

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT PEMBROKE

Effective Instructional Strategies for Middle School Choral Teachers:  
Teaching Middle School Boys to Sing During Vocal Transition

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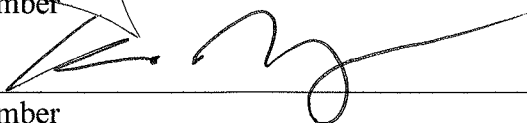
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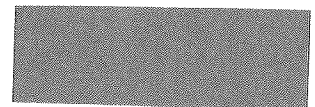
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## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	2
Abstract .....	3
Literature Review .....	6
Results .....	15
Conclusion .....	33
References .....	35

### Abstract

Teaching vocal skills to male students whose voices are transitioning is an undertaking that many middle school choral teachers find challenging. Research suggests that one reason why challenges exist is because of teachers' limited knowledge about the transitioning male voice. The development of peer pressure and the understanding of social norms, which will be associated with psychological transitions for this study, is another factor that creates instructional challenges for choral teachers. Research also suggests that transitions, such as the development of the larynx and the singing voice, create instructional challenges for choral teachers. The goal of this study is to examine the most effective teaching practices that middle school choral teachers can employ in the classroom, in order to eradicate challenges within the classroom setting.

This meta-analysis is supported by a review of previous research on the issues and challenges surrounding the transitioning male voice, and will be presented in two parts. These parts are comprised of a written document and a lecture-recital. The written document will consist of a review of current and relevant literature topics that examine the psychological and physical transitions that adolescent males experience, its impact on their body, mind, and singing voice. The written portion of this study will also list strategies that middle school teachers can employ in the classroom. Findings from the research will then be presented in the lecture. The presentation will include a vocal recital featuring four Italian songs, two English songs, and one Latin song. These particular songs will demonstrate what research has suggested in terms of instructional practices that middle school teachers can implement in the classroom. This recital will also feature

songs that follow the suggested guidelines with regards to how middle school choral teachers should select appropriate songs for transitioning voices.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- 1.) What teaching challenges does the transitioning male voice present to middle school choir teachers?
- 2.) What are some psychological changes that middle school choral teachers should be aware of that could affect middle school boys' ability to sing?
- 3.) What are some physical changes that occur to male voices during puberty that affect the teachers' ability to teach basic vocal skills?
- 4.) What does research suggest are the most effective instructional strategies middle school teachers can employ in their classroom to help middle school boys sing through their vocal transition?

### Literature Review

In "It's a Metamorphosis": Guiding the Voice Change at the American Boychoir School," Mary Copland Kennedy (2004) discusses her findings at the American Boychoir School, with regard to boys and their changing voice. Kennedy, through her ethnographic method of research, interviewed boys about their attitude towards the transition of their voice. Kennedy, while conducting her research study, found that the boys experienced a wide variety of different vocal transitioning experiences, ranging from very smooth, to very dramatic. Kennedy also found that boys were unprepared to handle their transitioning voice for a variety of reasons including training on how to use their head voice and constant encouragement from people in their environment. Kennedy's findings suggested five main ideas: (1) while all its common for boys' voices to change, it is still a different process for each child, (2) that teachers should explore and use all the available notes in a young male's range, as long as it is not harmful to the child, (3) that boys who are in a same sex environment tend to benefit more than those who are not; with regard to going through the transitions, (4) younger singers must be taught good vocal techniques, as well as their vocal capabilities, and (5) young boys who sing through their vocal transition stand a better chance of desiring to sing, than those who do not. Kennedy's ethnographic study was unique because this was the first time that boys, who were experiencing or had recently experienced their vocal transitions, provided first-hand accounts of how they felt and what they experienced during this transition.

In "Selecting Solo Repertoire for Male Adolescent Changing Voice Students," Gordan Harris (2006) offers educators, who are working with transitioning male students, suggestions for selecting repertoire that is appropriate for their students. Harris mentions

that working with the changing the voice is and always has been, a challenge for most teachers. Educators, however, must understand that it is our responsibility to understand the process and nurture their young voices by selecting suitable repertoires for them to sing. Harris mentions that teachers must know each student's vocal ability, as well as where they fall with regard to their vocal stage development. When it comes to selecting repertoire, Harris suggests that the music should avoid the following items: too many or sudden register transitions, rapidly changing pitches (including rhythms and dynamics), and long phrases. To help make this process easier to understand and applicable in the classroom, Harris provides a suggested list of the repertoire as well as a table of the Cooksey's five stages of classification. Harris concludes his article by stating that boys have to be constantly encouraged to sing while going through their vocal transition and that the correct selection of solo repertoire could be one of the ways in which educators can do this.

In "Boy's Changing Voices in the First Century of MENC Journals," Patrick Freer (2008) investigates, by way of compare and contrast, how researchers' findings and information, that has been posted in the MENC Journals since 1914, have evolved and changed. Freer starts the article by stating some of the findings that earlier researchers reported about the boys' changing voice, including the following: the only thing boys need is extra help and encouragement in order to get accustomed to their new voice(s), music was still fun and uncomplicated for seventh graders, and that boys will become loyal to the arts once they get past societal stigmas associated with singing in their head voice. Freer points out that Cooper's solution to the boys' changing voice, which basically states that a trained teacher is the key to helping boys transition, was something

