
Perception of the Meaning of High School Choral Experience

by
Eva Kwan
Indiana University

This study examined the perception of the high school choral experience as a function of gender, grade level, and musical experience. The perception of meaning of choral experience was defined by five factors of musical-artistic, achievement, integrative, communicative, and psychological as defined by Hylton (1980). Participants included 84 choral students from two public high schools in the State of Indiana. Among the participants, 29 students came from a small high school with approximately 400 students, and 55 students came from a high school with approximately 1000 students. A modified version of Hylton's (1980) Choral Meaning Survey was used. The 84 participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to each item on a 5 point Likert-type scale. The result show that all the factors of the Choral Meaning Survey received high means. The students responded most positively to items related to achievement dimensions. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure was employed. The main effects of gender, grade level, musical experience and their interaction effects were non significant.

Choral ensembles have held an important place in public schools since music programs were first established in public schools as part of the Boston school music movement in 1838. Students in most public schools are provided the opportunity to participate in music throughout elementary, junior high and high school. Despite this, according to Reimer (1997), only 9% to 15% of students perform in school-sponsored ensembles. Thompson (1986) found that in 51% of the high schools surveyed, less than 10% of the students were involved in choral program. The overall low participation rate for school music indicates that a better understanding of motivating factors of music participants is needed.

Asmus (1994) has stated:

Motivating student musicians to achieve is a constant focus of music teachers' effort. From recruitment, to keeping students involved in music study, to learning the fundamentals of scales, arpeggios, music teachers must constantly be alert to what motivates students and how best to apply these motivators to improve student achievement in music. (p.5)

Music educators are very concerned about motivation for music, and many studies have examined this issue (e.g. Asmus, 1985; Asmus, 1986; Asmus, 1987; Asmus and Harrison, 1990). The subjects of these studies included elementary students through college age students. The researchers focused on the attribution of success and failure in music, and also examined the reasons students cited for being musically motivated.

In a review of research in music education, 1982-1995 (Grant & Norris, 1998), only three studies were cited examining attitudes and music participation in choral music. For example, Haygood (1993) studied the reasons for participation and non-participation in collegiate choral ensembles by students who had high school choral experience. A wide variety of reasons were found. These were: (a) the literature to be performed, (b) self-perceptions of level of preparation to sing in college choirs, (c) the influence of parents, and (d) the personality of the

conductor. In another study, Mizener (1993) studied the singing interest and choir participation and self-perceptions of singing skill of elementary and middle school students. Results showed that most children have a positive attitude about singing in general but less than half were interested in choral singing. Castelli (1986) conducted a quantitative survey to identify attitudes of vocal music educators and public secondary school students regarding selected factors that influence male enrollment in secondary school vocal programs. The factors investigated were gender, family influence, peer pressure, role endorsement, male adolescent voice change, and future occupational change. The results showed a decline in male enrollment in the programs studied.

There were several additional studies concerning participation of high school students in choral programs that were not reviewed by Grant and Norris (Bowles, 1991; Buchanan, 1998; Hylton, 1980; Koutz, 1987; Neill, 1998; Poulter, 1997; Seago, 1993; Spell, 1989; Tipps, 1992). Two additional studies examined the attitudes of high school choral students (Hylton, 1980; Neill, 1998). Hylton developed an instrument titled the Choral Meaning Survey and administered it to high school students. Achievement was ranked as the respondents' main reason for participating in the choir. Neill (1998) also examined the motivating factors for student participation in high school choral programs. The results showed that "the love of singing" was ranked first as the reason to enroll in chorus; "performing" was ranked second. Koutz (1987) analyzed the attitudinal differences toward music performance classes in secondary schools among non-participants, current, and former participants. The primary reasons indicated by music students for choosing to participate in a music ensemble were interest in music, pride in the group and enjoyment of performance.

Results of Neill's study (1998) and Koutz's study (1987) suggest that "affect of music" or

"interest of music" was a crucial factor for secondary school choral participation. These results paralleled those of Asmus and Harrison's (1990) where high school students and college students cited "affect of music" to be the principal motivational factor in music participation.

