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Boys' Descriptions of Their Experiences in Choral Music

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ABSTRACT

This report centers on the words of six boys about their experiences in school choral music. The narrative excerpts are drawn from the stories of boys enrolled at a private school in the southeastern United States. The study sampled three types of boys: those who have sung continuously, those who sang but later withdrew from choral music, and those who did not sing at all. Analysis of the boys' broad narratives revealed allusions to components of optimal 'flow' experiences identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and others. Such 'flow' experiences are characterized by high levels of both perceived challenge and perceived skill, a clarity of goals, deep personal involvement and concentration, self-directedness, self-awareness, the receiving of immediate feedback, and a lack of awareness concerning time constraints. The report concludes with implications for choral music educators who seek to design pedagogy and rehearsal techniques that enable the emergence of these optimal experiences.

KEY WORDS

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The participation of boys in choral music has generated sustained interest from researchers, educators, and philosophers for much of the past century (Freer, 2008a; Gates, 1989; Koza, 1993; Van Camp, 1987). Research and anecdotal evidence indicate that within the Western tradition, fewer males than females sing in choral ensembles, this trend has remained constant over time, and it is a phenomenon without geographical or national boundaries (Adler & Harrison, 2004; BBC News, 2008; Harrison, 2008).

This is part of a broader discussion concerning the participation of males in all types of musical activities within and beyond formal schooling experiences. One strand of the related research and ensuing conversation is centered upon the belief that, as an educational endeavor, school-based choral music is flawed and needs to be remedied. These remedies would increase the participation and retention of males in choral singing, and the suggestions concern an array of issues including repertoire, recruitment and instructional techniques (Bayliss, Lierse, & Ludowyke, 2009; Freer, 2006a; Jorgensen & Pfeiler, 2008; Shively, 2004). Another strand of research focuses not on choral music education, per se, but on the male choristers themselves. This research is predicated on the belief that physical, cognitive and emotional development are indistinguishably intertwined with musical development. Greater knowledge about unique characteristics of male growth, learning and vocal maturation might point toward music education experiences that are developmentally appropriate and sufficiently motivating such that the long-held patterns of male choral participation may be reversed (Cooksey, 1992, 2000; Demorest & Clements, 2007; Freer, 2007a; Gruhn, 2004; Hall, 2009). This article is intended to

complement both strands of research by examining boys' descriptions of their choral music experiences, with a particular focus on elements that enhance their motivation to seek continued experiences in choral music.

Motivation and Optimal Experiences

Choral music educators rely on several different types of motivational strategies when working with adolescent students. Characteristics of choral instruction that positively affect adolescent motivation appear to include provisions for a nurturing environment, specific feedback, interesting repertoire and achievable challenges (Freer, 2008b; Stamer, 1999). When instructional strategies are not effective, adolescents experience negative changes in motivation, interest, self-perception, and confidence such that 'academic disengagement' is likely to follow (Midgley, 1993, p. 219).

The self-determination theory of motivation (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that individuals have three basic categories of psychological needs: competence, a sense of relatedness to others, and an increasing sense of autonomy. In a study specifically focused on the experience of adolescents during schooling, Hektner (2001) noted three related elements central to positive development: goal-directedness, intense and focused concentration, and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as the pursuit of an activity because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and includes such factors as curiosity, the need for autonomy, and the desire for control (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989). The measure of

intrinsic motivation has taken several forms, including the use of self-reports of interest and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001).

Related to intrinsic motivation is the idea that people strive to encounter situations providing a moderate level of stimulation, considered the optimal level of arousal (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This concept of optimal arousal has been extended into research about why humans seek challenges, what those challenges are, and what the optimal level of challenge may be (Abuhamdeh, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

The positive relationships between challenge, intrinsic motivation and engagement are well established for adolescents in general academic settings (see Daniels, 2005; Pate, 2005) and in music education settings (Byrne & Sheridan, 2000; Gangi, 1998). Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has contributed to this understanding by defining components of optimal experiences and how these components interact to increase intrinsic motivation and affect. The resulting 'flow theory' has been the subject of numerous research studies (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1975), including a substantial body of work concerning the experience of flow during adolescence (e.g. Csikszentimihayli & Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Wahlen, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Csikszentmihalyi has specifically outlined the relationship between choral music and flow theory (Gilbert, 1995), and research in both music education and choral music supports the application of flow theory to the choral experience of singers of all ages (Bloom & Skutnick-Henley, 2005; Custodero, 2002; Freer, 2008b).