that caused many authors to write about in the MENC Journal; with regard to pedagogy, choral singing techniques, and possible song selections. Freer states that after research and findings about the vocal change in boys' voices began to appear in the journal, more teachers began to conduct observations with regards to their male singers. Freer mentions that many researchers' ideas, regarding why boys decided not to sing during their vocal transition, have varied since the journal's existence. David Abel, in 1957, believed that this was because other people, including girls, sound better when they sing; while Kenneth Philips, in 1988, reported that boys choosing not to sing had nothing to do with their voice but with the fact that singing did not match up with their career goals. Steven Demorest, in 2000, reported that boys chose not to sing in choir because of their male identity. Freer draws attention to the fact that it was not until 1960, that the MENC Journal began writing articles that combined physiology and pedagogy concepts together. Once this was done, researchers, who were studying the transitional male voice, began writing about the commonality between voice mutation, larynx and the hormones that were appearing in the body during this transition. From findings like this, debates about whether or not the voice change was gradual or consisted of distinct stages grew. In order to prove or undermine another's opinion, researchers began using research based facts within their articles. Freer also mentions a variety of topics including the repertoire selection, pedagogy, and best practices, that have evolved and changed since the inception of the MENC Journal. In closing, Freer states that a variety of evolving research has only provided more information about the boys' changing voice.

In "Commonsense Training for Changing Male Voices," Christopher and Donna White (2001) state that there are two practices that can lead to young adolescent males



being successful during their vocal transition: phonation and vocal techniques and exercises. The Whites' believe that the problem with regard to recruiting, retaining, and training male singers is the entity that has plagued many public school teachers getting boys to sing during their transitional period. The Whites' offer a variety of reasons as to why this is including sociological perceptions linked with music and singing, development during puberty, and inappropriate musical literature. To fix this problem, the Whites' suggest the following ideas: choral teachers should show how important singing is in their lives, teachers should incorporate warm-ups that are centered on both the changing and changed male voice, and that teachers should place more emphasis on the fact that singing is as much a male trait as it is female. The Whites' also give detailed instructions about specific exercises that applied the "top down" approach that other researchers have recommended. These exercises help the male voice transition through their 'break' while expanding their range. Other exercises provided in this article focus on how to help boys find their head voice. In closing, the Whites' restate that the problem with recruiting and retaining males in choirs can be solved by implementing strategies including: creating a positive environment, linking male identity with the art of singing, creating musical male role models for male students, and being patient with their transitioning male students.

In "Rehearsal Break," Don Collins (2006) discusses what researchers refer to as the 'best practice' for teaching boys whose voices are changing. Collins mentions that in his early years as a teacher, boys were told to stop singing once their voices started transitioning, and were not allowed to sing again until they completed their transition. Many teachers during this time were afraid that singing during this phrase would cause

the student vocal harm. Collins mentions that known information regarding the transitional voice is due to the hard work of researchers like Cooksey, Cooper, and McKenzie. Collins states that these researchers pushed for publishing companies to write music specifically for boys who were going through the transition. This was important because this music was used as a tool to keep boys singing during their transition. One of the preferred practices that Collins mentions is the top down method, which consists of warm-ups that start in the boy's falsetto voice and come down past their vocal break, into their chest voice. This method is good for young singers because it allows them to "sing through the full compass of the voice with ease and without apparent detriment to the vocal apparatus." (Don. L Collins, 2006) This article also discusses the fact that many young boys have never used their head voice before, so learning how to maneuver their voices is a challenge faced by many public school music teachers. Collins states that teachers, who lack experience, regarding how to handle the boys' changing voice, is one of the many issues teachers are facing. He states that lack of time in which to train at the university level has left many teachers feeling useless when it comes to their male singers. Collins suggests different ways to deal with the boy's changing voice including providing a safe environment for male students, rearranging music to fit the voices of current students, and to be understanding of the process. In closing, Collins states that as more and more research is done on this topic, the more teachers will know and can apply in the classroom.

In "The Boys Expanding Voice: Take the High Road," Henry Leck (2010) discusses the challenges of boys and their changing voice. Leck mentions that these challenges exist due to the fact that transitioning male voice is always in a state on

transition and that these transition affect each voice differently (Leck, 2010). Leck, with this in mind, provides teachers with possible solutions to make this transition easier for both teachers and students alike. One of the solutions he mentions is educating both parties on what occurs mentally, physically, and emotionally to males during this transition. Leck also states that one way to address the issue of boys not singing, during their transition, is to use their head voice or falsetto. Leck states that using this voice, not only gives the singer a stable singing voice but also helps expand their range once they have completed their vocal transition. One interesting topic that was addressed in this article was the different techniques and methods teachers could implement in their classrooms to help male students feel more comfortable with using their head voice. Leck suggests warm-ups and vocalises that descend down across the register break, down into their lower register; which incorporates elements of the top down approach. Other vocalises and warm-ups mentioned in this article include descending sighs on the schwa vowel and glissandos, starting from high to low on the "ah" vowel. In closing, Leck states that there are many advantages, as well as disadvantages, linked with boys using their head voice. However, the former will produce male voices that are able to sing and create a wonderful sound during their vocal transition.

In "Singing Through the Voice Change," Julie A. Skadsem (2007) shares advice and techniques that are helpful with regard to teaching transitioning male students. Skadsem mentions that boys' voices are beginning to transition at an earlier age than what was suggested by researchers in the past. What was then now occurring in the sixth or seventh, is now occurring as early as the fourth grade. One of the techniques Skadsem mentions is for teachers to educate themselves on the changing voice. Skadsem believes

that this will help prepare teachers on how to guide their male students through the mental, physical, and emotional changes that will begin to occur. Skadsem states that the more teachers know, the better they can prepare themselves and their students alike. One bit of advice that Skadsem suggests is the importance of repertoire selection. Although this process is very challenging, it is very crucial that the teacher selects songs that are comfortable for male singers and that fit their voice at that time. In closing, Skadsem states that the process of the vocal transition can be a positive one if the male student is educated with regard to the process and is strengthened by support from his educator.

