

Instructional Decision-Making among Expert Choral and Instrumental Directors: How Musical  
Setting Influences Pedagogy

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**Abstract**

In large music ensembles, directors make countless instructional decisions on a daily basis that indicate their learning priorities and guide student learning. In particular, expert music directors (i.e., those having earned a master's degree and/or National Board Certification) have advanced problem-solving strategies and effective means of fostering student learning in their ensembles. To explore the influence of musical setting on directors' instructional decision-making, the authors examined expert choral and instrumental directors' perspectives on instructional decision-making. Forty experienced music teachers employed as either a choral or instrumental ensemble music teachers wrote open-ended responses to three scenarios, each representing different instructional challenges. Three main themes emerged related to instructional challenges: (1) Pedagogy, (2) Student Motivation, and (3) Classroom Management. Within each theme, the authors articulated multiple topics that revealed similarities and differences between the choral and instrumental settings. Understanding these comparisons and contrasts by musical setting is essential to enhancing teacher education programs. Implications include improving teachers' self-awareness and advancing professional development opportunities for both choral and instrumental music directors.

## **Introduction**

Instructional decisions that teachers make as they plan, execute, and reflect upon their teaching encompass both philosophical and practical matters, indicating both their focus of attention and their fundamental approach to education. These decisions are multifaceted and shaped by an amalgamation of influences including teachers' intuitions, values, and professional knowledge (Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Lee & Porter, 1990; Vanlommel, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2016). Factors such as educational policy, teacher training, the teaching environment, and teachers' beliefs regarding their students' capabilities also influence these views. Specific to music teachers, the musical instructional settings can vary greatly (i.e., in general music, instrumental music, and vocal music courses). Having previously published their research on teachers' decision making (Johnson & Matthews, 2017), the authors conducted this study to investigate choral and instrumental music teachers' instructional decision making.

The authors intended to explore the ways in which choral and instrumental ensemble teachers made instructional decisions to reflect the similarities of their respective settings. Because ensemble music-making takes place in social environments where teaching and learning are communal achievements, the musical goals may present different emphases and challenges than in typical classes (Gates, 2000; Lalama, 2015; Parker, 2016). Consequently, the authors also aimed to investigate the less apparent ways these music teachers choose particular approaches and procedures to promote student learning. Finally, the authors selected expert music teachers as participants to capitalize on their informed insights and thoughtful decision-making experience (Calderhead, 1996; Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare and contrast the instructional decision-making of expert choral and instrumental music teachers.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Decision-Making in General Education**

In general, teaching requires educators to make a variety of decisions throughout the teaching process (Shavelson & Stern, 1981). These decisions reveal teachers' motivations as well as their use of metacognition, critical thinking, and pedagogical reasoning. One paradigm in the general education literature specifies three phases of instructional decisions: pre-instructional planning, decisions made during teaching time, and post-instructional reflection (Bernstein-Colton & Spark-Langer, 1993). Furthermore, teachers often rely on information gleaned from classroom observations to modify current and future instruction (Bernstein-Colton & Spark-Langer, 1993; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014; Fogarty, Wang, & Creek, 1983). Specifically, in this paradigm, educators select appropriate instructional activities and materials based on contextual factors and curriculum standards, e.g. student needs, preferences, prior knowledge, and skill levels (King-Sears & Emenova, 2007; Lutnpe & Chambers, 2001). Also, while interacting with learners, teachers make spontaneous decisions about adapting instruction to meet student needs and to promote learning goals (Griffith, Bauml, & Barksdale, 2015) often referred to as reflection-in-action (Schön, 1986). These pedagogical decisions include how and when to scaffold instruction based on student performance and success (King-Sears & Emenova, 2007). After instruction, teachers' assessment of student learning serves to gather evidence for post-instructional reflection and decision-making (Kohler, Henning, & Usma-Wilches, 2008).

Furthermore, research on expert teachers adds a valuable component to understanding decision making in the classroom. More specifically, the decision-making skill of expert teachers has a noticeable effect on the quality of classroom instruction (Calderhead, 1996). Although the criteria for teacher expertise are difficult to delineate clearly (Berliner, 1986; Palmer, Stough, Burdinski, & Gonzales, 2005), expert teachers' grasp of both practical and theoretical insights about their teaching process is a key expression of their professionalism and pedagogical reflection (Carr & Skinner, 2009; Winkler, 2001). More specifically, these include experience making practical decisions and reflection about those decisions in general education. While years of teaching experience may seem to be a logical measure of teaching expertise, that metric alone does not provide a reliable indication of teaching expertise in music education (Standley & Madsen, 1991). Instead, they found that teacher preparation and subsequent education had a noticeable impact on pedagogical competence.

Perceptions of teaching environments can influence educators' approaches to teaching (Hora, 2014; Prosser & Trigwell, 1997). Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, and Ashwin (2006) found that teachers of physical sciences, engineering and medicine courses indicated a more teacher-focused approach to instruction in contrast to social sciences and humanities teachers who reported a more student-focused classroom. Hora's (2014) study of post-secondary math and science faculty found that disciplinary affiliation played a role faculty their views regarding how students learn and in turn influences decision-making. Specifically, the author found similarities and variations across disciplines with all teachers highlighting the importance of practice and perseverance but with differences between disciplines regarding the importance of using examples, repetition, memorization and individualized instruction. Decision-making of physical education teachers with its variety of sport contexts shows that secondary physical

education teachers make instructional decisions related to the age and number of students, curriculum requirements; and available resources (Viciano, Blanco, & Mayorga-Vega, 2015).

