

Competitive Versus Non-Competitive Goal Structures: An Analysis of the Development of Self-Esteem Within Vocal Students and Their Perceptions of Musical Achievement

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There is a tendency in music education to place elites and regulars on the same track, designing the system in such a way that most will inevitably fall by the wayside with only the cream of the crop surviving. Competitions, contests, and recitals all seem to revolve around that end.... One does not create enduring motivational patterns by showing people that they are incompetent. Insofar as an activity is structures to do that, it will be a motivational failure for the large majority of the participants. (Maehr, 1983)

The past decade has brought to light much interest and research into the nature of competition. Competition, in various forms has seeped into our school, our classrooms, our peer groups and our homes. It continues to have diverse effects on child development and thereby the nature of the pedagogy. Within this context, I examined the effects of including a competitive goal structure as a part of an ongoing voice instruction within a private voice studio. The purpose was to specifically study the effects of competition on the development of self-esteem in young singers. The development of self-esteem is but one important part of the general musical growth and development.

Research has shown a great divide in the effects of a competitive goal structure on the learning of children. Some research claims that competition, in an educational setting, will improve academic achievement in students, motivating them to perform to the best of their ability (Hayes, 1976; Michaels, 1978). Other researchers conclude that the main reason for participating in competitions is to provide students with a sense of accomplishment, to encourage high performance standards and as a means of evaluation and goal orientation. Such opposing research cautions music educators that while competition may work to boost music interest or performance in the short term, it may actually have less positive outcomes on musical development and appreciation (Austin, 1990; Austin & Vispoel, 1992).

Some researchers claim that a competitive structure is created when many people are striving for the same goal. Participants can only attain this objective if the other participants cannot reach their goals. Therefore, a competitive goal structure prevents all participants from reaching their highest goals in equal amounts (Skon, Nelson, Maruyama, & Johnson, 1981). Educators are becoming increasingly aware of the influence of competition on students, and must be cognizant of its diverse effects, both positive and negative (Ames & Felker, 1979; Ames & Ames, 1981; Ames, Ames & Felker, 1977; Covington & Omelich, 1984).

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of competitive and non-competitive goal structures on the development of self-esteem in solo vocal students, and to determine student perceptions regarding their own performance achievement. To this end, 60 voice students were chosen to participate during the 2000-2001 academic school year. These students all attended Take Note Music School in Mount Pearl, Newfoundland. Students ranged in ages from 9 to 16 and were divided into two age groupings. Group one ranged in age from 9 to 12 and group two ranged in age from 13 to 16. These two groups were then equally sub-divided and placed into a competitive (rewards based on an absolute standard) or a noncompetitive (all participants rewarded for trying their best) goal structure.

Over a period of six weeks, students were asked to prepare an accompanied solo piece for performance in a music festival setting. All participants maintained a guided journal for seven weeks prior to the festival and one week following the festival. Eight students and

their parents were randomly chosen to participate in one individual interview following the festival. Students also completed a post-festival attribution survey immediately following their festival experience.

Data was collected through these three data collection methods, as well as the results provided by the festival adjudicator. After completion of the study process data was coded and analyzed. Themes were identified as performance outcomes, self-esteem, goal structures, and perception of musical achievement. I will only briefly discuss two of these themes today.

Results

Goal Structures

When asked to choose a future festival goal structure, 70% of participants said they would choose a competitive structure while only 30% would chose a non- competitive festival. There was a significant difference in student response between the two age groups. Table 1 demonstrates the breakdown of student responses.

Table 1: Student Preference for a Competitive or Non-Competitive Goal Structure

Goal Structures	Competitive	Non-Competitive
Competitive ^a	13	2
Non-competitive ^a	11	1
Competitive ^b	11	4
Non-competitive ^b	5	10
Total	40	17

^aCompetitive and ^aNon-competitive participants are 9 to 12 years old.
^bCompetitive and ^bNon-competitive participants are 13 to 16 years old.
 Note: Three students were absent from the ^aNon-competitive festival.

