

# A Classroom in Perfect Harmony: The Educator's Role in Promoting Student Wellbeing in the Vocal Music Classroom

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## Abstract

*The need to create a positive learning environment is critical in all classrooms. Research studies demonstrate that singing in others' presence is a vulnerable thing to do. Thus, the importance of creating a safe and encouraging learning environment in the choral classroom is crucial. While wellbeing in the classroom is a widely discussed topic among researchers, educators, and administrators, little has been connected to Edward Deci's self-determination theory. This project examines how educators can promote student wellbeing by addressing these three psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in their classroom environment, classroom management, and teaching strategies. Oral history interviews allowed vocal music educators the opportunity to reflect on how they contribute to a learning environment that promotes student wellbeing. The implications of these interviews stress the importance for vocal music educators to develop students' self-confidence, motivation, and connection to others to best promote student wellbeing.*

We can all agree that singing is a vulnerable thing to do, arguably more so than playing an instrument. The singing voice is a deep part of oneself. Thus, creating a safe classroom environment that supports student wellbeing is of the utmost importance in teaching vocal music. The purpose of this essay is to provide vocal music educators with strategies to cultivate a classroom environment that promotes student wellbeing based on theme analysis of lived experiences and teaching strategies from experienced music educators.

## Literature Review

This study consisted of the synthesis and analysis of scholarly articles in the subjects of psychology, music education, and singing's effect on physiological, psychological, and social wellbeing. Of interest to this study is Edward Deci's Self Determination Theory (SDT), a macro theory of human motivation and personality that concerns people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs (Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016). This theory states that there are three psychological needs that every human needs to have met in order

to feel motivated and sufficient in order to learn and grow.

SDT's (Self Determination Theory) pioneer, Edward Deci, claims the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to be fundamental for the human psyche. The first of the three psychological needs in Edward Deci's SDT is autonomy, the need to experience behavior as self-organized and self-endorsed (Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016). Autonomy is enhanced when people feel intentional and authentic in behavior and reduced when they experience their behavior as driven by pressure, coercion, or external rewards.

Competence, the second psychological need, can be defined as the need to feel sufficiently effective and confident in order to act. Many studies discuss how vocal music contributes to positive self-esteem, self-expression, mood enhancement, and enhanced feelings of competence, achievement, and efficacy. Choral singers in Bailey and Davidson's study reported that choral singing 'improves mood', 'is an exhilarating activity', 'gives me a sense of achievement', 'is a creative experience' and 'gives me a kind of high' (Clift, 2010). Research also states that competence can be supported by providing activities that pose optimal challenge (Roberts, 2018) and giving accurate feedback that leads to successful growth (Roberts, 2018).

The third psychological need in this framework is relatedness, which can be defined as the need to feel that one belongs and is related to others. "Meaning consists of feeling like we belong to and serve something that is bigger than self. Choral singing can contribute to all aspects of well-being, but that sense of 'belonging to something bigger' may be its ace in the hole." (Menehan, 2013).

## Methodology

The music educator plays an essential role in creating an environment that best supports

autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Oral history interviews with four vocal music educators were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and synthesized to analyze themes among the interviewed music educators on valuable teaching strategies that best promote student wellbeing.

Upon analysis, a focus was placed on how the interviewed educators' teaching strategies in supporting well-being satisfied the three psychological needs stated in the SDT. While my narrators knew nothing about the SDT, many of the teaching strategies they shared fit each psychological need's satisfaction, stated by the SDT. While the SDT is a helpful framework, interviews were a collection of lived teaching experiences in a way that sought the narrator's strategies in creating an environment that supports wellbeing, unbeknownst to the narrators, they validated the self-determination theory and the importance of responsive teaching strategies that help to satisfy students' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

## Findings

### *Autonomy-Supportive Teaching Strategies based on a Theme Analysis on Experiences from Vocal Music Educators*

One central theme in creating a classroom where students are intrinsically motivated to learn and sing for the inherent satisfaction it offers (autonomy), was selecting repertoire. To support student autonomy, it is essential to incorporate both structure and personal choice in the classroom. The interviewed choral educators expressed a way that they encourage both structure and personal choice was in the selection of repertoire. "I try to pick engaging songs, songs that I think they'll enjoy...I ask them at the beginning of the year, What are your hopes and dreams, what do you want to learn about in music class?...Choosing things that the students are interested in, but still within the scope and sequence of the curriculum. I

think that is motivating to students” (Troxell, 2021). “Within a given teaching curriculum you follow the genre of repertoire that you want to provide, but you allow students to choose within that genre what pieces they enjoy.” (Gemmell, 2021). “I would never say to them, ‘Okay, now we're going to sing this song. Okay, now we're going to sing this’, I would say to them ‘what songs would you like to sing?’ So, they get to choose what songs they like to sing” (Stuart, 2020).

### ***Competence-Supportive Teaching Strategies based on a Theme Analysis of Experiences from Vocal Music Educators***

One central theme in creating a classroom environment contributing to successful growth was providing an optimal challenge and positive reinforcement. “Every concert there was one challenging piece...nine times out of ten that was always their favorite because it challenged them and they knew that they worked hard, did a good job, and that it sounded really good too” (Stuart, 2020). “With repertoire, you have to choose just the right blend of challenge versus the ability to meet that challenge.” (Gemmell, 2021). Along with selecting repertoire that poses an optimal challenge, music educators can support the need for competence by providing positive feedback. “Praise them for what they are doing well. This encourages students to be leaders and to be confident in singing out” (Evans, 2021). Professor Stuart said that “the big thing was always positive reinforcement and never pointing out the things that aren't quite right like say ‘I like how the altos are using good posture.’ rather than ‘Stand up straight, Andy.’ It makes the students want to work for you and for themselves” (Stuart, 2020). “I tell the kids ahead of time, no negative comments. We're all in a different place with our singing voice,

and you know what? That's okay. Everybody can sing, in my opinion, and it's our job to encourage them that they can” (Troxell, 2021).

### ***Relatedness-Supportive Teaching Strategies based on a Theme Analysis of Experiences from Vocal Music Educators***

One central theme in creating a classroom environment that promotes a sense of belonging among students (relatedness) was paving the way for emotional experiences to be shared while singing. “It's not just about accuracy...the goal is the feelings. You build community through the music” (Gemmell, 2021). “I think that there is something that is unifying about music...when you have that song that you have in common, and that moment that you share and remember making music. That contributes to a sense of community” (Evans, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Based on a theme analysis from interviews with vocal music educators, it was found that autonomy can be supported in the classroom by providing both structure and personal choice in repertoire selection. Additionally, educators emphasized the importance in supporting competence by providing students with an optimal challenge as well as positive feedback. The need for relatedness in the music classroom was stressed and a common theme for satisfying this need among educators was facilitating shared emotional and social connections through the music-making process. The implications of these interviews stress the importance for vocal music educators to develop students' self-confidence (competence), motivation (autonomy), and connection to others (relatedness) to best promote student wellbeing.

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