

# Characteristics of Successful Inner-city Music Teachers: A Pilot Study at the Choir Academy of Chicago

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## Abstract

This descriptive study, performed in the spring of 2007, seeks to illustrate characteristics that are shared amongst successful inner-city music teachers at a choir school in Chicago, Illinois. Specifically, through both formal and informal interviews, the researcher will present data related to the classroom management practices, curricular choices, and educational philosophy of four teachers who teach music at the Choir Academy of Chicago Charter School, the only public choir school of its kind in the United States.

## Introduction

The voices of practitioners need to be part of the ongoing conversation about music education in urban schools...members of the profession should hear the voices of practicing teachers in urban settings. This is essential if the profession wishes to develop quality music education programs in urban schools, to promote effective educational practices in urban settings, and to recruit and retain a committed group of teachers to work in urban environments.

- Smith, 2006

Successful music teachers incite passion in students. Successful music teachers foster a love of learning amongst their students. Successful music teachers help students overcome musical and personal challenges and achieve excellence. How do we know when we are in the presence of a successful music teacher? How would we describe the qualities possessed by these teachers? Would sharing stories of successful inner-city teachers help pre-service music teachers make connections between their own experiences and those currently teaching in urban areas? How would this information help to shape our teacher training programs?

In order to begin to answer the questions presented, I designed a pilot study to be performed at my previous place of employment. As the Director of Music Education and Associate Conductor at the Choir Academy from 2004 to 2006, I had the privilege of hiring and working with several outstanding young teachers. This group of four music teachers was very different in many of their approaches, but all achieved success with students. In my current position as a music education professor, I am now involved with preparing and training students who want to become music teachers. Most of our students come from suburban and rural school systems in Illinois. Many of the students seem curious about teaching in an urban environment, but lack any experience or knowledge of that endeavour. Emmanuel (2006) argued that the knowledge base that is most important for teaching is that which is created in context. Lacking this urban context, many pre-service music teachers, with little to no experience in city schools, express anxiety with the thought of working in these settings (Kindall-Smith, 2004 taken from Abril, 2006, p. 77). Coupled with stereotyped images from the

## **Characteristics of Successful Inner-city Music Teachers**

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media and “horror stories” they have heard about poor facilities and resources, discipline problems, and a lack of parental involvement or support, college students often express a hesitancy to teach in urban areas. These images have the capacity to breed apprehension and even fear in potential teachers, making it difficult to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in urban schools (Abril, 2006). How do we overcome these challenges and inspire our students to consider inner-city teaching? I believe that the experiences and stories of practicing teachers give students a model for successful teaching in urban settings and begin to create a context in which they can envision themselves.

In order to educate students on the complexities as well as the joys and rewards of inner-city teaching, we must help students reflect on, recognize, and understand their own worldviews (Emmanuel, 2006). Only then will they be able to attempt the difficult but important task of understanding the worldviews of their students. Music education majors bring with them a host of experiences with school music programs and these experiences shape their opinions about how music classes should be taught, what music should be played and sung, how students should behave, and what resources should be present. Our job as teacher trainers is to get them to analyze these experiences and use them as a starting point from which to learn. If the students’ experiences were positive, they often have a strong desire to replicate them, viewing the past as the ideal to shoot for in the future. If the experiences were lackluster or even negative, students aspire to do better; in both cases, the students seem to gravitate towards teaching in the context in which they themselves experienced during their music study. My hope is that, through the voices of successful inner-city music teachers, students are inspired to broaden their teaching aspirations to the urban setting.

### **Description of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gather information related to the success of several music teachers at the Choir Academy. As the former Director of Music Education at the Academy, I was involved with each of these teachers as their colleague and supervisor. I hired three of the four teachers and worked closely with all of them for two years. As such, I was very familiar with their work, both collectively and individually. Each teacher fostered success and high self-esteem in students; it was my hope that through this pilot study, I would be able to describe aspects of their teaching and philosophies that aid in their success with students. Unlike recent similar studies in which teachers at different sites were interviewed, this pilot study of teachers at one school seeks to provide a more richly contextualized analysis and discussion (Smith, 2006; Abril, 2006).