In "Working with Male Adolescent Voices in the Choral Rehearsal," Rollo Dilworth (2012) discusses research based strategies that will help teachers who are working with adolescent male voices. Dilworth starts the article off by reminding teachers that they need to be aware of the mental and emotional effects, not just the physical attributes that go along with puberty. Dilworth offers teachers some 'best practices' that they can apply during choral rehearsal; with regard to the adolescent voices. One of the practices Dilworth mentions that is vital during a male's vocal transition period, is individual voice testing. Although boys at this stage are very shy about their voice, Dilworth states that it is important to assess their voice so that the teacher can get an idea in regard to the best way to help the student transition. Dilworth also discusses the potential benefits of all-male rehearsals including elimination of social problems, supportive environment, and more accessible time to talk about 'guy' problems. Dilworth, however, mentions that education, with respect to what the child can expect to occur during this process, is going to be the key to getting them through their vocal transition. Dilworth also addresses warm-ups and vocalises that educators can do in

rehearsals that are geared towards adolescent boys. In closing, Dilworth states that one the most important jobs a director can do is to maintain a healthy and productive rehearsal environment by being positive, supportive, and flexible.

In "IPA-It's Not Just for Voice Studios Anymore," Colin Brown (2013) discusses the benefits of using IPA in the classroom instead of only in private studios. IPA, which is a scientifically based alphabet that represents language sounds with symbols, can be used to help young singers learn how to sing songs in other languages with ease and simplicity. Helping singers learn how to produce sounds by showing them how to form the mouth and tongue are one of the things that makes IPA so successful with teaching students foreign language. Teachers can also use IPA to help singers sing with uniformity with regards to singing vowels. Instead of singers trying to write down a way to remember how to say a particular word, which could lead them to produce many different sounds, IPA uses symbols that teach students how to pronounce vowel the same way. Teachers can also use the IPA to teach students respect for the language of a particular culture. When students learn what it takes to learn a particular language, Brown suggests, that they develop a new found respect for this language they understand it at a deeper level. One the benefits of using IPA in the classroom, according to Brown, is that singers learn how to not only sing with unified vowels, but they also learn how to correctly place constants and vowels. Another benefit of using IPA in the classroom is that singers learn rules and knowledge about diction that can be used in other choral settings. Some of these rules include nuances found in foreign-language, flipped or rolled r's, and dental or aspirate t's. Another benefit of using IPA in the classroom is it

helps students learn how the words 'feel' as they speak or sing them. The author also provides the reader with some websites that go into greater detail about IPA.

In "IPA in the Choral Rehearsal," Duane Karna (2006) informs the reader about the benefits of the teachers teaching their students IPA. The author starts the article by stating why IPA is needed in the choral setting. Students, in an effort to remember how to pronounce certain words in a foreign language piece, often resort to writing down incorrect ways to pronounce the words; which they often times forget, and end up mispronouncing. IPA, by way of offering symbols and a pronunciation guide, helps lessen the chance that students will incorrectly learn how to pronounce words in other languages. Duane goes on to mention some of the benefits of using IPA in the choral setting. One the benefits of the using IPA in the classroom is that once the students learn the symbols and how to pronounce them, the teacher will spend less time on modeling and echoing the correct to pronounce a certain word. In theory, all the teacher would have to do, in order to correct the problem, would be to point at the chart and the student could correct the problem themselves. Duane also states that IPA is a useful tool in the classroom because it teaches students how to accurately sing in other languages, as well as English words like "heaven". Using IPA in the classroom, according to Duane, can also help and/or improve musical skills like vowel formation and unification, pitch accuracy, blend, and tone color. Duane provides examples of how teachers can teach the students with regards to learning IPA. One way to teach singers how to use IPA is by incorporating them into various warm-ups that include rhythmic exercises and vocalises. Duane also states that IPA can be used to teach students about voiced and unvoiced consonant sounds.

## Results

### **Challenges**

The transitioning male voice presents different challenges to middle school choral teachers. Learning how to encourage middle school boys to sing during their transition period is a task that many choral teachers find difficult. White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001), state this challenge exists due to the fact that boys occasionally struggle with sociological perceptions about music and singing, as well as psychological and physiological developments that occur during puberty. Research has suggested that an additional reason why transitional males stop singing during this period is due to the fact that teachers are failing to meet their needs in the classroom.

Freer (2009) mentions that the challenge to get middle school boys to sing exists because middle school choral teachers are not meeting the needs of their male students. During this transitioning period, males need constant encouragement from their teachers; however, research indicated that students were not having this need met in their choral classes. This lack of encouragement caused males to have self-esteem problems, which hindered them from singing. During this stage, Leck (2010) and a well-known cognitive music researcher, S.M.Demorest (2010), discovered that self-esteem was the underlining reason why boys stopped singing during their transition. These authors suggest that boys decide not to sing because the personal risk that it requires is too great. In order to get students to take that personal risk, Demorest suggests that the repertoire should be engaging and challenging, a task that many choral teachers struggle to master.

Repertoire selection is one of the factors that determine whether or not boys will sing during their vocal transition. This infers that transitioning males may not sing if they

find the music of little interest (Demorest, 2000). Developmentally appropriate music, however, may perhaps encourage boys to participate even with limited use of their voice (Demorest, 2000). Gordon Harris adds that the most important goal that music should accomplish is encouraging transitioning males to sing through the voice change without causing any vocal damage, strain, or stress (Harris, 2006). Other researchers, including Henry Leck (2010), state that teachers should select effective music based in education, yet interesting and fun for the students. This task, according to Drew Collins (2012), is one that is difficult but not impossible.