Though flow theory initially served to detail the characteristic qualities of optimal experiences, applications of flow theory point toward ways in which instruction and educational environments can be designed to support the occurrence of optimal experiences for students. The primary qualities of these optimal, flow experiences include several related to personal

control (goal clarity, a sense of increasing autonomy, and deep concentration) and others related to awareness and competence (a disappearance of self-consciousness, the receiving of immediate feedback, and a sense that action and awareness merge effortlessly). The quality most highly associated with flow is a sense that one's skills are equal to the challenges being presented, whether those challenges are musical, academic, athletic, emotional, or otherwise. An implication for music education settings is that challenges must be continually adjusted upward to match the increasing skill levels of student musicians. A mismatch in the levels of challenge and skill will lead to frustration (challenges too high), boredom (challenges too low), or apathy (challenges *and* skills are low) instead of promoting the experiential qualities associated with flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000).

Flow experiences are discreet and, though they may persist for a matter of time, they are fleeting. The relationship of flow to intrinsic motivation is manifest when individuals seek to repeat or recreate occurrences when they have experienced qualities of flow. People who routinely seek flow experiences, often by seeking ever-higher challenges, are said to possess 'autotelic' personalities, referring to 'having its goal within itself' (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989). The word 'autotelic' is derived from two Greek root words: auto (self) and telos (goal). People with autotelic personalities seek flow experiences as a matter of habit; as they gain skills, they seek higher challenges that require an increase in skills.

Teachers regularly see tacit results of the challenge/skill balance in their classrooms, and for choral music teachers, in their rehearsals (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004; Wiliam, 2008; Gangi, 1998). For example, repertoire chosen because of immediate appeal may prove unchallenging as rehearsals progress, resulting in student boredom. In another instance, a teacher may choose a piece of unattainable sophistication, with the result being high levels of student anxiety. This

relationship between challenge and skills extends beyond the choice of repertoire. It becomes central to all interactions that occur between teachers, their students, and the music they produce together (Sutton, 2004).

Narrative Techniques and Flow Theory

Dewey (1913) observed that education cannot be considered complete without knowledge of what a student experiences during a schooling activity. Dewey saw that genuine interest propels a student to independently seek fulfillment of that interest. But, it is only through the incorporation of interest that school effort 'never degenerates into drudgery' (p. 15). In Dewey's words, interest 'absorbs the powers of an individual in a through-going way' (p. 65), much like Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow.

Flow theory assumes that individuals will vary substantially in their responses to similar experiences, and the many facets of these experiential variations must be understood before broad conclusions can be drawn. The characteristic, generalized qualities identified with 'flow experiences' were initially identified through extensive interviews involving thousands of individuals in research projects spanning several decades (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). This volume of narrative data formed the core of flow theory, which sought 'to clarify the subjective phenomenology of intrinsically motivated activity' (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). Semi-structured interviews remain the preferred methodological technique in flow research seeking thorough descriptions of individuals' subjective experiences. Qualitative interviews are central to the most current directions of flow research: domain-specific

descriptions that enumerate how flow is engendered and experienced in diverse settings (Chavez, 2008/2009).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the theory of flow as situated in educational settings was predominantly explored through quantitative measures. Since 2000, flow research in education has increasingly employed qualitative and mixed method designs to examine students' subjective responses to instruction and classroom environments (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). As Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi state, 'It is the subjective challenges and subjective skills, not objective ones, that influence the quality of a person's experience' (2002, p. 91).

One method of gathering information from students about their experiences is through surveys and questionnaires, versions of which have yielded most data to date about flow experiences. Researchers of adolescence are increasingly employing other narrative techniques to amplify quantitative data and present contextual information that would not be otherwise represented (Doda & Knowles, 2008; Saval, 2009; Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2008). Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider's (2000) study of adolescence and flow is particularly notable for the incorporation of illustrative quotations by teenagers.

