert student shared about her experience on Leadership Team: “I have been part of the Leadership Team since my freshman year. I am usually here helping set up [and] tidy things up, as well as singing with and helping out the underclassmen.”

Choir directors in high school programs juggle many different roles other than that of teacher. Audrey often shared how overwhelmed she felt with the many different tasks she had to accomplish as the sole director at Gilbert:

There’s no way I can keep up with all the choir mama stuff like the teaching, the six choir classes, and doing all the money and contracts and all that crap, because I am actually not a person that involves parents as much. Because of this, Audrey relies on her Leadership Team, and student assistants within choir classes to help her accomplish all that needs to be done. She has pairs of students in each class help with collecting money “every day it takes half an hour to collect money…so every single class has a receipt writer and two people who sit down at my desk to…write deposit slips and add up receipts.” She explained a tedious, multi-step process that must be followed for every fundraiser, trip payment, and choir fee. Her school is beginning an online payment system this year that she hopes will eliminate the need for students to handle this.

At Oak Bluff, the student leadership structure is called the Choir Council. Choir Council is also made up of students from 9th-12th grade, with two to three representatives being chosen from each choir class. The Council is headed by a Choir President, and one or two Vice Presidents, who are all seniors. To be considered for Choir Council, students submit an
application to directors, where they answer questions about their personal values or principles, how they would describe a “positive high school role model,” and what they take the most pride in about themselves. Wyatt has potential Choir Council students, and their parents sign a statement promising to do their best to set good examples for other students, follow all school and choir rules, pass their classes, and make choir their extracurricular priority. Students also interview with all three directors as part of the Choir Council selection process. Josie explains that the interview is an opportunity for students to show maturity and readiness. She explained “they’re [going to be] around other students and they need to be able to voice their opinion. So, if they can’t get through an interview process with just us, they’ve got some growing up to do.”

Students on the Choir Council commit to a weekly meeting before school with the directors to discuss choir needs, concerns, and event planning. Wyatt, Josie, and Andrea also use this time to teach students about time management, planning events, and leadership skills. Wyatt explains “we do little talks on how to better manage time. I give them goals each week….and so they’re really learning leadership skills with some guidance, some direction.” The responsibilities of Choir Council include planning and implementing choir socials and nearly every aspect of Pop Show and communicating any concerns and needs from their classes with directors. Wyatt asks Choir Council students to act as a “thermometer” and “thermostat” for their choir class, communicating concerns, questions, and giving feedback on how activities are going or received by students. Wyatt explains that this representative intermediary structure sometimes acts as a buffer between teachers and students:

That peer-to-peer response seems to work a lot. A lot of times [it works] better than [if] a teacher respond[s]…that’s always their first line of defense. Go talk to your Council member. The Council can bring it to me, and they’ll let me know ‘hey, I had this conversation with so-and-so this week. They were just feeling like…you were mad at them,’ or whatever the case. And I can address it if it’s something that needs to be
addressed. But most of the time it’s something they can handle. And it’s not on my plate, which is nice.

Andrea, assistant choir director, observed.

Some teachers may think that’s showing too much weakness or asking for opinions too much, but we actually use Council for that a lot. [Wyatt]…wants to know what the kids are thinking…and he doesn’t ask the whole class. He doesn’t want it to become a vote. But Council can help, and they’re really honest, too. So that’s really nice to have.

At Oak Bluff, the Choir Council were tasked with planning an outdoor choir social, keeping in mind COVID-19 distancing guidelines: they chose a snowball fight. Andrea explained: “we got coolers of shaved ice from a [snowball truck] and the kids just threw it at each other. It was really fun…the council planned that out.” Ethan, a council member, used his input to help recreate a fun memory during a choir social:

Every year we have a social in which we invite 8th grade choir students from both of [our feeder] middle schools…I was inspired to mention a game that I enjoyed playing so much [when I was] an 8th grader with all the high school students, who at the time seemed like giants.

Within the structure of the choir program, directors give students a great deal of agency to affect the social connections and enjoyment within the group. Through the myriad opportunities students in these programs have for leadership, they must work together to determine the best course of action. The problem encountered may be as simple as what game to play to kick off the choir social, as complex as how to motivate a committee to plan choir banquet, or as contentious as choosing who should sing the solo in the Pop Show. Throughout their experience, directors guide students through the thought processes, reflecting on past experiences through iterative agency, and helping them to make good decisions.
Students as Secondary Actors

In most classroom situations, the teacher was the primary actor, decision-maker, and guide. Though the choir teachers interviewed made many of the musical decisions throughout rehearsal, each of them found opportunities for students to become part of the process as secondary actors, exercising opinion, and making decisions during small portions of the rehearsal. Directors did this through leading discussions on musical interpretation of repertoire, and student-led rehearsal activities (sectionals, warm-ups, sightreading). Over four years in the program, teachers guided students through the process of learning and interpreting music, helping them gain confidence and independence. Enabling students to make creative choices is one of Audrey’s main goals for her students.

I want them to develop their own artistic idea of the way the phrases should move, and where the syllabic stress should fall. In essence, I want them to make their own decisions, as opposed to doing what I tell them.

To that end, she has incorporated Judy Bowers’ Rules of Musical Interpretation (2012) as a guiding principle. The rules she used most often were: (1) “The Rule of the Dot,” which teaches students to crescendo when singing any note value that is dotted, (2) “The Rule of Syllabic Stress”, which directs singers to sing with the same syllabic inflection as one might speak, and (3) “The Rule of Punctuation,” which teaches students to breathe where there is punctuation in the text, and to carry with no breath when there is no punctuation. Audrey told me, “I’m always spouting out those rules, and they then take them on, and make their own decisions about it.”

Audrey feels that the rules give students a starting place, keeping musical interpretation from being a “guessing game”. If students want to make a different musical decision and break one of the rules, they do it with knowledge and intention: “the framework provides some way to justify
why they’re doing it or justify why they’re not doing it.” Several of Audrey’s students mentioned this experience in their questionnaire. Summer shared this anecdote:

    We were working on a Latin song that had no dynamics in it. So as a class we came up with ideas. It was beautiful to see everyone collaborate and say “Ooo it would be cool if we did a crescendo here!

    One of Audrey’s select ensembles was chosen to participate at a divisional music educator’s conference. They had so many pieces to learn that Audrey would use giant Post-It notes to formulate future rehearsal plans with her singers. For one of their pieces, she chose to have students perform a folk song that was very meaningful to her school community. Along with a local expert, Audrey and her choir aurally and extemporaneously composed a new piece based on local folk melodies to perform on the concert. Students improvised harmonies and collaborated with Audrey on the form of the piece. They even came together to change the choreography at the last minute: “[on] the day of the event, we had this idea of everybody com[ing] off of the risers, go a cappella, and the last beat we’re going to all stomp at the same time…and it was like a dream…everybody in the audience stood up.” The successful experience belonged to all of the singers, along with Audrey, as they helped to make the musical decisions that led to their showstopping performance.