Finding pieces that engage boys is a challenge that choral teachers face; however, this is not the only reason why this task is challenging for teachers. During the transitional period, the male voice starts to become unpredictable. This process begins after the disappearance of the students' highest range, which makes selecting repertoire challenging for teachers (Leck, 2010). Due to the fact that no one can predict when or how these changes will occur, knowledge about the boys' vocal transition is something that every choral teacher should be knowledgeable about.

One reason why it is important for teachers to have adequate knowledge about the transitional voice is to avoid causing a disruption to the boys singing cycle. These disruptions include forcing male students to stop singing during they transitional period. Don Collins (2006) recalls that in the early stages of his teaching career, teachers believed that boys should not sing until the voice had fully transitioned. Teachers were worried that singing would render their vocal instruments useless or damage them for the remainder of their lives (Collins, 2006). This perception was conceived based on the lack of knowledge that teachers had about the transitioning voice. Knowledge about the



transition voice is a crucial to avoid causing vocal damage to the boys' voice. Without that knowledge, teachers often times become confused about where to place the transitioning students in terms of voice classification. Leck (2010) explains that some untrained teachers believe that just because a boy can sing high that he should sing alto. This concept, although rational, is inappropriate and damaging to the transitioning voice.

Researchers Freer (2008), Leck (2010), and Rollo Dilworth (2012) agree that choral teachers must have working knowledge about the transitioning voice in order to be effective in the classroom. They, however, offer different views regarding the importance of teachers being knowledgeable about this topic. Freer (2008) states that choral teachers need this knowledge to address and correct choral problems that exist in middle school. While Dilworth (2012) concludes that teachers need this information in order to have successful rehearsals. Leck (2010) then suggests that knowledgeable teachers can train the male to produce healthy tonal sounds. Gordon Harris (2006) suggests that the lack of knowledge regarding the transitional process is one of the reasons teachers find the transitioning voice challenging to teach and train.

The lack of knowledge about the transitional voice exists for various reasons. One reason for this is due to the universities failing to adequately prepare future choral teachers (Collins, 2006). This lack of preparation was not due to the fact that universities failed to recognize the importance of teaching choral teachers about the transitioning male voice, but because other classes were thought to better prepare teachers for the overall classroom experience (Collins, 2006). Another reason why this problem exists is because middle school vocal programs are often times run by those who have degrees in other music concentrations that are not voice related (Collins, 2006). Collins suggests that

many teachers who are teaching middle school chorus have little to no knowledge about the voice (Collins, 2006). Despite the reasons why teachers lack knowledge about the transitional voice, the fact remains that teachers still need this knowledge if they want to successfully teach transitioning male students.

### **Psychological Changes**

Teachers, along with having working knowledge of the transitional male voice, should be aware of the psychological changes that could affect their male students' ability and desire to sing. One of the changes, according to Demorest (2010) and White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001), is the influence of peer pressure. These scholars' research indicates that the thoughts and opinions of their peers influence the transitional males' choices. However, they offer a different explanation concerning peer pressures' impact on singing. Demorest (2000) infers that peer pressure intensifies around this time, and in the eyes of an adolescent boy, choir becomes less important. This indicates that if their current friends are not interested in the choir or singing, chances are the student's desire to sing will lessen, leading him to drop out of the choir. Comparatively, White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001), states that in social settings, adolescent males often adopt his peer groups' collective opinion, rather than processing his own. This theory infers that if the group sees singing as a waste of time, this attitude could affect all those connected to the group, causing boys to drop out of choir and/or stop singing. However, the opposite may apply to this as well if the peer group is excited about singing, that boys within the group will become excited about it as well. Peer pressure, therefore, can be used to either persuade or dissuade transitional males from singing

Another psychological change that affects male students' ability and/or desire to sing that middle school choral teachers must be aware of, is the one that occurs in the brain. During adolescence, according to Freer (2006), the structural regions of the brain began to change and develop. The onset of this development causes the learning style of males to differentiate from that of females. Freer (2006) indicates that at this stage boys learn best when their environment contains elements of competition, whereas females in this same situation, often times were not. The brain, during this transitional period, also experiences a gradual shift, regarding the control of emotions and how it relates to language use and higher order of thinking (Freer, 2006). This shift causes boys to desire an increase of physical activity; this coupled with a stressed environment are the ideal elements needed to help male student become successful learners (Freer, 2006). This need for physical activity and an environment where stress is prominent, explains why male students are more likely to choose sports over music. This, however, also explains why teachers need to be aware of these changes. If teachers create a classroom environment that incorporates and meets the same physical and psychological needs as sports, it is possible that teachers will be able to persuade male students to sing during their transition. This, though, is contingent upon the males' perception about singing.

In elementary school, most male students have no reservations about singing, even when it requires them to use their falsetto voice; however, once they enter middle school their perception about singing and how they sound while singing changes. There are numerous explanations regarding this sudden change of heart towards singing. Researchers, however, are more inclined to state that the males perception towards singing changes from elementary to middle due to the fact that they perceive singing to

be a non-masculine activity. Patrick Freer (2008), a leading researcher on the transitioning male voice, and Henry Leck (2010), whose specialty includes the transitioning voice, suggest that boys stop singing during their transitional period because they perceive singing as a feminine task. Despite the fact that both authors have reached the same conclusion, they have a difference of opinion regarding why this perception exists. Freer (2008) states that transitioning males' perception of singing as non-masculine is encouraged by the fact that they are outnumbered by females in choir. While Leck (2010) attributes the perception's existence to how boys feel while singing particular in reference to using their high voice, which in their minds makes them sound feminine.

