

# **The Relationship Between African American Enrollment and the Classroom Environment in Secondary Choral Music Programs**

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Choral music ensembles serve as part of the framework for secondary music in American schools and are a principal source of formal vocal training for thousands of high school students. Despite their widespread presence in schools, most of these programs are elective in nature and the profession is faced with the reality that students who do not choose to participate in ensemble classes rarely have access to in-depth, sequential school music instruction.

Many researchers investigating music participation have documented a disparity in enrollment patterns when looking at the ethnicity of students. Schools have become increasingly diverse, yet many music programs have failed to attract African American or Hispanic students in proportionate numbers. Casper (1989) investigated several Northwestern schools and found only one high school with proportionate minority enrollment in vocal jazz choirs. Discrepancies in minority enrollment were also reported by a group of Florida researchers who found 28% of high schools surveyed had a disproportionately low minority student rate in music classes. Lind (1999) found that half of the schools surveyed for her study on Hispanic enrollment had a disproportionately low minority population when comparing the school population to the population of students enrolled in choral music classes.

It is known that minority student participation varies in different programs and in different parts of the country, yet little is known about why this discrepancy exists. Stewart (1991) reported that certain school characteristics such as school size, location, and number of college bound students accounted for some of the disparity in minority enrollment. His study did not, however, account for all of the variance in enrollment patterns and did little to explain why programs in similar types of schools with similar student populations have gaps in participation rates.

One theory posited by Lind (1999) is that minority participation rates may be linked to the classroom environment. Lind compared the classroom environment in programs with proportionate Hispanic enrollment with the classroom environment in choral programs with low Hispanic enrollment and found that there was a difference. Programs with proportionate Hispanic enrollment were assessed as having a lower level of affiliation, less emphasis placed on competition, and less teacher control. Lind concluded that differences in students' perceptions of the classroom environment could either encourage or discourage Hispanic enrollment in elective choral classes.

Additional factors have been linked to student participation in music programs. Family influence, particularly parental support, has frequently been related to minority student participation in school music programs (Casper, 1989; Ensley, 1988; Stewart, 1991; Watts, Doane, & Fekete, 1992; Tyler-Bynum, 2002). Musical self-image, peer influence, attitude towards music, career goals, and self-improvement have also been associated with choral music participation (Clements, 2003; Tyler-Bynum, 2002).

Although we are beginning to gather information related to student participation in music, we have a long way to go. This is particularly true when we look at the issues surrounding under-represented populations. We cannot assume that the current research investigating student participation in music applies to all students regardless of family background. In her book *Learning While Black*, Janice Hale (2001) describes the need to

recognize the unique culture of African American children when considering school improvement programs. School policies and practices that are successful for mainstream, White students are not always successful for students with different backgrounds and learning styles. In writing about school reform designed to improve the experiences of African American students, Hale (2001) writes, "There is no morally correct solution to this problem unless quality education is extended to every child in America, regardless of his or her family background or income level" (p. xvii).

The disparity in minority participation in choral music programs is a clear example of an area where cultural differences may require a shift in the policies and practices in the classroom. If we believe that music education is important and that an equitable education includes music programs that meet the needs of all students, we must find answers to the questions surrounding minority student participation. We suggest that the quality education Hale writes about includes music, and we as music educators must find ways for all students, including minority students, to experience the richness that music brings to the school environment.

The purpose of this research was to investigate African American student participation in choral music ensembles. Specifically, this study investigated whether there was a relationship between African American students' decisions to participate in choral music programs and the classroom environment. Additional factors including family background, peer influence, the influence of the teacher, academic requirements, opportunities for musical growth, and personal satisfaction and enjoyment were investigated. Two research questions were studied: 1) Is there a difference in the classroom environment between programs with a large percentage of students participating in the choir and programs with a small percentage of students participating in the choir? and, 2) Is there a difference in the factors that influence student participation between programs with a large percentage of students participating in the choir and programs with a small percentage of students participating in the choir?