    At Oak Bluff, Wyatt also wants his students to have ownership in their musical learning: “I see rehearsals as being very interactive. Lots of questions, 'Let’s try it this way. Hey, so-and-so thinks that the peak of our phrase should be this word. Let’s sing that.' Wyatt tries varying interpretations suggested by students, asking them which they prefer and why. He says “[I] come in with a road map, I know where I want to end up, but how we get there, and even how long it takes us to get there is up to the kids.” Wyatt, along with assisting directors Josie and Andrea, acknowledge that students in 11th and 12th grade are given more freedom for
interpretation than younger students. Andrea, who teaches beginning students said, “I’ve struggled to incorporate [agency] as much as I want to because of how much of the basic vocal technique we have to teach the beginning kids…I want to figure out more ways to do that.” In the beginning groups, directors will sometimes lead singers in discussion, and sometimes will just tell them what to mark and why. Josie observes that musical markings decided upon by the singers are more likely to be remembered: “Having that little bit of ownership is like gold,” she said, adding, "they [say] oh, that is our marking, and they never forget it after that.” Jordan, an Oak Bluff student described this process, saying,

In our chamber choir, we would all read through the music together. Each person would have a turn and read the text, and each person would inflect different words. We would then discuss the meaning. We would talk about how we could put emotion into the songs we sang.

Lily, another Oak Bluff student reported,

In class I try my best to contribute by giving suggestions on how we can embrace the markings the composer [chose]. Occasionally I’ll suggest we overdo dynamics and/or add our own subtle style to the music [by] adding extra accents and adding more movement.

Student-led sectionals are an important part of the rehearsal process for both schools as well. At Gilbert HS, Audrey decided to incorporate student-led sectionals to satisfy the requirement for group work in the teacher evaluation system. She reflects on how different this method is from her early teaching: “I used to want it so quiet in my rehearsal, but now I [tell them] get in your section circle and figure it out, and they will actually talk about the music…it looks messy…but they will start to lead] each other to chant it out or fix it.” Now she uses it daily as part of her sight-singing routine. She feels that the students help each other to learn it better sometimes than if she were teaching them directly. Again, several students shared about their experience leading sectionals. Anna recounted “sometimes our class splits into sections in order to learn a piece faster. We would all work together to learn the piece.” Claire agreed,
saying “we’ve had multiple students pull a section aside and lead sectionals or lead the entire class. The experience felt more like it was one-on-one time since it was one of our own leading us.”

Gilbert students’ process of learning a piece with “section circles,” as Audrey calls them, is an illustrative example of the primary and secondary tones of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) concept of practical-evaluative agency. Audrey introduces a new piece of music to the class and tells them to get into their section circles. Problematization here is the need to decode and learn the new piece of music as a sectional. Students would employ iterative agency a bit here through the process of characterization, thinking back to their knowledge of key signatures, solfege, rhythm, and other music theory knowledge. Further problematization would occur if the section has difficulty with a rhythm or interval in the passage. Student leaders may think back to how Audrey has handled this issue in the past, to help their fellow students overcome the problem, another example of characterization. Students will reflect on how best to solve the problem, sometimes discussing, but often moving through the cycles of deliberation, decision, and execution very quickly as they apply their previous knowledge to this new piece of music. Lily described this process well, explaining:

My job was to lead our section through parts of the new music and help others fully understand our part. We start by chanting through the solfege and then sing the music. Then we would go back over any parts of the music we had trouble with. Leading in class was a big responsibility I enjoyed, it felt great to help the others understand the music better and learn with them as well!

Choir students at Gilbert also routinely lead the class in warm-ups and sightreading. This allows Audrey to take attendance and tend to other administrative matters, as well as providing students another opportunity for peer leadership. Audrey begins with volunteers, but later in the
semester chooses even the quietest students to lead the class. Audrey said, “It’s a good lesson in getting up in front of people.”

All three directors at Oak Bluff spoke enthusiastically about using student-led sectionals in rehearsal. “I really like it because it gives them responsibility,” Josie shared. “I was kind of hesitant [to] relinquish that control, but they love it, and they get more done…sometimes that student-to-student language is easier than teacher-to-student.” At the beginning of the year, students already involved in student leadership would be asked to run sectionals, but as the year progresses, other students are tapped for this role. Younger groups may be asked to practice only rhythm or solfege with their sections, while older groups may be tasked with practicing on pitch, and more complex problem solving. Jordan reported:

I have been empowered to lead my section. I felt nervous when I was leading my section and was always afraid of messing up. I would start off the song and stop and give feedback about what I heard that was wrong or that we could improve upon.

**Students as Primary Actors**

At times, teachers in both choir program tapped some students to act as the primary actors in the classroom. This means students had various opportunities to lead the entire ensemble musically, making musical decisions, giving feedback, and deciding the trajectory of the rehearsal. In some instances, this was done daily, as a student director for a particular class. On occasion, during a planned teacher absence, students filled in using the director’s rehearsal plan. When a significant unplanned absence occurred at Oak Bluff, the Choir Council rehearsed the choir on their own initiative. Students were also given opportunities to rehearse and conduct elementary and junior high students through special events at Gilbert. In all instances, students stepped into the role of director – constantly using practical-evaluative agency to diagnose and correct musical issues and navigating the complicated social network of peer musical leadership.
At Gilbert HS, Audrey has had two students serve as a student director in choir, rehearsing and conducting their peers daily. The first, Allie, wanted to pursue music education in college. Audrey offered her the chance to lead the tenor-bass ensemble, in order to give her classroom experience. Allie shared:

My duties as a student teacher included leading warm-ups, assessments, and sectionals in each class that I am assigned, and when Ms.[Hayes] was absent, or when she wanted me to, I would lead the whole class…I was beyond lucky to have Ms.[Hayes] as my teacher and mentor. She taught me so much and has led me to many amazing opportunities.

In the event of a planned absence (like attending a professional conference), teachers in both choir programs would have their students lead the class, supervised by an adult substitute teacher. Directors wrote out detailed rehearsal plans and assigned each portion of the rehearsal to a student leader. Josie said, “We give them a timed rehearsal, like a schedule, and then they send us recordings and that’s their major grade…we kind of turn it into a project.” Ethan recalls his experience leading his peers while the directors were out of town:

I was assigned to help guide my peers throughout the learning of our [assessment] pieces. This made me freak out a bit because it was such a huge responsibility, but ultimately it was really rewarding seeing how much I could do.

Audrey mentioned having students take over leading rehearsal for her during planned and unplanned absences as well. Several students shared about this in their responses. Emma said:

Usually when teachers have a substitute in class, we don’t do anything. In choir, though, we have a few students that will lead the choir to work on our music. Every class period is a new chance to practice and work hard on the music we need to know.

When all three directors at Oak Bluff were suddenly and unexpectedly quarantined due to possible exposure to COVID-19, the Choir Council jumped into action, improvising two weeks of rehearsal plans on their own. Wyatt described the situation, saying:

We found out over the weekend [that we would be quarantined], so Monday the kids didn’t even know that we were going to be out. I told the sub: “You need to talk to these
students [Choir Council] and they are going to lead rehearsal. They’re going to know what to do. It’s going to be a little scary the first day,” he warned, “but they’re going to jump on and handle it, and for two weeks they led rehearsals and when we came back, they knew their music.

The choir had been in the process of preparing repertoire for their winter concert, and there would be little time to learn music when the directors returned after Thanksgiving break. Ethan shared his experience:

The substitute teachers didn’t know how to do anything except take attendance. This prompted certain students to lead the class in preparation for our winter concert. Luckily, these students had prior piano and music theory knowledge and [they] were treated, like everyone is treated, with respect. We managed to get a lot of music done and prepared for our directors’ return.

Audrey has also used fundraisers and special events to provide opportunities for students to lead musically, and exercise practical-evaluative agency. Audrey created an “honor choir” workshop experience for junior high choir students that is completely staffed by her high school choir students. “Junior High Live” helps recruit future choir members and provides leadership opportunities for students. Audrey chose student conductors to prepare, rehearse, and conduct a piece with the junior high students on a final concert. “That was a big eye-opener, because [when] they have to start seeing what we go through, the respect goes way up,” Audrey declared.