### **Decision-Making in the Variety of Musical Settings**

The planning-instruction-reflection model articulated by Bernstein-Colton and Spark-Langer (1993) is consistent with those used in music teaching, such as the three-legged curriculum model consisting of objectives, strategies, and evaluation, described by Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2014). In general music settings, teachers prioritize a life-long love of music and fostering responsible citizenship, with pedagogical foci on developing clear goals and objectives, using appropriate methodologies, and student assessment (Johnson & Matthews, 2017). In instrumental settings, however, much of the instructional focus during beginning instruction highlights proper tone production, posture, and other specific psychomotor skills with the overarching goal to build individual and ensemble skills (Millican, 2012).

Some scholars have investigated instructional decisions made in a variety of musical settings. For example, in a comparative study examining pre-service teachers' perceptions of the knowledge and skills needed to teach effectively in instrumental vs. choral contexts, Rohwer and Henry (2004) found identical ratings in the top three musical skills, i.e., musical expression, error diagnosis, sight-reading. The authors also reported differences as expected by their respective performance area, i.e., choral respondents rated singing and piano skills higher, while instrumental respondents ranked transposition higher. These results parallel the findings reported by Taebel (1980) who surveyed 201 in-service teachers about the relative importance of musical competencies and their corresponding impact on student learning. In his study, significant differences by area were limited to competencies with obvious direct applications to a particular

music education setting, e.g. vocal demonstration with proper technique scored significantly higher among the choral respondents. Some previous studies addressed instructional efficacy in both choral and instrumental music ensembles (e.g. Bergee, 1992; Price, 1992). However, those authors did not provide comparative data by ensemble type, nor did they study expert ensemble directors.

In other related research, Parker (2016) highlighted the importance of creating a caring community within ensembles as an important part of successful music instruction. In her case study of four choral directors, she found that there were intentionally individual and ensemble relationships that foster caring communities, cooperation, acceptance, and teamwork. Influences of the urban setting have been studied in choral and instrumental music, showing that teachers instructional methods are influenced by knowledge of the learners and their cultural contexts and teachers' personal, practical knowledge (Shaw, 2015).

Although these examples represent an exploration of instructional decision-making in different musical settings, substantive application of this research to comparative choral and instrumental music education settings seems to be lacking in the literature. Many publications on choral music instruction focus on methodology, conducting, and choral literature (e.g. Madura, 2017). Similarly, the literature on instrumental music education highlights the importance of student motivation and performance achievement (Colwell, Hewitt, & Fonder, 2017; Miksza, Tan, & Dye, 2016). Consequently, research on music teachers' decision making and how it varies by musical setting appears to be largely absent from the literature.

Music ensemble directors not only guide their students in developing the necessary performance techniques, but they also conduct their ensembles in rehearsal and performance. These directors, however, may have other priorities that indicate other important teaching and

learning foci. To investigate for differences and similarities in music teachers' instructional decisions by musical context, the authors examined choral and instrumental directors' perspectives on instructional decision-making in middle and high-school musical ensembles. The authors used these three guiding questions to frame their study: (1) what decision-making processes do expert choral and instrumental music teachers use as they plan, execute, and reflect on their classroom instruction? (2) what motivates them to make these decisions? and (3) how does musical setting influence pedagogical decision-making?

## Method

### Participants

Participants included forty ( $N = 40$ ) expert music teachers employed as either choral or instrumental ensemble directors. Nineteen taught in a choral setting while 21 taught in an instrumental setting, either band or orchestra. To qualify as "expert teachers," participants needed to have earned a master's degree and/or National Board Certification as validation of their advanced knowledge about the disciplines of teaching and music (Berliner, 1986). The authors used this qualification because years of teaching experience does not account for observed teaching expertise in music education settings (Standley & Madsen, 1991). Thirty-nine of the participants held master's degrees (choral  $n = 14$ , instrumental  $n = 20$ ), and one choral participant held only a bachelor's degree, but with a National Board Certification. Five participants held doctoral degrees in addition to their bachelor's and master's degrees (choral  $n = 4$ , instrumental  $n = 1$ ). Thirty of the participants had been teaching more than 11 years, and 10 participants had been teaching less than 10 years. Forty-two percent taught high-school (choral  $n = 10$ , instrumental  $n = 7$ ), while 38% taught middle school (choral  $n = 6$ , instrumental  $n = 9$ ).

Spanning multiple grade ranges, 15% taught in both middle and high schools (choral  $n = 3$ , instrumental  $n = 3$ ), and 5% taught either elementary and middle, or elementary, middle, and high school (choral  $n = 0$ , instrumental  $n = 2$ ). See Table 1 for their demographic information.