Some researches have focused particularly on adults' attitude and choral participation (Bowles, 1991; Buchanan, 1998; Poulter, 1997; Seago, 1993; Spell, 1989; Tipps, 1993). The subjects in these studies were college students, church choir members, community choir members, and adult music participants. Hylton's Choral Meaning Survey was used in different studies to measure the "choral meaning" within the samples (Poulter, 1997; Seago, 1993). Results from Poulter's study (1997) showed that high school choral experiences were strong indicators of collegiate choral participation. In that study, 83.4% agreed that their decision to participate at the collegiate level was made while still in high school. Results from Bowles's study (1991) on adult's music participation confirmed the importance of high school choral participation to future enrollment, given that the highest percentages of participation occur in high school age students. The respondents also ranked choral organizations highest among preferred performance organizations. Positive attitude towards participation was found to be significantly related to current participation and to early participation in classroom general music.

In summary, high school choral experience appears to be an important influence on continuing choral participation. That is, high school choral interactions provide a link to adult music participation. However, only a few studies specifically examined high school choral students' attitude. To better understand what constitutes a meaningful choral experience for high school students, there is a clear need for further research specific to this age group. The purpose of this study is to examine the attitude of high school choral students as a function of

gender, grade level, total years singing in choirs, and total years of formal music training.

Dependent variables included students' perception of the meaning of the choral music experience (musical-artistic, achievement, integrative, communicative, and psychological) as defined from Hylton's (1980) study.

The following research questions were addressed:

How do high school choral students perceive the meaning of choral experience?

To what extent will the perception of high school choral experience differ as a function of gender, grade level, musical experience (number of years singing in choirs, number of years having formal music lessons), and the interaction of these variables?

For this pilot study, musical experience is defined by whether a student has/had taken any instrumental or vocal lesson.

Method

Subjects were 84 choral students from two public high schools in the State of Indiana. There were 29 students from a small high school with an enrollment of approximately 400 students. The additional 55 students came from a high school of approximately 1000 students. Both schools have auditioned and non-auditioned choirs. Students from both schools participate in winter and spring concerts, performances in the community, and participate in contests. Participants included 67 females and 17 males. The students were divided into two grade groups according to their grade levels. Students of grade 9 and 10 form a group and students of grade 11 and 12 form another group. There were 51 students in the 9th and 10th grade group, and 33 students in the 11th and 12th grade group.

Content validity was enhanced by Hylton's use of a pre-pilot study (1980) to generate items for the choral Meaning Survey. The use of open-ended questions presented to a sample

of subjects similar to those in the main study helped to ensure that the survey was a valid measure of the universe of meanings of choral experience. Construct validity was documented by Hylton through factor analysis of data from his pilot study. Factor analysis with oblique rotation revealed the relationships of the variables (statements) in the survey to six factors. The original Choral Meaning Survey used in Hylton's pilot study (1980) consisted of 72 items.

A modified version of Hylton's Choral Meaning Survey (1980) consisting of 59 items was used in this study to measure the subjects' perception of the meaning of the choral music experience ([Appendix A](#)). In considering the current debate in public schools regarding the separation of church and state, the items grouped under spiritualistic factor will not be included in this study. Students were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to each item on a 5 points Likert-type scale.

The dependent variables were factors labeled musical-artistic, achievement, communicative, psychological and integrative. These were defined as follows:

Psychological -- Statements relating to development of self were included in this category.

Choral experience is meaningful insofar as one achieves personal satisfaction and growth from it in an existential way. Statements in this category indicate that choral experience is meaningful in that it helps to make one aware of his or her identity.

Communicative -- Statements in this category involve reaching out to others. These statements concerned the expression of ideas and feelings to an audience.

Integrative -- Statements in this group reflect a desire to participate in and interact with the group. This category reflects the social aspects of choral participation. Statements were indicated that choral participation fulfills a need to be with others.

Musical-Artistic -- Statements in this category involved musical growth. Development of self

occurs through the drawing in of musical knowledge. Choral participation is meaningful insofar as it affords opportunities for musical growth and development.

