

Research Report

Bryan E. Nichols, editor

Mindset, Self-Concept, and Long-Term Musical Engagement

by Kari Adams

Student motivation is often a chief concern among choral music educators. There are many factors that influence student motivation, and among those factors are the beliefs students hold about their musical abilities. Two important beliefs that influence motivation are self-concept and mindset. Students form these self-theories during adolescence based on experiences and interactions with others, which means the strategies conductors use in rehearsal can influence these developing theories.

Mindset

The term mindset, from the work of psychologist Carol Dweck, refers to the way people view the nature and source of their abilities. A student who holds a *fixed mindset* about their musical ability believes that musical skills are in-born traits. If they have the talent, they can improve their skill, but without natural talent they cannot improve. A stu-

dent with a *growth mindset* believes that musical skills are malleable and that their ability can improve with deliberate practice.

Researchers examining mindset in academic domains have found that individuals who hold a fixed mindset are likely to set performance goals (i.e., goals designed to prove talent), ignore corrective feedback, and give up in challenging situations. Those who hold a growth mindset are likely to set learning goals (i.e., goals designed to bring about growth), use corrective feedback for improvement, and persevere in the face of challenges. These mindset characteristics appear to transfer across a wide variety of subjects including math, science, visual arts, sports, and music.

Educational researchers have consistently discovered strong correlations between mindset and goal orientation. Bret P. Smith discovered that undergraduate instrumental music majors who held a fixed mindset were more likely to endorse

performance goals, and those with a growth mindset were more likely to set learning goals. Although fewer music education researchers have examined the construct of mindset, several have studied the role of achievement goal construct in music, especially its role in self-regulated practice, commitment to musical activities, and task persistence. Additionally, practitioners have written about the value of mindset in the music classroom and provided strategies for promoting a growth mindset specific to the choral rehearsal.

The strategies conductors use in rehearsal—including feedback style, instructional approaches, and rehearsal structure—can influence students' developing mindsets. In their seminal study, Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck's fifth-grade participants who received praise for their ability when completing math problems were more likely to display behaviors associated with a fixed mindset, including low task

persistence, reduced enjoyment, and decreased performance following a failure. Those who received praise for effort instead did not display any of these maladaptive behaviors. Kevin Droe replicated this study with fourth-grade students completing rhythm-reading tasks and had similar results: participants praised for effort were more likely to select learning goals and exhibit increased task persistence, but the talent-praise group was more likely to select performance goals and exhibited low task persistence.

Self-Concept

Another meaning system that can impact student motivation and behavior is musical self-concept. Self-concept describes a complex, multi-faceted, hierarchical view of the self, but many use the term to describe the evaluative portion of the self-concept. Although not synonymous, self-concept is often used interchangeably with self-worth and self-esteem. Musical self-concept most often refers to the views individuals hold regarding the quality of their musical skills.

Like mindset, most people de-

velop their self-concept during childhood and adolescence based on experiences and interactions with others. Self-concept during adolescence is especially vulnerable to challenges or failures in highly valued domains as well as negative interactions with significant others. Researchers in music education have found that musical self-concept plays a role in student decisions about whether or not they will enroll in elective music activities.

As children enter adolescence, they begin to devalue effort. If they try and fail, they experience a loss in self-concept, but if they fail without any effort expenditure their self-concept is protected. Maladaptive behaviors such as lack of effort, procrastination, or self-destructive tendencies are especially salient when the environment encourages comparison rather than self-referential judgments. In competitive environments, especially during adolescence, students are likely to shift toward performance goals and make self-concept judgments based on their ability to outperform others.

Sandra Simpkins and colleagues observed that students generally experienced a loss in musical self-concept over time. They posited that this decline may be due to increased competitiveness and emphasis on ability as students progress through school. Other researchers have indicated that negative social interactions with peers or conductors may decrease musical self-concept during adolescence. These findings are important to choral music educators concerned with retaining

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students in choral programs, because researchers have found relationships between self-concept and involvement with musical activities at all levels.