### **Method**

Through a series of informal observations, previous supervisory visits, collegial interactions, and formal interviews, I gathered data related to three main areas: educational philosophy, classroom management, and curriculum. In-depth interviews occurred late in the spring, just before the school year ended. Each teacher was also asked a series of questions related to his/her educational background, experiences in school, and what led them to the job at the Choir Academy. Once data was gathered, formal interviews were transcribed and the method of open coding was used to identify themes or commonalities among respondents. In addition, the framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) was used as a

theoretical underpinning of the study. It was believed that each of these teachers unconsciously used CRP and thus, would articulate aspects of this theory through their interview responses.

### **Site: The Choir Academy of Chicago Charter School**

This school, modelled after the Choir Academy of Harlem, is the only public choir school of its kind in the United States. It began as a partnership between the Chicago Children's Choir (CCC) and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 2001, opening its doors to fourth to sixth graders from across the city. As a charter school, the school is open to any student living in Chicago, does not charge tuition, and is allowed to have a special academic or other organizing focus. Using the choral music education experience to excite children is unique in the public school movement; there is a history of private choir schools in the United States, with St. Thomas Choir School in New York City and tuition-based schools such as the American Boychoir School in Princeton, New Jersey. However, both are same sex programs, serving adolescent boys. Like the Choir Academy of Harlem, the Choir Academy of Chicago seeks to improve the public education offerings of a large urban area, with an arts-based educational experience centred on choral music.

Currently, the Choir Academy has just finished their sixth year with 200 students in third to eighth grade. The majority of students is African American and qualifies for free and reduced lunch. Not without struggle, the Academy has gone through many changes over the six years and staff turnover has been high, both at the administrative level as well as with teachers. Independence was sought and gained from Chicago Children's Choir in 2005, and a new board of directors was established in 2006. Having lost their lease on the current space, the Academy is moving into a temporary space for the 2007-2008 school year, hoping to secure a new building within the year. The challenges faced at the management level for this charter school have an influence on the morale of teachers and students; but with a strong mission, the school perseveres.

The music program at the Choir Academy is a comprehensive music education curriculum including class piano, world percussion, and choir. All students sing in at least one choir, rehearsing every day, and most sing in more than one. A heavy emphasis is placed on music literacy, vocal techniques of different genres and styles, and large all school performances. In addition, the Elite Ensemble, an auditioned group of 40 singers, performs regularly around the city and state. In addition to a stand alone music program, the school's overall organizing focus is music. All classes are taught with music integration, and classroom teachers regularly pair up with music teachers to do joint projects. These opportunities are meant to strengthen connections between and among subject areas as well as between and among staff members. Infused with music at every level, the Choir Academy's innovative and unique model is without comparison to date.

### **Participants**

Teacher #1 has been teaching at the Choir Academy for four years, beginning as a student teacher in the spring of 2003. She is an African American female in her late 20s who has spent her entire educational career, both as a student K-12 and college, and as a teacher, in CPS. Teacher #1 comes from a musical family and participates actively in music ministry outside of school. In addition to her work with choirs at the Choir Academy, this teacher assists with choirs at the both the city level and at a local performing arts college.

## **Characteristics of Successful Inner-city Music Teachers**

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Teacher #2 is a white female in her late 20s who has been teaching piano and choir at the Choir Academy for three years. Prior to the Choir Academy, she was the general music teacher at two CPS elementary schools, with over 700 students in grades K-8. Teacher #2 grew up in rural Illinois and then attended a small, private college in rural Ohio. She comes from a family of teachers and moved to Chicago to teach four years ago.