Studies of adolescence and music education have included narrative techniques to investigate longitudinal changes in the perception of musical challenge (Custodero, 2003), the development of personal identities as singers (Monks, 2003), and how teenagers perceive music in and outside of school (Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007). Research in choral music education has increasingly used narrative elements to explore the unique perspectives and experiences of choristers in general (Durrant, 2005; O'Toole, 2005) and males in specific (Freer, 2006b; Hall, 2009; Harrison, 2008; Kennedy, 2004, 2002). At least one study has investigated

how prominent American choral conductors have alluded to the characteristic qualities of flow when describing their work (Freer, 2007b).

Methodology

This article centers on the words of six adolescent boys about their experiences in choral music as students at Holtz Academy, a private school in the southeastern United States (see Table 1). In this school, all music education, including choral singing, occurs within regular instructional hours and is subject to the same academic regulations as other content areas such as mathematics, language arts, and science.

The quotations presented here are excerpted from a larger study in which the boys were interviewed about such issues as the relationship of 'school music' to their daily lives, their musical lives outside of school, effective instructional practices, peer support and/or pressure, and role models for continued musical involvement (XXX, in press, 2009). Each boy was interviewed for 30 minutes on three occasions at two-week intervals. The boys were selected for participation in the study because they each represented one of the following three categories: those who had sung in school choral ensembles continuously, those who sang but later withdrew from choral music, and those who did not sing at all. The three categories had been suggested by Freer (2006b) to ensure that boys with different types of experiences were included in research about male participation in choral music.

The interviews provided portraits of how these boys responded to participation in school choral ensembles, engaged in music outside of school, and hoped to take part in music after

graduation from high school (see Table 1). Five of the six boys, excluding Billy, related diverse experiences with choral music that were predominantly positive. A secondary analysis of the narrative data was conducted with HyperRESEARCH qualitative analysis software to assess areas of congruence between these positive choral experiences and the characteristic qualities of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The quotations that follow are unique to this analysis and are not presented elsewhere.

Flow theory is a proximal theory of motivation in which the enjoyment of an experience or activity results in the desire to seek repetition of the experience. These boys indicated that their positive experiences in school choral music created a desire to sing in choirs through high school and into adulthood. By understanding how these boys' comments reflected qualities of flow, it is hoped that choral music educators may be able to design pedagogy and rehearsal techniques that enable the emergence of these optimal experiences.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Sense of Personal Control

Three of the characteristic qualities associated with flow relate to a sensation that one is in control of a situation. These include an awareness of clear goals, a sense of autonomy as the goal is approached, and deep concentration that inhibits distraction.

Clarity of Goals

Goal clarity for adolescents can refer to both proximal and distant aims (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Though the goal of ensemble performance is omnipresent during choral rehearsals, there is often a parallel set of goals held by the students within the ensemble. For some of these boys, school music experiences were vehicles for pursuing their own musical goals. Clark suggested that choral music teachers could help integrate these personal and ensemble musical goals by sharing content-specific information about music:

Clark: I really want to try to get my voice back in shape. Right now it's kinda raspy. But, it goes up and down. But, when I try to sing and try to sing higher notes, it either doesn't come out or it comes out an octave too high.

Interviewer: What if your teacher were to tell you what muscles were involved, what was happening with the process of voice change and what you could expect to happen next. Would you be interested in that?

Clark: I would, both from a science end and from a music perspective, yes.

Young adolescents like Clark need a teacher's specific guidance to connect immediate classroom activities to more distant instructional goals (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1999). A teacher's use of task-specific instructional feedback can assist students in the understanding of musical goals. Danny related how a teacher might offer such feedback during rehearsals of 'old Latin songs' that are 'boring and dull':

Danny: One of the things that really strikes me as a boring and dull song is if it's really, r-e-a-l-l-y s-l-o-w and just sort of feels like the song drones on and on forever.

Interviewer: What about if your teacher shared with you the things about the slow sections that made them really interesting or unique?

Danny: Well, that would probably help me and a lot of other people to sing it with a lot of enthusiasm, but the teacher would have to think of a good way, a fun way, to sort of get that across.