The high school singers also sit with the junior high students to augment their sound and give them a taste of the high school choir experience. “The middle school kids just thrive on those high school kids being the directors!” Audrey shared. Audrey believes this creates a safe place to learn, as the middle school kids have so much more limited experience and expectations of the student conductors. Zoe, a Gilbert student emphasized “My favorite [way to lead the class] is conducting. I felt very honored to know my choir teacher picked me for this and I felt ecstatic the entire time.”
One of the main student-led choir events the Oak Bluff Choir Council plans and coordinates is the spring Pop Show, which features contemporary popular music, performed by choir and student soloists with a live band. Wyatt said:

It’s what keeps kids coming back for us, that Pop Show. Not only does it bring students in, [but]…we make $12-15,000 [each] year, and so we do minimal fundraising the rest of the year. It’s something that [Oak Bluff] has become known for, but for me, what’s so great about it is the students are doing every aspect…everything that happens on stage is driven by kids.

The Oak Bluff Choir Council has agency to plan the entire pop show event. The Choir Council discusses these plans during the regular weekly meeting with directors. Under their guidance, Choir Council selects the theme, chooses choral and solo repertoire and costumes, and develops and teaches choreography to their class.

Josie described how directors guide students in choosing repertoire for the show. The process was as follows, again illustrating Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) dominant tones of practical-evaluative agency. Students had chosen a theme of “Icons” for the Pop Show and were developing a list of songs choir members could choose from for solo auditions.

Problematization here consists of the need to choose songs, and that they be appropriate, balanced, and fit within the theme. The directors may point out new things to consider, as Josie described “there are lots of songs that are great, but they’re made in a studio…[we ask them] is it a song that would [work] with a live band?” Through the process of characterization, students reflected on their own concept of music “icons”, what students had performed in previous Oak Bluff Pop Shows, and their own musical preferences. Then the Choir Council, guided by the directors, engaged in deliberation, discussing if proposed songs could be performed effectively by a live band, if students could achieve them vocally, and if the original artists could truly be considered music “icons”. Students then come to a decision, the mental and/or verbal choice,
and then *execution*, the physical action that is a result of the decision. This is actuated when students compile the final proposed set list and post it for their follow students to see and use to develop solo auditions.

Wyatt departs from the traditional music learning procedures when students are learning Pop Show repertoire:

> For our Pop Show, we are less choral than most of the schools in the district...we don’t do anything written on the page for Pop Show. It’s a lot of [the choir singing] unison, [and] we’ll add some harmonies here [and] there.

Wyatt described an organic process of students picking out harmonies by ear and teaching them to their sections. Wyatt is allowing his students agency to create an organic arrangement for their choir, in the moment, validating an aural, improvisational musical tradition alongside musical literaey.

The students on Choir Council, along with choir directors, are part of auditions to determine who performs solos on the Pop Show. “I think it’s a lot of the reason that most of them get onto the council. They want to have a say in that process of creating Pop Show.” says Wyatt. Directors speak with Choir Council at length about what qualities to look for in a soloist, and how to prioritize the show’s quality above all. “The final decision comes down to what I want…to protect them, but they really are making those decisions, and that’s the whole point,” Wyatt explained. Pop show is scheduled for the end of the school year, after choral assessments. Students look forward to planning and performing in this final, fun concert, and teachers look forward to a break: “Pop show is really us just going ‘Here – have at it!’” laughed Josie. Wyatt agreed, “The last four weeks of school, I’m just drinking coffee, and it’s great.”
**Projective Agency**

Projective agency describes actions students take, or feel able to take, in light of their self-image and future goals (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). A student’s present actions affect their future life trajectory, and they may make different choices based on what path they desire to take in future life. This future may be years down the road, as an adult, or as near as next week, next semester, or their placement in choir for the next school year.

I will discuss projective agency for the most part through the lens of the teacher participants at Oak Bluff and Gilbert. These teachers offer their students many different types of agency, as well as excellent instruction and guidance, because they want them to be successful future members of their choir, the music community-at-large, and society as a whole. I will discuss two broad goals directors in both cases had for their students: for them to be “Literate Thinking Musicians,” and for them to be “Better People.”

"*Literate, Thinking Musicians*"

In both cases, directors focused intentionally on making sure students were strong in sight-reading and music theory. Audrey shared: “The number one goal is to create an independent musician that can sing beautifully, who is musically literate. Music literacy is the most important thing we can give the kids.”

Oak Bluff employs “Theory Thursday,” and frequently assesses students on musical vocabulary and understanding by assigning students “score studies” of each piece they are learning in class, as well as more traditional assessments. Wyatt reported “[The] score study includes number measures, solfegging…we highlight different things: dynamics, articulations, time signature or meter changes, things that affect tempo…and so I’m assessing basically, do
they understand what’s on this score?” It is important to Wyatt that these students not only know the facts of music knowledge, but what it means and how to use it.

I just asked the question in men’s choir yesterday ‘When I tell you that something is in the key of E flat, what does that mean?’….and finally Leo says, ‘It tells us where DO lives.’ Yes, but how do we know if I say E flat? How does that tell us where DO lives?’ And they all thought for a minute and they said ‘Well, isn’t E flat DO?’ Light bulb! These are the things we don’t think about. …they know this, but they don’t necessarily know what it means.

Audrey, at Gilbert, in light of the prohibition of indoor singing during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced pianos to her choir classroom. She taught them basic chords and keyboarding and helped them understand how they could accompany a warm-up or play their part on the piano. “I think they [will] have some understanding of the scales and the chords, [by learning them] on the piano, I think [it] really does make them more aware of what’s going on in the music.” Gilbert students agreed that this was one of Ms. Hayes’ goals for her students. Anna expressed “I feel like she really wants us to learn how to become better musicians in general so that we will be super prepared to get into college choirs if we want to.” Lee agreed, “She wants us to become better musicians altogether.” Audrey is passionate about this goal and has a larger one in mind. She stresses:

My whole thing is I want to create lifelong musicians to sing in church. [There are] hardly any musicians to fill the [church] choirs. And so, if I can teach you how to read this [music], you’ll be able to [sing] on your own.

Listening to music and thinking about it or discussing it was also a way the directors fostered projective agency in their students. A poster hangs on the wall of the Oak Bluff choir room proclaiming “THINK, SING.” Both Wyatt and Audrey valued ear training as an important skill for singers, Audrey employing it as part of warm-ups daily. Audrey also used listening as a rehearsal technique at Gilbert: “We’ll have row[s turn towards each other], listen. What do y’all
hear? Evaluate what you’re hearing.” Wyatt also encourages listening within rehearsal to help singers self-assess the ensemble.

When singing was hampered by the pandemic in Fall 2020, Wyatt brought diverse musical examples to play for his select chamber group. He asked them to listen and “express intelligently what they’re hearing. Not ‘Oh, I like that song’, or ‘oh, I hate that song’, but…use musical terms [to] articulate why this is your preference? Just to understand what they like and what they don’t like.” Similarly, Audrey uses the state choral assessment rubric to help her students listen to and critique musical performances using proper technical terms. “I want them to be able to speak intelligently about what they hear, and not just [say] “Oh, that was pretty!” By encouraging students to “develop the ear” (Audrey) or learn how to critique music intelligently (Wyatt), participant teachers help students to make decisions about their own preferences and thoughts about music. They hope this will help them become more discriminating music listeners and music makers in future life.

Wyatt’s interest in music theory and mathematics has led to a concerted effort to help his students think about and discuss music intellectually, as well as a focused effort on musical literacy.

