

Fostering Connection: Fifteen Social-Emotional Learning Strategies for Building Community in the Choral Classroom

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Choirs have always been an authentic form of community music making. In the K–12 setting, a choral ensemble provides fertile ground for students to develop essential social-emotional learning (SEL) skills in ways that may not be prioritized in other academic environments. Social-emotional learning encompasses the skills students use to understand themselves, regulate emotions, build empathy, form healthy relationships, and make responsible choices—skills that are actively rehearsed each time singers listen, respond, and create together.¹ Given the increased prevalence of mental health problems in students, it is necessary to deepen our understanding of protective methods that can counterbalance negative effects of isolation and address the psychological vulnerability and distress among adolescents.² Recent research has argued that resilience is a strong protective factor in mitigating internalizing problems, and partly externalizing problems, particularly as these difficulties tend to increase with age.³ Importantly, resilience should be promoted through a systemic approach that recognizes the value of family, peers, schools, and communities as key protective networks.⁴ Therefore, maintaining and nurturing supportive relationships should be a priority for promoting adolescents’ mental health.⁵ Other researchers have emphasized the importance of fostering resilience

and social and emotional competencies early in life, as demonstrated by innovative programs for toddlers that have documented promising results.⁶ Continued efforts to adopt such practices within schools and communities can help equip young people to face present and future challenges with greater well-being and hope.

Because social-emotional learning is most effective when embedded within authentic, relational contexts, music classrooms—and choral ensembles in particular—offer a uniquely powerful setting for this work. While SEL research often highlights outcomes across developmental stages, the collaborative, vulnerable, and interdependent nature of ensemble singing makes choral spaces especially impactful for adolescents navigating identity, belonging, and peer relationships, while remaining relevant across K–12 and postsecondary settings. Music educators are, therefore, increasingly tasked not only with developing musical skills but with intentionally cultivating rehearsal environments where students feel valued, safe, and seen.

This article explores fifteen social-emotional learning strategies designed for use in choral settings across age levels. Some strategies are drawn directly from my own secondary choral teaching practice, while others are adaptable ideas informed by current research and pedagogical frameworks. Together, they offer practical,

flexible entry points for educators seeking to foster authentic community alongside musical excellence. The strategies are grouped into four broad categories: (1) identity and belonging, (2) voice and agency, (3) wellness and reflection, and (4) community connection beyond the rehearsal room.

Identity and Belonging

Strategy #1:

“We Are Family” or “Student Spotlight” Project

One of the most impactful strategies to foster connection is to allow students to share about themselves in structured and affirming ways. The “We Are Family” project enables each student to introduce themselves to the ensemble through a personal slideshow presentation. This method is particularly effective in environments where students may not already know each other well, such as after program turnover or in ensembles consisting of multiple grade levels, unlike other academic subjects where students are grouped by grade level. By incorporating key personal elements—such as name, pronouns, hobbies, musical interests, and family—students are invited to be seen holistically by their peers.

When introduced in my own classroom during the spring of 2023, this activity helped combat the fragmentation caused by our hybrid model of instruction. Presentations occurred at the start of each class with one student sharing per day, and classmates were encouraged to ask respectful questions or find common ground. This normalized a routine of daily personal connection and encouraged empathy, reduced social anxiety, cultivated new friendships, and fostered peer validation.

An additional benefit of this activity is that it provides a structured and meaningful way to start rehearsal while allowing the teacher to take attendance or check in with students as needed. Because the activity is student led and engaging, everyone is naturally tuned in and invested. Administrators who visit during these presentations often witness authentic, unscripted

moments of student-to-student appreciation, making it an excellent showcase of classroom culture and SEL in action. Research supports the effectiveness of peer-sharing activities in building classroom community and empathy.⁷

Strategy #2:

Musical Identity Collages

This strategy invites students to visually express their unique musical identities by creating personal collages using magazine cutouts, drawings, or digital tools. Students showcase their favorite genres of music, artists, cultural influences, and formative musical memories. Sharing these in class helps students appreciate the diversity of their peers’ musical backgrounds, fostering deeper empathy and inclusion. It also allows introverted students a meaningful avenue to share more about themselves. Rooted in culturally relevant pedagogy, this strategy affirms each student’s musical voice and creates a foundation of mutual respect, showing students that all musical paths are valid and worthy of celebration. Consider offering multiple modalities for students to choose, for example: Google Slides, Canva, or simply a posterboard.