## Method

### Participants

Six large urban schools were originally selected to participate in this study. Three schools were identified as having a large percentage of student participation in the choral music program with more than 10% of the student body participating. Three schools were identified as having a small percentage of student participation with less than 10% of the student body participating in the choral program. The schools were selected based on the percentage of African American students enrolled in the school, type of school, and the nature of the choral music program. The population of African American students in the selected schools ranged from 81% to 99%. All of the schools were conventional high schools; no magnet schools or charter schools were selected. In addition, all schools had a traditional choral program with a full time African American choral director. Questionnaires investigating the classroom environment and reasons for participation were distributed to the students in six schools during their regular choral class meeting time. Five schools completed the questionnaires correctly, yielding 229 completed responses. One school, identified as a smaller program with less than 10% participation, completed the questionnaires incorrectly and the data could not be used.

### Questionnaires

The Classroom Environment Scale – Form S (Trickett & Moos, 1995) was used to investigate the first research question, "Is there a difference in the classroom environment between programs with a large percentage of students participating in the choir and programs with a small percentage of students participating in the choir?" The Classroom Environment Scale (CES) is a standardized test designed to assess nine dimensions of the classroom environment, 1) student involvement—how attentive students are in the class; 2) affiliation—how well students work together and whether friendships are formed in the

class; 3) teacher support—how much individual attention is given to the students and whether the teacher shows a personal interest in the students; 4) task orientation—the emphasis placed on completing assignments and staying on task; 5) competition—level of competition for grades and teacher recognition; 6) order and organization—emphasis placed on orderly behaviour; 7) rule clarity—whether there is a clearly established set of rules; 8) teacher control—how strict the teacher is; and 9) innovation—whether or not the teaching practices and student projects are viewed as different or unique. Form S was developed for use with groups of students and has been found to be a reliable test when comparing the mean scores for groups of students (Fraser, 1982; Fraser & Fisher, 1983).

A second questionnaire, the Student Participation Survey, was developed by the researchers to investigate additional factors that influence student participation. In order to identify factors to include in the survey, a series of interviews were conducted with high school choral music students. During the interviews, students were asked to discuss the reasons they chose to participate in choir. The interviews were transcribed and the information was analyzed using qualitative methodology. In addition, information on music participation was gathered from music education literature. Seven categories were identified as possible factors influencing choral music participation: 1) academic requirements—needed for fine arts credit for graduation and/or college entrance, 2) performance opportunities—allows students to be on stage, 3) family influence—support and encouragement of family 4) musical growth—desire to learn more about music 5) personal feelings—opportunity to express one’s personal feelings, a personal interaction with the art of making music 6) teacher influence—desire to study with the director, and 7) peer influence—desire to be with friends. The Student Participation Survey included 29 questions answered using a four point Likert type response. Students were asked to rate how important a variety of factors representing each of the seven categories were in their decision to join choir, 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = a consideration, 1 = not a consideration.

**Results**

The first research question asked, “Is there a difference in the classroom environment between programs with a large percentage of students participating in the choir and programs with a small percentage of students participating in the choir?” A series of t-tests indicated a significant difference between programs with a large percentage of students participating in the choir and programs with a small percentage of students participating in the choir and six dimensions of the classroom environment ( $p < .05$ ). Table 1 summarizes the results of the t-tests. Programs with a large percentage of participation were perceived as having less student involvement, a lower level of teacher support, and less emphasis placed on task orientation, competition, rule clarity, and order and organization.

**Table 1: Summary Table: T-test, Percentage of Student Participation and Assessment of the Classroom Environment**

Source of Variance	Mean Difference	DF	t-value	p level
Involvement	-0.56	227	-2.648	0.0087
Affiliation	-0.06	227	-0.4	0.688
Teacher Support	-0.34	227	-2.489	0.0135
Task Orientation	-0.346	227	-2.514	0.0126
Competition	0.478	227	-3.507	0.001

Source of Variance	Mean Difference	DF	t-value	p level
Order and Organization	-0.497	227	-2.724	0.007
Rule Clarity	-0.869	227	-5.536	<.0001
Teacher Control	-0.22	227	-1.61	0.1087
Innovation	-0.232	227	-1.454	0.1473

The second research questions asked, "Is there a difference in the factors that influence student participation between programs with a large percentage of students participating in the choir and programs with a small percentage of students participating in the choir? A series of t-tests indicated a significant difference in two of the factors investigated as part of this study, 1) academic requirements and 2) peer influence. Students enrolled in programs with a large percentage of participation were less likely to identify these two factors as important when compared to students enrolled in programs with less participation. See Table 2.

