

THE SUCCESSFUL MIDDLE SCHOOL CHORAL TEACHER

Technical competence, professional understandings, and personal qualities all seem to play a role in the development of the successful middle school choral teacher.

BY ANTHONY L. BARRESI

One day last year, a student from my methods class appeared at my office door looking rather confused and more than a little upset. Pat had just returned from a practicum session at one of our local middle schools. In fact, that day she had taught her first lesson to a fifty-voice eighth-grade chorus of boys and girls in various stages of physical and vocal development. Despite the fact that we had discussed what she might encounter, the actual experience, while "interesting" and even "exciting," to use her terms, was very unnerving. She asked me, "How will I ever become good at this when there is so much that I have to know and be able to do?" Of course, I offered the usual words of comfort and encouragement, advising her to take one step at a time and reassuring her that experience would answer many of her questions. But Pat had posed the eternal question asked by aspiring middle school teachers: "What are the attributes, both



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Besides being a fine musician and vocal model, the middle school choral teacher must motivate students and help them realize that chorus is a valued activity.

personal and professional, of successful middle school teachers, and how do I acquire them?"

For many years, I have been convinced that the most important determinant in the success of a middle school choral program is the teacher. In fact, I have traveled around the country leading workshops and clinics

in which I constantly enumerate the personal and professional qualities necessary for success in this area. I have amassed my information on these qualities from personal research in adolescent voice development, personal experiences as a teacher of voice and supervisor of middle school choral programs, and professional interaction

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with many middle school choral directors of varying abilities and experiences. Yet Pat's question still gave me pause.

I was rethinking my response to the question when my phone rang and Steven Demorest of the University of Washington asked me to consider contributing an article to this series on middle school choral programs. It became clear that this was an opportunity to focus my thinking on the question of teacher attributes that are most critical to middle school choral success. For this purpose, Steve and I identified and contacted eleven successful middle school choral teachers, five from the state of Washington and six from Wisconsin. These teachers, who were from urban and rural settings, were deemed successful because of their reputations for musical and expressive excellence in choral performance and the large numbers of students involved in their choral programs relative to the size of their schools.¹

In my questionnaire, I asked the teachers to list five personal or professional attributes they considered to be most important to professional success as a middle school choral director. More specifically, I asked them to think of attributes along the lines of personal qualities, professional training, and technical skills. While this collection of data was by no means a controlled research endeavor, I trust the responses because they are representative of varied socioeconomic school settings, teaching experiences ranging from three to twenty years, and various teacher preparation programs. Additionally, the music performance background of the respondents varied widely, distributed across various instruments, piano, and voice.

I anticipated that the three major areas of personal, professional, and technical attributes would be noted as highly influential in the potential for teacher success in middle school choral programs, and indeed, this was the case. Under the classification of personal qualities, interaction skills were identified as a necessary element of effective student-teacher relations in the learning environment. Responses concerning professional training

included knowledge relating to teaching approaches; general information about school and program administration, school policy, and classroom management; background experiences related to program development and implementation; and vocal and musical training necessary for middle school program success. Technical skills identified in the responses included abilities to effectively implement professional training, to choose and use repertoire appropriate for young singers, and to interest and motivate students.

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While the responses received were, for the most part, anticipated, I was enlightened and sometimes moved by explanations in support of them. Throughout the remainder of this article, I will refer to these responses by highlighting teacher comments and sometimes augmenting them with observations and conclusions drawn from my own research and teaching experiences. The surveyed teachers have agreed to my listing their responses and giving their names, in parentheses after a quote. The teachers' full names and school affiliations are listed in note 1 at the end of this article.

