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**Citation to Publisher** Hackworth, Rhonda S. (2004). Voluntary versus compulsory upper elementary choir participation:  
**Version:** A comparison of performance evaluations. *Missouri Journal of Research in Music Education* 41, 4-19.

**Citation to this Version:** Hackworth, Rhonda S. (2004). Voluntary versus compulsory upper elementary choir participation: A comparison of performance evaluations. *Missouri Journal of Research in Music Education* 41, 4-19. Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T3Z60MF4](https://doi.org/10.7282/T3Z60MF4).

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## **Voluntary versus Compulsory Upper Elementary Choir Participation: A Comparison of Performance Evaluations**

**Rhonda S. Hackworth**  
**University of Missouri-Kansas City**

*This study's purpose was to compare performance evaluations given by musicians and nonmusicians to upper elementary choirs with either voluntary or compulsory participation. Subjects were undergraduate music majors (n = 32) and non-music majors (n = 24) enrolled in a music methods course or choral ensemble. Subjects rated three different elementary choirs using a 10-point Likert scale and wrote comments on the best and worst aspects of each selection. The independent variable was participation in each choir: Choir 1 was voluntary, Choir 3 was compulsory, and Choir 2 was a mix of voluntary and compulsory. Results showed no significant difference between the three choirs' ratings or between the ratings of majors vs. nonmajors. All written comments of majors and nonmajors for best aspect were significantly different ( $p < .05$ ). Written comments pertaining only to musical characteristics were significantly different for best aspect ( $p < .01$ ) and worst aspect ( $p < .05$ ).*

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The number of fifth and sixth grade students who choose to participate in choir can vary greatly. Research supports the idea that singing activities are generally enjoyed by students (Mizener, 1993); however, research has also concluded that a favorable attitude towards music decreases as students' grade level increases (Broquist, 1961). Therefore, the dilemma for music educators includes not only attracting upper elementary students to choir but also keeping them interested once they join. Teachers must make many decisions regarding the conception and maintenance of an elementary choral ensemble.

In addition to issues such as selection of singers, selection of music, and rehearsal time/location, educators must decide which type of participation, voluntary or compulsory, is better for their elementary choral program.

This study compared three upper elementary choirs from schools in the same district. Membership in choir one (fifth and sixth grade) is voluntary, and its rehearsal time occurs during an afternoon recess. Membership in choir two (fifth and sixth grade) is voluntary for fifth grade but compulsory for sixth grade, and its rehearsal is part of a class time. The third choir's membership (sixth grade only) is compulsory and also part of the general music experience; therefore, no rehearsal outside music class is required. Selections by each choir were recorded and subsequently evaluated by undergraduate music and nonmusic majors using a 10-point Likert scale for an overall rating and written comments for best and worst aspects of performance.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. Can any difference in performance quality be detected between choirs that are voluntary or compulsory?
2. Will there be any difference in the ratings assigned by music majors versus nonmusic majors?
3. Will there be any difference in the comments given by music majors and nonmusic majors?

The results will hopefully help music educators make informed decisions regarding the structure of guidelines for participation in ensembles for older elementary students.

### **Limitations**

In order to examine elementary choral programs in their typical conditions, the choirs in this study were not exactly the same size and did not rehearse under identical circumstances. An elementary choir's typical performance venue was also considered, and recordings were made on stage during a choral festival rather than in a recording studio. The quality of the recording may have been sacrificed, however, the choirs performed under more natural circumstances.

## Review of Literature

There is little debate on whether or not ensemble participation is beneficial. Singing in an ensemble can enrich a student's life. Placing students in a choir can also help the teacher accomplish the first National Standard which states that all students in kindergarten through twelfth grade be able to sing "alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music" (Phillips, 1994).

A positive experience in an ensemble can have a lasting effect on a student's social and academic life. Students in both high and low socioeconomic schools can be positively influenced by performance in successful music groups (Nolin & Vander Ark, 1977). Success in choral or instrumental ensembles can also positively affect performance in other subjects. Bassett (1979) discovered that quantitative fluency of speech might be encouraged by choral reading instruction, and singing instruction may develop accuracy and precision of speech. Even though choral reading and singing instruction did not produce statistically significant improvement in language and reading achievement scores in Bassett's study, exceptional gains for the students in choral reading or singing treatment groups were noted.

Success in music ensembles can sometimes be attributed to attitude rather than ability. When Mizener (1993) studied the responses of children, he concluded, "it might be expected that subjects with more singing skill would have a more positive attitude toward singing, but these results seem to indicate that singing skill has little influence on attitude toward singing" (p. 243).