I want them to understand music, again, coming from a theory background…I’m always asking questions to get them not to just look at their part, but to look at other parts in the music. How does your part play a role in the harmonic structure or the rhythmic structure? I’m always asking “Whose part is the most important in this passage or who are we listening for?” So I do try to integrate music theory a lot just because I want them to understand what they’re doing.

"Better People"

All four participating directors stated that an explicit goal of their choir program was to help their students to become better people. “Let’s be better humans, better musicians, and all
that other stuff will happen,” Wyatt shared. Defining this further, they mentioned leadership, hard work, compassion, empathy, honesty, teamwork, and serving others. Because students are aware of these named goals, teachers encourage students to use their projective agency towards this goal of self-betterment, and group betterment. Students also recognized that learning music was not the only goal. Lily selected “teamwork” as the most prominent Oak Bluff choir goal. She attests “Our directors prepare us to work together not only in the classroom, but in the real world!” Ethan, another Oak Bluff student identified a main goal “to learn from others, properly sing, and grow together to better both yourself, and your classmates.”

Audrey, through music, wants to help her students become “really responsible citizens who are going to love [their] neighbor, always be givers, and just to be really good people…thoughtful people who see that something needs to be done.” Audrey holds all students to high expectations, musically and non-musically. In contrast to many programs in surrounding areas, in Audrey’s choir program all students perform and compete, even those who are just beginning in choir. Drawing on her mid-Western work ethic, she is always encouraging students: “whatever they go into, to be the best.”

Because Audrey is the sole choir director at her high school, she wants and needs students to show responsibility in carrying out their duties in planning choir events. Students on the executive board head up committees charged with certain aspects of event planning, and Audrey places the onus on the students: “you have the decorating committee…the promotion person…the board has to make sure everybody’s doing their work because I can’t micromanage [everything] and teach the class.”

Confidence and being brave are important attributes all four participant teachers desired for their students. As described earlier there are many opportunities to lead in the Gilbert choir
program. At first, Audrey allowed students to volunteer for small, in-class opportunities to lead the class in warm-ups or sight-reading. Over the course of the semester, though, she begins to choose the more reticent members of the class to lead. As the year begins, she starts by having small groups of students lead together, and “then after they feel more comfortable, I’ll start selecting the shyer students so that everybody has to get up there and try,” she explains.

Members of the Executive Council at Gilbert also learn to be brave enough to lead from within. Audrey laughed: “it’s fun to see the upperclassmen laying down the law like they’re the teachers. It cracks me up.”

This resonated strongly with her students, as Summer, a Gilbert student described:

I was really shy my freshman year, but my junior year I always wanted to lead the stretches at the beginning of choir, as well as do counts for sight-reading. It made me feel so confident and empowered to lead something and get built up for it instead of torn down.

Claire, a Gilbert student confirms that she believes Audrey “[wants me to learn] that we’re capable of anything we put our minds to.”

The directors at Oak Bluff challenge their students to sing out in class, even if it means making mistakes. Wyatt shows students he is willing to do this as well, by modeling for them even though he doesn’t have a typically lovely voice:

with my inaccuracy or un-lovely tone at times, I’m giving them the comfort of – Mr. [Jones] makes mistakes, and he sings things that are wrong – I can do that. Nobody laughs at him…and sometimes we do laugh at me. But that’s OK. I think [modeling] has become more important to me, but it’s more about empowering them to be confident, rather than matching my tone.

Josie and Audrey, although they teach at different schools, expressed that female students tend to be less confident and aware of their abilities than male students. One of Josie’s main goals is
for varsity women to be confident in their abilities...guys will make a huge mistake and [just state] ‘that was wrong’, and they’re fine with making those mistakes. But girls, I feel like they second guess everything that they do...if I can build even more into their confidence, I feel like their ability will shine through anything else.

Audrey expressed consternation that female singers often judge a varsity treble choir to be inferior and a lesser experience compared to a mixed voice choir, even if the varsity treble choir singers are at a higher ability level. She observes “if I could convince the best women that the best choir is the women’s choir and not the mixed choir...but they all want to be with the guys because the guys make it fun.” I add “women’s choirs are pretty awesome and powerful too, especially if they know they are.” Audrey smiles, and agrees “Exactly.”

By challenging all of their students to grow in confidence, and be courageous, directors are preparing them to employ projective agency towards success in many life directions. Julie, an Oak Bluff student, shares how stepping up to lead the class helped her grow in confidence: “When I was [in leadership my] sophomore year, I lead the advanced women choir for our pop show dances and songs. I was nervous at first, but I had to put that behind me so I could be my own leader as well.”

At Oak Bluff, Wyatt’s choir motto is “Sing, Serve, Lead!” This motto encourages students to think outside of themselves, and look for opportunities to serve the group, school, and larger community. Directors at Oak Bluff encourage singers to serve the choir in class every day giving their best efforts. The choir lives out their motto by taking on service projects in the community, including participating in the Wreaths Across America project. The Wreaths Across America project was put forward as a suggestion by a choir student, and honors fallen veterans and their families. Jordan, an Oak Bluff student confirmed this service-minded focus: “We typically go out and do community service...[we] sing at community centers during the
holidays.” According to the handbook, choir members are expected to give at least two service hours annually in order to be considered for placement in a varsity choir.

The culture of “Sing, Serve, Lead!” is supported by the Oak Bluff posted classroom rules:

1. Be Here
2. Be Honest
3. Be Responsible
4. Be Respectful
5. Be Grateful
6. Be the Best.
7. Be Courageous

“Be Respectful” asks students to be respectful with their teachers, but also with each other, ensuring that Oak Bluff choir can be a safe space to learn and grow. Wyatt defines “Be the Best” by explaining that it is not about winning every competition they enter, but about putting forth your personal best in rehearsal and performance each day. As head director, he applies “Be the Best” to himself as well, self-assessing each year if he is still what Oak Bluff needs. Josie connected this expectation to a concept pulled from the larger school culture of Oak Bluff: 212°.

212° is the degree at which water boils. We always talk about that one extra degree, and [how] giving just that little bit more makes all the difference. I want them to take away that we believed in them, even when they didn’t believe in themselves, and that extra degree in the real world is going to make a difference, it’s going to shine through.

Wyatt believes that if the students and directors are all working towards upholding these rules, the music will fall into place. He tells his students: “Who you are comes out in what you do.
People will see who you are by the product that we put out.”
I tell them at competition, it’s not about getting [top ratings]. It’s about exploring this music and making this the best music that we can, and we’ve always had that as our goal, and been successful at [competition]. But we haven’t been successful at [competition] because that [was] our goal.”

Relational Context

As expressed in earlier chapters, the relational context of agency refers to agency always being towards something or someone (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The condition of relationships between people will affect the agentic acts they will take, and the motivation for taking them. In the cases of these two choir programs, relationships between directors and students, and between students on a micro and macro level, help students to feel confident enough to act, lead, and make decisions. Ethan, an Oak Bluff student emphasizes:

My experience in choir has led me to appreciate those in my life so much. [We are] this community of people that are united and connected through one thing: music…I never realized how much I’d be grateful for a class where I thought I’d just learn about music, when in reality [it] is so much more than that.

The directors at Oak Bluff and Gilbert have worked to get to know their students well and help the students in their choirs connect with each other as a group. In order to work well together to plan events, accept peer leadership, and make music, it is important that positive relationships are formed within the group. Student leadership teams work continually to plan social events for the choir, service projects, as well as continuing to communicate with the directors about the needs and concerns of the group.