Self-concept and Mindset

Although mindset and self-concept are not related, there are striking resemblances between the maladaptive behaviors designed to guard self-concept and the behaviors associated with a fixed mindset. Perhaps because of these similarities, mindset can predict changes to self-concept. For example, a stu-

dent entering middle school with a growth mindset is less likely to experience a downward trajectory of self-concept over time than a student who enters with a fixed mindset. Students who encounter challenges and failures with a growth mindset view those experiences as learning opportunities, but those who hold a fixed mindset view the same experiences as evidence of their lack of ability.

In addition to predicting changes to self-concept, mindset may have some influence over the decisions students make regarding their elective activities. Researchers have

identified mindset as a salient factor in students' decisions to remain active in elective sports activities. Although music education researchers have not yet examined the connection between mindset and enrollment decisions in the domain of music, it seems possible that mindset, along with self-concept and perceived value of musical activities, could predict future music participation.

Based on the characteristics associated with mindset and self-concept, a student with a high self-concept and a fixed mindset would be likely to continue in musical activi-



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ties as long as their self-theories are reinforced. In the face of failure or challenge, students with a high self-concept but a fixed mindset are likely to quit. Students with a fixed mindset and a low self-concept may view themselves as incapable of improvement and therefore hold a very low value for music making. Students with these characteristics often experience low levels of self-efficacy toward musical tasks and will be unlikely to enroll in musical activities by choice. However, students who hold a growth mindset and value music are likely to see musical activities as worthy of their time and effort regardless of their self-concept. These students are more likely to welcome challenges and continue enrolling in elective musical activities.

Previous researchers have indicated that self-concept is important in enrollment and retention in ensembles. Although researchers have not examined the role of mindset in enrollment decisions, mindset's mediating effect on self-concept lends credence to the idea that the two self-theories may work together in students' decisions about elective musical activities. Consider two hypothetical students who both have a low self-concept toward musical ability but differ in their mindset.

The student with a low self-concept and a growth mindset is theoretically more likely to continue elective singing than a student who has a low self-concept and a fixed mindset, regardless of the value they might place on the activity. When a student believes they are not good at something and cannot

get any better at it, it is highly unlikely that they will be motivated to continue to work on that skill—especially during adolescence when others' views of the self are so salient and proving competence is a primary goal. If educators want to improve the chances of students electing to continue involvement in musical and singing activities, it may be advantageous to work to promote a growth mindset toward singing ability.

Promoting a Growth Mindset

With the goal in mind of promoting a growth mindset toward singing ability, choral music educators might consider the pedagogical practices in place in the choral rehearsal and how those strategies may influence students' developing mindsets. When strategies promote or actively teach a growth mindset, students are more likely to adopt it and its associated behaviors. Strategies that promote competition or emphasize ability over effort and growth may inadvertently promote a fixed mindset among students and lead to maladaptive behaviors, lack of motivation, and loss of self-worth.

Feedback

Researchers have consistently found across a variety of domains that the feedback students receive can quickly alter their behaviors. Students who receive effort- or strategy-related feedback exhibit the behaviors of a growth mindset, and those who receive ability-related praise exhibit the maladaptive

behaviors of a fixed mindset. These effects are temporary, but consistency of growth-related feedback over time can increase the chances of students adopting a growth mindset. Choral music educators might consider shifting positive feedback away from ability-based praise (i.e., "You are so smart/talented/such a great singer!") and toward effort-based praise (i.e., "You have worked really hard on this concept today, and it is sounding better because of it!"). It may also be advantageous, both pedagogically and in the development of mindset, to limit praise and instead focus feedback on strategy use (i.e., "This wasn't quite right. Here's a strategy we can use to fix it."). Feedback can also focus on acknowledging growth over time, helping students focus on evidence of their own growth and thereby reinforcing the idea that musical abilities can improve with effort and appropriate strategy use.