Self-esteem

For the purpose of this study, the terms self-concept and self-esteem were used interchangeably. They are defined as the evaluation an individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself or herself. Self-esteem expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself or herself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds towards himself or herself (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 4-5).

For the purpose of this study, perceptions of self-esteem (high, low and average) have been categorized according to sample written comments by using the writings of the participants. Table 2 provides categorized statements from the study participants.

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Self-Esteem (Sample)

High Self-Esteem	Average Self-Esteem	Low Self-Esteem
"My singing voice is good"	"I am comfortable with my singing voice"	"My singing is not as good as it should be"
"I am musical in several ways"	"Sometimes I like my singing some days I don't"	"Sometimes it makes me doubt my musical abilities"

High Self-Esteem	Average Self-Esteem	Low Self-Esteem
"I feel really good about my singing voice"	"I have just an average everyday singing voice"	"After I finished performing I cried"
"I feel confident with my singing voice"	"My voice is good but it could be better"	
"I have pride in myself"	"My singing voice sounded alright"	
"I love my voice"		

One of the major needs of life is to feel a sense of belonging. As a child develops, it is where they get their sense of belonging that changes. These places begin in the home with the parents and move to the school and teachers at an early age. Children in the middle school develop the need to be a part of, and accepted in a peer group. According to Dr. Jerry Aldridge there are three elements that affect or impede this sense of belonging: comparison, competition, and conformity (Aldridge, 1993).

Students compare themselves to each other, leading to an externally oriented self-esteem. This leads to a feeling of inadequacy in an individual, how they perceive themselves, and affects their sense of belonging to a group. Aldridge (1993) maintains that competition will have an effect on the development of self-esteem and the sense of belonging in a child. When involved in competition a child may feel that he or she is not as good as a peer and may compromise his or her sense of belonging in a peer group. The idea of conformity also starts at a very early age in life. Students realize that there are sets of rules to which they must conform in order to be accepted. The price of conformity is often lack of creativity and the result is that they often become like everyone else. Students sometimes feel that they are not allowed to be themselves for the sake of the group and their uniqueness is not valued.

Perceptions of Self Esteem

From the grid constructed as a means to determine the level of self-esteem demonstrated by the study participants the following information was disseminated.

Nine to Twelve-year-old Non-competitive Festival

Students participating in this festival class demonstrated a perception of an average level of self-esteem in their journal entries. Students attributing the success of their performance to effort had either high perception of self-esteem or average perception self-esteem. Perceptions of self-esteem levels were evenly split between average and low. One student said, "I like my singing voice because I can sing high notes and sing clearly." One student said, "I am musical in many ways and I think that my singing voice is good." Another student stated, "I think that my voice is nice but I wish that I could sing higher notes."

Thirteen to Sixteen-year-old Non-competitive Festival

Students participating in this festival class indicated a more varied distribution of their perceptions of self-esteem. Twenty percent (20%) or three students expressed high perceptions of self-esteem, seven students (47%) conveyed average perceptions of self-esteem, and five students (33%) indicated low perceptions of self-esteem. Students indicating a high perception of self-esteem also expressed high perceptions of their musical achievement. Six of the seven students (86%) conveying an average perception of self-esteem indicated an average perception of musical achievement. One student (14%) indicated a low perception of musical achievement. The five students (33%) expressing a

low perception of self-esteem in the festival experience also indicated a low perception of their musical achievements. One student said, "I'm not very happy with my voice." Another student stated, "I feel that my singing voice is just an average, every day singing voice."

Nine to Twelve-year-old Competitive Festival

Students participating in this festival class also indicated a variety of levels of self-esteem. Seven participants (47%) expressed a high perception of self-esteem, seven participants (47%) conveyed an average perception of self-esteem and only one student indicated a low perception of self-esteem. Five of the students who placed first, second or third in this festival expressed high perceptions of self-esteem in their ability to sing. Two students, who did not place, continued to convey positive perceptions of self-esteem. One student said: "I think that in a festival you set your sights too high. You think you are going to win first place and when you don't you are discouraged." Another student stated, "I feel confident with my singing voice."