Personal Qualities

As I read through the teachers' responses, I was struck by the similari-

ties among the personal qualities listed as elements necessary for success. One teacher characterized middle school students as "ever changing, developing, and challenging" (Albert). This means the teacher must have a strong, decisive personality and be able to set boundaries for behavior and goals for learning. In addition, these students, though they may sometimes complain, appreciate and even seek teachers who are tenacious but patient and who maintain high musical and behavioral standards (Albert, Schmidt, and Krunnusz). A "passion for what you are teaching" and a full commitment of oneself to the program and the students were also noted as essential; the teacher must model the kind of commitment and dedication that is needed from young singers (Clements and Patterson). One teacher observed, "Too many middle school teachers sell their students short on both counts. The students will go in the direction of your standards. If you have the knowledge to lead them, they will rise. If you let them, they will decline" (Krunnusz). Another teacher said:

Having a well-managed classroom allows learning to take place. The kids ... like a teacher who can balance being not too strict and not too lenient. They like clear expectations and consistency from the teacher. They need boundaries and clear expectations of their work, behavior, and the basis for their grade. (Fulmer)

The middle school choral director must be self-motivated and energetic and needs to "be motivated to welcome day-to-day changes" (Morrissey). There was a general consensus on the need to be caring and understanding of the special psychological, physical, social, and musical needs of the middle school age-group. Love and devotion to children were highlighted by one teacher, who contended that the effective teacher must focus his or her "energies on the children" (Larson). Another teacher stated, "If the teacher is fair and friendly to each learner, respect follows. Students can sense warmth and caring in a teacher and will respond wholeheartedly if

they feel that their teacher really cares about them and wants to know what makes them tick" (Albert). To this statement was added the caveat, echoed by other participants in the survey, that friendship exhibited should be that of an adult to a student. These young singers really do not want an adult who tries to act like one of them. Instead, young teenagers seek to interact with a teacher who uses a friendly manner to guide and direct them in musical and social situations.

Throughout the responses was a theme of respect for the students as essential for gaining their cooperation and interest. The teacher must have "little tolerance for bad behavior and must think that middle schoolers are interesting and entertaining" (Schmidt). Further, to be effective with this age level, a teacher needs a sense of humor. Potentially explosive emotional situations, often encountered when working with early teenagers, may dissipate if the teacher is able to show a sense of humor. At times, the ability to laugh at oneself, as modeled by the teacher, allows an early teenager to view herself or himself in a less serious way and encourages more joy in the act of music making.

A number of the teachers were strongly convinced that enthusiasm and the ability to motivate students were of utmost importance (Brown, Albert, and Schmidt). Furthermore, "Students at this age need to know that you care and are willing to challenge them to become the best that they can be. They need opportunities to grow musically. Believe me, they will take great pride in their accomplishments when they have worked hard to achieve them" (Fulmer). Another teacher concluded:

My ability to remain patient and in good humor while my students struggle from plateau to plateau has been one of the keys to their trust and respect. Significant learning is about challenge: the tougher the challenge, the more successful you feel about meeting it. Middle school kids love a challenge but must be able to trust that the adult guiding

them respects their efforts and never loses faith in what they will eventually attain. (Banton)



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My experiences over the years lead me to agree fully with the comments of these teachers. Middle school-aged students seek strong leadership as a rudder to guide them through the sometimes emotionally and socially stormy seas of early adolescence. They are attracted to teachers whom they perceive as emotionally stable, humanely directive, personally sensitive to the needs and interests of others, and highly knowledgeable about what they teach. These students want to be part of something that they perceive to be successful and unique, and they will expend great energy to achieve such goals.

But they also need an adult leader who is caring and respectful of them as individuals, who demands high behavioral and musical standards, and who has a sense of humor that can defuse emotionally tense situations, should they arise. In short, they want leadership that is steady, consistent, motivating, and "understanding of what students are going through in their early teen years" (Fulmer). Positive change is effected by a teacher with "a high level of confidence, charisma, and good verbal and nonverbal communication skills." (Patterson)

Professional Understandings

All of the teacher respondents recognized the necessity for understandings that are directly related to the development and operation of a successful choral program—specifically, understandings about vocal techniques appropriate for young singers and repertoire appropriate to the physical and vocal development of early adolescence. While I was already personally convinced that such knowledge is essential to program success, my convictions were reinforced by the teachers' responses.

That young singers go through some difficult physical and emotional times during early adolescence was noted often. Understanding that psychological and physical development are related closely to the accompanying voice changes is critical. Awareness of such psychological factors as self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and peer relationships is essential before one can begin to teach singing to these young people. This awareness helps the teacher develop effective teaching and classroom management strategies.