Freer (2006), Collins (2006), and White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001), all agree that the child's perception about singing, like the ones mentioned above, is shaped by many factors including friends, family, male role models, and social networks. White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001), however, mention that the biggest impact on the transitioning males' perception of singing is the one made by his male role model(s). For example, if the boy's role model disapproves of him using his falsetto voice based on the idea that they sound feminine, this could potentially dissuade the transitioning male from singing, as well as implant the idea that using the falsetto voice makes them less of a man (Ashley, 2006). Along with trying to decipher the psychological perceptions of what being a man constitutes transitioning students also experience the physical changes associated with manhood.

**Physical Changes**

Physical changes that could affect the teachers' ability to teach come in addition to the aforementioned physiological changes that middle school boys face. Researchers, like Kendra Friar (1999) and White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001), have concluded that one of the physical changes that occurs to male voices that could affect the teacher's ability to teach transpires due to the change in the larynx. Friar (1999) states that during this transition, the vocal chords become longer and thicker, which is what causes the sound of the voice to become fuller and more adult like. White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001) mention that the muscle and cartilage of the larynx change in position, size, strength, and texture; this causes the singing voice to develop in regards to power, range, and tone. (White, C.D. & White, D.K., 2001). White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001) also state that during this stage of development, changes occur in the organs, muscles, cartilage, and bones that support the phonatory process, as well as an increase in size and shape of the resonating cavities. These are important changes for teachers to be aware of because the transitioning student will need guidance with regard in how to effectively use their 'new voice.'

As the voice begins to grow and develop, it will have an effect on the overall sound, range, and ability of the singing voice. These developments will alter how the teacher approaches the voice, which is why it is so pertinent for the teacher to be aware of these changes. In research conducted by both Robert T. Sataloff and Joseph R. Spiegel, they state that a male's voice may change in the one of the following ways.

Table 1  
Four Ways Transitioning Males Voices Change

The Voice Change	The Effect on the Voice
A sudden vocal drop to a full register in the bass range, leaving no treble range.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Singer may experience trouble using their falsetto voice</li> </ul>
A gradual vocal transition into the lower range, one or two notes at a time while retaining the treble range.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As the chest register becomes stronger, a distinct break emerges between the chest and head register.</li> </ul>
The voice retains the treble range using the head register and is capable of singing several pitches in the bass range; however, the voice is incapable of singing in the middle range between the bass and treble.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This voice has a hole in the range; and the individual may be labeled as "tone-deaf" because he cannot match pitch in the midrange.</li> </ul>
The voice retains the young treble quality and, at the same time, is capable of singing comfortably in a full register with baritone quality and range.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This rare voice can be remarkable in the ringing quality of the high range, the ease of transition to the low range, and the absence of register breaks.</li> </ul>

Note: Adapted from "Commonsense Training for Changing Male Voices," by White C.D. & White D.K., *Music Educators Journal*, 87(6), 39.

These developmental transitions lead to the development of two registers; the chest register produces a full-bodied tone and the head register, which produces a lighter tone that uses more nasal pharynx-or facial mask- for effective resonance (White, C.D. & White, D.K., 2001). The developmental transition, according to Cooksey, begins when the higher range becomes unstable and slightly breathy (Freer 2008).

As the higher range gradually disappears the onset of vocal gaps will appear. This physical change, which is another physical change that teachers need to be aware of, is very unpredictable and can occur at any time (Kennedy, 2004). Mary Kennedy, during her interview with transitioning boys, learned that one of the boys who experienced this mentioned that his vocal range was from middle C to G and sometimes from D to G. The boy, however, could never pinpoint where and when the gap would occur until he started singing (Kennedy, 2004). An additional physical change that occurs in boys' voices that

could affect the teacher's ability to teach basic vocal skills is voice cracking. This phenomenon, caused by laryngeal muscles growing at different rates, is difficult to pinpoint (Freer, 2008). Researchers, however, have created some instructional practices for teachers to use in the classroom to combat these challenges, changes, and transitions considered difficult and cumbersome.

### **Effective Instructional Strategies**

Although these challenges and changes may leave the choral teacher feeling helpless, there are effective instructional techniques that can be applied in the classroom to aid their transitioning students. Research, however, has suggested that some strategies were found to be more effective than others, in terms of teaching transitioning males.

One practice that researchers suggest to be most effective when teaching transitional male students is to teach them how to sing using their head or falsetto voice (White, C.D. & White, D.K. 2001; Leck, 2010, Julia Skadsem, 2007). White, C.D. & White, D.K., (2001) mention that teaching males how to properly use their head voice is a tool that choral teachers can use to train their male singers' voices. Leck (2010) too suggests the use of the head voice as a great tool, further stating that it provides the males a foundation as their chest voice continues to develop.

Teaching students to use their head voice is a good strategy to employ because it strengthens their ear as well as their changed voice (Skadesem, 2007). The implementation of the falsetto voice also allows singers to develop an extended range that contains no breaks across their passaggio (Leck, 2010; Kennedy, 2004). In her 2004 study, Kennedy interviews a student named Chris, who states that at the time singing in the falsetto voice, as well as his emerging baritone voice was one of the reasons that his

range spanned five octaves (Kennedy, 2004). Leck (2010), however, states that the range of a boy's voice will only expand if they continue to sing in their high voice. Teaching students how to properly use their falsetto voice can be a challenge for choral teachers; White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001) suggest that students use sighs and sirens as a tool to discover where their falsetto voice lays. Another great way to get students to explore and discover their falsetto voice is to have them sing the falsetto refrain from the *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* (Skadem, 2007). Although songs like this help transitioning males explore and discover their head voice, they could be perceived as boring and child-like and cause males not to sing, which is why repertoire selections is a very crucial and difficult process for teachers.