Thirteen to Sixteen-year-old Competitive Festival

All of the students involved in this festival class expressed either a high perception of self-esteem or an average perception of self-esteem. Eight students (53%) indicated a high perception of self-esteem. Five of those students with high perceptions of self-esteem placed first, second or third in the festival and attributed their festival success to ability. One student said, "I think my singing voice is both strong and weak at times, but overall improving." Another student stated, "Sometimes I think my musical abilities aren't good enough, but I try to convince myself that I do my best."

At this time I would like to share some student and parent reflections on competitive and non-competitive goal structure.

The competitive nature among his classmates has greatly affected Sam. It has affected his self-esteem and his sense of self-worth. He's felt he was no good. He's even gone to the point of saying mom I wish I would die. Mom you should go out and get another kid because I'm no good. (Parent, 2001)

I would choose a non-competitive festival because this way, I could have a great learning experience without losing. Sometimes I feel my musical abilities aren't good enough, but I try to convince myself that I do my best. (Student, 2001)

I prefer to compete in a competitive festival because it feels like you're working towards something. (Student, 2001)

I would prefer to participate in a non-competitive festival because a non-competitive festival is more relaxed with less pressure. In a competitive festival everyone wants to win and there is too much emphasis put on it. (Student, 2001)

I would prefer a competitive festival. I would try really hard to sing good so I would win and be congratulated by my dad. (Student, 2001)

I think that in a competitive festival you set your sights too high. You think you are going to win first place and when you don't you are discouraged. (Student, 2001)

I don't know if they should be competitive. I like the non-competitive festival because I feel that they are being judged on just a few minutes of time rather than their ability from the whole year. One child could just have a bad day, they could come back two hours later and do it perfectly. So in judging a competition, each musical talent is different, so I think it's hard to judge one better than the other. (Parent, 2001)

I would choose a non-competitive festival. I found it very helpful that we weren't compared so much to each other but we still got an adjudication to help us, like what we need to work on. In a competitive festival, if you don't win it would make you feel kinda bad about your musical abilities. In a non-competitive festival you are not compared, you are given an adjudication and you are told what your strengths and weaknesses are, you can just work on that. (Student, 2001)

I like the competitive festival because it makes you work harder to be your best. I like that you can win first, second or third. If you don't win you know what you have to work on so you can try and win the next time (Student, 2001).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that competition does not produce superior levels of musical achievement or self-esteem in voice students. Students achieve equally to the best of their ability in both competitive and non-competitive goal structures. Students who win in the competitive structure are more likely to think their ability is greater than those who do not win. Those who do not win in a competitive festival and those who participate in a non-competitive festival are more likely to choose effort as the reason for the festival outcomes. These findings are in agreement with the work of Ames (1984), Covington (1984), and Austin (1991).

Music self-esteem did have significant effect on music achievement. Students with a high self-esteem were more apt to attribute ability as reason for the festival outcomes. Prior research (Asmus, 1986; Austin 1988) indicates that more students generally attribute success to effort than ability. This study has demonstrated that those students who win in a competitive festival are more apt to choose ability as the leading attribute for success. Students who do not win, but have successful performances are more likely to attribute their festival outcomes to effort. Students with low self-esteem are more likely to attribute their performance outcomes to effort or task difficulty and a small percentage to luck.

When students were asked to indicate which type of festival they would prefer in the future, competitive or non-competitive, the issue of self-esteem played no significant role in this decision. However, students with low music self-esteem seemed to favour a non-competitive class, while students with high music self-esteem preferred competition. There was no correlation between the goal structures the students had experienced in the study and their future goal structure preference.

Implications

These results question the traditional acceptance of competition in the voice studio. While researchers and educators continue to struggle with this element of self-esteem as it is related to competition, it is important for individual educators to be aware of the differences among students needs, their attitudes towards musical experiences and levels of self-esteem. Competition is not for every child and children need to be given alternative, supportive performing environments to help increase their self-esteem and perceptions of their musical abilities.

One possible approach to this issue would be the creation of a student profile at the beginning of the school year. Each student and parent would meet with the teacher to discuss goals for the child's musical development. Decisions regarding participation in such events as competition, workshops, festivals and concerts could be dealt with at this time.

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