Choir as Family

The theme Choir as Family describes the nature of the relationships within the choirs at Oak Bluff and Gilbert, and how it supports strong student agency. A recurring phrase, mentioned by most directors, and over half of student participants, from both schools, described their choir as a family. Summer, a Gilbert student explains “Choir is more than just singing…it’s
bonding, it’s therapy, it’s family, it’s something you have to be a part of to fully understand.” Julie described her relationships with her teachers, extolling “I love these directors, because they make me feel like we’re in a big family and I learn new things that I never thought I would while in choir.” Wyatt reported in his initial questionnaire response, “the most often heard adjective for our program is ‘family,’ and I am the so-called ‘choir dad.’” Wyatt’s role as “choir dad” arose from a student asking a question in class and accidentally calling him dad, but the moniker endures.

**Choir as Safe Place**

The theme Choir as Safe Place describes the intentional designation of the physical choir room, and interpersonal choir community as a place where students are welcome and free to be themselves, providing a free environment to exercise student choice. Students who feel they can try new things without fear of ridicule or criticism are also more likely to exercise their agency. Wyatt describes the classroom environment,

> They know it’s safe enough to make a mistake, safe enough for a guys voice to crack even in mixed choir…I tell them any time your voice cracks [it’s] just because you’re doing something really difficult, and you’re getting better at it…we just laugh at it and move on.

Directors work hard to create a safe environment within their classrooms for musical growth. When asked what she would want students to take away from the Oak Bluff program, Josie answered “That they were always safe. That they were always cared for first and foremost, and we added the music stuff later. I think if they feel those things, if they know that they’re safe and cared for, you can ask them to do pretty much anything.”

Audrey, as a teen, used choir and school activities as an escape from a difficult home environment. Now, she aims to create an environment where students can make music that is
free from stress and pressure. Both Wyatt and Audrey, though they have high expectations for their students, do not feel that using grades to penalize students is appropriate within their choir. Both feel that given the stress of grades, GPA pressures, and typical teen angst, the choir room should be a sanctuary for their students, a calm from the storm.

**Challenges of Increased Student Agency**

I asked both directors to share instances in which giving students more agency caused problems or difficulties. Audrey reported, unsurprisingly, that sometimes high school students will not execute a task as well as she would have done it herself. She described asking two Gilbert student leaders to record a choir recruitment video to show to incoming middle school students. She told the students to make a video reflecting the cultural diversity and varied interests of the choir. When they showed Audrey the finished video, “it’s just this one white girl, and it was very well done, but I was so irate because it had no diversity.” She complimented the polished production value, but asked if they could redo the video, adding other students reflecting the multiplicity of the program. She sighs “they never redid the project…it’s so hard to teach them workmanship.”

Audrey found that this year’s choir leaders are finding it very difficult to be motivated with the cancellations and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were unable to meet in person and failed to follow through on the few projects Audrey had given them. “They’re kind of flopping, actually…some of them aren’t even engaged in class.,” she notes. She expounded on her advice to them, saying “you have to be a leader no matter what. You can’t just be a leader when it’s fun and easy…it’s almost like they’re crushed, and I guess I would be too.”

At Oak Bluff, Wyatt described moments when students take too much ownership in the program. He explains “they think they can tell me things that they shouldn’t tell me…they think
[I] don’t know [something, so they] correct me.” There are times where he has to reassert the balance of power in the program. Wyatt told an anecdote of a student who came to class very emotional and upset. A Choir Council member, well-meaning, told the upset student that she could sit out in the hall until she felt better. Wyatt told the student “I love that you’re looking out for students…that you are wanting to help, but that’s not your call. That comes from me.” Wyatt reiterated that he expects that when working with teenagers, many life lessons will need to be taught. He tries to keep their good intentions in mind and respond with instruction instead of with anger. Wyatt emphasized, “He’s not trying to undermine my authority, and it’s just keeping that balance.”

When students are given a voice, they expect to have their voice heard. Although Wyatt sometimes gives his top chamber choir more input on their performance repertoire, Wyatt gets the final say. If he does not choose their favorite piece, he asks them to trust his judgement, but he acknowledges this is a battle that must be fought. In his opinion, mutual trust is important to the relationship with student leaders.

The experience of participating directors showed that giving students agency involves much guidance, conversation, and sometimes correction when needed. Asked if it is still worth it, Audrey responded, “Yeah, I mean sometimes it’s hard because they won’t do the job quite [as I would, but], sometimes they surpass the job that I would do, and that’s the joy of it.” She described seeing former students become professionals and adult leaders, and she insists “what we did in Leadership Team, they take with them.”
Summary of Findings

The data revealed that the choir teachers at Oak Bluff and Gilbert offered many types of agency to their students. Through iterative agency, students made choices based on their previous experiences. A middle school choir experience rich in musical knowledge and skills, and sustained opportunities for leadership roles throughout their high school years provided *schema* on which students could base wise, informed, decision making. Practical-evaluative agency, deliberating and making decisions in the present moment, was available in a variety of avenues. Teachers offered students leadership structures which they could choose to join, opening more possibilities for decision making and choice through planning and executing concerts, events, and fundraisers. Within rehearsals, teachers asked all students to consider questions of musical interpretation and assessment, and lead their peers in sectionals, warm-ups, and sight-reading. Some students were even asked to be the primary actor of agency, directing the large ensemble in rehearsal, and rehearsing and conducting literature in concert. Teachers continually asked students to consider their future trajectory, encouraging them to seek self-improvement and future career paths. This projective agency, by way of intentional music literacy instruction and promotion of virtues encouraged students to be “thinking, literate musicians” and “better people.” Students experienced agency in the relational context as well, feeling comfortable enough to take advantage of decision-making opportunities because of the strong relationships between teachers and choir members, and amongst the choir members themselves. Both teachers and students described the social context of choir as “family”, and the choir room as a “safe place” to learn and grow.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I contextualize the findings of this study in light of extant literature. I first explore how the data resonated with or departed from literature on agency. Second, I discuss the transferability between the situation and environment at Gilbert and Oak Bluff. Third, I discuss implications for incorporating opportunities for student agency into teaching practices. Fourth, and finally, I advance implications for future research on student agency.

Contextualization of Findings

Teaching techniques observed in both cases mirrored Jackson’s (1986) transformative tradition, especially in the goal of “a metamorphosis” (p. 120), character formation goals, and student discovery of knowledge (i.e., musical interpretation and describing musical opinions). According to the literature (Allsup, 2003), and observation of many contemporary music programs, the mimetic tradition is a well-worn method of large ensemble teaching. The mimetic tradition is familiar to many choral directors and constitutes the main steps pre-service music teachers are given when first learning to rehearse and conduct an ensemble. The transformative tradition, though encouraged as student-centered, differentiated instruction, tends to be the focus of education classes rather than choral conducting, and including them as part of rehearsal technique may seem difficult or unrealistic to many directors. In this study, however, participants described a mixture of mimetic and transformative techniques, blending them with the goal of producing literate, empathetic musicians, and leaders.

Concepts of democratic education were observed in both programs (Tan, 2014). Wyatt and Audrey in their striving for student buy-in allowed students a representative voice within the ensemble, and decision-making power as regards musical interpretation, repertoire selection, and
choir event planning. Though they are the undoubtable leaders, they encourage student participation and input on many aspects of program administration.

Much of what Weidner (2015, 2020) observed that supported musical independence in a secondary band setting was also present in the observed cases. Students were encouraged to learn how to diagnose and correct musical errors, interpret musicality in an individual way, and make “musical decisions that matter” (Shieh & Allsup, 2003, p. 30). Through peer musical leadership, discussion, and questioning techniques, directors at Oak Bluff and Gilbert endeavored to help students become “literate, thinking musicians.”