Roger felt that boys would respond to a sense of competition that clarifies both product and process-oriented goals:

'You know, in elementary school, everyone's playing on the same team – there aren't any umpires at the baseball games. But, on the first day of sixth grade, you have tryouts and you're placed on teams based on your ability. Competition becomes a driving force for middle school boys, whether that's good or bad. They want to go play ball, they want to skateboard, they want to go play videogames, they want to compete. I think if the choral teacher made it more competitive, the boys would ask themselves, "Do I really want this?" and if they do, then they would have to step up.'

In a lengthy exchange about why boys withdraw from chorus because they don't understand what's happening during the voice change process, Roger made an analogy to goals in baseball:

> 'I learned that when I swing the bat, I have to rotate it up to put topspin on the ball. When I rotate it down, I can put downspin on the ball. So, if I want do those things, I need to strengthen certain muscles with certain exercises. I know what I need to do to improve. In chorus, it would probably help a lot if teachers talked about the physiology of the voice. Instead, boys just get frustrated with their voice range and the awkwardness. I think choral teachers underestimate how much students are able to understand.'

Autonomy, Control and Deep Concentration

Research indicates that courses in school that emphasize individual work are the most conducive to experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Doug highlighted the relationship between autonomy during rehearsals and the resulting musical performance: 'I love sectionals. You kind of develop your section as a team and you help each other along. That makes you a stronger section, and that makes a stronger chorus.' But, Coy noted that though sectional work is important, students still need the support of the teacher's musical skills:

> 'I wish there had been a male teacher, someone who could work with me as an individual and understand my voice. With our bass section, there's no way that our teacher can hit the pitches. She's like, "Well, y'all have to figure it out on your own." But, it ends up

making that group learn it themselves. They have to work together, and it ends up making them a stronger reader of music, and, honestly, a better choir student. They can read sheet music better because of it.'

The boys in these interviews spoke about control and autonomy in ways that alluded to the influence of peers and teachers. Roger conjectured,

'If our teacher would go into the men's ensemble class and say, "OK, I'd like to talk to each of you individually and see what your goals are for this program," I believe some of the kids would say, "You know M'mam, I like this and I enjoy doing it," and that would be fine. But, then she's going to get some of the kids who say, "I really enjoy this, and I'm sorry I can't practice, but I want to advance, I want to be in the Chamber Singers." So, then she could better figure out what to do with the class, how many can she push, how many is she not going to get anything more out of. If you know what you're working with, you can tailor it to go where you want it to go.'

Roger's comment echoes research findings that high school teachers can promote higher quality student experiences of competency and autonomy by providing tasks connected to student goals and offering multiple opportunities for individual success (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). Doug mentioned that his frequent participation in state and national honor choirs provided him with a sense of individual success. Doug recalled that when he sings in these select ensembles,

> 'We're told that "every single person is important to this chorus." No matter what, we're all there, and we're all together when we sing, so each person has a part in it. I think that is one of the things that made this past year's All-State incredible, was that our conductor really gave ourselves value. She gave us control. She encouraged us to sing loud and add our own spice to it.'

Coy spoke at length about the differences between the current choral music teacher and the one he had studied with during the first two years of high school. He noted that the previous teacher focused almost entirely on ensemble work, while the new teacher's emphasis on individual musicianship promotes higher-level performances from the group:

> 'With our former teacher, it was strictly, "We have to do this music, sing it," and nobody really loved it. With our new teacher, we have a lot of fun. She asks us if we're having any musical (…or emotional!) problems, and she offers us tips to deal with them. We do a lot of activities to improve our singing ability and stuff like that instead of just focusing on the music, and when we learn the music, we sing it a lot better than we would have before.'

Studies of intrinsic motivation in adolescents indicate that self-regulation is a precursor to the mastery of content and skills (Zimmerman, 2008). Doug spoke of the concentration that is possible when his knowledge of the repertoire extends beyond correct pitches and rhythms:

> 'When I sing it's my expression, it's my way of pushing out all that I'm thinking about so that I can put myself in a completely different mindset of singing. Like, I like to research the background information of the music so that I can put myself in the place where the writer of the song felt. If this guy was in love, I want to feel like I'm in love when I sing the song. If this guy was chased down and murdered, I want to feel like I'm being chased. It's something where I just love expressing and showing people the true value of music.'