Research indicates that students in upper elementary grades have distinct opinions about ensemble participation. There are a variety of reasons why students join or stay away from an ensemble experience. Roewer's (2000) conclusion was that most students choose to participate because their friends also participate. "Playing more challenging music" was the highest ranked reason for participation in an extra-curricular ensemble according to Kohl (1997). In the same

study, "too busy" was the reason most often cited for nonparticipation by responding students.

When asked what their anticipated favorite part of choir would be, most students in Roewer's (2000) study indicated "trips outside of school with the choir" as their first choice. Broquist (1961) discovered that "preparing for a program" was one of the highest rated activities by elementary choir students, and music reading activities (including singing with syllables, numbers, or letter names) was rated low.

Asmus (1985) compiled sixth grade opinions on student success or failure in music and assigned them to one of the following categories (a) ability, (b) task difficulty, (c) effort, and (d) luck. Most sixth graders' responses were assigned to the categories of ability and effort.

Most research shows that participation in a choral ensemble is best reserved for upper elementary grades in addition to a general music experience. According to Swears (1985), students in upper elementary grades are usually at a higher readiness level for a choral experience than younger students. Reserving the choral experience for older students creates anticipation for younger students and gives them something to move toward. Swears also stated, "Often times, children who are late in developing vocal skills will make tremendous progress in chorus" (p. 17).

There is some debate about the selection process for elementary school chorus. The word "audition" can have a negative connotation if not used delicately. Phillips (1992) suggested that offering a select choir as the *only* choral experience for elementary children sends the wrong message. Students who are not selected for the choir may be improperly labeled "non-singer." A select choir, according to Phillips, should be a supplement to a program that allows *all* children to sing in at least one choir. Others, however, believe that an audition can have a positive effect on participation. Sometimes more students are interested in joining the ensemble if they are told they passed an audition (Hollenberg, 1996). It is a perception issue; a perceived value of the product.

According to Hollenberg (1996), the central issue is a

choral experience for all versus a high-quality experience for the best students, and budget cuts and/or teaching loads are the reason most schools are not able to provide both. Another reason some schools choose not to provide both is an issue of scheduling. Finding time to rehearse an extra ensemble may be extremely difficult, especially when student attitudes are involved. Eighty percent of the respondents in Roewer's (2000) study said "morning rehearsals" would be their least favorite part of choir, suggesting that some students might choose not to participate if a morning rehearsal was necessary.

Hollenberg (1996) stated, "The key to an auditioned chorus at the elementary level is flexibility and leniency" (p. 37) and made the point that the goals of excellence and inclusion can both be accomplished by a "leniently select" choral program. This philosophy might be helpful when trying to assure a balance between male and female voices. If left completely to volunteer participation, a choir that is intended to be a mixture of male and female voices can often become a girls' choir.

One of the main deterrents to male participation in choral ensembles may be attributed to the perception that recreational singing by males is often discouraged in American society (Gates, 1989). This discouragement seems to follow a pattern in American culture; many boys elect to withdraw from singing activities at a certain age because of stereotypes that declare singing to be feminine (Castelli, 1986). These findings are reinforced by Chaney's (1996) survey of seventh and eighth grade students. When asked about their attitude toward singing, 81 percent of females reported a positive attitude toward singing in a group. Singing in a group was a positive experience for only 56 percent of males. In the same survey, 91 percent of females rated singing in general as a positive experience, compared to 62 percent of males.

In order to avoid a negative attitude toward singing by boys, Swears (1985) suggested general music programs from kindergarten through sixth grade should include a strong and positive approach to singing and never allow the term "sissy" to be used as a label for singing. Phillips (1995) agreed

saying, "When we can get boys singing confidently in the primary grades, there will be fewer recruitment and retention problems as they move through the intermediate and secondary levels" (p. 29). To accomplish this task, Phillips suggested providing examples of quality singing by males, talking positively about singing as early as first grade, and stressing the equal relationship between singing and sports (both require physical conditioning and practice).

### Method

The purpose of this study was to compare performance evaluations given by musicians and nonmusicians to upper elementary choirs with either voluntary or compulsory participation. Five elementary choirs participated in a suburban school district's winter choral festival. The three choirs recorded for this study were chosen based on their varying participation structure. The first choir was voluntary and was comprised of fifth and sixth grade students who give up recess at the end of the day to attend rehearsal. Participation in the second choir is voluntary for fifth graders and compulsory for sixth graders. Rehearsing for this choir takes place during a music class time so that no outside rehearsal is required. Choir three's participation was also compulsory, and its membership was sixth grade only. Music class was also the setting for the third choir's rehearsal. Choir one had approximately 60 singers; 60 percent are female, 40 percent are male. Choir two had approximately 55 singers. The entire fifth grade portion of the choir was female, and the majority of the sixth grade portion was female. Choir three had 60 singers, and its female/male ratio was also 60:40. These descriptors are summarized in Table 1.