Achievement -- Statements in this category reflected students' fulfillment of a need for achievement through experiences in choral music.

Demographic information for the independent variables such as gender, grade level and musical experience was collected in a separate form ([Appendix B](#)).

Musical experience was defined as whether the students have ever taken any instrumental or vocal lesson or not. The students were divided into two groups. One group consisted of the students who have/had instrumental or vocal lessons. The other group consisted of students who had no instrumental or vocal lessons. There were 26 students who have/had instrumental or vocal lessons, and 58 students who do/did not.

Results

In this study, the reliabilities for the items in each of the five categories were computed using the Cronbach's alpha formula. The reliability coefficient for each category is presented in Table 1. Three of the categories: Musical-artistic, Integrative, and Psychological have high internal consistency. This implies the items in these categories tend to define their respective factors. Surprisingly, the reliability coefficients for "achievement" ($r = .60$) and "communicative" ($r = .40$) were moderately low. These results were different from a previous pilot study ([Kwan, 1999](#)) in which all the correlation coefficients for the five categories were high ($r = .77$ to $.88$).

Table 1
Reliability Coefficient for Each Factor Category

Factor	Reliability Coefficient
Achievement	.60
Musical-artistic	.92
Psychological	.89
Integrative	.89
Communicative	.40

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure was employed with the scores on categories in the Choral Meaning Survey: achievement, musical-artistic, communicative, psychological, and integrative as the multiple dependent variables. The results of a three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) are presented in Table 2. Neither the main effects nor the interaction effects are significant.

Table 2
MANOVA and ANOVA ANALYSIS for the Choral Meaning Factor

Source	df	F	p
Gender	5,72	1.499	NS
Grade Gp	5,72	.747	NS
Musical Exp.	5,72	1.681	NS
Gender X Grade Gp	5,72	.541	NS
Gender X Musical Exp.	5,72	.539	NS
Grade Gp X Musical Exp	5,72	.549	NS
Gender X Grade Gp X Musical Exp.	5,72	.604	NS

The results in Table 3 show that all the factors of the Choral Meaning Survey received a high mean. This implies that in this study, all students view choral singing as a very meaningful experience. Students responded most positively to items related to the achievement dimensions, followed closely by communicative. The ranking order of the categories in this study parallel with the last pilot study. The order of ranking of this study was very similar to the order of ranking from Hylton's (1980) study.

Table 3
Mean and Standard Deviation of the dependent variables: Achievement, Musical-artistic, Psychological, Integrative, and Communicative by all the students

Dependent variables	Mean	SD
Achievement	4.13	.64
Musical-artistic	3.91	.61
Psychological	3.40	.78
Integrative	3.94	.68
Communicative	4.08	.78

The correlation among the factors range between .47 "Psychological" with "communicative" to .68 "musical" with "psychological", "achievement" with "integrative", and "psychological" with "integrative". All of the factors are positively correlated and all are significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 4
Pearson Correlation Coefficients Among Factors

	Achieve	Music.	Psycho.	Integra.	Comm.
Achievement	1.00	.67**	.63**	.68**	.52**
Musical		1.00	.68**	.59**	.50**
Psychological			1.00	.68**	.47**
Integrative				1.00	.58**
Communicative					1.00

**p < .01

Discussion

The internal consistency for the "musical-artistic", "psychological" and "integrative" were high but moderately low for "achievement" ($r = .60$) and "communicative" ($r = .40$). This result is surprisingly different from previous results (Kwan, 1999; Hylton's 1980). The correlations among the factors were moderately high. This confirms that the factors are not discrete but instead suggest a single factor called the choral meaning.

Mean responses of the students were highly positive for each independent variable. These

results indicate that the choral program provides a meaningful experience for the high school students in this study. These students ranked "achievement" with the highest mean and followed closely by "communicative". The same pattern held across gender, and grade groupings.

