

AN INVESTIGATION OF RHYTHM READING PRACTICES
IN TEXAS MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIRS

A THESIS

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BY

SHELBY MORGAN, B.A. & B.S.

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ABSTRACT

SHELBY MORGAN

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The purpose of this study was to investigate rhythm-reading instructional practices used in the middle school choral classroom. The study included an assessment of the amount of time spent on rhythm instruction per week, an examination of choral sight-reading method books and pedagogical techniques employed, and the rhythm counting system used. A link to a researcher-designed survey was emailed to current Texas middle school choral directors and 129 responded with a response rate of 15%. Questions addressed demographics, teaching experience, musical training, and teaching methodology. Analysis of popular choral methods books showed that most of the available literature support a separation of pitch and rhythm during instruction. Results of the survey indicated that time spent on rhythm instruction and the pedagogical approaches used varied greatly among middle school choral directors. Further, many participants had not received rhythm training in middle school or high school choir. Recommendations for future research include a study of band and orchestra rhythm instructional practices and how they could be adapted for the choral classroom. Additionally, investigation into rhythm pedagogy presented in university choral methods classes could provide possible solutions to raising the level of rhythmic aptitude among middle school and high school choral students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Every vocalist has heard the phrase, “singers can’t count.” This maxim is based on the evidence that many vocalists struggle with counting rhythms in their music. Singers oftentimes perform rhythms in relation to how the music “feels” or they rely on the accompaniment/instrumentation either to provide cues or to “follow” their rhythmic inaccuracies in performance. This generalization does not apply to all vocalists any more than positing that all instrumentalists have a clear understanding of rhythm and play with 100% accuracy. However, based on my educational experience and anecdotal evidence from my colleagues, I felt that an investigation into rhythmic instruction in the choral classroom would reveal the cause for deficiencies in rhythmic performance.

I was a choir member from 4th through 12th grade, and I did not learn how to read music, let alone count rhythm, until I entered college as a music major. How many other students have had a similar experience? Are students being taught music, or are they being taught to read music? The approach educators use to teach a piece of music can potentially impact their students’ career options. Music teachers are molding future generations of musicians, including music educators, performers, music therapists, and composers. Are we developing independent musicians who can potentially become successful college music majors, or are we only teaching them to perform a musical selection?

Middle school is a critical period in the development of musical skills, as many students move from a general music classroom to a band, orchestra, or choir. Teaching middle school can present a number of unique challenges to a music educator, due to the students' rapidly changing physiology and accompanying emotional angst. In spite of the fact that the middle school years are seminal in terms of presenting foundational material, Demorest (2000) found that there is a "relative scarcity of information" available to music educators regarding this age-group (p. 21). Research oftentimes focuses on the social aspects of the instructional setting, such as Demorest's (2000) study of techniques for teaching middle school singers, which emphasized creating a healthy environment conducive to student learning. Due to the paucity of information available to middle school choral directors about effective instructional techniques for teaching music literacy, my objective is to expand the resources available through an investigation of pedagogical approaches to teaching rhythm in middle school choral classrooms.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Educating Young Musicians

The goal of music educators is to design an instructional approach that results in student understanding and retention of course content. While Furby's (2013) focus was primarily on assessment in the choral classroom, he suggested that educators' first step is to define their philosophy--the "whys" involved in teaching. Furby stated that teachers' awareness of their priorities in music instruction drives decisions about curriculum and corresponding assessments. Furby outlined a number of assessment strategies, based on the National Music Standards, including auditions, singing examinations, rhythm circles, melodic variations, rhythm composing, chord progressions, spoken and written performance evaluations, and cross-curricular projects. Furby pointed to the need to individually assess student understanding in a number of areas, including pitch and rhythm.

Sight-Reading in the Secondary Classroom

Literature on basic skill preparation for young singers focuses primarily on sight-reading. Kuehne's (2007) study of Florida middle-school choral programs found that 49% of responding music educators included sight-singing in their classrooms daily and the methods most often used were the practices they learned while in middle school. Kuehne reported that the sight-reading methods being employed included moveable-Do

versus fixed-Do and use of Curwen hand signs, but he did not mention rhythm reading. Nichols's (2012) study of middle school choral directors belonging to a state-level music education organization revealed that 53% of respondents included sight-singing in their classroom daily, yet participants were neutral regarding whether rhythm and melody should be taught separately or together.

Research also addresses individual vocal sight-reading skills. Killian and Henry (2005) focused on the use of a practice period prior to the performance of a melodic line when sight-reading. Participants were observed and scored while reading two melodic lines, with a study and practice period preceding the performance of the first line, and no study period before singing the second line. Killian and Henry (2005) found that the accurate singers performed better when given practice time, whereas the inaccurate singers gained no benefit from the practice period. The only mention of rhythm was in relation to pitch, i.e., most successful sight-readers kept a steady tempo or maintained the beat in their bodies during the performance. Other studies (Henry, 2004; McClung, 2008) show a similar focus on pitch and sight-reading with no discussion of rhythm.