When adolescent learners feel confident about their own musicianship, they can begin to concentration on their individual contributions to the collective music making of the choral ensemble (Hamann, Mills, Bell, Daugherty, & Koozer, 1990; Moore & Rocklin, 1998). This ability to concentrate is a result of the self-awareness afforded by perceptions of control and autonomy, in conjunction with clarity about the immediate goals of rehearsal and performance.

Awareness and Competence

A second group of flow characteristics highlights the relationships between feedback, awareness attained through feedback, and actions implemented in response to feedback.

Receiving of Immediate Feedback

During an optimal experience of flow, individuals feel supported by a constant flow of feedback that tells them what they are doing, how well they are doing, and what they need to next. Feedback within instructional environments takes many forms and can come from a wide array of sources, including teachers, selves, peers, parents, and school administrators. Research indicates that positive interpersonal relationships between teachers, students, and sub-groups of students are critical to the development of classroom environments where 'friendliness and good intentions' allow for individual reflection and self-critique (Hadjioannou, 2007, p. 384). Hattie and Timperley (2007) have identified four types of instructional feedback: feedback about tasks, feedback about the processing of tasks, feedback about self-regulation, and feedback about the self. The boys in these interviews made comments about each type.

First, task-related feedback directs students how to modify their efforts to achieve acceptable results. Doug recalled an instance when his conductor was able to base task-related feedback on personal experience, making a strong impact on the choristers:

> 'I'm thinking about the national ACDA [American Choral Directors Association] honor choir when Mr. [Henry] Leck was teaching us, and you could tell that everything was based off of his experience. Like, when a voice would screw up or crack or something like that, he would correct the posture and it would be fine. It was like he didn't read about it, but, like, he knew it was effective, he could reinforce it with personal experience.'

A second form of feedback concerns the processing of instructional tasks. Feedback about how tasks are processed is important for understanding the construction of meaning and

relates to relationships, cognitive processes, and transference to other situations. Doug shared some insights about how he relies on his musicianship to provide feedback when attempting new musical tasks:

Interviewer: Do you think playing guitar helped you in choral music?

Doug: Yeah. I think it was one of those two-way type relationships. Because playing guitar took me farther, it took me to another level. And once I was at the guitar level, I had a better understanding of what I was doing in chorus, especially when I learned theory. Of course, my middle school teacher taught us sight-singing and she taught us key signatures and stuff like that, but like she never had time to really go into it, like explaining that this all follows a certain pattern and it's all linked together. And so, I think when I started learning guitar, like, I just developed more of an ear for choral music so that when my teacher played something, I could just go and with my tonal memory, it just started becoming a lot easier.

Closely related to feedback about processing is feedback about self-regulation. When students monitor, direct, and regulate actions toward specific learning goals, they exhibit qualities associated with autonomy, self-control, self-direction, and self-discipline. Feedback about self-regulation could come from the choral teacher or student peers as they react to choices made by an individual singer. In classroom environments where students regularly explain their reasoning and share their learning strategies, other students more freely consider alternative options and ideas (Walshaw & Anthony, 2008).

Roger compared issues of self-regulation in chorus and on the football field:

'Oh, man, this is interesting, thinking about chorus and football. Let's say that the football team only has enough spots for four wideouts. If six guys want to play, the coach has to choose the best four. So, the other two are forced to either step up to the next level and beat someone out, or they can have fun sitting on the bench. It would be interesting if the choral teacher said, "OK, only four of you guys are going to get to sing the most difficult part . . . the best part. Otherwise, you're going to be background noise." For those that want the opportunity, they'll have to practice, learn the notes, and get better. But, just like the coach shows you how to get better, the chorus teacher will have to let students know when they're getting better.'

Finally, Hattie and Timperley (2007) note that feedback about the self contains positive (and sometimes negative) evaluations and affect about a student. Feedback about the self can take the form of praise, but it is only effective when it is truly focused on the task. In the following exchange, Coy commented on the need for task-related praise when learning musical skills:

Interviewer: Do you remember compliments that a coach has given you?

Coy: Yeah, like the other day I made a great play on the field and they yelled and clapped for me.

Interviewer: And, how did that make you feel?

Coy: Good. It always feels good, especially if they give you a "High 5" signal

or slap you on the back.