Teacher #3 is a white male in his late 30s who performed with a Grammy nominated pop band for several years prior to going into teaching full time three years ago. His first full-time teaching job was at the Choir Academy, where he has been the world percussion teacher at the Academy for three years, as well as teaching some piano classes. In addition, he auditions and rehearses a percussion ensemble of advanced kids after school. Teacher #3 grew up in a suburb of Detroit, is the youngest of seven kids in a musical family, and went to a small, private college in Michigan. Outside of the Choir Academy, Teacher #3 regularly performs outside of school and teaches a full percussion studio in the city.

Teacher #4 is an African American male in his early 30s who has been the Principle Conductor and Artistic Director of the Choir Academy for four years. Prior to teaching at the Choir Academy, this teacher built a successful program at a local high school. Like teacher #1, he has grown up in the CPS system, and attended college at a well-respected university in Chicago. An active performer, teacher #4 sings with local groups regularly as well as directs a gospel choir at a local performing arts college.

### **Data Analysis and Theoretical Framework**

As mentioned previously, formal interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). CRP is a pedagogy committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment (1995). Teachers who ascribe to this philosophy of teaching treat students as partners in education and work to share knowledge and experiences in a way that fosters academic pride and power amongst students. Leadership skills, strength in culture, and academic excellence are pillars of CRP, which is based on work with African-American children. The CRP framework asserts that (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Through this lens, each teacher's interview transcripts were analyzed and consistencies amongst all four respondents were noted and coded as themes.

### **Results**

Eight emerging themes were identified from analyzing interview transcripts; these themes support CRP as well as offer new directions for reflection on music teaching in the urban environment. When appropriate, selected interview responses have been included so that the theme is illustrated through the voices of the participants themselves.

#### **1) Participants are reflective practitioners**

Participants were able to reflect on their own experiences and use those as a starting point (rather than the definitive lens) for relating to the experiences of students, especially those of a different racial and cultural background. In addition, participants reflected on the success of their teaching, and used these reflections as a way to improve practice.

Teacher #2, discussing an experience she had had as a new teacher:

Both schools I taught at were 100% African American and I am Caucasian and I think kind of allowing myself to admit that there were cultural differences was one thing that I had to do first because I wanted to come in and say it doesn't matter if all of my kids are black and I am white...But it does matter because we have had very significant differences in our experiences and there are just great cultural differences. So it is reflecting on that and admitting that and then talking about it and then understanding, OK, yes I am white and not from the inner-city and you have experienced different things and then talking about it and moving on. And then still having a relationship so we've had different experiences but we can still relate to each other. That took a little bit of time (personal communication).

Teacher #3, illustrating his method for charting progress:

I take a lot of notes—during class, after class, when I am out and about in the city. I am constantly thinking about how I can use what I experience to provide an inspiration for students. And I try to write about what didn't work with kids, so I don't use it in the future.

## **2) Participants are active musicians**

Three of the four participants are actively performing and teaching outside the school environment, which provides both personal outlets for expression as well as inspiration for teaching. All four teachers believe it is important that students see that you can do what you are asking them to do—sing, play, read music, work with others, and so on and that you do.

Teacher #1, articulating the role music has played in her life:

We [my family] live music. Everybody in my family sings and everybody in my extended family plays some instrument or sings—piano, violin, clarinet. I have always been surrounded by music and that has always been a strong point for me...I will always sing and I teach a lot by demonstration. The students seem to get inspiration from that—my love of singing.

Teacher #3, describing the importance and impact of demonstrating high-level skills to students:

You still have to kind of prove yourself as a teacher and even as a performer to gain students' trust and respect. I mean you can tell kids, you know, play it this way, play it this way, play it this way, and then when

## **Characteristics of Successful Inner-city Music Teachers**

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you actually sit down and show them how to do it, you have to show them your best stuff.

### **3) Participants believe that choral singing encourages expression and fosters discipline**

Teachers shared common beliefs about what is most important about choral singing: an outlet for emotional, physical, and creative expression and an experience that teaches self-discipline as well as responsibility towards others who are working towards a common goal.