Strategy #3:

Creating a Choir Code

At the start of the year, students can cocreate a set of class commitments that reflect their collective values, such as kindness, focus, effort, honesty, and vulnerability. These shared agreements—sometimes called a “Choir Code”—serve as a foundation for ensemble culture and accountability. Students are more likely to honor expectations they helped create, and revisiting the commitments throughout the semester helps reinforce positive norms. Posting the commitments publicly creates a sense of ownership and pride. This process promotes responsible decision-making and social awareness, ensuring that classroom management isn’t top down, but rather a shared, student-led commitment to a safe and supportive space.

Strategy #4: **Peer Pair-Ups and Musical Mentorship**

This strategy pairs students intentionally across experience levels to foster support and mentorship during sectionals or sight-reading practice. Rather than random grouping, the teacher selects partners with complementary strengths, encouraging students to learn from and encourage one another. Coaching prompts guide students to give feedback rooted in kindness and curiosity. This structure reduces performance anxiety, strengthens social bonds, and models collaborative musicianship. It also helps emerging leaders develop communication skills and builds a culture of mutual respect. Over time, pair-ups become a norm that empowers every student to feel seen, heard, and capable of contributing to the ensemble's success. This is a useful activity to include during solo and ensemble contest season. It is worth noting that compliments can start out simple and work toward more complex and mature musical vocabulary.

Voice and Agency

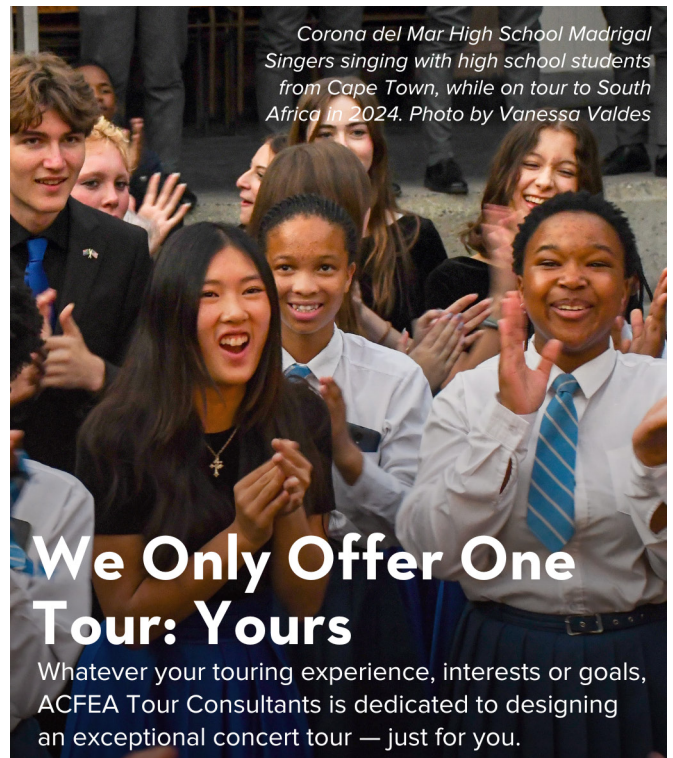
Strategy #5: **Student-Led Warm-Ups and Conducting**

Empowering students to take on leadership roles such as leading warm-ups or conducting sectional rehearsals deepens their investment in the ensemble and develops their sense of self-efficacy. Assigning rotating student leaders for these tasks fosters both musical and interpersonal growth. For instance, when one of my more introverted students was invited to lead a warm-up, they surprised the class with thoughtful vocalizations that had students wanting to build upon them day after day. It ultimately became a fun activity that students eagerly looked forward to at the beginning of rehearsals. Peer leadership within rehearsals helps students learn to support one another musically and emotionally. It also provides a platform for shy or emerging leaders to step into visibility. According to Patrick Freer,⁸ student leadership in choir develops critical think-

ing, confidence, and peer mentorship skills, all of which enhance musical outcomes and SEL competencies.

Strategy #6: **Collaborative Repertoire Selection**

Another impactful approach is giving students a voice in selecting one or two pieces of repertoire per concert cycle, which fosters ownership and agency. This process can involve a brainstorming session, listening to recordings together, or voting on pieces from a curated list that includes culturally responsive, age-appropriate works. This strategy builds the SEL skills of decision-making, perspective taking, and community awareness. When students see their input reflected in performance choices, their commitment to rehearsals



Corona del Mar High School Madrigal Singers singing with high school students from Cape Town, while on tour to South Africa in 2024. Photo by Vanessa Valdes

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and concerts increases. Culturally responsive teaching practices emphasize that shared decision-making fosters inclusion and relevance.⁹ When thoughtfully facilitated, repertoire selection can also expand students' musical worldviews and expose them to diverse traditions and languages.