Table 1

*Demographics of music teachers*

	Choral	Instrumental
<b>Degrees</b>		
Bachelor Degree	1*	-
Bachelor & Master Degree	14	20
Master & Doctoral Degree	4	1
<b>Additional certifications</b>		
National Board Certification	10	2
Other Certification past initial Certification	-	2
<b>Grade Level Presently Teaching</b>		
Middle School	6	9
High School	10	7
Middle & High School	3	3

Elementary & Middle School	-	1
Elementary, Middle & High School	-	1
In-Service		
Total years of Teaching 4-10	4	6
Total years of Teaching 11-20	9	6
Total years of Teaching 21-30	6	9

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*Note: n = 19 Choral; n = 21 Instrumental*

*Note: \*The one choral participant without a graduate degree had National Board Certification.*

## **Procedures**

Each participant wrote open-ended responses to a set of three rehearsal scenarios, adapted to his or her musical setting (choral or instrumental) and presenting different decision-making challenges. The authors adapted the scenarios from *Music in Childhood* (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014) to represent the complexities of teaching in both choral and instrumental music. Because using scenarios facilitates critical and reflective thinking (Conway, 1999a), the authors chose to use them in the current study to allow participants to express themselves freely. More specifically, participants explained how they would finish the same rehearsal scenarios and then provided reasons for their answers. Their responses illuminated their views of multiple aspects of instruction, classroom management, curriculum, and the learning environment. This methodical approach provided an expressive process for respondents to describe their reasonings across similar situations (Alexander & Maiden, 2005). It also allowed respondents sufficient time for reflection and metacognition, an important element for expert teachers to apply theory to practice (Carr & Skinner, 2009; Winkler, 2001). This method afforded the authors a way to maintain the

open-ended nature of this study (Rossman & Rallis, 2011), and to investigate applied reasonings and metacognition by comparing and contrasting responses systematically (Tandogan & Orhan, 2007). See Appendices A and B for the choral and instrumental scenarios, respectively.

### **Analysis**

The authors began analyzing the data using open coding to investigate participants' pedagogical reasoning. This approach enabled the authors to examine specific decisions in response to the scenarios, and then to develop themes around the responses. As an established research methodology, grounded theory provided the authors with a systematic process to collect and analyze data inductively. The authors used a modified grounded theory approach to analyze participants' decision-making in their classrooms and then derived emergent themes from their analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Participant responses to instructional scenarios revealed motivational trends within choral and instrumental music contexts. Multiple analysts, peer reviews, and systematic data coding enhanced the data analysis, triangulation, credibility, and rigor of this study (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Initially, nineteen codes emerged when the authors independently examined the data. Through discussion and memoing, the authors narrowed these into three shared themes: pedagogy, student motivation, and classroom management. Within some themes, more specific setting-based ideas emerged illustrating differences in pedagogical approach and performance practices within the choral and instrumental ensembles.

## Findings

The findings represent three main themes that highlight the overall similarities of the decision-making processes described by expert choral and instrumental music educators. The major themes were: (1) Pedagogy, (2) Student Motivation, and (3) Classroom Management. In general, both choral and instrumental music respondents highlighted the importance of utilizing a variety of strategies to focus student learning throughout the rehearsal. Also, as both settings involved students working in ensembles, directors from both groups indicated the importance of the second theme, Student Motivation. Respondents focused on balancing successes and challenges, creating positive rehearsal climates, and the value teamwork to motivate students. Classroom Management emerged as a third theme, cited by participants from both groups. They mentioned specific expectations and structures to address, prevent, and respond to behavioral problems in their respective musical settings. Within each theme, variations emerged that described differences between choral and instrumental settings. Those included developing techniques specific to the voice or the varied instruments, highlighting different aspects of music literacy, and utilizing different methods to motivate ensemble members. In the following sections, the authors discuss similarities within each theme and then explore contrasting ideas by musical setting.

### Theme 1: Pedagogy

The first theme of Pedagogy included how participants focused on particular instructional strategies to develop students' musical knowledge. More specifically, three specific areas of instructional strategies emerged within their respective settings: (1) using warm-ups to teach

skills and focus student attention, (2) scaffolding student learning, and (3) assessing student learning.

**Warm-ups.** Many choral and instrumental teachers discussed the importance of a warm-up which served several purposes. First, warm-ups set the tone for the rehearsal and guided student attention to focus on the rehearsal. Instrumental director Matt explained the importance of the warm-up process, “Warm-ups should be routine and effective. They need to engage the mind as well as the air, tone, and characteristic sound of all the ensemble.” Choral director Teresa echoed the importance by writing, “Warm-ups are not a race to the finish line to just get them done. They are an imperative part of the vocal rehearsal process and should connect to the work that is being done in class that day.”

Both choral directors and instrumental directors discussed how they used the warm-up to reinforce good fundamentals within their ensemble. Differences between the choral and instrumental teachers in the area of warm-up reflected performance practices in their respective settings. For example, the choral teachers highlighted the importance of tone and using the designated warm-up time teaching and reinforcing proper vocal techniques. Specifically, they viewed the warm-up time as the time for them to be “voice teachers” working on strategies for each student to improve their personal vocal technique. During this time, they focused on particular singing techniques such as tone production, unifying vowels, developing range, posture, and music literacy. Choral director Amber’s response to the scenarios articulated this idea:

The chorus teacher is the voice teacher. If she needs for the students to be able to sing in the higher ranges, she will need to give every student instruction on the vocal pedagogy required to reach the high notes. If she needs them all to successfully attempt the rhythmic responses she has created, she will need to slow down and make sure that everyone has the rhythmic vocabulary to complete the exercises.

Instrumental director responses regarding warm-ups focused on students' fundamental music literacy skills, with a basis in prior knowledge. The instrumental respondents highlighted the importance of connecting the warm-up to a mastery objective, such as using the same key signature for a warm-up that corresponds to specific rehearsal or performance repertoire. For example, Renee's response also supported the idea of building on musical knowledge. She stated, "I would tailor the warm-up to be in the same key or keys as the music of the day, and use rhythms from the music for the exercises. This would make things more relevant and interesting for the students." Also, instrumental teacher, Kevin, indicated he would focus on long tones in the warm-up to build endurance and ensemble sound. Although participants cited differences in pedagogy through comments related to the basics of their respective performing area, posture was a fundamental skill mentioned frequently by both choral and instrumental teachers.