The number of singers, female/male ratio, and rehearsal time were the only characteristics considered when choosing the choirs in order to keep the comparison simple. It was presumed that the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students were relatively the same due to the fact that all three schools are in the same school district and feed into the same junior

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Table 1  
*Summary Data of Demographic Information for Each Choir*

Choir	Grade level	Participation	Rehearsal time	% of females/males
1	5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> ( <i>n</i> = 60)	Voluntary	during recess	60% female, 40% male
2	5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> ( <i>n</i> = 55)	5 <sup>th</sup> – Voluntary 6 <sup>th</sup> – Compulsory	during class	5 <sup>th</sup> – 100% female 6 <sup>th</sup> – 60% female, 40% male
3	6 <sup>th</sup> ( <i>n</i> = 60)	Compulsory	during class	60% female, 40% male

high school.

Because a goal of this study was to evaluate sound only, performances were audio taped rather than videotaped. Prior research indicates that visual aspects such as physical appearance can often negatively affect the evaluation of a musical performance (Birmingham, 2000; Elliott, 1995; Killian, 1990; Morrison, 1998; Wapnick, Darrow, Kovacs, & Dalrymple, 1997; Wapnick, Mazza, & Darrow, 1998, 2000).

Each choir sang two songs (titles listed in Table 2) that were recorded live using a portable Sony MiniDisc recorder (model MZ-R30) and a RE-50 dynamic omnidirectional microphone, 150 Ω impedance. The microphone sensitivity switch on the MiniDisc recorder was set on high, and the automatic volume-limiting switch (AVLS) was set to normal.

Table 2  
*Titles of Musical Selections*

Choir	Titles	Composer/Arranger
1	<i>Boats Sail on the River</i> <i>First Footprints</i>	Mark Patterson Wolfe-White & Bodooin
2	<i>Sing a Song of Peace</i> <i>Put a Little Love in Your Heart</i>	Jill Gallina Holiday, Myers, & Shannon
3	<i>Rock-A-My-Soul</i> <i>Eja, Eja (We Will Sing for Joy)</i>	Linda Spevacek Mary Lynn Lightfoot

Each selection was recorded onto a high quality, 74-minute Sony MiniDisc, then transferred to a personal computer and edited using Cool Edit 2000. All selections were subsequently

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burned onto a CD-R compact disc using similar recording levels at a sampling rate of 44100 Hz in monaural sound at 16-bit resolution. The selections were recorded onto the compact disc in random order (Choir 1, tracks 1 & 3; Choir 2, tracks 4 & 5; and Choir 3, tracks 2 & 6). Each selection was normalized to 95 % for clarity, and as much applause as possible was edited out.

Following the editing process, music majors (*n* = 32) and nonmusic majors (*n* = 24) were asked to listen to the recorded compact disc and evaluate each selection. Their evaluation involved two parts, (a) giving a written assessment of the best and worst aspect of each selection, and (b) giving each selection an overall rating using a 10-point Likert scale (1 = worst, 10 = best). The evaluation instrument is shown in Figure 1. All the evaluation took place during the undergraduates' class time, where all students in each class evaluated while listening to the recording at the same time.

Both music and nonmusic majors were chosen as subjects to determine whether their evaluations would be similar or different. Different listeners often hear a variety of things in a choral performance, and the level at which a musician or nonmusician evaluates a performance is usually tied directly to his or her level of musical experience (Robinson, 1990). Copland's opinions (1939) support this position by proposing that the only real difference between a musician and a nonmusician listener is the level of musical appreciation and knowledge of music. Sometimes, a significant difference can be found between the ratings of musicians and nonmusicians (Johnson, 1996), and other times the differences are subtle. Wilson (1986) said, "Our intuition tells us that everyone at a performance hears the same music, but because certain people have a special point of view, they will respond to the performance in individual ways" (p. 60).

Results

The first research question asked if any difference in performance quality could be detected between choirs that are



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the best aspect comments of music majors and nonmusic majors was found:  $\chi^2 (df = 1, N = 330) = 4.84, p < .05$ . No significant difference was found when comparing the musical and nonmusical worst aspect comments of majors and nonmajors:  $\chi^2 (df = 1, N = 318) = .79, p > .05$ .