Strategy #7:

SEL Songwriting Workshops

Although this strategy may seem a bit more advanced than the others, consider scaffolding this activity to suit the needs and abilities of your students. In small groups, students collaborate to write original lyrics and melodies based on themes like perseverance, identity, or gratitude. These songwriting workshops offer a creative, student-centered approach to SEL, giving students ownership of both message and music. Whether performed in class or recorded for personal portfolios, these compositions allow students to explore emotion, narrative, and teamwork. Students practice active listening, compromise, and reflection—essential SEL skills embedded in a meaningful musical experience. Teachers can offer light guidance while encouraging autonomy. These projects often become highlights of the semester, as students express authentic stories through song and develop pride in their artistry. This could be a stand-alone unit in your curriculum or can be used for the final days or week of school when all finals and end-of-the-year concerts/activities have concluded.

Wellness and Reflection

Strategy #8:

Wellness Days in the Choir Classroom

Another highly effective approach is scheduling regular Wellness Days to provide a much-needed pause in the whirlwind of students' academic and extracurricular demands. Designating a portion of one rehearsal per week (e.g., "Wellness Wednesdays") for SEL-

focused activities can significantly impact student morale and engagement. In my own teaching experience, students responded positively to activities such as guided meditations, journaling, and class discussions centered on stress management, peer relationships, and the emotional benefits of music during our late starts on Wednesdays.

These sessions help students build the SEL skills of self-awareness and self-management, two competencies that contribute directly to ensemble engagement and focus.¹⁰ Students report increased emotional regulation and a renewed focus during rehearsals following these sessions. Research highlights that musical ensembles serve as emotional safe spaces, and when music teachers incorporate wellness-focused reflection, students feel both musically and personally supported.¹¹

When implementing wellness-focused rehearsal practices, educators may encounter concerns regarding use of time, particularly in ensembles with limited rehearsal schedules. Framing these practices as instructional *supports* rather than instructional *interruptions* can help address such concerns. Brief, intentional SEL moments support students' self-awareness and self-management, which in turn enhance focus, collaboration, and rehearsal efficiency. When students are emotionally regulated and engaged, rehearsals often process *more* productively, not less.

For ensembles that rehearse once or twice a week, Wellness Days do not need to replace an entire rehearsal. Instead, educators can integrate wellness practices into existing structures through short, purposeful moments, such as a five-minute grounding activity at the start of rehearsal, a brief stretch or breathing reset after cognitively demanding work, or a reflective closing prompt that invites students to process their musical and emotional engagement. These practices can also be implemented selectively during high-stress periods, including concert weeks, testing windows, or transitions within the school year.

Importantly, integrating wellness practices does not diminish musical rigor. On the contrary, many educators find that students rehearse with greater focus and responsiveness following brief SEL-infused moments. When positioned as tools that support readiness and ensemble cohesion, wellness practices become a means



of protecting rehearsal quality while attending to students' holistic needs.

Strategy #9:
Choir Journals and Guided Prompts

A choir journal is a reflective tool that allows students to process musical and emotional growth privately. A teacher could offer simple prompts such as, “What challenged you today?” or “When did you feel most connected to the music?” Students write weekly or biweekly entries, which may be shared voluntarily or kept personal. This consistent practice strengthens self-awareness and helps students recognize patterns in their rehearsal mindset, relationships, or confidence. Journals are especially helpful for students who need time to articulate their thoughts. They also offer teachers insight into students' emotional and artistic development, making it easier to support them holistically.

Strategy #10:
“Lyric of the Day” Emotional Check-In

“Lyric of the Day” is a simple yet powerful daily ritual. A student shares a lyric that resonates with them emotionally and briefly explains its significance. The rest of the class listens reflectively or responds in writing. This activity allows for emotional expression in a structured, low-pressure way, and it connects music directly to students' lived experiences. It also builds listening skills, empathy, and emotional vocabulary. By starting rehearsals with this SEL touchpoint, students center themselves emotionally and intellectually, laying the groundwork for more focused, connected music making. Over time, the activity cultivates a sense of community through shared vulnerability.

Strategy #11:
Community Circles and Reflection Time

Community Circles offer a structured way to process rehearsal experiences, conflicts, and successes. At

the end of a rehearsal week or before a major concert, gather students in a circle and pose open-ended reflection questions: “What made you feel most connected to the music this week?” or “How have you grown as a singer or teammate?” Encouraging students to listen actively and respond respectfully supports the SEL competencies of social awareness and responsible decision-making. These moments of reflection validate students' emotional experiences and deepen ensemble trust. Reflective practices encourage students to delve into their emotional experiences during musical activities, promoting greater self-awareness and emotional expression. For instance, a 2021 study found that participants in a performing arts-based experiential learning environment developed a deeper understanding of their emotional states and those of their peers through guided reflection sessions.¹² These sessions allowed students to connect their emotional experiences with their musical performances, leading to more expressive and authentic artistry.