Approaching Mistakes

The way in which leaders approach mistakes can have a serious impact on organizational culture as well as students' forming self-views. When educators react with frustration or anger at mistakes, students can become fearful and avoid challenges that might result in failure. One of Carlos Abril's participants stopped singing entirely for fear of her choral director's wrath at mistakes made in the ensemble. However, when conductors approach mistakes as opportunities for growth, or even celebrate mistakes as evidence of effort, students will quickly learn to take risks, accept

challenges, and not allow mistakes and failures to negatively influence their mindset or their self-concept. Choral music educators might consider celebrating mistakes, communicating with students that a rehearsal without mistakes is a failed rehearsal, or even instituting a motto or catch phrase to encourage students to embrace errors. For example, one of the foundational principles of improvisational comedy is, "There are no mistakes, only gifts." Discussing this concept with students and referring to mistakes throughout the year as "gifts" allows the ensemble to move forward

and address the mistakes in a productive manner.

Assessments

The ways in which we choose to assess our students can influence their developing self-views. Working to instill a growth mindset means choosing to emphasize growth and process rather than ability and product. It is vital that we assess students, help them reach benchmarks, and hold them to certain standards, but high-stakes assessments (i.e., one-shot assessments that carry a high point value) can actually discourage a growth

mindset. If a choral music educator works in rehearsal to teach a growth mindset but then assigns a high-stakes assessment, students will understand that perfection is valued above growth.

Similarly, assessments that measure students based on their relative ability compared to peers (i.e., normative assessments) may cause students to judge their ability in relation to others and encourage both a competitive culture and a fixed mindset. Alternatively, assessments that allow for students to demonstrate growth over time communicate that effort and effective

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strategy use are highly valued and promote self-referential judgments rather than comparison. Educators might consider allowing students to retake assessments or explore assessment options that take growth into account as well as reaching standards. Such assessments may have the added benefit of pushing advanced students to move beyond the standard rather than coasting through the course on assessments that never challenge them.

Ability Grouping

Many choral music educators create ability-grouped ensembles, which form a choral hierarchy. Although this practice emerged to improve contest performances, many educators now maintain it in the hopes of placing students in the ensemble in which they will experience the most success. However, research indicates that ability-grouped classes at the secondary level may negatively impact students' self-theories, including self-concept and mindset and may be a barrier to developing healthy rehearsal culture. If it is necessary to use ability-grouped ensembles, choral music educators might consider ways to handle auditions, student relationships, ensemble culture, and movement between ensembles so as to avoid detrimental effects on students' self-views and long-term participation in music.


Instructional Strategies

Direct instruction is a commonly used instructional strategy for many choral music educators. A typical rehearsal often relies heavily

on conductors telling students what to do and how to do it or modeling the way they would like a piece to be performed. Direct instruction is a useful pedagogical tool, but alternating it with more cognitively engaging processes may help improve students' self-efficacy, a self-view that is closely tied to both mindset and self-concept. One excellent pedagogical tool which has the potential to improve self-efficacy, increase self-concept, and encourage a growth mindset is cognitive apprenticeship. With cognitive apprenticeship, the conductor models their cognitive process for students, coaches students as they learn to think through those processes, and fades as students take ownership of their own learning and run rehearsals or sectionals independently. Through cognitive apprenticeship, students learn valuable musician-ship skills and that they are capable of learning and growing on their own.

Conclusion

The theories students hold about their singing abilities can influence their behavior, motivation, and desire to continue participating in elective musical activities. Researchers believe that musical self-concept is a factor in ensemble enrollment decisions, but it is important to note that mindset plays an important role in students' developing self-concept. By examining current practices and implementing strategies that promote a growth mindset, choral music educators can help students buttress their self-concept against

challenges and failures and increase the likelihood that they will remain active music-makers for years to come. 

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NOTES

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