Knowledge of physical development helps the teacher to be aware of the physical characteristics of the early adolescent voice change for both males and females. As one teacher stated, "A knowledge and comprehension of the changing voice and how to deal with the changes that occur with this age group are essential" (Brown). This teacher also felt that each singer must be educated about the changes happening in his or her voice and reassured that these changes are normal. Another teacher reinforced this idea and added that "a good knowledge of vocal change that occurs in this age span ... is very important for keeping males enrolled in the program" (Clements). In summary,

The middle school choral director needs to have a thorough understanding of the different stages and ranges of a boy's changing voice, as well as a girl's. That understanding should also include the ability to teach the basics of great singing—pure vowels, diaphrag-

matic breathing, posture, phrasing, and vocal expressiveness. (Albert)

The above comment was representative of the views of a number of other respondents, who thought that a working knowledge of adolescent voice change was essential. This discussion was taken one step further by a respondent who observed, "By demystifying the voice for teenagers, we can contribute to greater self-confidence" (Banton). Another respondent asserted that the teacher must be a good vocal model who can demonstrate appropriate singing techniques, as well as good vocal health (Morrissey).

Teaching considerations, growing from an understanding of the adolescent voice, were not limited to factors of singing for most of the respondents. A number of them cited the selection of appropriate repertoire as essential to program success. An understanding of the adolescent physical and psychological development, as well as the voice maturation process, allows the teacher to select pieces that are appropriate in vocal range, text, and technical difficulty (Morrissey). An understanding of how to arrange and rearrange music for these voices can be a critical element in program success (Krunnfusz, Brown, and Albert). One teacher was most emphatic on this point:

The successful junior high choral teacher must be willing to put extra hours into choosing quality literature and matching it to the ensemble. Never stop looking for the perfect piece! This means hours and hours of going through your files, other teachers' files, and other schools' files; searching J. W. Pepper's Internet database for ideas (they have lists of many states' required contest and festival repertoire, among other things); reading professional magazines, saving lists of recommended literature, and then actually going to a music publisher and rummaging through their files; [and] going to concerts and conventions to hear what other similar groups are doing. (Patterson)

I was surprised that the teachers only tangentially addressed factors of school policy—specifically administration, curriculum, scheduling, or community influence—as important to program success. Certainly they were aware of how these factors could inhibit or promote program growth and development. As I pondered this seeming omission, I realized that these teachers were very proactive within their schools. They were highly cognizant of the necessity for performance and parental awareness of the program's goals and accomplishments.



The students want to be part of something that they perceive to be successful and unique.



Further, these teachers actively participated in the culture of their schools, serving in a number of instructional and advisory capacities. In fact, a number of them had been coaches for athletic activities, advisers to various clubs, and chaperones for various school activities. Each of them was aware of his or her place in the total school curriculum and sought opportunities to influence administrative and curricular decisions by serving on various committees composed of administrators, parents, and faculty members. These teachers understood that in order to affect school policy, one has to be in a position to affect decision making.

Technical Competence

When reading the responses of the teachers in this category of attributes,

I was struck again by their similarities. Time and again, the same skills were identified and even the same words were used. In addition, many technical skills that were identified also related to professional understandings about vocal development, music performance, and classroom management.

Most of the teachers' responses implied that knowledge of early adolescent vocal development was essential to conveying effective singing techniques and assigning appropriate vocal parts. One must know the stages of vocal change and the characteristic vocal qualities of each stage, the average and tessitura ranges for each stage, and the characteristic vocal problems often experienced during each stage. Indeed, a number of researchers have dedicated a great deal of time and effort to the examination of these phenomena and have published their findings extensively.²

Knowledge of the early adolescent voice can also assist teachers in the arrangement or rearrangement of pieces for their ensembles. One teacher observed: "There is still way too much music that doesn't fit the voices, especially male parts. The ability to [write] and rewrite parts [so that they] still sound musical lets all of the students have a legitimate shot at being successful" (Krunnfusz).

