



Research Report

**Elizabeth Cassidy Parker and
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Potential Mental Health Benefits of Collaborative Ensemble Singing for Female Adolescents

by Catherine Grimm

Research has shown that adolescent females are more at risk for anxiety and depression than their male counterparts.¹ This widespread mental health decline has been exacerbated by the isolation and uncertainty caused by the pandemic.² Many interventions have been implemented for youth as a whole in the United States, and some have focused on the female adolescent population. Participation in choral singing may be productive for well-being because of its proven effects of community building, emotional expression, and social connection.³ This review of literature seeks to uncover how choral music educators may address anxiety, depression, and stress in adolescent girls. Specifically, this article explores the potential benefits of collaborative ensemble singing as a tool for building mental health and wellness in female adolescents.⁴ In this article, the term “adolescence” refers to the general ages of children between twelve to eighteen years old.

Mental Health in Female Adolescents

By adolescence, females are twice as likely to experience anxiety and depression than males.⁵ This is due in large part to biological developments and societal expectations specific to female adolescents. Biologically, numerous hormonal changes cause girls to have a lower rate than males of instrumental coping skills to

combat symptoms of anxiety and depression. Social stresses resulting from problematic relationships such as conflicts with friends or rejection by classmates have been shown to be a predictor of depressive symptoms in adolescence, with which female adolescents have an even greater risk.⁶ When social stresses become chronic, they affect the dysregulation of physical, neurohormonal, and biochemical operations and may cause anxiety, withdrawal, and depressive symptoms.

Internalizing strong emotions is a socially groomed behavior placed upon female adolescents that presents significant risks for their mental health.⁷ Girls are more likely than boys of the same age to perceive a larger discrepancy between their current and ideal self while attempting to maintain academic and social expectations. In trying to close this uncomfortable gap between the current and the ideal self, anxiety, somatic problems, and eating disorders may manifest.⁸ Female inclination toward internalized, repetitive focus on these issues is correlated with anxiety, depression, and decreased well-being.⁹ Laura Finch et al. state, “Despite the challenges of measuring...‘soft’ outcomes like self-esteem and resilience, it is clear that a focus on ‘hard’ outcomes alone [i.e., grades, test scores] will not work.”¹⁰ The need for mental health interventions for adolescent girls has never been higher, with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness significantly

worsening in this demographic during the pandemic. Choral music educators stand in a unique position to serve the wellness needs of female students.¹¹

Benefits of Choral Participation for Female Adolescents

Choir participation has the potential to help change the course of declining mental health in female adolescents through “encouraging and empowering women as holistic individuals, leaders, and musicians.”¹² The benefits of singing and the benefits of choral singing overlap in the areas of self-esteem and self-confidence.¹³ To further enhance these benefits, directors can intentionally incorporate a collaborative ensemble model.¹⁴

A sense of belonging is one of the most powerful and beneficial byproducts of choral singing, but especially from a developmental standpoint for adolescents.¹⁵ The teamwork of ensemble singing can elicit a sense of unity among singers.¹⁶ Additionally, choral students may be more comfortable and at peace with their identity, enhancing the sense of community through expressing individuality in the music. Members of a choir are able to connect and be vulnerable with each other and the group, effectively breaking down the barriers to friendship that are so sought after in adolescence. Adderley et al. echo this in their research, identifying respect from peers as an additional benefit of consistent music participation.¹⁷

Parker notes that one of the most important outcomes of choir participation for teens is increased self-acceptance and understanding.¹⁸ Teen girls, in particular, report actively exploring and developing their changing voices rather than concentrating on their limitations.¹⁹ This is in opposition to factors like rumination on disordered symptoms and body image dissatisfaction that are characteristic of the age group.²⁰ Forming identity is a large part of adolescence, and choral participation may be a proactive tool to empower female adolescents through this developmental stage.²¹ Additionally, pride in achievements and accomplishments through music making can help to combat low self-esteem and low self-confidence, which are two main factors cited in the literature as predictors of anxiety and depression for adolescent girls.²²

Collaborative Ensemble Models: A Learner-Centered Design

The learner-centered design of collaborative ensembles is not a new concept in educational theory, but one that may specifically benefit female adolescents in choir because of the level of empowerment it adds to the rehearsal. Much of the learner-centered design approach agrees with and is derived from constructivist models, which would complement findings for women in educational settings that show an emphasis on narrative thinking and community interaction.²³ A peer-based, social-learning classroom encourages empowerment in all students regardless of gender through recognizing their lived experiences as valuable knowledge for problem solving within the music.²⁴ When the singers use their own knowledge to solve musical problems, the authority shifts from the conductor to the ensemble members, tapping into the developmentally appropriate modes of belonging, social affiliation, and relational learning experiences through the co-construction of dialogue with peers.²⁵ Through learner-centered collaboration, all singers become harnessed for learning experiences.

A Closer Look at the Collaborative Model Ensemble


The equalization of power between the student and the teacher in a collaborative model can empower individuals to express their own voice.²⁶ This peer-based, social-learning classroom cultivates feelings of empowerment in students by recognizing their lived experiences as valuable knowledge for problem solving within the music.²⁷ Bartolome noted that when control of the artistic process was handed over to singers in a girls' choir, an “empowered ownership was evident in each rehearsal.”²⁸ Mitchell also found that the relational nature of rehearsals gave opportunities for personal risk-taking, which actually increased self-efficacy.²⁹

Throughout the course of the rehearsal season, the ensemble members and conductor must provide opportunities for the practice of open-discourse, validation of ideas, balancing of group dynamics, and listening in order for this process to be successful.³⁰ However, Bryson cautions that individuals must be “willing to learn, experiment, and take on new responsibilities” in

implementing this method.³¹ The collaborative model ensemble also offers opportunities for students to engage in messy critical thinking and problem solving that fosters musical agency.³² The learner interacts and makes meaning from their musical environment through the help of small peer-groups, aligning with the educational philosophy of John Dewey.³³ The more responsibility female adolescents are given, the more empowered choir members and individuals they become, and these democratic processes may help them find their identity through music.³⁴

Issues with leadership such as role confusion, lack of direction, and individual apathy have been found to arise in this model, yet more findings suggest that the groups seem to support individual contributions; an intimate, collective desire for the success of each member; and a reciprocal trust in the interest of meeting the musical goals of the ensemble.³⁵ Most importantly, collaborative decision making has been correlated with a sense of connectedness and autonomy, which inspires even more community in the group.³⁶ This support meets the blossoming need for social affiliation and belonging in adolescent girls.

Conclusion

Many interventions have been implemented for youth in the United States, yet few have focused on the mental health of the female adolescent population in music. A collaborative ensemble model has the potential to harness the benefits of choral singing to generate empowerment and provide these students with a locus of control that is correlated with improved mental health. Some resources that educators may utilize as a small beginning in their own classroom include *The Learner-Centered Music Classroom* by Jonathan Kladder and Nana Wolfe-Hill's "Collaboration and Meaning Making in the Women's Choral Rehearsal," in *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*. The collaborative model ensemble may be an opportunity to rewrite the choral and mental health narrative for female adolescents in the United States. 

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NOTES

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- ⁴ In this article, the term "female" refers to cisgender women who identify with their sex assigned at birth, while recognizing that gender identity is a spectrum.
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