Parker (2014) found that students experienced greater enjoyment and ownership of their secondary choral experience when they were given a voice, leadership roles, and a shared experience of learning. The experience of students in the Oak Bluff and Gilbert choir programs supports these findings. Students were enthusiastic and hyperbolic when sharing in reference to their choir experiences, and the place of choir in their lives. These students also described their active participation in leading musically and non-musically and were grateful for and positive about these experiences. The findings reinforce Parker’s research that community and relationships helps to defray the costs of competition on the ensemble. Though students at Oak Bluff and Gilbert competed for solo opportunities, and participated in All-State choir auditions and group assessments, participants did not comment on this competition affecting choir community in a negative way. The experience of *communitas* (Turner, 1969), investigated by Parker (2016), was evident in these programs as well, as student participants repeatedly described their choir as a family.

Sweet (2008) found a theme of choir as “Safe Place” (p. 92) within an exemplary choir teacher’s student-centered middle school program. She observed “in a safe middle school choir
environment, students are more willing to take risks and not worry about consequences from unexpected results” and “peer support is essential to the perseverance of middle school singers.” (p. 202). This aligns well with the findings of this study, that providing a safe place within the choir program encourages students to try attempts at growth in vocal technique and musical understanding, as well as first attempts at leading peers. Sweet (2008) also found that elements of moral teaching were very prominent within this program, correlating with my theme of projective agency manifested as teachers’ goals to help students become “Better People”.

Many of the democratic rehearsal procedures Scherer (2021) discovered were important to secondary band directors were also used by Wyatt and Audrey in their secondary choral programs. While there is much overlap in the concept of democratic rehearsal techniques such as “student-led sectionals” (p.4) and “identify and describe opportunities for individual and ensemble performance improvement” (p. 4), the difference may lie in the balance of power. In the programs investigated within Scherer’s study, the concentration of power is unquestionably with the band directors, with agency being granted to students by them as “secondary actors”. The directors at Oak Bluff and Gilbert were willing to give their students more agency in select instances, moreover, employing democratic rehearsal techniques that were less used and preferred by surveyed band directors, such as “student-led full ensemble rehearsal”, and “select music for performance” (see Students as Primary Actors).

Some aspects of how agency was implemented within these choir programs differed from data reported in similar studies. Students in the observed cases experienced episodes of aural and improvisational harmonization of melodies, through Oak Bluff’s unique pop music process, and Gilbert’s organically evolving folk music performance. These types of educational experiences were promoted as antidotes to power imbalance in the classroom (Hess, 2017).
These experiences, however, were couched within the traditional large ensemble rehearsal model, unlike the unstructured experimental model that Allsup (2003) advanced. This suggests that music educators need not throw out the large ensemble model entirely to accommodate moments of creativity, agency, and peer leadership.

Sweet (2008) observed student-centered learning in her dissertation study, but that ultimately the structure of the classroom was an autocracy. An autocracy is defined by one individual having absolute power, but a more complex power structure was observed at Oak Bluff and Gilbert. Though the choir directors did have final say and governing authority over students, they allowed students freedom to make many decisions within certain areas: socials, pop show, event planning and sectional leadership. This increased independence may be due to the fact that the students investigated in this study were high school students, whereas Sweet was observing middle school students.

Transferability

Qualitative research is emergent, and each case is singular, thus results of a study are not generalizable or replicable. In this section, however, I will examine certain unique qualities of Gilbert and Oak Bluff and consider what case attributes facilitated my findings. I will observe which characteristics may not be transferable and are particular to these cases.

While there were many similarities between Gilbert and Oak Bluff—program goals, opportunities for leadership, high performance standards, and superior ratings at annual group assessments—key differences existed between the cases. These included the situatedness of the school within its environment, the influence of teacher allocations on the programs, and the influence of directors’ formative experiences and reasons for providing student agency. Oak
Bluff is situated within a large school district known for its support of fine arts programs. The surrounding high schools and feeder middle schools all feature choir programs with many students, multiple directors, and success at assessments. The directors at Oak Bluff are part of a musically rich community, with many sources for professional development, encouragement, and affirmation. It is significant that even though having multiple directors in a program would ostensibly facilitate easier accomplishment of tasks by experienced adults, Wyatt still chooses to have students take on many tasks, in order to gain their perspective, buy-in, and develop leadership skills. The student leadership structure established at Oak Bluff included weekly meetings with students and all three directors before school, providing for regular opportunities for director to guide students. Oak Bluff students heard multiple adult voices regularly, advising them on how to plan events, choose repertoire and wise decision making. This weekly opportunity for teacher “checks and balances” ultimately resulted in more favorable outcomes for student decisions.

In contrast, Gilbert is in a smaller city, and although Audrey praised her middle school feeder choir program, she did not have many positive things to say about other choir programs in the area. Because of this, Audrey lacks a professional community in which to connect, learn, and get new ideas. Although Audrey sought higher education and training outside her geographical area, she often spoke of feeling overwhelmed and at a loss, especially with the added challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions stemming from the pandemic. Audrey was overcome with the number of duties asked of her by administration, and the busyness of her choir’s calendar. A weekly Leadership Council meeting would likely have been too much, and so students relied on outside of school (mostly digital) communication with Audrey and amongst themselves to plan events and make decisions. While this method helped students to accomplish
tasks, and did not require as much of Audrey’s time, it often necessitated Audrey correcting student work after it was completed, rather than communicating with students regularly as they navigated projects, and discussing alternate decisions and reasoning. In other words, Audrey often had to correct students’ independent efforts reactively, rather than proactively. This suggests that the student leadership structure at Oak Bluff may not be feasible for a school that does not have multiple directors without significant simplification or modification.

The deep influence of teacher’s formative experiences on their programs was significant to me as well. Wyatt’s past and current experiences as a singer and guitarist in a rock band validates this musical practice for him, and by extension, for his students. While he values learning music in the traditional method, and places music literacy among his top goals for students, he is also comfortable with guiding students through understanding vocal techniques used in a rock idiom and learning pop-style music without notation. While these values and practices are beneficial for students, teachers without this background may not feel confident allowing students this type of freedom.

Formative experiences affected Audrey’s decisions as a choir director as well. As a young person, Audrey looked to choir and school experiences for escape, fun, and teacher affirmation and encouragement. As a teacher, the desire to recreate this for students has motivated many of her decisions on how to structure her choir activities and program. Now, late in her career, she is close to burn-out – overwhelmed by the many fun, affirming, creative events she herself has scheduled. She is now struggling to find the balance between providing rich experiences for students, while still preserving her health, peace, and personal life. While student agency is a worthy goal, it should not be established at the cost of teacher well-being.
Implications for Teaching Practice

Music literacy and the ability to perform at a high level musically are worthy and common goals teachers have for their choir students. If teachers want students to be able to decode, perform, and interpret music independently, especially once they leave the school music setting, teachers must provide for students the iterative agency of acting upon past musical knowledge and experience. A solid foundation in vocal technique, ear training, and reading musical notation is vital. If students do not receive this in their middle school music program, teachers should make efforts to teach these fundamentals in the first years of high school choir, in order to build strong schema that will enable future agentic decisions. Many resources exist to aid teachers in this endeavor, and daily practice in vocal technique, sightreading, and repertoire performance is essential. Teachers should talk with students about the goal of musical literacy and independence, and why daily practice is key towards achieving those goals. Students who join choir for the first time in high school should also be given an opportunity to gain this knowledge, so that the choir can begin on a consistent and firm foundation of knowledge and skills.