I recently conducted a weeklong course on adolescent voice development at Shenandoah University in Virginia. Most of the participants were teachers who had taught for several years and were attending the class because they had a number of questions. While these teachers were aware of vocal changes, they were unsure about how to classify singers according to change stages and about how to assign singers, especially boys, to choral parts that fit their particular stage of change. But perhaps their most urgent questions related to the selection of repertoire. Their efforts had convinced many of them that the ranges required by pieces advertised as middle school repertoire were often inappropriate for their singers. Parts were often too high or too low, or the vocal requirements were too difficult for young singers.

As we studied the stages of change, the reasons why these pieces were often inappropriate became evident. At the conclusion of the course, we arranged pieces according to what we had discovered and then had middle school singers perform them. While we were all aware that this procedure was very time consuming, we were convinced that the educational and musical results were worth the effort. Further, our discussions revealed that each person felt much better prepared to select music that would meet his or her ensemble's vocal, musical, and educational demands.



In addition to effective vocal modeling, the teacher must be a fine musician, possessing a discriminating ear for vocal tone and pitch accuracy.



The modeling and teaching techniques that are appropriate for singers experiencing vocal change were central to many of the responses in the technical skills category. Concerning modeling, one teacher concluded:

It is so important to promote and model good vocal health and good technique. The students must be given the tools to develop their instruments in the healthiest way possible. By modeling good vocal technique, students see that it is of #1 importance. With the knowledge of voice building, strengthening exercises, as well as ear training exercises help students take care of their voices when on their own. (Morrissey)

According to teachers' responses, techniques for the development of pitch accuracy, tonal development, and adequate working ranges within each stage were of utmost importance for the director to be effective and successful. One teacher summarized these thoughts succinctly: "Especially at the middle school level, the director is primarily a voice teacher and must know the instrument" (Krunnfusz).

In addition to effective vocal modeling, the teacher must be a fine musician, possessing a discriminating ear for vocal tone and pitch accuracy. As one teacher put it, "A good ear is a must" (Brown). In addition to having a good ear, a teacher must also be a "first-rate musician" (Schmidt). All of the responses in one way or another touched upon musical skills that might come under the heading of good conducting skills, both gestural and musical.

One additional skill that was evident in the majority of responses was piano skills. Stressing the ability to use the piano effectively, these teachers asserted that the keyboard assisted insecure singers with note learning and pitch accuracy. While I generally support this concept, I feel that young singers can become too dependent upon the piano for pitch support. The effective teacher must also know when to encourage a cappella singing as a means of strengthening student vocal tone, musicality, and independence. One respondent did point out that a teacher's keen ear and knowledge of the score frees him or her from the keyboard and helps in the identification of rehearsal inaccuracies and musical interpretation. In addition, "students can successfully rehearse anything a cappella if the teacher knows the score well and has a good ear" (Patterson). Not only will the students benefit from the teacher's ability to detect error, but their musical independence will encourage opportunities to perform without the crutch of keyboard doubling of choral parts.

The last area of major focus by respondents was rehearsal management. "Lessons must be interesting and have a good pace" (Larson). "Each rehearsal must be carefully planned to keep the student on task for the entire

class period but still be flexible enough to change as needed" (Brown). A well-planned lesson results from knowing the choral score well:

Before I can ask the questions and design the lessons that guide any choral student to understand the music they are singing, I have to have done my own homework. What are the rhythmic and melodic patterns? What is the relationship between the parts? How does the harmonic structure fit with the text? What are the meanings of the words and how does the musical structure reinforce their content and emotion? What is the cultural or historical context of the piece? Once I know these things, I can design opportunities for students to discover them as well. (Panton)



The effective teacher must also know when to encourage a cappella singing as a means of strengthening student vocal tone, musicality, and independence.



Another teacher agreed with the above statement, but used a different rationale for her comments on careful planning:

A teacher ... needs organization in rehearsal. A well-planned rehearsal should include warm-ups for technique; goals for each section of music to be explored; different, creative ways to achieve those goals; timing; and flexibility, if needed. Daily,

weekly, and monthly goals need to be set. Communication with parents and administration needs to be ongoing. (Albert)

Goal setting was very important to one teacher, who noted that the teacher "needs to adjust the expectations upward as goals are met, so the ability to know what the next step is and how to get there are crucial" (Patterson). Certainly, this last comment gets at the very essence of how careful preparation for and implementation of creative and interesting musical experiences can contribute so significantly to the success of the middle school choral program.