**Scaffolding.** Both choral and instrumental teachers discussed the second pedagogical strategy of Scaffolding. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) first used this term to describe an instructor's or capable peer's modeling of a skill with the goal of gradually removing the support as the students develop the skill (Schunk, 2015). This practice provides students with instructional support for new skill acquisition (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992). As examples of scaffolding, both choral and instrumental teachers mentioned the importance of breaking down tasks, using slower tempi, focusing on small, attainable sections, and isolating challenging passages. Some teachers discussed the importance of scaffolding musical concepts by teaching them through separate exercises. Another strategy respondents described was addressing a particular concept separately from the larger work as part of the warm-up or within the body of the rehearsal. Many teachers also addressed designing home practice routines to address specific issues.

Both choral and instrumental participants discussed the importance of breaking musical elements down into manageable tasks and thereby tailoring the pace of the instruction to fit the students' development. Instrumental director Charles highlighted this process when addressing learning scales:

I would have them say the fingerings (e.g. 1, low 2, 3 low 4 etc.) [then] I would isolate the problems with rhythm. I would have the students say the rhythms out loud together. I would then have the first violins, cellos, and basses play while the seconds say the rhythms, [Next], I would then switch it up.

Choral director Nathan agreed with Charles as he explained how to increase student vocal range,

“[I would] concentrate the choir's efforts in an area that is slightly comfortable, but challenging for the majority of the choir... much [of the] exercise should be done at the edge of the comfortable [vocal] range, gradually moving into the more challenging exteriors of the range, and working back and forth in those areas.”

**Assessing student learning.** While the third pedagogical strategy of assessment was more prominent among instrumental teachers, participants in both groups responded with assessment ideas as tools to modify their teaching according to student accomplishments and challenges. In particular, many teachers highlighted the importance of formative assessment to aid their reflection-in-action (Schön, 1986). The differences between each group of directors focused on learning objectives specific to their musical setting. For example, the choral participants repeatedly emphasized quality tone production while the instrumental participants highlighted learning fingerings and scales.

Instrumental director Adam explained his thoughts on assessing student learning in a scenario, along with implications for altering instruction:

[Ms. Barr] needs to do a quick formative assessment of where the students are and where they begin to lose their ability to stay with the group... she might ask “tell me where you are unable to play well.” Then she could begin from that point. Slowing down and working in smaller chunks should produce quicker results and much happier students!

Instrumental teacher Irene added, “Spot check by section or by rows. Take the time to make sure they are ‘getting it.’ ... Quality versus quantity should be the goal. Do my kids understand more today?” Choral director Paula agreed and introduced an interpersonal connection when she wrote, “I would slow down and better assess the sounds that I was hearing. Once I determined where the issues were, I would have the students pair up in weak-strong pairs and practice the rhythms together.” Instrumental director Frank echoed both Paula and Irene with his comment, “If Ms. Barr’s goal is to introduce the new scales and new rhythms that students aren’t familiar with, then I would assess student progress and go back to review more thoroughly the scales/rhythms that students are least proficient with.” In this manner, teachers described warm-up activities to prepare their students for a more successful rehearsal. Following instruction, the teachers used assessment to reflect and modify their instructional decisions for the subsequent rehearsal.

## **Theme 2: Student Motivation**

With regard to the theme of student motivation, responses from the choral and instrumental participants had a high degree of consistency. Replies from participants in both groups centered around three areas: (1) balancing challenges and successes, (2) creating a positive rehearsal climate, and (3) highlighting teamwork.

**Balancing challenges and successes.** Many respondents discussed the importance of encouraging students to grow. They also indicated the importance of promoting student efficacy by highlighting success during the rehearsal. Instrumental director Brian pointed out the importance of alternating rehearsal of a particular element in a specific passage, with returning to a larger section where the students were successful. He recommended designing rehearsals that

ended with a sense of accomplishment and concluded on a positive note. Choral director Brittany emphasized the importance of this when she wrote,

Students who are so eager and who are trying so hard should not be challenged to the point of failure over and over. Little failures help students work harder, but it is up to the teacher to ensure that her students mostly experience success.

Many other participants indicated that ending on a positive note was important for enhancing student motivation. For example, Brittany also wrote, “The most important thing would be to end the class with the students being successful at something and regaining some confidence.”

Choral director Edgar agreed, “One important element would be to back up to the spot where everyone had been equally successful...” Instrumental director Kevin added to this by writing:

I would slow the tempo down thus differentiating the practice into a manner where more of the students can find success. Once the success is there, the tempo can slowly begin to increase. It is better to find a common ground for all to be successful and then to scaffold off of that common ground (providing harder exercises to those who are advanced, while providing simpler ones to those who are struggling).

**Productive rehearsal climate.** For the second area of Student Motivation, the participants focused on the joy of performing and the satisfaction from a job well done. Then they discussed how they would build on this for future performances. Choral director Paula wrote:

I would remind them how great it felt to sing so successfully for their parents at the December concert and remind them of how hard they had to work to get their pieces to such a high level of performance.

Connecting with the students was also paramount to these directors. Brian, an instrumental director wrote:

First off, be real...connect with students where they are, engage (even if briefly) in the general merriment, express my delight and enthusiasm for being back [after the break],

wanting the band to continue to be the most amazing 7th grade band in the history of history, engage the students in the business of making music - from the basics on up. ...Make their experience by one that sets us up for a spectacular 2nd semester...