Both of these schools were from a rural setting; their perception of choral meaning may not be generalized to students in urban and other settings. It is recommended that, in future research, the questions should be readdressed using a larger sample with schools in other settings as well. Additional independent variables in the future such as teacher's influence, school size, urban/rural setting, and socio-economic status of the students should be considered.

Appendix A

Modified Version of Hylton's (1980) Choral Meaning Survey

Each of the short statements listed below represents a possible meaning of the choral experience. For each statement, please indicate how well it expresses the value of the choral singing experience for you by circling one of the responses.

SA = strongly agree
A = agree
U = undecided
D = disagree
SD = strongly disagree

Make your responses thoughtfully. We want to find out what the meaning of the choral music experience is for you. There are no right or wrong answers. You must decide how well each item describes a meaning for you.

- | | |
|--|-------------|
| 1. To enrich my musical knowledge. | SA A U D SD |
| 2. To work with other people. | SA A U D SD |
| 3. To find out who I am. | SA A U D SD |
| 4. To give others a message through my singing. | SA A U D SD |
| 5. To prepare for a musical career. | SA A U D SD |
| 6. To sing many different kinds of music. | SA A U D SD |
| 7. To learn how to control my voice. | SA A U D SD |
| 8. To learn how to get along with other people. | SA A U D SD |
| 9. To get a sense of accomplishment. | SA A U D SD |
| 10. To give me a good feeling inside. | SA A U D SD |
| 11. To please other people with our singing. | SA A U D SD |
| 12. To learn how to read music. | SA A U D SD |
| 13. To relax and forget my problems for a while. | SA A U D SD |
| 14. To sing well for others. | SA A U D SD |
| 15. To meet new people. | SA A U D SD |
| 16. To be with a great group of people. | SA A U D SD |
| 17. To train my ear. | SA A U D SD |
| 18. To have an experience full of feeling. | SA A U D SD |
| 19. To help me feel at peace with myself. | SA A U D SD |
| 20. To get out in front of a crowd and sing. | SA A U D SD |
| 21. To make and enjoy good friends. | SA A U D SD |

- | | |
|--|-------------|
| 22. To learn to appreciate all kinds of music. | SA A U D SD |
| 23. To develop my self-discipline. | SA A U D SD |
| 24. To communicate so well with an audience that they applaud. | SA A U D SD |
| 25. To share my talents with others. | SA A U D SD |
| 26. To hear others around me perform. | SA A U D SD |
| 27. To try, succeed, and get to better. | SA A U D SD |
| 28. To associate with other talented people. | SA A U D SD |
| 29. To perform for others. | SA A U D SD |
| 30. To develop my musical talent. | SA A U D SD |
| 31. To learn to sing some new songs well. | SA A U D SD |
| 32. To feel a sense of pride. | SA A U D SD |
| 33. To present good concerts. | SA A U D SD |
| 34. To work together to achieve a goal. | SA A U D SD |
| 35. To find out if I have some singing ability. | SA A U D SD |
| 36. To enjoy being part of the sounds of many voices blending together. | SA A U D SD |
| 37. To have others listen to me. | SA A U D SD |
| 38. To help life go by easier. | SA A U D SD |
| 39. To feel more at ease. | SA A U D SD |
| 40. To experience musical art. | SA A U D SD |
| 41. To discover styles and patterns in music. | SA A U D SD |
| 42. To feel rewarded. | SA A U D SD |
| 43. To have people hear the final product of a lot of hard work. | SA A U D SD |
| 44. To contribute to the group effort. | SA A U D SD |
| 45. To understand why other people love music. | SA A U D SD |
| 46. To learn to sing parts other than the melody. | SA A U D SD |
| 47. To help make the world a better place to live in. | SA A U D SD |
| 48. To feel the satisfaction of practicing long hours and getting musical results. | SA A U D SD |
| 49. To help other people enjoy music. | SA A U D SD |
| 50. To be part of a very close group of friends. | SA A U D SD |
| 51. To learn to appreciate the arts. | SA A U D SD |
| 52. To help me get to know myself better. | SA A U D SD |
| 53. To have a good time with the rest of the group. | SA A U D SD |
| 54. To express a composer's words and thoughts contained in his music. | SA A U D SD |
| 55. To learn to sing songs well. | SA A U D SD |
| 56. To see the faces of the audience when we give a concert. | SA A U D SD |
| 57. To be a part of something good. | SA A U D SD |
| 58. To have the excitement and thrill of presenting concerts. | SA A U D SD |
| 59. To be with chorus people. | SA A U D SD |

Appendix B

Your responses to the following items will be held in strictest confidence. Please do NOT put your name or your school's name anywhere on this form.