Teachers should be aware of how they balance teacher- versus student-centered instruction in rehearsal. Students benefit greatly from teacher direct instruction, but they also gain confidence, independence, and knowledge transfer when they interact with the music on their own. As demonstrated by the participants in this study, this could be accomplished through discussion and questioning techniques about musical interpretation, allowing students to lead portions of the rehearsal (sectionals, warm-ups, sightreading), and allowing students to determine what still needs to be rehearsed in the repertoire. Teachers can also lead students in listening to music of varying styles and engaging in discussion about it. It is important that teachers model
appropriate student feedback, rehearsal techniques, and the use of correct musical terminology in a way that makes students aware of them. These can become part of a “musical toolbox” for students to use when working in peer groups or on their own. Using student-centered, open-ended rehearsal techniques can sometimes be less efficient, but can result in increased student learning and greater independence as students move through the program.

As agency provides for more independence, students can be given the opportunity to lead as a primary actor, as shown in these cases. Students could be allowed to run large ensemble rehearsals on their own when teachers are absent, under the guidance of an adult substitute teacher. It is recommended that students be held accountable for their progress in the absence of directors in some way, perhaps by submitting a recording. Teachers can consider appointing a student conductor from within the ensemble, or providing smaller opportunities for students to choose, rehearse, and conduct the ensemble in performance.

Incorporating student agency into a secondary choir program need not be seen as a “free-for-all”. It is recommended that teachers designate certain components of the program to be an area of increased student autonomy and freedom. For example, participating teachers allowed students more voice in designing and executing the pop show, a sensible choice given the culturally relevant nature of repertoire to student interests. Choir socials were also planned by students, as these functions directly impacted student relationships and enjoyment. On the other hand, repertoire for assessments, trip destinations, and program structure (as well as many other program decisions) were decided by directors alone, and not open to student input. Teacher “checks and balances” in areas of student agency are important for helping students meet teacher expectations, allow for director input, and enable students to learn to lead successfully.
The data suggests that allowing students areas within the program structure where they can choose repertoire, lead their fellow students, and make meaningful decisions are beneficial to student learning and leadership skills. While many choir programs may include student leadership roles like president, and/or vice president, the experience of participating teachers shows in addition to these, a small, representative leadership group made up of students from all four grade levels is best. Structuring student leadership this way provides input and delegation on behalf of all choir students, and opportunities for students to develop leadership experience throughout their high school years. By the very existence of this representative group, all choir members receive the message that their voices are important. Sustained leadership experience aids 12th grade student leaders to be stronger, more confident, and effective leaders. Regular meetings with teachers provide opportunities for reflection, feedback, guidance, and discussion on leadership topics, and may lead to more proactive strategies for helping students to make wise choices, rather than reactive correction.

Evening out the balance between student agency and teacher authority, leadership positions at these schools were not democratically elected. Teachers allowed students to put themselves forward for consideration, and the selection process afforded students time to reflect on their suitability for leadership. Letters of intent and application questions allowed students to demonstrate confidence, poise, and existing positive relationships with teachers and fellow students. Directors then vetted students through an interview process (Oak Bluff), or through recommendations by teachers in other areas (Gilbert). Choir directors then, were able to give greater decision-making power to students who had been deemed responsible, capable, positive, and a good team player, rather than whomever was most popular. This seemed to contribute to student success and positive working relationships between directors and students.
While the leadership structure used at Oak Bluff may be overwhelming for a single choir director, it may be possible with some caveats. Establishing rapport, relationships, and trust with students to increase buy-in is perhaps even more important. The data from this study, and previous research (Parker 2014, 2016; Sweet, 2008) indicated that when choir is a place where students feel connected to each other, and their director, and they feel safe to learn and try new things, student agency and leadership will thrive. Weekly meetings may be too much for one director, but bi-monthly meetings may be achievable. Increased agency should be introduced gradually, over time, so as not to be overwhelming to teacher or students. Participating directors promoted virtues of respect, kindness, empathy, responsibility, and service to students. Expectations for program, philosophy, and agentic behaviors should be explicit within the program. The culture of increased student ownership and established teacher expectations must be done intentionally and incrementally.

Teachers looking to incorporate more student agency into their program should be prepared for the challenges in doing so. Students’ ideas and efforts may often fall short of teacher expectations. As previously mentioned, regular meetings and discussions with teachers are recommended, so students understand teacher expectations and program needs. Students should be held accountable for doing tasks well, but teachers should also discern when it would be best to allow students to do it their way, even if it is different than what the teacher would have done.

Positive models of peer leadership are important in perpetuating a culture of student agency within the choir program. In the absence of positive peer models, students may find it difficult to remain motivated, or feel unsure of expectations and direction. In this instance, director guidance and input are crucial. Directors should consider seeking inspiration from
outside the program: reading and discussing accounts of student leadership and efforts with their own students and sharing video examples of student projects. Directors should persevere in their efforts, as the culture of leadership and agency perpetuates itself, as students learn and become more confident in their endeavors.

It is inevitable that when students are given more agency that some will begin to overstep the bounds of appropriate leadership and voice within the program. This is to be expected, and assuming the best of student intentions should always be held in mind. Teachers should make every effort to establish boundaries of student leadership and voice from the beginning. When overstepping occurs, teachers should deal with this issue in an instructive manner and re-establish balance and boundaries. Teachers should seek to establish trust and caring relationships with students, making it easier for students to acquiesce, because they believe their teacher has their best interests in mind. Students should understand from the beginning, that although they will be given autonomy in some areas, that the teacher always has the final say.

These cases make clear that student agency always exists in balance with teacher authority and control. Students are given great freedom for choice and decision making, but only in certain areas. These autonomous categories generally included the social life of the ensemble and culturally relevant performance opportunities like Pop Show. Students were encouraged to develop their own ideas and techniques in many areas of musical leadership, performance, assessment, and interpretation.

In Gilbert’s case, however, some forms of student agency were not oriented towards advancing student learning, but simply towards getting paperwork and logistical classroom tasks accomplished. While allowing students to process student payments and write receipts may build math and clerical skills, these are not typical musical learning goals, and could present
problematic situations between students, teachers, and administrators. If students are given too much agency, without opportunities for proactive teacher guidance, the teacher may lose control of how things are handled within the program, leading to myriad potential problems.

Most program decisions, however, were unequivocally made by the directors with little input from students. Student leaders were chosen by directors. Directors chose nearly all concert repertoire and planned instructional activities. Directors also served as sources for guidance in student decision making and peer leadership, with the ultimate goal being student independence, both musical and non-musical.

Directors, in their programs, established a culture and guiding principles of hard work, respect, and a safe environment that filtered down to guide student interactions. These models of shared power, and a balance of teacher authority and student agency respond directly to those who claim the hegemony of large ensembles demands the tearing down of the traditional ensemble model, to be replaced with completely new and comparatively unstructured class concepts. Student agency is possible in a traditional choral large ensemble setting and is greatly beneficial to student learning.

Implications for Future Research

In his investigation of musical independence in the secondary band program, Weidner (2020) offers “preconditions of musical independence”: elements that he believes must be present in order to allow for students to gain musical independence. The cases I investigated included preconditions for student agency. These include a strong foundation of musical skills for students, usually acquired in middle school, strong peer models within the program to acculturate younger students to program values and priorities, and a director who is willing to
cede control in certain areas to allow students more autonomy. Without these elements, it is unclear whether student agency can be offered and accepted at a high level.