**Table 2: Summary Table: T-test, Percentage of Student Participation and Choral Music Participation**

Source of Variance	Mean Difference	DF	t-value	p level
Academic Requirements	-0.252	219	-2.593	0.0102
Performance Opportunities	-0.045	220	-0.358	0.7205
Musical Growth	0.007	223	0.065	0.9478
Family Influence	-0.013	221	-0.107	0.9146
Personal Feelings	-0.052	218	-0.422	0.6734
Teacher Influence	-0.133	222	-1.103	0.2712
Peer Influence	-0.27	223	-2.516	0.0126

The responses of all the students on the Student Participation Survey indicated that the seven factors positively influenced student participation. The mean scores for the seven factors ranged between 2.3 and 3.8; all were above the mid-point.

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate there is a difference in several dimensions of the classroom environment and the enrollment patterns of African American students. Programs with a higher rate of student participation were assessed as having less student involvement, teacher support, task orientation, competition, rule clarity, and order and organization. Several of these dimensions relate to dimensions of the African American culture as described by Boykin (1986). Boykin described African American culture as vibrant, energetic, and lively. It is, therefore, not surprising that African American students tended to participate in programs that did not over emphasize the structure of schooling. The larger

programs tended to be those that were assessed as a bit more fluid, without an emphasis on order, organization, and rules.

Larger programs were also assessed as having less competition among the students reflecting what Boykin described as communalism or social connectedness and what Hale (2001) described as a "sensitivity to the fundamental interdependence of people" (p. 117). If the idea of communal support and interdependence is truly important for African American students, it follows that they would choose to participate in programs that de-emphasize competition.

The findings in the level of involvement and teacher support were a bit surprising. Programs that had a larger percentage of student participation reported a lower level of student involvement and a lower level of teacher support. If the programs with a higher percentage of students were also larger in number, this variance may be the result of larger class sizes. It is easier for students to "hide" in large classes and be less involved. Likewise, it is difficult for teachers to give individual attention to students in large classes. This is, however, an unsubstantiated speculation. We collected data on program enrollment and did not look at individual class size.

The results of the student participation survey also yielded interesting results. All of the seven factors investigated in this study were assessed as important reasons for student enrollment. Mean scores ranged between 2.2 (teacher influence) and 3.2 (musical growth). Students in programs with a smaller percentage of student participation, however, tended to cite external factors as more important than did students in programs with larger percentages of enrollment. Academic requirements and peer influence seemed to be important for a few students, but did not tend to be as important to students who participated in programs with a proportionate percentage of student participation. It is possible that students who enroll for external reasons participate for a short amount of time, get the needed credit, and move on to other elective choices. Students who enroll for reasons specific to music learning and personal growth may tend to stay in the choir for longer periods of time.

## **Conclusion**

Hale (2001) outlines what she calls three generally recognized purposes for educating children: 1) imparting skills, 2) creating information growth, and 3) providing children with the opportunities to develop talents and interests that can lead to fulfilling leisure time pursuits, the identification of careers, and an opportunity to make a creative contribution to the world. It is this third purpose that served as the impetus for this study and is the area in which music educators can make meaningful contributions. Music education allows students to develop talents and interests, explore careers and opportunities in the field of music, and work creatively in the classroom environment. We must, however, discover what causes disenfranchised populations to participate in music and what factors serve as barriers to student participation.

The results of this study indicated a relationship between enrollment patterns of African American students and the classroom environment. Likewise, we found a difference in enrollment patterns and the reasons students choose to join choir. Programs that were less rigid, did not emphasize rules, order and organization, and did not focus on internal competition among students tended to have a higher percentage of African American student participation. Other factors certainly influence student behaviours, and the results of this study do not give us all the answers. Nonetheless, the findings of this study suggest traditional programs may create hidden barriers that influence the enrollment patterns of African American students.

These findings begin to look at the issue of African American participation in choir, but are only a starting place. It may be that African American students are more likely to enroll in choral music programs that are structured in a way that complements the African American culture. Although we have not found all of the answers, we have started looking in the right place.

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