Killian and Henry (2005) discovered that individuals who had received private voice lessons, played piano or another instrument, and/or received individual sight-singing tests, were more likely to be successful sight-readers. In their study of the effects of private training on sight-singing skills, Demorest and May's (1995) study revealed that the greatest predictors of successful sight-reading were the number of years spent in choir and the length of time the participants had taken voice lessons and/or played piano or another musical instrument.

Pitch and Rhythm

Henry (2011) focused her study on pitch and rhythm accuracy during vocal sight-reading performance. Specifically, Henry investigated whether prior training on an instrument would cause a singer to give preference to pitch or rhythm when sight-reading a difficult passage. Henry found that students with no instrumental background were more likely to have pitch accuracy when performing difficult rhythms, but that their rhythmic accuracy would drop considerably. Further, Henry discovered that students with prior experience in an instrumental ensemble or with a background in piano were slightly less accurate with pitch, but much more rhythmically accurate overall. Henry's results indicated that students were more likely to have pitch accuracy when they felt secure rhythmically. Henry stated that it might not be true that singers cannot count; rather they just choose not to count. "Singers don't care when to sing, until they know what to sing" (2011, p. 81).

Likewise, Giles (1991) endorsed the separation of rhythm and pitch when teaching sight-reading. Giles provided a number of secondary-level classroom approaches to sight-reading and rhythm-reading practices based on Orff and Kodály methodologies, which are typically used with elementary-level students. Giles further advocated spending several minutes of each class working solely on rhythm-reading skills at the start of each class. Giles recommended beginning with echo clapping short rhythms on the board, and then gradually making them longer to stretch students' musical memory. During the next step, students would compose rhythmic patterns and write them on the board for the class to perform. Rhythm was used not only as a means of warming

up a group, but also a method to pre-teach difficult rhythms found within literature and as a means to challenge students' rhythmic skills. Giles then discussed how Kodály and Orff techniques could be used in sight-reading to better understand pitch and improve accuracy.

Teaching Rhythm

Bohn's (1943) study centered on rhythm and its role in the creation of music. Bohn explained: "Rhythm is the first fundamental of the singing tone...Every tone pulses around a definite beat which controls its temporal value as a note...Syllables and sounds must be produced in relationship to the given rhythm of a composition (Bohn, 1943, pp. 62-63). Bohn referenced sight-reading in conjunction with rhythm, explaining that students who are sure of their rhythmic accuracy are more likely to feel confident in their sight-reading abilities. Bohn stated that solely practicing rhythms found in performance repertoire limited students' training. Bohn ended with a call to invigorate the elementary education provided to our students, to move beyond rote teaching and broaden the education of young musicians. One step Bohn stated that would move music education in the right direction would be for all students to take part in rudimental drumming. Bohn suggested that providing young musicians with drums would create an enthusiasm for music and its creation and would help students better interpret the notes on the page.

Conway, Marshall, and Hartz (2014) examined rhythmic instructional practices within instrumental ensembles. Conway et al. acknowledged that misconceptions and assumptions were made that beginners had a basic understanding of how to maintain a steady beat, or subdivide if needed, to promote rhythmic accuracy. The method Conway

et al. endorsed to improve this skill with beginning instrumentalists was to have students move or create flow in order to maintain a steady beat. Further recommendations included having students mirror the conducting pattern and tempo changes shown by their director and practice with a programmable metronome.

Northrup et al. (1977) suggested techniques used in university elementary music method classes to teach pre-service teachers how to help students develop a sense of rhythm through body percussion, movement, and composition. Although they primarily focused on techniques used within the elementary music classroom, Northrup et al. also provided examples of how rhythms could be introduced in high school band classes, using rhythmic duets band students created, based on excerpts from literature being worked on in class. Northrup et al. recommended that their methodology be used from elementary school through high school, allowing for fluid musical growth. Further, Northrup et al. maintained that rhythm-reading skills should be assessed throughout a student's musical career.

Teaching Rhythm within the Choral Classroom

Cappers (1985) stressed the importance of secondary teachers continuing to teach the basics of music, rather than rote teaching, cautioning that otherwise, "music learning stops and singing takes its place" (p. 46). Cappers recommended separating the rhythm from the melodic line, allowing students to practice each independently, and then combining them once they can perform them accurately. Cappers maintained that literature selection at the beginning of the school year should be based on educational considerations. Working on a minimal amount of music that is relatively simple in nature

allows more time to develop necessary skills. Further, Cappers stressed the importance of using a consistent counting system with students and moving away from the elementary counting systems of “ta and ti-ti.” Cappers included approaches to teaching melody and sight-reading, but he stressed the need to give rhythm and tonal study equal precedence in the choral classroom.