Teacher #1, discussing her philosophy of music education:

Every child is artistic in some way. Either they draw or they sing or they can tap out a rhythm from thin air. I think music happens to be a very effective artistic and expressive outlet because it involves all of that. You can paint colors with music, you can tell a story with music, it helps the child become creative in his or her own way...Music is a discipline and if you can discipline yourself to learn music without leaning on someone else, then it will help you in life.

Teacher #3, articulating an outcome of singing in choir/participating in music:

The discipline is probably the best thing you can get out of music. And I think it's the most important. Without discipline you are not going to be able to do anything [in life]...But music gives you that discipline that they need and helps with the rules of life. This is how we do things and this is why we do things. The bigger picture, oh this is how I study math this is why I should do it this way. We are constantly breaking that down for students.

### **4) Participants believe the students are the heart of a successful curriculum**

In turn, participants articulated that you must consider students first when choosing literature. To accomplish this in a meaningful way, student abilities, interests or experiences, and student cultures – “city culture,” pop culture, and racial or ethnic culture – must be considered.

Teacher #1, discussing her process for choosing literature:

If you know the students, consider them greatly...start with what you know about the students. I'll look at the dynamic of the group, who is in the group, what they have gone through this year, or what direction I want them to go, and I'll choose [music] based on that... I don't want them to be singing music that they are not comfortable with, and there I have to consider their racial background. And I don't want them to be singing music I'm not comfortable with...

**5) Participants believe that students should be exposed to as much music as possible, as well as be educated about “their music”**

All four teachers stressed exposure to music that is unfamiliar to students was imperative to stretch students’ musical understandings as well as their appreciation for all music. Secondly, building bridges between the unfamiliar and the familiar strengthens students’ ability to relate to music of different cultures, genres, and styles. Teachers expressed a desire to help students better understand and appreciate music that was familiar to students, as a way to instill a sense of pride in students’ musical heritage as well as help them to make connections between and among all forms of music. In particular, gospel and pop styles were studied and programmed regularly, along with classical music from around the world.

Teacher #4, articulating his efforts to broaden the students’ musical experiences:

You know, I believe in building an eclectic program, because it gives the students the opportunity to experience different kinds of music. Any music of any genre can teach you the basics of music, but some things are specific to specific genres. So they need to have the opportunity to experience those things that are unique to certain genres of choral music... In that way, it adds value, too, to the music that they already embrace. Especially when the music that they already embrace, may be looked down upon by the dominant portion or the majority in society as lacking value or substance. When you put Twista on the same program as Mozart, you’re saying it’s just as valuable in terms of the quality of the music and in terms of the need for people to experience it, and what people are able to experience from it. So that’s another reason why it’s important to have an eclectic repertoire. It adds value to that which the students already appreciate, and shows them, “What you listen to at home, it is good, it’s important, it is making a difference in the world, it is doing something unique and special for people, just like the music that’s being played at the Lyric Opera House.”

Teacher #2, discussing her feelings on curriculum:

You know repertoire from different time periods, different genres of music, certainly different languages from different cultures as well as the best of the music from their culture. Exposure to great music of all kinds is so important, especially when relating it to what they already think of as great music.

Teacher #3, illustrating his process for choosing materials and music:

Well, my curriculum is so broad and I feel like that is really important...I try and find things that are a common thread in the culture—pop, gospel, jazz...and then branch out from there, relating things along the way. I teach a world of music through rhythm.

**6) Participants expect excellence from students, both musically and personally**

## **Characteristics of Successful Inner-city Music Teachers**

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Participants believe that high quality music (in any style) is both attainable and necessary for urban students. Participants acknowledge difficulties but believe in helping students overcome circumstances in order to achieve success. Participants believe in holding students accountable for their actions, while at the same time, showing love, understanding and support.

Teacher # 2, articulating the need for having high expectations, "Musically, specifically, in a choral classroom, choosing quality repertoire is always possible no matter what the ability level of the singers or the age. Always possible and always necessary."

Teacher #4, describing his role as a teacher: "I believe my role [as a teacher] is to show someone his/her potential; show someone what's really good about them and what's great about them."