Interviewer: Can you relate those experiences to being in chorus?

Coy: I think it would help if chorus teachers would celebrate every time guys learn a new part, sight-read a line of music, or improve their vocal tone quality. Guys need to know when they've improved so they can feel good about themselves and their accomplishments.

Disappearance of Self-Consciousness and Merger of Action and Awareness

During his final interview, Billy, the self-described 'non-singer,' somewhat surprisingly related an incident where he sang for pure enjoyment. The previous interview had ended with Billy stating, 'I'm not a good singer.' So, the next session began by having him describe his singing voice. In this exchange, Billy highlighted the minimized role of self-consciousness as he and a friend 'copied' (sang along with) the vocals of a popular country-western song (Green, 2001). Though Billy was very much aware of his actions, he was not inhibited by self-consciousness and self-criticism.

Interviewer: So, it was just the two of you guys?

Billy: Yep.

Interviewer: Is this something you've done before?

Billy: We've done it twice. We did a different song the first time.

Interviewer: Did you like your voice either time, or were you just goofing around?

Billy: Ahhh, the second time was better. I sounded like the guy who was

singing.

Interviewer: You sounded like which one, Willie Nelson or Toby Keith?

Billy: Uh, Toby.

Interviewer: Really? He's got a deep, powerful voice. Do you think you could ever sound like that if you sang in chorus?

Billy: Probably, if I practiced. I couldn't get that good, but I could kinda sound like that.

Each of the boys in these interviews remarked that middle school boys often withdraw from chorus because of self-consciousness related to the voice change process. Roger offered that male-only choral ensembles might alleviate such self-consciousness because boys 'would rather have a voice crack in front of a bunch of boys than they would a bunch of girls, you know in front of mixed company.' Clark related that he had to endure teasing from other boys about his involvement in chorus but did his best to ignore them: 'I'm not really one to take jokes very seriously. The people who said stuff like that, I didn't really take it seriously, I didn't really think much of them at all.'

Coy offered that musical insecurity can promote self-consciousness in chorus members, perhaps owing to a mismatch between the skills required to meet the challenges presented by the music:

> 'Half of our chorus members just don't know what they're doing or aren't confident. They're trying to read the music and they're just scared to death that they're going to miss a note that they can't think about rhythm or feeling or energy or anything like that.'

There is a melding of action and awareness when students can attend to both their process of learning and the resulting musical performance. When engaged in the rehearsal and/or performance of choral music, students must cognitively interact with large amounts of incoming information in the same moment that they physically produce sounds responsive to that information. Singers need to be able to take the measure of their personal contribution and its concurrent effect on the larger ensemble. Research suggests that members of musical ensembles may need guidance from their conductors and teachers to avoid the possibility that deep concentration may progress to self-absorption instead of a heightened sense of awareness (Seddon, 2005). Individuals experiencing flow are able to maintain this difficult balance.

Doug related that a key to this balance was emphasizing each chorister's role within the larger ensemble, much as baseball coaches call attention to the value of each player:

> 'Sports teams get better because they're very reliant on each member. The coach drills it into them that you can't play baseball without a second baseman. But, if you're missing a bass in chorus, you're not missing the whole section. If the teacher would emphasize the value of the individual to the section, that would make a bigger impact on the entire chorus.'

Doug also spoke of how his guitar teacher taught him how to use immediately practical applications of music theory to solve musical problems. As a result, he can clearly see the relationship between immediate feedback, action and awareness – process and product – when he leads music at his church:

> '. . . if one of my female singers can't sing in the key that I can and she's going be the one leading the song on Sunday morning, then I have to change keys. So I just take our music sheets and change them real quick. So, that's probably one of the things that increased my musicianship, just because I learned to multi-task, learned to think while I was playing the music at the same time.'

Reward through Challenge and Skill

Deep concentration that enables the ability for feedback to inform adolescents' action is directly related to the optimal balance of challenge and skills (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). When individuals are regularly able to conquer difficult challenges through application of their increasing skill levels, the result can be a heightened motivation to seek similar experiences of mastery time and time again.