Community Connection
Beyond the Rehearsal Room

Strategy #12:
Sharing Positive Affirmations and Affirmation Circles

Peer-driven positive affirmations can play a vital role in fostering inclusivity and recognition in diverse choirs. The Affirmation Circle is a guided activity where students take turns sitting in the center of a circle while peers respond to reflective prompts such as, “Please acknowledge someone who made you feel included.” Physical touch (such as a gentle tap on the shoulder) is optional, and alternative non-contact methods (e.g., sticky notes, index cards) should be provided for those who prefer them.

To ensure equity and visibility across all grade levels in a mixed grade-level ensemble, I typically begin by asking each class of students to take a turn in the center of the circle—first the freshmen, then sophomores, followed by juniors, and finally seniors. This progression

structures the experience while reinforcing class identity to foster a sense of respect and appreciation across grade levels. The exercise helps build trust, empathy, and a culture of appreciation among students. SEL research underscores that affirmations support the development of emotional intelligence and belonging. When this strategy is implemented in a choir, research shows increased student bonding, reduced bullying, and improved group cohesion.¹³

Strategy #13: ***Choir Compliment Chain***

A few times each month, the choir forms a circle for a “Compliment Chain,” where students offer genuine praise to one another, either verbally or on sticky notes. Compliments must be specific and related to musical effort, character, or teamwork. For example, “I appreciated how you helped with the alto part today” or “Your positive attitude during warm-ups lifted the group.” These affirmations validate effort and promote gratitude, encouraging students to notice and acknowledge each other’s contributions. Over time, this ritual builds community, boosts morale, and fosters peer recognition as a natural part of the ensemble culture.

Strategy #14: ***Post-Concert Reflection and Celebration Ritual***

After major performances, set aside time for the choir to reflect, celebrate, and decompress. Students can write or share reflections about personal growth, ensemble success, or emotional moments during the concert. Combine this with a low-pressure celebration—such as watching a concert recording, enjoying a snack, or doing a fun musical game. This ritual honors the emotional intensity of performance while reinforcing group identity. It also models healthy closure, helping students move forward with a sense of accomplishment and clarity. When students feel that their work is seen and celebrated, their investment in the ensemble and in each other deepens.

Strategy #15: ***Choir and Family Cultural Social Event***

Another powerful strategy is to bridge school life and home life by inviting families and community members to celebrate the cultural heritage of your students/singers by incorporating family-centered events. One example is a “Tamalada and Carols” event—a culturally inclusive activity where students and their families gather to make tamales and sing holiday songs in English and Spanish. This creates a cross-generational, multilingual celebration of culture and provides space for joyful music making outside the formal concert setting.

Events like these align with the SEL core competency of relationship skills¹⁴ and allow for deeper familial investment in students’ musical lives. This type of event can be facilitated in collaboration with culinary teachers or community kitchens. Depending on the cultural backgrounds represented in your ensemble, this model can be adapted to feature a variety of foods and repertoire.


In addition to building community, these events can serve a dual purpose as fundraisers or outreach initiatives. For example, freshly made tamales can be sold for \$1 each to raise money for the choir’s travel fund, uniforms, or sheet music. Alternatively, a portion of the food can be packaged and donated to families in need within the school or wider community, fostering a spirit of generosity and social responsibility among students. Whether generating revenue or giving back, integrating food and music in this way promotes a sense of shared purpose and meaningful impact. Music education events that include families and integrate cultural food and song traditions can provide meaningful opportunities for inclusivity and intergenerational learning.¹⁵

Summary

As you begin implementing these and other SEL strategies, remember that their success depends on creating a space that is safe, respectful, and emotionally supportive. While many of the strategies outlined can help foster this environment, the foundation of trust and rapport must be intentionally built to ensure all students feel secure and open enough to engage fully.

Fostering SEL in the choral classroom is not an ancil-



lary goal—it is central to the mission of building a musically expressive, socially bonded ensemble. By intentionally and consistently integrating SEL strategies—ranging from personal storytelling and leadership opportunities to family engagement and community reflection—we not only shape the ensemble’s musical sound but also nurture a culture of belonging that endures far beyond the classroom. As choral educators, we are in a unique position to nurture students’ musical identities alongside their human development. SEL strategies give us the tools to do both with depth and intention. 

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NOTES

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Related Choral Journal Content

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Lindsey Blackhurst and Robin Freeman, “Healing Our Singers, Healing Ourselves: Social and Emotional Learning in Choir,” *Choral Journal* 62, no. 9 (2022): 20.