In both choral and instrumental contexts, teachers focused on creating a positive climate by giving positive feedback when warranted. Instrumental director Frank stated:

Most students appreciate positive feedback and will work to gain that same attention (rather than negative attention) from the teacher. I would be sure to focus on the music only—draw attention to things the students already know (previous knowledge) - identify patterns in the music, be sure that everyone is involved in the music making process right from that moment forward.

Instrumental director Howard agreed:

I would find a scale we can all perform correctly. This is to set an atmosphere of success. I would then focus students' attention to certain aspects of successful performance by commending them on proper bowing, listening to each other, correct finger placements.

**Teamwork.** For the third topic in Student Motivation, teachers in both musical settings explained how students were a team and that the success of the ensemble relied on everyone.

Instrumental director Frank stated:

I would remind the students that respect and support of one another is most important in an ensemble/team setting, and that we rely on one another to be successful together ... I would end the rehearsal with a reminder again (using different words than before) that the band needs all members' contributions to be successful, to remind them to respect and support one another.

Similarly, choral director Amber wrote, "Members of a choir are a team, and we are only as strong as our weakest link." This observation is consistent with the communal nature of ensemble music-making (Gates, 2000; Lalama, 2015; Parker, 2016).

Regarding the student motivation theme, the most striking difference among the choral and instrumental respondents was the emphasis on interpersonal vs. intrapersonal focus. While participants in both groups emphasized the success of the ensemble and unification of the group, the instrumental directors promoted interpersonal knowing and cultivated a team effort more

often than their choral counterparts. For example, instrumental director Ophelia wrote, “Many times, with peers pairing up, students feel more success, and students who are doing well feel very good when they can help a classmate out.” This example indicates the value of interpersonal reliance on peers within the group. Also, following a disciplinary action, instrumental director Frank wrote, “I would remind the students that respect and support of one another is most important in an ensemble/team setting, and that we rely on one another to be successful together.” In an example of cooperative learning, instrumental director Nathan highlighted another method of using teams of teams with peer-teaching to help the whole ensemble conquer scales by writing:

I [would] form teams which include a mix of high-achievers and those needing to catch up. If the students could handle it, spread the teams out in the room to work on one of the more challenging scales, then have each team report back by performing the scale for the rest of the class.

This comment promoted mutual respect and support to achieve performance excellence, highlighting the value of social skills and cooperation.

Both choral and instrumental teachers indicated the importance of recognizing when students were doing well, whether that success was in performance, demonstrating good posture, or exhibiting appropriate behavior. For example, choral director Jonah indicated that he would, “...choose phrases they [the students] could do well, and build on these small successes with some positive feedback.” Instrumental director Irene further exemplified how teachers reward ensemble members’ good behavior with verbal praise, “Give a positive note of thanks to those students who are doing what they need to be doing and prompt the off-task students to participate as expected.” Instrumental director Renee agreed:

A thing that actually still works in middle school is to say, “I like how Bob is demonstrating good posture,” or, “I like how Sally is playing with excellent tone.” The

kids like to be praised, but only when it's real and defined. You can't say, "the trumpets are doing a good job," because you haven't defined what you mean.

### **Theme 3: Classroom Management**

The third theme of Classroom Management included four approaches common to both choral and instrumental participants: (1) clear expectations and consequences, (2) specific management strategies, (3) teacher reflection, and (4) ways to address unforeseen problems.

**Clear expectations and consequences.** Many choral and instrumental participants mentioned the importance of communicating expectations and working with students to develop and use regular classroom procedures. These expectations included the use of strategic seating to prevent or to respond to behavioral problems, while others focused on good tone production and proper playing posture. Teachers in both settings commented that established classroom procedures should be in place so that students understand expectations and teachers avoid classroom management issues. Here, instrumental director Adam provided an example of this expectation:

If I were the director coming into the situation, as a class we would put everything away, we would go outside the classroom and we would learn as a group the proper way to enter the room, what the expectations are... students [need to be]assigned where to be, [the teacher]needs to have materials (music) ready prior to class and have a plan in place.

Some choral teachers also focused on having the ensemble generate classroom expectations. For example, choral director Harriet wrote, "I would .... take the time to go over classroom expectations, and I would most likely make my students practice the procedures." Several teachers in both settings mentioned consequences for inappropriate talking which included the loss of the privilege to participate, worksheets, or going to the office. Additional

respondents explained that it is important for students to understand and see that consequences to actions exist, and for the teachers to be consistent with expectations and consequences.

**Specific management strategies.** Participants cited numerous strategies to manage the classroom. Those included the use of assigned seating, the teacher's proximity to students, and playing to minimize talking. For many teachers, seating charts were essential classroom management tools. The students' placement within the ensemble helped with disruptions and talking during rehearsals. For instrumental directors, the seating can be determined by traditional ensemble set-up. In contrast, some instrumental directors indicated that non-traditional seating could be an effective classroom management tool. Instrumental director David explained:

I would assign seats, with specific attention given to separating problem combinations of students. Students do not have to sit in a typical band set-up, especially in the younger grades. Put the saxophones in the front, the flutes in back.

Several choral teachers recommended placing strong singers as mentors next to weaker singers to help with pitch matching and confidence. Choral director Rachel highlighted that non-traditional seating could help students gain proficiency as she wrote:

Switch the seating - put the tenors and basses in the front and altos and sopranos in the back. Focus on having the whole group sing a section of the bass and tenor parts - show that the bass and tenor parts are as important as the higher voices.