Finally, a number of the teachers maintained that teaching appropriate rehearsal and concert behavior is essential to the success of the program. It instills pride in and respect for what one is doing. Moreover, the teacher is the model for this behavior. In summary,

Always expect professional attitudes and behaviors in rehearsals, in the audience, and on the stage. It is important that the teacher model professionalism. Consider how you dress, what posture you model...your singing voice, and what physical things you do to produce sound. Is it what you want from your singers? (Patterson)

Formulating the Answer

I now felt better able to answer Pat's question about the teacher attributes necessary for success as a middle school choral director. And yet, while I could point out the personal qualities, professional training, and technical skills that contribute to success, I felt that something still seemed to be missing. That something became apparent to me as I reviewed the responses from teachers. Each of them had acquired insights as a result of personal and professional growth and experience.

From the recesses of my memory, I recalled what may have been a folk saying that my father often used when speaking of learning and growth: "When you are green, you grow, and when you are ripe, you rot." My

reflections upon the teacher responses not only brought back this saying but also heightened my understanding of its deeper meaning. While one is learning and open to new ideas and experiences, one can and will grow professionally. However, if one believes that he or she has all of the answers and no longer seeks new understandings and experiences, a process of professional



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degeneration sets in.

The success of all of these teachers is based upon their continual personal and professional growth. They are seeking to understand and perfect their ability to interact effectively on a personal level with their students. They are constantly striving to add to their professional training so that their perceptions about teaching and their potential to teach creatively will be heightened. They seek out opportunities to further develop and add to their technical skills as musicians and teachers through interaction with other teachers, attendance at professional conferences, and continued formal education. As one teacher put it, professional attributes are developed, maintained, and extended if the teacher does such things as "take lessons, go to concerts, sing in a community or church choir, attend professional conventions, observe other teachers and [borrow] their best ideas,

read professional journals, and attend sharing sessions with other choral teachers" (Patterson).

Pat had embarked upon the first stage of her journey toward success when she asked her perceptive question. I think she sensed that acquiring the attributes of a successful middle school choral teacher was in fact as much a matter of time and living as it was a matter of acquiring and assimilating personal qualities, professional training, and technical skills. As my father would have said, "She is green, and she will grow."

Notes

1. The teachers who responded to my questionnaire have given me permission to print their names and their comments: Ann Albert of Kromery Middle School, Middleton, Wisconsin; Leanne Banton of Kellogg Middle School, Shoreline, Washington; Kathy Brown of Gillette Middle School, Gillette, Wisconsin; Ann Clements of Totem Junior High School, Kent, Washington; Sheri Erickson of Leota Junior High School, Woodinville, Washington; Karen Fulmer of Sumner Junior High School, Sumner, Washington; Daniel Krunnusz of Hamilton Middle School, Madison, Wisconsin; James Larson of West High School, Madison, Wisconsin; Mary Lynn Morrissey of Central Middle School, Waukesha, Wisconsin; Leora Patterson of Cedar Heights Junior High School, Kent, Washington; and Mary Schmidt of Sun Prairie Secondary Schools, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.

2. See John M. Cooksey, "The Development of an Eclectic Theory for the Training and Cultivation of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice" (four-part article), *Choral Journal* 18 (October 1977):5-14; (November 1977): 5-17; (December 1977): 5-15; (January 1978): 5-17; John M. Cooksey, "The Male Adolescent Changing Voice: Some New Perspectives," in Maria Runfola (ed.) *Proceedings: Research Symposium on the Male Adolescent Voice* (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1984).

Also see Kenneth Phillips, *Teaching Kids to Sing* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1998); Anthony L. Barresi, *Barresi on the Adolescent Voice*, videotape (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Extension Arts, 1986); Anthony L. Barresi and Diane Bless, "The Relation of Selected Variables to the Perception of Tessitura Pitches in the Adolescent Changing Voice," in Maria Runfola (ed.), *Proceedings: Research Symposium on the Male Adolescent Voice* (Buffalo, NY: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1984). ■