Matched Challenge and Skill

Young adolescents report elevated levels of affect and motivation during choral rehearsals that present achievable challenges (Freer, 2008b; Stamer, 1999). Clark spoke about his experiences in chorus and drama class, where 'a challenge is kinda nice sometimes. 'Cause if you learn something, that's important.'

Danny noticed the impact of perceived challenge and skill on the persistence of his peers in choral music. One of his choruses' best male singers wouldn't be rejoining the following year because, as he told Danny, there was 'nothing more to learn about singing.' Csikszentmihalyi has likened the ever-rising balance between challenge and skills to the pedagogical technique of instructional scaffolding model commonly identified with Vygotsky (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). Doug commented about situations where teachers fail to provide the support necessary for their students to experience success:

> 'A lot of boys don't say that the teacher's going too fast, because they'll just let it go and be frustrated. Teachers need to know how to read the students so they know how fast to present something, how slow. Some kids have dropped out because the challenge was too high and they just weren't having fun.'

Adolescent musicians indicate enjoyment when teachers encourage them to discover new ways of negotiating challenges instead of simply 'telling' how to do things (Custodero, 1993, p. 46). For many boys, matched challenges and skills are most evident in relaxed, supportive musical environments:

> 'Thinking about the all-men's choir here at Holtz, they're a goofy bunch. They're not the greatest singers, but they do like to sing, and I think that's because of the current teacher. She makes it fun but teaches them the music at the same time. She's avoided being a stickler about every nit-picky thing. I think once you get to that point of "Don't do that, don't do that" it becomes a hassle.' (Coy)

Choral ensemble rehearsals frequently consist of one-dimensional pedagogical experiences focused on large group instruction with few opportunities for students to work in small groups (Freer, 2008b). Numerous studies of flow and adolescent students indicate that individualized and small group learning experiences can facilitate the continual adjustments necessary to match challenges with skills (e.g. Rathunde & Csiksztmihalyi, 2005). Cooperative learning techniques, which prompt students to work in small groups with clearly defined responsibilities, have been found to promote matched challenge and skill opportunities more readily than large group instructional techniques:

> The implication for teachers, therefore, is that carefully designed and monitored cooperative learning tasks that help students achieve future goals can help students engage more actively in their learning experiences. The tasks should provide a challenge to students and should require use of skills that they feel capable of using to maximize their involvement in the tasks (Peterson & Miller, 2004, p. 132).

Autotelic Characteristics

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), autotelic individuals have a 'psychic energy [that] seems inexhaustible…they pay more attention to what happens around them, they notice more, and they are willing to invest more attention in things for their own sake without expecting an immediate reward' (p. 123). Danny epitomized some of these characteristics:

> It seems like I can always find something new about the song, I can always find something interesting about it. And, it's just fun to know more about the song, to learn more parts of the song . . . I had really fallen in love with singing by seventh grade. It was just so much fun. I had enjoyed being involved in previous drama productions and I heard that there would be another musical. I thought that being in the chorus might help my singing and prepare me for the musical . . . You know, I like to hear what we sound like singing together. I like being a performer.'

Roger's musical involvement was solely with the band, and he found that when he arrived at Holtz,

> '. . . it was a fairly small band program and, honestly, I was not challenged, and there was less of an incentive to be good. I was going to be first-chair whether I was amazing or whether I never practiced. So, I gave myself a challenge by becoming drum major. I liked that because it gave me a leadership role in band – something I loved to do.'

Research with adolescent students indicates that the existence of autotelic characteristics can promote positive self-esteem that mitigates the effects of boredom emerging within low-challenge environments (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Doug related being bored in regular high school chorus rehearsals, but,

> 'When I go to sing in All-State honor choruses, that's when I get my fix for the entire year because I'll just have three days straight of singing. But, I think it's kind of irritating

when I'm in that stretch of not doing any honor choruses, because I realize how easy this stuff is. I want to push myself farther.'

Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider (2000) found that, when compared with the general population, adolescents with autotelic characteristics report higher levels of concentration, higher self-esteem, greater optimism, and a stronger sense of congruence between current activities and future goals. These elements were evident as Coy concluded his final interview. A senior in high school, he looked forward to going to college and singing in a 'heavy-duty ensemble, just because you know that the people are committed. You're not going to have people that are just going to mess around. You're gonna have serious singers, and that's what I'm looking for.'