Particularly in choral settings, and in contrast to instrumental ensembles, choral directors emphasized inclusive pedagogy, where the stronger singers helped the struggling students. Choral director Diana wrote, "It would be helpful to have some of the best singers interspersed or behind the weaker singers so they can be heard. Possibly have the students move to a circle so that they can hear each other." Choral director Nathan agreed and commented:

[The teacher in the scenario] should spend a fair effort teaching to the back end of the group and pulling them forward. Also, having the strongest singers all in the front is a poor plan. They should be spread around the sections with stronger singers next to

weaker ones, and the majority of strength concentrated towards the back (so as to be heard better by those in the front).

The teacher's proximity to the students and use of playing to minimize talking were also strategies reported by instrumental directors. For example, instrumental director Frank stated, "The teacher should work to match the energy level of the band - move around the room away from the podium to be sure that everyone is on-task, etc." He continued with another strategy which was balancing the amount of time spent on rehearsing (playing) as compared with time spent on verbal instruction (talking). He stated, "I would be sure the students are playing their instrument as much as possible during that time - only limited verbal instruction from the teacher (if instruments are being played there is less chance of student talking, etc.)"

**Teacher reflection.** Teacher reflection provided a basis for improving Classroom Management in both choral and instrumental music settings. For example, as he responded to the scenarios, instrumental director Brian reflected on the importance of his role in preparing and engaging the students:

Several questions that I'd need to answer: past history with the students; what worked for them? Role of peer interactions; what have I set up as a precedent for student leaders throughout the group, who has been empowered to set the tone for the group? But also, more importantly: how real have I been in bringing myself to the group at this post-holiday moment, and how have I engaged the students? What are our expectations on the first day back? Have I given the group an opportunity to check in with my expectations...?

In another instance, Brian reflected on musical details, student behavior, and effective problem-solving strategies, by asking:

For reflection - what's with the tempo that the students are trying to match at a dress rehearsal? Are we not settled into performance mode by now? Dress rehearsals are for confidence, not craziness. Set the tone/energy/intensity level first, then dig in.

In contrast, the choral directors relied more on intrapersonal reflection for both instructional and behavioral issues. For example, choral director Edgar made this suggestion

when the choir was having difficulty with a particular passage, "...make sure everyone knew exactly how they had been successful. You do not under any circumstances want them to be unaware of what they know." This observation underscores the value of the students appreciating their abilities, even when their performance could be improved. Similarly, choral director Mark made this recommendation following a disciplinary incident to reinforce self-knowledge and responsibility: "I would ask the students to write a reflection on why they were removed from class while they waited."

**Addressing unforeseen problems.** Addressing unforeseen problems, including extra-musical concerns, was an essential aspect of Classroom management for all teachers. For example, when addressing a fight in one scenario, many teachers indicated that order and safety were the most important considerations. Their responses included alerting administration and parents immediately. Choral director Laura explained, "I would call the office to help get those two students removed from the situation or send another student to grab an administrator."

Instrumental director, Emily concurred and wrote:

I would record the time of the incident, the actions I observed to present to administration in an office referral after rehearsal. I'm not sure how long this would take and could ruin the chance to continue rehearsing. If necessary, I'd give up the rest of rehearsal for the safety of the students and create a plan B on the spot that asks everyone to bring everything back to the band room, put instruments away, bring chairs and stands back and all percussion equipment.

After confirming the safety of the students, many directors discussed how to refocus the students on finishing the rehearsal effectively. Instrumental director Emily emphasized the importance of giving minimal attention to the altercation by speaking quietly to the disruptive students in her response. Instrumental director Larry agreed and stated:

I would begin by diffusing the situation. I would separate the two boys and contact the front office administration for assistance with the fighting students, assistance with the student with the cut on her foot, and to reestablish order and safety. Then, I would speak

to the class (who are now silent after the escalated scenario) about making good choices, and how Mack's choice to knock over the snare drum caused more trouble than he intended. I would ask the students leading questions about how it could have been handled better and allow them to answer briefly. Once the mood has calmed and if time permits, we can then continue with our music lesson.

Other suggestions included a discussion with the students on their desire to give a good performance and on the importance of a dress rehearsal.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this study illustrate how expert choral and instrumental teachers described their decision-making processes as prompted by responding to three rehearsal scenarios. The themes revealed respondents' instructional decisions with a focus on: Pedagogy, Student Motivation, and Classroom Management. The authors found a multiplicity of similarities in scenario responses among the choral and instrumental teachers. Regardless of their musical setting, choral and instrumental participants highlighted the importance of pedagogical knowledge and instructional strategies as they described decisions about how they would assist the students in advancing their musical skills and knowledge. The teachers also focused on the importance of developing group skills to create unity within their ensembles. Participants also agreed on the importance of making classroom management decisions, clarifying expectations, and following through with consequences when needed. Despite the possibility that differences in the musical setting would amplify inconsistencies in participants' decision-making processes (Rohwer & Henry, 2004; Taebel, 1980), the emergent themes demonstrated more parallel processes than differences. The overall commonalities in the decision-making processes between the choral and instrumental participants may be a function of similarities in their overall common

tasks, e.g. leading musical ensembles, teaching performance skills, and developing musical understandings.