Selecting songs that help students sing through their transition is one reason why researchers suggest that choosing appropriate repertoire for transitioning male students as one of the more effective methods to use in the classroom (Freer, 2007; Gordon, 2006). Selecting appropriate repertoire of transitioning males determines if they will sing during their transition (Freer, 2007). Research also mentions that boys decide not to sing in the choir due to the fact that they find the music unappealing (Freer, 2007). This indicates that selecting appropriate repertoire is important and vital if the teacher wants their transitioning males to participate. Besides helping their males sing through their transition, repertoire selection is an effective strategy because if chosen incorrectly, could cause vocal harm and damage to the voices of transitioning males.

Researchers like Gordon Harris (2006) suggest that choral teachers who select the wrong music for their transitioning male students run the risk of damaging their developing vocal chords and creating bad vocal habits. For example, if a teacher chooses



a piece that contains many high notes, the student could begin to experience tension and frustration in the voice (Harris, 2006). Pushing, which every choral teacher considers a bad vocal technique, could also be a bad habit developed by choosing inappropriate repertoire for transitioning male singers. For example, songs that contain extreme dynamic markings like *ff* or *pp* is deemed inappropriate due to the fact that it forces the child to strain or push in order to produce the note (Harris, 2006). This demonstrates why choral teachers must take into account the vocal range and ability of their students while selecting music. Teachers who are knowledgeable about their students' voices will select music that can be used as a tool to develop good musical techniques, vocal habits, and avoidance of vocal damage. To help choral teachers select appropriate repertoire for their transitioning males, Harris suggests some musical elements to look for as well as to avoid. Some elements choral teachers should look for in music include pieces that are appropriately voiced, contain appropriate intervals, and music that is somewhat challenging (Harris, 2006). Choral teachers should avoid songs that have sudden register transitions, passages that contain extreme dynamics, rapidly changing pitches, long phrases, and fast rhythms (Harris, 2006). To find songs that meet these requirements, choral teachers should create what Harris (2006) refers to as a repertoire selection analysis. This analysis is broken down into eleven different categories including educational value, moderate range, whether or not it contains rapidly shifting harmonies, and whether or not the music has lasting value (Harris, 2006). The teacher would then simply check yes, or no, with regard to whether or not the song meets the various criteria needed to address the needs of their transitioning male students. Meeting the physical

needs of transitioning males in choir can manifest itself in many different ways; however, researchers have suggested that some ways are more effective way than others.

Teaching the transitioning male voice, by incorporating physical movement in the classroom, is another strategy suggested by research. Incorporating physical movement within the classroom can be an effective practice because it helps transitioning boys retain and learn new information (Freer, 2007)). Dilworth (2012) states that physical movements within the classroom are also effective when teaching musical concepts including breathing techniques, relaxation, posture, and healthy vocal production habits.

For example, moving your arms in an

arc-like motion above the head and then downward, is a suggested physical movement that can reinforce three musical concepts simultaneously; posture, breathing, and relaxation (Dilworth, 2012). Physical movement within the musical classroom can also show the correlation between the physical components of singing and playing sports (Dilworth, 2012). This concept could be described by explaining that in music we use breathing exercises to help us sing and sustain notes, just like swimmers or runners use good breathing habits to help sustain their muscle movements (Dilworth, 2012).

Researches like Freer and Dilworth offer a variety of ways on how to add physical movement within the classroom, which includes creating music centers (Freer, 2007), warm-up stations (Freer, 2009), various kinesthetic movements (Dilworth, 2012), and learning stations (Freer, 2009). Choral teachers can incorporate music centers as a way to reinforce the students' understanding of the lesson. These centers would allow the students to engage in physical movement, while reinforcing what the teacher taught the students. This allows the teacher to complete informal assessment regarding whether or

not the students understand the concepts. Music centers also allow students to interact and collaborate with their peers, as well as receive personal support from their teacher, which is one of the ways boys learn during this stage (Freer, 2009). In these warm-up stations, each student travels to the assigned station, which contains a set of instructions describing what the opening activity is (Freer, 2009). Freer states that these stations help students transition from the hallway into a rehearsal setting, and allows the students' time to interact with their peers, while working on a learning-focused based activity (Freer, 2009). One of the learning centers that students travel to could be centered on explaining the changes that transitional students should expect; which is another effective teaching strategy suggested by research.

Julia Skadem (2007), explains that students feel more comfortable about going through the transitions because someone explained the process to them and talked about what they can expect to happen . Being informed about what will occur with the body and voice offers a host of benefits to both teachers and students alike. Mary Kennedy (2004) concludes that explaining the process to transitional boys helps motivate them when they become frustrated with their voice (Kennedy, 2004). Another benefit of informing students about the changes that have or will begin is that: students, who are informed about the changes, tend to be better at making choices regarding to how they sing (Kennedy, 2004). Informing students about the change their body and voice have, or will have to go through, also helps them become knowledgeable about the overall process. One way to explain the transition with students could be to have monthly vocal sessions where the teacher or vocal specialist speaks about the stages of the vocal development that they will experience, as well as some tips regarding vocal health.

Informing the students about the change their bodies will experience is a great way to be proactive regarding students becoming frustrated or upset; however, research suggest that an even more effective approach to address this issue is by creating a safe learning environment for transitioning males.