Conclusions and Implications

The comments of these six boys reflect findings from other studies in music settings. These studies collectively imply that during flow experiences, (1) the music making of individuals is inseparable from that of the ensemble; (2) individuals are able to monitor and adjust their singing in response to the ensemble sounds around them; (3) conductors are aware of the individual needs of singers within the larger ensemble; and (4) the repertoire and rehearsal techniques are artistically authentic and developmentally appropriate (Custodero, 1999, 2005; Freer, 2008b; O'Neill, 1999; St. John, 2006). Other points emerging from research in music ensembles suggest that flow experiences occur most frequently during the final, extended performance segment of rehearsals (Kraus, 2003), young and/or inexperienced musicians rely on

their conductors to set goals (Kraus, 2003), and conductors prevent flow from occurring when they do not attend to differences in the skill levels of their singers, particularly with regard to pitch and rhythm (Rybak, 1995). In other words, flow experience in ensemble rehearsals is possible, but only when individuals are presented with challenges that equal their skill levels.

As evidenced in the comments of the five boys who reported affirmative choral experiences, the successful completion of challenges is positively correlated with enjoyment of an activity. This is particularly true for school activities that adolescent students consider non-academic, such as art and music (Abuhamdeh, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Vispoel, 1998). It may be that students enjoy the freedom to be unsuccessful on initial attempts to negotiate challenges. For instance, when adolescent male singers know that they will have repeated opportunities to refine their musical skills and meet the challenges presented by a piece of choral repertoire, they may display greater persistence if each successive attempt is followed by specific feedback rather than an academic grade.

Long after they leave adolescence, adults recall their most influential teachers as deeply interested in young people and how they learned, constantly readjusting instruction to reflect the skills of their students (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Doug, Coy, and Roger each remarked that this teacher interest would need to extend to conversations with boys about their individual musical needs. Coy related that his choral teacher inquires about students' musical or vocal problems so that she can offer corrective feedback. He later added, 'I like that, 'cause when we sing well, she's happy. When she's happy, then I'm happy!' Though this teacher's 'happiness' may not necessarily equate to flow, it is worth pondering the effects on students of a teacher's personal experience of flow. Bakker (2005) found that the more frequently music teachers reported optimal flow experiences the more their students reported being in flow. The

relationship between student and teacher experiences of flow is the subject of several recent doctoral dissertations, indicating that this may be an area for further investigation in music settings (Beard, 2009; Cartwright, 2007; Gunderson, 2003; Hood, 2008; Zhu, 2002).

Those concerned about the future of male participation in choral music can find optimism in the comments of these boys. Their words resonant with affirmations of what we know about adolescence through research and experience. As educational philosopher Max van Manen succinctly stated, "Pedagogy is child-watching" (1986, p. 16). Music educators who watch and appreciate the complexity of adolescent development must adjust curriculum and pedagogy so that the musical experiences are relevant to young peoples' milieu, providing knowledge and skills that will benefit them throughout their lifetimes (Campbell et al., 2007; Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001).

Choral teachers who examine their classroom and rehearsal practices with regard to the needs of adolescent boys may find that there are opportunities to enhance the conditions within which flow experiences can occur. Sustained attention to boys and their musical experiences may increase the likelihood that these young singers will seek pathways for choral music involvement into adulthood.

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TABLE 1

Distinguishing Characteristics of Interviewed Boys

Name	Age	Choral Status	Musical Background
Billy	14	Never sang	Played trumpet in band but dropped out earlier this year because it 'just wasn't fun anymore.' Joined drama club instead.
Clark	15	Sang but dropped out	Plays baritone saxophone in band. Dropped out of chorus because of lack of boys. Considers himself 'not a good singer anymore' but hopes to join a choir in the future.
Coy	18	Sang but dropped out	Enthusiastic singer and elected student leader of choral program even though he dropped out because of schedule conflicts.
Danny	14	Sang continuously	Has sung throughout elementary and middle school. Sings in various church and community choirs.
Doug	18	Sang continuously	Member of numerous regional and national honor choirs. Organizes musical performances at church.
Roger	17	Never sang	Strong supporter of school choirs though he never joined. Would like to join a choir in college. Tuba player and student director of school marching band.