Themes from both the choral and instrumental responses indicated overlapping ideas, yet subtle differences emerged within each theme. These differences aligned with the specific pedagogies related to developing vocal or instrumental techniques. For example, choral teachers focused their warm-ups and assessments on vocal tone production, while instrumental teachers focused on fingerings and scales. Similarly, interpersonal vs. intrapersonal foci as related to group unification represented setting-based differences in the Student Motivation theme, reminiscent of Parker's findings (2016). The use of seating by teachers as a classroom management tool also varied by musical setting, with more emphasis on inclusive pedagogy being apparent in the choral participants' responses. While the musical setting might appear to shape the tools that ensemble directors use to meet their goals (Rohwer & Henry, 2004; Taebel, 1980), instructional decisions seem to be congruent across both the choral and instrumental musical educational settings.

In a previous investigation, the authors utilized a similar methodology and found that general music teachers highlighted different learning outcomes in comparison to ensemble directors (Johnson & Matthews, 2017). Specifically, general music teachers sought to promote a life-long love of music and responsible citizenship. Other key components of general music instruction were decisions guided by specific formal and informal methodologies. In the current study, performance, student motivation, and classroom management were the most prominent themes guiding the decision-making processes of ensemble directors, regardless of musical setting.

Limitations of the current study included teachers responding to hypothetical scenarios and self-reporting their instructional decisions. In the future, researchers could observe teachers in their classrooms to examine their actions *in situ* for a more authentic view of practical decision-making in choral and instrumental ensembles. Other factors that could influence instructional decision-making (e.g. socio-economic status, school resources, and developmental differences between middle-school and high-school students) were beyond the scope of the current study. Follow-up studies could examine the effect these settings and other factors have on music teachers' instructional decisions.

Understanding teacher decision-making in musical settings is essential to effective teaching, program development, and music teacher education. Understanding how teachers make decisions will help guide teacher education curriculum. Understanding which tools and concepts are similar or different across choral and instrumental instruction is also a crucial element of addressing both choral and instrumental preservice teachers' curriculums. These findings may also help music teachers who find themselves teaching outside of their concentration to make informed instructional decisions outside their pedagogical "comfort zone" (e.g. vocal teachers teaching an instrumental class or vice versa).

In addition, by highlighting similarities and differences in instructional decision-making by musical setting, findings of this study may guide music teacher-educators to design more effective curricula in response to licensure that includes both choral and instrumental contexts. These and other insights will forward instructional strategies for music-teacher education pedagogy and practice. Other implications of this study include improving in-service teachers' self-awareness, advancing professional development for expert teachers, and enhancing the effectiveness of music teacher education programs. Reflective thinking is an important skill for

teachers at all stages of their careers (Conway, 1999b) and encourages them to reconsider their thinking by evaluating prior knowledge (Veal & MaKinster, 1999). Utilizing teaching scenarios to prompt reflection is another outcome of this study, potentially useful in future investigations.

## **Appendix A**

### Choral Scenarios

#### Choral Scenario 1

It is January and Mr. Brickford's seventh-grade choir at Northside Middle School is back from break. Mr. Brickford plans for the students to begin their Grade 3 festival/contest music. This is a step-up from the Grade 2 music they performed for the December concert. As his students arrive, they chat and jostle before settling into their seats. Because Mr. Brickford has not finalized the seating chart, the students sit with their friends within their sections and begin to warm up. Mr. Brickford distributes the choir music including, "Ave Verum Corpus," and then stands behind the podium to arrange his scores. Once the bell sounds, he gets their attention and explains that they are about to embark on some new choir music that may be a bit tough at first. With a wink and a smile, he assures them he thinks they are up to the challenge.

Just before he can start the warm-up with melodic pattern exercises related to the new music, one of the baritone's remarks, "Oh no, not an ostinato-ho-ho-ho!" while another baritone mimics Santa Claus and starts singing "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer," causing several other students to snicker. With a stern look and using the school-wide discipline protocol, Mr. Brickford gets the students' attention again and redirects their attention to the warm-up exercises. He notices that most of the first two rows (sopranos and altos) are singing the exercises attentively, while several of the baritones are making up their own rhythms, which are similar to

“Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.” Additionally, many of the others are giggling, singing loudly and with uncharacteristic tone. They are generally not on task. As the exercises go on, he notices some students sitting with poor posture or fidgeting in their seats.

Mr. Brickford has thirty (30) more minutes left in this rehearsal. If you were the director, how would you proceed? Be sure to include the reasons for your answer in your response.

#### Choral Scenario 2

Mrs. Barr’s ninth-grade choir has arrived for their late-morning class. They settle themselves into their auditioned seats, with the best singers in the front row. The choir has good well-balanced numbers, including 25 sopranos, 20 altos, 15 tenors, and 14 basses. The students know the routine, but Mrs. Barr verbally reminds them to move quickly and quietly into their seats. “Vocal warm-ups on ‘O,’” she calls, and begins playing arpeggios on the piano. The students join her and do well with the mid-range arpeggios, but more and more singers struggle as she plays the piano in higher and higher keys. Mrs. Barr continues at a very fast pace until no one in the choir except the best soprano can keep up. Then, she proceeds to do some rhythmic echo exercises that she models. She increases the difficulty and length of the exercises from quarter notes to dotted eighth-sixteenth note rhythms. Gradually, more singers are unable to produce accurate responses. The second sopranos and altos are singing with less rhythmic precision than the first sopranos, tenors, and basses, but Mrs. Barr continues to maintain a quick pace, increasing the difficulty of the rhythms.

Mrs. Barr has thirty (30) more minutes left in this class period. If you were the director, how would you proceed? Be sure to include the reasons for your answer in your response.