Please complete the following:

1. How many years have you participated in choirs? (any kind of choir) _____ years
2. Have you even taken private music lessons? Yes No
3. If yes, what kind of lessons? _____
how many years? _____
4. What is your gender? *Female* *Male*
5. What is your grade level? (Please circle) 9 10 11 12

References

- Asmus, E.P. (1985).
"Sixth graders' achievement motivation: Their views of success and failure in music." *Bulletin of Council for Research in Music Education*, 85, 1-13.
- Asmus, E.P. (1986).
"Student beliefs about the causes of success and failure in music." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 34(4), 262-278.
- Asmus, E.P. (1987).
"The effect of grade level and motivation level on high school student's beliefs of the causes for success and failure." Paper presented at *Southeastern Music Education Symposium*, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.
- Asmus, E.P., & Harrison, C.S. (1990).
"Characteristics of motivation for music and musical aptitude of undergraduate non-music majors." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 38, 258-268.
- Asmus, E.P. (1994).
"Motivation in music teaching and learning." *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 5, Number 4, 5-30.
- Bowles, C. L. (1991).
"Self-expressed adult music education interests and music experiences." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 39(3), 191-205.
- Buchanan, S.R. (1998).
"Factors motivating non-music majors to participate in collegiate choral ensembles." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59(04).
- Castelli, P.A. (1986).
"Attitudes of vocal music educators and public secondary school students on selected factors which influence a decline in male enrollment occurring between elementary and secondary public school vocal music programs." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 47(06).
- Grant, J.W. & Norris C. (1998).
"Choral Music Education: A survey of research 1982-1995." *Bulletin for Council for Research in Music Education*, 135, 21-59.
- Haygood, J.L. (1993).
"A study of the community of choral singing from secondary choral programs to selected higher education choral program in Indiana." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 54(12).

- Hylton, J.B. (1980).
"The meaning of high school choral experience and its relationship to selected variables." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 41(07).
- Koutz, T.A. (1987).
"An analysis of attitudinal difference toward music performance classes in secondary schools by nonparticipants, current, and former participants." *Dissertation Abstract International*, 48(09).
- Kwan, E. (1999).
"Perception of Meaning of High School Choral Experience" (Pilot Study). *Unpublished manuscript*.
- Mizener, C.P. (1993).
"Attitudes of children toward singing and choir participation and assessed singing skill." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 41(3), 233-245.
- Neill, S.L. (1998).
"Motivating factors for student participation in high school choral programs and vocal enrichment activities." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59(04).
- Poulter, P.S. (1997).
"A study of the factors which influence collegiate choral ensemble participation by non-music majors at six-state-supported activities in Illinois." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 54(05).
- Reimer, B. (1997).
"Music education in the twenty-first century." *Music Educators Journals*, Nov. 97, Vol. 84 Issues 3, 33-38.
- Seago, T. (1993).
"Motivational factors influencing participation in selected Southern Baptist church choirs." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 54(05).
- Spell, G. M. (1989).
"Motivational factors and selected socio-demographic characteristics of Georgia community chorus participants as measured by the Education Participation Scale, The Community Chorus Participation Scale, and the Personal Inventory Form." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 51(02).
- Thompson, K.P. (1986).
"Status of music in Pennsylvania schools." *Pennsylvania Music Educators Association Bulletin of Research*, 17, 1-24.

Tipps, J. W. (1992).

"Profile characteristics and musical backgrounds of community chorus participants in the Southeastern United States." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53(07).