Students, although knowledgeable about the transition, are still often times very self-conscious about their voice. Research, therefore, has suggested that one of the more effective teaching practices is to create a safe learning environment that allows transitioning males to feel comfortable and secure about their developing voice. One reason why this strategy is effective is due to that fact that it allows students to create a bond with each other, which could positively alter their singing experience (White, 2001). One of the more successful ways to create this type of environment is by meeting male students either before or after school. Research suggests that this type of setting tends to make male singers less self-conscious, which could possibly lead them to feel more comfortable about singing (Demorest, 2000). This type of environment is healthy for transitioning boys because their social problems vanish when members of the opposite sex are separated from each other (Dilworth, 2012). Researchers have also suggested that this strategy is effective due to the fact that boys feel more comfortable addressing issues like the changing voice, falsetto singing, and increasing their range when they are around members of the same sex (Dilworth, 2012). This type of environment, although hard to create, offers a lot benefits; however, it is not the only way to create said environment.

Another way that choral teachers can create a safe, encouraging learning environment by developing a workshop that focuses on male singers. According to

Demorest, this workshop should be composed of two male choirs, one for changed and another for unchanged voices (Demorest, 2000). The goal of the workshop is to focus on the needs and issues of transitioning males (Demorest, 2000). This approach is a great way to create a safe, encouraging learning environment for male singers, due to the fact that students will be much more comfortable around males who are experiencing the same issues. This workshop also allows students to learn how to overcome vocal challenges while singing. This workshop concludes with a performance of the two choirs, containing songs that they worked on during the workshop. Research suggests that workshops like this create a boost in male enrollment at the middle school choir level (Demorest, 2000). Workshops like this are beneficial for transitioning males is that it allows them to feel special, due to the fact that it is an event that only they can participate in. After attending the workshop, teachers notice that their transitioning males gained more confidence in their voice and felt less intimidated (Demorest, 2000). Freer (2007) offers another way to make students feel less self-conscious about their voice, which is to have them sing with their friends. Transitioning males are more inclined to be successful in music class if they are surrounded by a group of friends who have the same goals and desires (Freer, 2007). Along with having friends with similar beliefs it is also important that transitioning males get a chance to see and hear male role models sing. Another way the teachers could create a safe, encouraging, learning environment for their male students is by inviting appropriate male role models to come and sing for the class. Research suggests this approach is effective due to the fact it demonstrates to young singers, that singing is an activity that can be enjoyed by everyone no matter the gender (White, C.D. & White, D.K. 2001).

Another strategy that research suggests to effectively teach transitioning male voices is the top down approach. This approach consists of bringing the voice down from its falsetto range, passing through the passaggio, into chest voice. One reason why this approach is considered an effective practice is due to the fact that it allows males to continue to sing through the full compass of their range without causing any damage to the voice. This approach also allows transitioning males greater range extension, while allowing them to experiment with singing without use of their chest voice (Collins, 2006). The ability to merge the head and chest voice using descending exercises is another reason why the top down approach is an effective instructional method for choral teachers (Dilworth, 2012). One way teachers can incorporate this approach is by creating vocalises that start high above the break and come down across the break (Leck, 2010). Teachers could have students begin to sing high in the head voice on an [e] vowel and shift a [ʌ] as they cross the passaggio, and then modify the vowel again to an [a] and eventually to an [ae] at the bottom of the range (White, C.D. & White, D.K., 2001). White, C.D. & White, D.K. (2001) also suggest that teachers could implement a five-step vocalise on [je] beginning high in the head register and descending by half steps with each performance (White, C.D. & White, D.K., 2001). Once the student becomes comfortable with these warm-ups, teachers can use them to teach their students about IPA, which is another effective strategy that research suggests for teaching the transitioning male voice.

Another practice that research suggests to be most effective with regards to teaching the transitioning male voice involves using IPA to teach students how to sing songs in other languages. IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), which is a scientific-

based alphabet that uses symbols to interpret sounds, is used to help singers understand how to form sounds with the mouth and tongue (Brown, 2013). IPA, created in 1988 by linguists, interprets all the sounds of the human language. These interpretations make learning a new language easier for singers to remember, while simultaneously keeping the integrity of the language that it is being interpreted.

There are many beneficial reasons why using IPA is useful in teaching transitioning males how to sing songs in other languages; one being that it allows singers to create uniformity regarding the vowels they use. Many times, especially when singing in a different language, students may hear or interpret different ways a vowel is supposed to be pronounced (Duane, 2006; Brown, 2013). Brown also states that the symbols used in IPA help singers understand and demonstrate the correlation between unified vowels, correct placement of said vowels, and consistent idiomatic consonants (Brown, 2013). Brown mentions that uniformity is a very important feature due to the fact that often times students may create their own language by remembering how to pronounce certain words, and if the whole choir has their own language, the pronunciation is sure to be as varied as their own languages (Duane, 2006). Additionally, singers also learn specific diction rules and practices that they can apply throughout their time in choir when learning songs in other languages. The reason they are able to do this, is because IPA is the same across the board; excluding the revisions, the rules never change in a particular language. So once they learn it, it does not change. The use of the IPA symbols helps students 'feel' how to produce the different and unique sounds that may present themselves in a certain piece; which is another benefit of IPA (Brown, 2013). Understanding how to pronounce words in another language is often times dependent on

students 'feeling' how to pronounce the words, using their mouth and tongue. For example, IPA has symbols that help students understand the feeling of glides, closed and open e's, constants, rolled or flipped r's, etc. This type of information is useful because it appeals to two of the singers' senses, which likens the chance that they will remember and apply it daily (Brown, 2013). Another reason to use IPA is that once it is taught and problems in the classroom arise with regard to pronunciation, all the teacher has to do is direct the singers to the chart for clarity and discussion. This approach can, if taught effectively, lessen the amount of time the teacher wastes on re-teaching the same diction concept, which gives the teacher more time to teach new lessons. The last reason why using IPA is an effective practice is because of its ability to teach transitioning males songs in other languages, while teaching the students the beauty of other languages (Brown, 2013). Once students spend time learning the nuances of other languages they learn to appreciate the details, sounds, and approach to the language.