### Choral Scenario 3

Mr. Robinson is about to begin an after-school dress rehearsal of the top concert choir at Western Valley High School in the gym. There are 80 students in the choir. The students are very energetic, and the acoustics are very live. As the students take their places in the traditional choir set-up, most are either laughing, talking loudly, singing their music, or even texting. Mr. Robinson moves quickly to the podium and calls up the first selection, an *a cappella* version of “Shenandoah” by James Erb (SSAATTBB). Without pause, he gives the downbeat and conducts straight through the music. “Shenandoah” is a difficult composition, in E major throughout. It opens with an exposed, sustained melody for the women, then for the men, before growing to busy thick harmonies. As the piece progresses, the harmonic development occurs with repeated rhythmic patterns, often moving in step-wise motion. A close canon occurs in the middle of the piece through the layering of entrances. The students struggle with those entrances. Despite the rocky start, the students adjust. However, Georgia, soprano section leader, cannot keep up and misses her entrance, making it very hard for the choir to perform. At the conclusion of the run through, Melinda, one of the altos makes a loud comment, “What is wrong with you, idiot, can’t you find the beat?” and shoves Georgia. She falls, landing onto Stephanie’s foot gashing her big toe. Stephanie begins to sob in pain, because she is wearing flip-flops. By the time Mr. Robinson approaches Melinda and Georgia, their pushing and shoving has escalated, and they are now throwing punches.

Mr. Robinson has thirty (30) more minutes left in this class period. If you were the director, how would you finish the class? Be sure to include the reasons for your answer in your response.

## Appendix B

### Instrumental Scenarios

#### Instrumental Scenario 1

It is September, and Mr. Brickford has begun the school year with a plan for his seventh-grade band at Northside Middle School: to begin Grade 3 music. As his students arrive, they chat and jostle before settling into their seats. Because Mr. Brickford has not finalized the seating chart, the students sit with their friends within their sections and begin to warm up. Mr. Brickford distributes the band music including, “Ostinato Fanfare,” and then stands behind the podium to arrange his scores. Once the bell sounds, he gets their attention and explains that they are about to embark on some new band music that may be a bit tough at first. With a wink and a smile, he assures them he thinks they are up to the challenge.

Just before he can start the warm up with scale exercises related to the new music, one of the trumpet players remarks, “Oh No not an ostinato-ho-ho-ho!” while one of the percussionist mimics Santa Claus and starts singing “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer,” causing several other students to snicker. With a stern look and using the school-wide discipline protocol, Mr. Brickford gets the students’ attention again and redirects their attention to the warm-up exercises. He notices that most of the first two rows (flutes and clarinets) are playing the exercises attentively, while several of the saxophone and brass players making up their own rhythms and generally not on task. As the exercises go on, he notices some students sitting with poor posture or fidgeting in their seats.

Mr. Brickford has thirty (30) more minutes left in this rehearsal. If you were him, how would you proceed? Be sure to include the reasons for your answer in your response.

#### Instrumental Scenario 2

Mrs. Barr's top high school orchestra has arrived for their late-morning class. They settle themselves into their auditioned seats, with the best players in the principal chairs. The orchestra has a well-balanced instrumentation with 12 first violins, 16 second violins, 6 violas, 7 cellos, and 3 bassists. The students know the routine, but Mrs. Barr reminds them as she calls, "One octaves scales in series." The students begin playing a collection of major and minor scales from three sharps to four flats. The students do well with A, D, G, and C scales but more and more struggle with the flat scales. Then, they proceed to some echo rhythmic exercises that Mrs. Barr models. She increases the difficulty and length of the excerpts from quarter notes to dotted eighth sixteenths. More and more of the students unable to play accurately. The second violins and violas are playing with less rhythmic precision than the first violins, cellos, and basses, but Mrs. Barr continues to maintain a steady pace to keep the class.

Mrs. Barr has thirty (30) more minutes left in this class period. If you were her, how would you finish the class? Be sure to include the reasons for your answer in your response.

### Instrumental Scenario 3

Mr. Robinson is about to begin an afterschool dress rehearsal of the ninth-grade band in the gym. There are 75 students in the band. The students are very energetic, and the acoustics are very live. As the students take their places in the traditional band set-up, most are either laughing, or talking loudly, or playing their music, or even texting. Mr. Robinson moves quickly to the podium and calls up the first selection, "Fanfare and Allegro" by Clifton Williams. Without pause, he gives the downbeat and conducts straight through the music. Fanfare and Allegro is a Grade 5 composition, which opens with a fanfare that gives way to a woodwind theme accompanied by busy ostinati. After an interlude of swelling chords, the brass introduces the allegro. The composition accelerates to the end with more and more complicated rhythms

and tessituras, which test every instrument. Despite the rocky start, the students adjust. The students keep trying to match Mr. Robinson's tempo. However, Billy, the snare drummer, cannot keep up and misses the tempo making it very hard for the band to perform. At the conclusion of the run through, Mack, one of the trombonist makes a loud comment, "What is wrong with you, idiot, can't you find the beat?" and pushed Billy's snare drum with his slide. The snare drum falls, landing onto Stephanie's foot, who is playing mallets next to Billy. Stephanie's is beginning to sob in pain, because she is wearing flip flops. By the time Mr. Robinson approaches Billy and Mack, their pushing and shoving has escalated, and they are now throwing punches.

Mr. Robinson has thirty (30) more minutes left in this class period. If you were him, how would you finish the class? Be sure to include the reasons for your answer in your response.

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