Teacher #3, articulating his philosophy of music education: "I believe that every student can perform and can have an opportunity to perform and develop confidence if given the chance in the right environment. Period."

Teacher #2, describing her views on promoting positive student behaviour:

And it is just kind of about learning integrity. It shouldn't matter who is watching you, you should make want to make yourself proud of yourself. Not because I am going to say I am proud of you and give you a high five as you walk out the door, not because you can get a treat or get points, but because you are proud of what you have done... And I think you foster a desire to be successful- I tell them that they are excellent and want them to practice being excellent everyday. Not perfection but just encouraging pride in themselves and in the ensemble so that it can be as great as it can be.

### **7) Participants believe that teamwork is at the centre of the choral experience**

Participants see the value in collaborating and cooperating with others to achieve goals. Participants expect students to develop a social conscience in choir. Participants provide opportunities for students to be involved in the teaching process, which supports leadership development as well as shared decision making. Participants believe in offering choices to students; compromise is always a possibility, except when it comes to quality.

Teacher #1, illustrating the importance of creating community in choir:

The most successful thing would probably be creating a sense of community, togetherness. I mean yes of course having them sing well and it sounds good and everything is a success in itself. But creating a sense of community within the group, you know that whole thing where if the person next to you is not singing the right note, you just nudge them but don't embarrass them. I want them to be able to support each other in the music.

Teacher #3, discussing the need for collaborative activities:



The kids...its just a radical thought, and its my own opinion, but I think the more kids are on their computers, their Game Boys, their cell phones, the less time they are communicating with each other, the less time they are going outside and playing, the less time they are learning those skills to be social...but I think its important to build those friendships and those relationships and know when you can do things and when you cannot do things as a community and interacting with people.

### **8) Participants believe that you cannot be successful if you do not truly care**

This theme was twofold: caring about students as people and about the integrity of the music and the experience. The old adage: *Students don't care about how much you know, if they don't know how much you care...* teachers articulated this theme in many ways, from supporting students academic efforts in the form of after-school tutoring to driving students home after a late practice to braiding a student's hair before performances. Each of the four participants felt this was their number one priority in teaching: to make sure each student knew how much he/she cared about the student and the experience of making music together.

Teacher #2, discussing the need for each student to feel valued:

And then just making them feel they are needed and important and that...each individual is creating and contributing to this larger thing that we are making together and that it wouldn't be as great if one of the students wasn't there or giving her best.

Teacher #3, illustrating the importance of building relationships with kids:

Just the kids knowing that you care and for one thing—the experience they are going to have with you. So, once they realize that, they're building some trust in you and you start to build a relationship with them through that.

Teacher #4, articulating the impact of caring teachers on students' lives:

Children in the city, outside the city, wherever, are all looking for the same thing. They're looking for an adult that cares about their well-being, and if you're able to communicate that honestly, that's what's going to reach them the most. And I would say, that's especially important for teaching students who are growing up in difficult neighborhoods where they see a lot of violence, a lot of people not caring about each other, people violating other people's person, they need to have a place where they can feel safe and to feel like, "I'm not going to be violated or humiliated or hurt or taken advantage here. When I come into your classroom, I know I can be safe here. I know I won't feel humiliated in the presence of this person." And having the characteristic of, "I genuinely care about you," and also, "I

## Characteristics of Successful Inner-city Music Teachers

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believe in your potential for learning; I believe in your potential for being successful," the students will pick up on that and feel that, and you'll be able to get across to them.

### Conclusion

The participants in this study are dedicated music teachers who are making a difference in the lives of their students. They are professionals who care deeply about music education and children. Choral music is the vehicle with which these teachers inspire, educate, support, and motivate students. Celebrating and elevating the culture of students are two important aspects of their teaching philosophies; and students' abilities, interests, and backgrounds are important components of the choral music curriculum. Preservice music teachers need role models and a rich context in which to envision themselves as music teachers in an urban setting. The stories and experiences of successful inner-city music teachers add a realistic and inspiring perspective from which to draw. Their voices are strong.

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