There are a variety of ways to teach students how to use IPA. One way to do this is by starting slow, introducing the students to a few symbols at a time. For example, Brown suggests introducing the students to basic vowels, adding special consonants when needed (Brown, 2013). Duance states that teachers can employ warm ups as a way to teach their students IPA. Warm-ups are effective because you can use them in different ways. For example, teachers can teach IPA using rhythm exercises and vocalises within a warm-up example. Duance provides one example of how to do this in the classroom. He states that teachers can choose two of the pure vowels and incorporate those vowels into a warm-up that the students are familiar with (Duance, 2006). Once the teacher has done this, they then display the two symbols on the board, demonstrate the sounds for teacher



vowel, give the choir a special word for the sound, and then have the singers use the two sounds within their warm-up (Duance, 2006). Using rhythmic exercises is another way teachers can instruct students how to use IPA, especially when teaching voiced and unvoiced consonants. Duance suggests that teachers provide their students with copies of the rhythm patterns and have them verbally reproduce the pattern using selected IPA sounds (Duance, 2006). Once students understand this process, the teacher could then ask them to apply a different consonant sound to a certain rhythm, eventually working the students up to singing consonants and vowel combinations (Duance, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

Effectively teaching transitioning male students is a challenge that many middle school choral teachers find overwhelming and difficult. This task is considered daunting due to teaching challenges that arise in the classroom, as well as the physical and psychological transitions that males experience during this stage. Teaching transitional males to sing during this transition, however, can be made easier by applying the suggested effective instructional strategies. These effective practices include teaching the students how to use their head voice, creating a safe learning environment for students, teaching students the top down approach, explaining the transition process to students, incorporating physical activities in the classroom, selecting appropriate music, and using IPA to teach foreign language songs.

One reason why research regarding how to effectively teach the transitioning male voice is important is due to the fact that many transitioning males drop out of choir at an alarming rate due to the fact that they become frustrated with their singing voices. The more research done on the transitioning voice, the more teachers can ease the

frustrations of their transitioning male singers. Another reason why research like this is important is that it provides beginning teachers, who often times have no experience about the transitioning voice, a guide of what to expect and how to be proactive when problems arise regarding the transitioning voices.

Future research regarding how to effectively teach the transitioning voice will only help teachers in the classroom as well as male students who desire to sing but are held back by the fact that their voices are transitioning.

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# UNCP Graduate Lecture Recital

The University of North Carolina at Pembroke  
Department of Music Presents

Graduate Lecture Recital

Jonathan Leif Thomas, countertenor

Dr. Seung-Ah Kim, piano

Presentation of Research Findings.....Jonathan Thomas

## INTERMISSION

Dove sei, amato bene? (from *Rodelinda*).....George Frideric Handel  
(1685-1759)

Ch'io mai vi possa (from *Siroe*)

Il fervido desiderio.....Vincenzo Bellini  
(1801-1835)

Ma rendi pur contento

Now sleeps the crimson petal.....Roger Quilter  
(1877-1953)

Blow, blow, thou winter wind

Pie Jesu (from *Requiem*).....Andrew Lloyd Webber  
(b.1948)

Dr. Jaeyoon Kim, tenor

## THESIS COMMITTEE

Dr. Valerie Austin  
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Jaeyoon Kim  
Studio Professor

Dr. José Rivera

Dr. Katie White

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Music Education. Jonathan Thomas is a graduate student of Dr. Valerie Austin and studies voice with Dr. Jaeyoon Kim. As a courtesy to the performers and audience, please adjust all mobile devices for no sound and no light. Please enter and exit during applause only.

March 27, 2014

7:30 PM

Moore Hall Auditorium

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# **Effective Instructional Strategies for Middle School Choral Teachers: Teaching Middle School Boys to Sing During Vocal Transition**

UNCP Graduate Lecture Recital

Jonathan L. Thomas

## **Abstract**

Teaching vocal skills to male students whose voices are transitioning is an undertaking that many middle school choral teachers find challenging. Research suggests that one reason why challenges exist is because of teachers' limited knowledge about the transitioning male voice. The development of self-identity, peer pressure, and the understanding of social norms, which will be associated with psychological transitions for this study, is another factor that creates instructional challenges for choral teachers. Research also suggests that transitions, such as the development of the larynx and the singing voice, create instructional challenges for choral teachers. The goal of this study is to examine the most effective teaching practices that middle school choral teachers can employ in the classroom, in order to eradicate challenges within the classroom setting.

This meta-analysis is supported by a review of previous research on the issues and challenges surrounding the transitioning male voice, and will be presented in two parts. These parts are comprised of a written document and a lecture-recital. The written document will consist of a review of current and relevant literature topics that examine the psychological and physical transitions that adolescent males experience, its impact on their body, mind, and singing voice. The written portion of this study will also list strategies that middle school teachers can employ in the classroom. Findings from the research will then be presented in the lecture. The presentation will include a vocal recital featuring four Italian songs, two English songs, and one Latin song. These particular songs will demonstrate what research has suggested in terms of instructional practices that middle school teachers could implement in the classroom. This recital will also feature songs that follow the suggested guidelines with regards to how middle school choral teachers should select appropriate songs for transitioning voices.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- 1.) What teaching challenges does the transitioning male voice present to middle school choir teachers?
- 2.) What are some psychological changes that middle school choral teachers should be aware of that could affect middle school boys' ability to sing?
- 3.) What are some physical changes that occur to male voices during puberty that affect the teachers' ability to teach basic vocal skills?
- 4.) What does research suggest are the most effective instructional strategies middle school teachers can employ in their classroom to help middle school boys sing through their vocal transition?

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