Future research may include a deeper investigation into the student experience of student agency in the secondary choral setting, including multiple individual and group student interviews, as this was not possible within this study. Future studies should also include multiple classroom observations to further triangulate data gathered through student and teacher interviews and offer a deeper level of detail to understanding the process of incorporating agency. More research is needed in the area of understanding the importance of musical foundations and fundamentals as relates to the musical aspects of student agency. Also beneficial would be discovering how this type of agency-supportive culture could be established in a newly founded choir program. Future research of programs incorporating student agency within an urban setting would be valuable as well. Researchers should examine how much the school district and surrounding area affect the potential for students to develop independence and agency.

Fostering agency within the complex social network of the secondary choir program can prepare students to make better decisions in the future. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) claimed “actors who are positioned at the intersection of multiple temporal-relational contexts can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention. (p. 1007). It is my hope this study of student agency in the choral classroom will aid music educators by giving them tools to use in their classroom that facilitate student independence and growth.
APPENDIX I. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Questionnaire to Solicit Participants

"What are the three to five most important student learning objectives for your curricular music large ensembles (including but not limited to [choirs and chamber groups] of any type)?”

(Weidner, 2020, altered to fit my topic and area)

Interview Questions

Teacher Interviews

Opening statement:

Thank you for agreeing to this interview, as your participation in this study is voluntary. The focus of this study is on student agency and the role that various individuals and activities play in the ensemble classroom. I am recording this interview, so that I can focus on our discussion without taking notes. Before we go on, could you introduce yourself by your first name, and acknowledge that you are being recorded, and that you are okay with that.

Phase One: (Current/Pre-COVID Program, Rehearsal Dynamics)

1. Describe yourself, and your background (personal, professional, educational, musical).
2. Tell me about the program at your current position:
3. How would you describe your student population? (Demographics, private lesson availability, prior instruction)
4. How long have you taught at this school?
5. What would you say are the goals you value most for your students?
6. What do you want them to “take away” from their experience in your choir program?
7. What does a typical choir class look like right now (COVID)?
8. Can you describe the types of activities you might plan for your class currently? (Both typical and infrequent, distance learning or in-person)
9. Can you describe a typical rehearsal in your choir program before COVID?
10. Can you describe the types of activities you might plan for your class before COVID? (Both typical and infrequent)
11. What do you see as your role in your students’ musical development? (If not mentioned, what role does modeling play in your practice? What role do questioning strategies play in your practice?) (Weidner, 2020)
12. How do you help students to make musical decisions during rehearsal? Can you describe an example?
13. How do you help students learn how to make musical decisions independently in the future? Tell me more about that – maybe a specific anecdote?
14. How do you evaluate student progress?
15. [Follow-up with probing questions investigating any episodes of agency observed in recent rehearsals.]

Phase Two: (Student Leadership & Choice)

16. Tell me about how your choir’s performance literature is chosen. Can you describe the process?
17. Tell me about how your ensemble is led musically. Do you have a student conductor? If so, can you describe their roles/actions in rehearsal.
18. Do you have student leadership positions in your choir program?
19. (If yes) what types of positions do students hold?
20. What are their responsibilities?
21. Who conceived of the positions?
22. How would you feel if a student came up with their own idea for a new position (i.e., student conductor, outreach chair)? Has this happened? – describe what you would do in response to the student.
23. What does student leadership look like this year (COVID, distance learning, etc.)?
24. [Follow-up with probing questions investigating any episodes of agency observed in recent rehearsals.]
25. Is there anything else you would like to share about your program?

Student Questions

Opening statement:

Thank you for agreeing to this interview, as your participation in this study is voluntary. The focus of this study is on student agency and the role that various individuals and activities play in the ensemble classroom. I am recording this interview, so that I can focus on our discussion without taking notes. Before we go on, could you introduce yourself by your first name, and acknowledge that you are being recorded, and that you are okay with that.

1. How long have you been in choir?
2. What made you decide to join choir?
3. Tell me about your musical experiences outside of choir class (church choir, musical theatre, private lessons, favorite personal music).
4. Can you describe a normal choir class this semester (COVID)?
5. Can you tell me about a typical choir rehearsal (pre-COVID) at your school from the time you come into the room to the time the bell rings at the end of class?
6. What class activities do you enjoy most? Least? Why?
7. What do you feel like your teacher wants you to learn in choir?
8. Tell me about a time your teacher empowered you to lead in choir class.
9. Can you think of a time when students led the ensemble or chamber ensembles? Tell me about it.
10. How does your teacher decide what music to sing on the concert?
11. Do you hold a leadership position in choir?
12. If so, what position, and what are your responsibilities?
13. Can you tell me about a time you spoke with your teacher about:
   a. your ideas related to choir leadership?
   b. extramusical choir activities?
   c. rehearsal or musical interpretation?
14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience in choir?
APPENDIX II: DOCUMENT REQUEST PROTOCOL

Please provide any available documents you believe would help me to better understand your process of incorporating student agency into your choral program. I am interested in how you give students agency now, but also the process of how you began to incorporate agency into classroom activities, student leadership, student-led ensembles, etc. Anything that you think might be helpful would be very appreciated.

Please submit:

- student choir handbooks from the current year, and past year(s)
- information about student choir officer responsibilities and elections
- Examples of Web presence (choir website, Facebook page, etc.)

Items that could also be helpful are:

- Any information given to students about how to mark music or make musical decisions
- communications with parents about your program that reference student agency or leadership
- any pertinent email correspondence between you and parents, administrators, and/or colleagues

Like all data collected for this study, documents and artifacts will be kept in strict confidence. If excerpts are used in a published report, all identifying information will be removed.
APPENDIX III: INITIAL TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

Audrey Hayes, Gilbert HS:

1. Become an independent, well rounded musician. – I want kids to know everything possible about their music…to be able to [sightread] their music independently…to develop their own artistic idea of the way phrases should move, where syllabic stress should fall.

2. Become literate in music.

3. Be able to sing alone and with a group, using a proper tone and vowel formations.

4. Be able to assess choir performances using terms on the [State] Rubric for Performance Assessment: Tone, Intonation, Diction, Balance, Interpretation, Musical Effect, Other Factors. – I want them to develop a choral ear/aesthetic and be able to talk about performances using the correct terminology. I want them to know how we are assessed.

5. Be able to sing with proper technique, while performing choreography.

Wyatt Jones, Oak Bluff HS:

“1. Be better humans – learn empathy, teamwork, collaboration, ownership, and respect. Apply those characteristics in all aspects of life.

2. Be more creative – explore all types of choral music. Explore different tones, timbres, and musical styles while singing with good vocal production in the choral setting. Give students a voice in the rehearsal. Give them opportunities to assess other voice parts, the blend and balance in the choir and the musical expression happening in the rehearsal with limited prompting from the director.
3. Be better musicians – understand musical terms, notation, solfege. Enable students to read music on their own, opening up the possibilities of their own musical exploration.

4. Create an atmosphere of trust, honesty, safety, and curiosity where students are willing to try new things, accept constructive criticism and are eager to explore music of different cultures with the end goal of appreciation and performing with excellence.”
REFERENCES


VITA

Danielle Laird, born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and graduated with a BME in Music Education from Florida State University. She taught high school choir for six years at two high schools in Cypress-Fairbanks ISD in Houston, TX. Danielle has sung professionally as part of Houston Chamber Choir, Cantare Houston, and as a cantor. She has taught in a variety of music education environments including high school choir, middle school choir, children’s choir, elementary general music, and private voice instruction. Danielle chose to pursue her master’s degree at LSU in Music Education with a secondary concentration in Choral Conducting in order to further define her teaching philosophy and refine her teaching practice. Upon completion of this master’s degree in August 2021, she plans to return to the music classroom.