

Middle School Choir is Group Therapy

Ailisa Newhall (Used with permission of Washington ACDA's *Unison*)



If you have ever taught middle school choir, you know everything is a huge dramatic deal inside a tiny bubble created by these emerging adults. It makes the emotion of the music exhilarating. It makes every other aspect of life something of a crazy roller coaster ride. One student told me, “The only reason I even get on that bus every morning to come to school is because I know I get to go to choir. It’s my daily group therapy.” Sometimes the big deals really are big deals.

Last fall, one of my beloved seventh-grade choir students passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. About ten minutes before my sixth-period choir class on a Friday afternoon, I was told the horrible news. It was not yet public, but I was given permission to let the fifty-five members of her choir know before they went home for the weekend and heard about it on TV or social media. This was one of the most tragic moments of my career.

As I watched my students deflate into sadness, confusion, and despair, I knew this was a time to let music heal them.

This was a time to teach them how to use music as their emotional outlet and therapy. I told them that we were going to honor our friend by composing a song together.

We started by making a big poster. Everyone wrote to our friend as though we were writing in her school yearbook. We wrote what we loved about her. We wrote stories. We wrote all the things we wanted to say to her and wouldn’t be able to say. Over the next week, we added to our poster as we progressed through our grief.

We began to listen and discuss keys and chord progressions. We played around with different accompaniment instrument possibilities and styles. The kids migrated to the popular music style that currently spoke to them: key of C, simple piano accompaniment with cello.

Once our poster was full, we began to circle phrases and ideas that stood out to us. We circled things that were poetic or things that seemed to be a theme. I played through our chord progression for our chorus over and over, and the kids began to sing some of the phrases to different melodies. A

few students sang their melody; others tried some variations. Finally, the students had created the chorus. I recorded and notated it.

We used the same process with the verses and the bridge. Once we had created the song, the kids started making up harmony, and we added a cello part. Students learned the piano, cello, melody, and harmony parts, and we performed the song at a tribute concert to our friend. We then went to the recording studio and professionally recorded the song so that all of the students, family members, and people affected by the tragedy could listen to the song and be comforted.

Dealing with such a loss and then creating this piece of music to honor our friend made a strong and lasting bond for all the students. It created a tight and caring choir family that took care of each other inside and outside of rehearsal. I had countless emails from parents and communication from counselors and administration officials praising the project. There were so many individual stories from students, how he or she was coping with the loss and how they were surviving because of this very special song. It became the answer to the question we all had that day, “How are we going to survive without her?” The answer? Music. ■