As the results of the chi-square were being analyzed, it became apparent that the majority of comments given by both groups were musical rather than nonmusical. Table 4 shows the percentages of comments given. To understand further distinctions between the large amounts of musical comments given by majors (87 %) and nonmajors (78 %), the musical comments were assigned to subcategories (diction, rhythm, intonation/blend, and other) by the researcher, and another chi-square analysis was performed. This analysis showed a statistically significant distribution of comments between majors and nonmajors in both best and worst categories. See Table 5 for percentage results for musical comments on (a) best aspect:  $\chi^2 (df = 3, N = 274) = 14.82, p < .01$ , and (b) worst aspect:  $\chi^2 (df = 3, N = 310) = 10.76, p < .05$ .

Table 4  
Percentages of the “Best Aspect” and “Worst Aspect” Comments in Musical and Nonmusical Categories Given by Music Majors and Nonmusic Majors

	Musical	Nonmusical
<u>Best aspect comments*</u>		
Music majors (n = 32)	.87	.13
Nonmusic majors (n = 24)	.78	.22
<u>Worst aspect comments</u>		
Music majors	.97	.03
Nonmusic majors	.98	.02

Note. Each subject gave an average of 6 comments per musical selection in each category.  
 $p < .05$

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Table 5

Percentages of the “Best Aspect” and “Worst Aspect” Comments in Four Different Musical Categories Given by Music Majors and Nonmusic Majors.

	Diction	Rhythm	Int./Blend	Other
<u>Best Aspect Comments**</u>				
Music Majors	.19	.14	.16	.51
Nonmusic Majors	.06	.07	.28	.58
<u>Worst Aspect Comments*</u>				
Music Majors	.08	.04	.54	.34
Nonmusic Majors	.10	.00	.44	.46

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Discussion

No significant difference between the ratings of the three choirs would make an excellent case for allowing a teacher to choose which type of choir experience (voluntary or compulsory) is best for students at any particular school. Some critics of compulsory participation may argue that a student who is interested enough to volunteer will be a better singer. The findings of this study, however, show that the type of participation does not seem to have any affect on the sound quality of the choir. This finding supports earlier research that compared attitudes toward music (Pogonowski, 1985). Therefore, it can be concluded that compulsory choir participation for sixth graders is not better or worse than voluntary participation.

The chi-square results in this study support prior research findings and opinions on the differences between responses given by musicians and nonmusicians (Copland, 1939; Johnson, 1996; Robinson, 1990; and Wilson, 1986). After examining the vast difference between the numbers of musical vs. nonmusical comments, it seems one confounding variable may

be present in the comments given by nonmusic majors. Twenty-two of the 24 nonmusic major subjects were enrolled in a music course taught by the researcher, and the remaining two students were enrolled in a university choir. Although these students were instructed to give general opinions, they may have believed musical comments were expected more than nonmusical comments. Further research could answer this question by using nonmusic majors enrolled in nonmusic classes as subjects.

Encouraging a student to develop and maintain a positive attitude towards choir membership can have a lasting effect. In a survey conducted by Mizener (1993), a high response of “not sure” by elementary students when asked if they planned to participate in music at the secondary level indicates that more encouragement to participate and remain in elementary ensembles could result in continued participation at the secondary level. Mizener’s study also suggested the strongest influences to participate in ensembles do not result from family and/or peers but from within school sources. Since no difference was found between the types of choirs tested in this study, it can be concluded that *any* type of encouragement toward participation in elementary ensembles will be beneficial.

Many students may not voluntarily participate in choral ensembles because they find singing difficult. Even though Lowell Mason made it very clear in 1838 that singing is a behavior that can be learned, the myth that some people cannot sing continues to be perpetuated (Phillips, 1992). Phillips suggested the key to dispelling this myth is to give students the tools they need in order to learn how to sing. He stated:

Why is singing so threatening to students? Because, singing is a very complex skill. A writing teacher would not tell students to take out a piece of paper and write with no previous instruction in writing. But in music, we just expect students to open their mouths and sing! Those that can do; those that can’t learn very quickly not to be heard. When one sings,

one shares the inner self. That in itself can be intimidating, especially if one lacks confidence in the delivery system! (p. 18)

Giving a child the tools necessary to develop confidence in singing is a delicate and important process. Nurturing children through that process can positively affect their views of the musical experience. Conversely, rejecting them as singers after only one audition can have multiple negative implications.

Further research that compares different choirs singing the same musical selection would answer questions that were beyond the scope of this study. The ratings given to choirs performing the same music could provide a more exact comparison of the performance quality. Future research that compares choirs of exact conditions (same number of participants, same rehearsal conditions, same age level, same balance between genders) whose only difference is participation level might help to strengthen the present study’s conclusions.

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