Popular Choral Method Books

A large number of sight-singing method books are available to music educators. Pender’s Music Company and J.W. Pepper Music Company, two of the largest music distribution companies in the US, provided a list of their top-selling choral sight-reading books. Although they did not have data regarding the grade level the purchasers taught, it is likely that the beginning method books were predominantly used by middle school directors. The two music companies had a number of duplications among their top sellers. An evaluation of the 15 method books (listed in Bibliography) suggested four categories: (a) no separation of pitch and rhythm (2 – 13%), (b) occasional separation of pitch and rhythm (1 – 7%), (c) consistent separation of pitch and rhythm (9 – 60%), and (d) books focused solely on rhythm instruction (3 – 20%) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Evaluation of Presentation of Pitch and Rhythm in Top-Selling Choral Sight Singing Method Books (N=15)

Choral Sight-Singing Method Books	No separation of pitch and rhythm	Some separation of pitch and rhythm	Consistent separation of pitch and rhythm	Solely focused on rhythm
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<i>90 Days to Sight-</i>	X			
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<i>Reading Success</i>			
<i>Essential Sight-Singing Vol. I</i>		X	
<i>Insight Sight Singing</i>			X
<i>Patterns of Sound Vol. I</i>			X
<i>Patterns of Sound Vol. II</i>			X
<i>Sing at First Sight Vol. I</i>			X
<i>Sing at First Sight Vol. II</i>			X
<i>Sing on Sight Level I</i>			X
<i>Sing on Sight Level II</i>			X
<i>SMART</i>	X		
<i>SOS – Simplify Our Sight Reading</i>			X
<i>The Rhythm Reader (Supplement for SOS)</i>			X
<i>The Rhythm Reader I</i>			X
<i>The Rhythm Reader II</i>			X
<i>The Sight Singer</i>			X

Justification of the Study

Typically, the focus in a music classroom is on the end result, rather than the process of acquiring musical skills (Reimer, 2004). Musical literacy requires mastery of both rhythm and pitch reading, and while numerous studies have been conducted on best approaches and practices of teaching sight-reading within the choral classroom (Durocher, 2006; McDonald, 2010; Nichols, 2012; Nolker, 2001), far fewer studies have focused specifically on rhythm-reading (Bader, 2014; Stegall, 1992). More research is needed to understand how middle school choral directors are approaching rhythm instruction in their classes and what practices would be most beneficial to all students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate rhythm-reading instructional practices used in the middle school choral classroom. The study included an assessment of the amount of time spent on rhythm instruction per week, an examination of choral sight-reading methods books and pedagogical techniques employed, and the rhythm counting system used.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How much emphasis is placed on the development of rhythm skills in the middle school choral classroom?
2. What pedagogical techniques are used to teach rhythm in middle school choral classrooms?
3. What influences the director's approach to rhythm instruction (i.e., counting systems used and musical background)?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants ($N=129$) in this study were music educators who were currently teaching or had experience teaching middle school choir in public or private schools. Criteria for participation in the study included the following: (a) membership in Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) and (b) experience teaching middle school choir. Only members that allowed TMEA to release their information were polled.

A database of email addresses for vocal division members was obtained from TMEA. A recruitment email was sent to 985 potential participants (see Appendix B). The electronic communication contained an explanation of the purpose of the study, description of the procedures, potential risks of participating in the study, a consent form, and a link to the online survey. A total of 98 emails were returned as undeliverable, leaving a pool of 887 participants. Over a four-month period, potential participants received a reminder email at the beginning and middle of each month. A total of 129 middle school choral directors completed the online survey with a response rate of 15%.

Instrumentation

The Rhythm Reading Practices Survey (see Appendix C) was used to assess the educational background of participants and the pedagogical materials and instructional approaches used for rhythm instruction in the middle school choral classroom. The researcher-developed survey contained 19 questions.

The first portion of the survey addressed demographic data—years of teaching experience, grade levels taught, instruments played, and choral and instrumental ensemble experience. The next section of the survey contained questions regarding pedagogical materials and techniques used in teaching rhythm. Finally, the survey addressed the participants' rhythmic training and skills.

Prior to administering the instrument to participants, a pilot study was conducted with graduate music education students ($N=6$) and feedback was requested regarding the content, order, and formatting of the questions in the survey instrument. No changes were suggested by the respondents in the pilot study.

Data Collection and Analysis

J. W. Pepper Music Company and Pender's Music Company were contacted via phone, requesting a list of their best-selling choral sight-reading books. Some of the titles were duplicated, resulting in 15 books. The method books were separated into four categories: no separation of pitch and rhythm; some separation of pitch and rhythm; consistent separation of pitch and rhythm; and solely focused on rhythm. Each book was reviewed in its entirety and each exercise analyzed for the presentation of pitch and rhythm. The books that did not separate pitch and rhythm, introduced a single melodic line or an exercise without focus on rhythm instruction. Those method books that occasionally separated pitch and rhythm did so for some exercises, but not others. Books in the third category contained exercises in which rhythm and pitch were introduced separately every time. The final category focused solely on rhythm instruction, with no melodic content.

The researcher-designed survey was created using Google Forms, a data collection form which has embedded statistical computation software. Participants were asked to answer 19 questions—15 checklist and 4 free-response. Data were reported in terms of frequency of response and percentages. Responses to the survey questions were displayed in tables, charts, and graphs to provide a clear overview of the results.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Although the potential pool of participants was 887 members of the vocal division of TMEA, it is important to note that some of the recipients could have been high school choral directors or private voice instructors, and thus did not qualify to be in the initial group of potential respondents. Because number of potential participants was possibly inflated, the actual response rate among middle school choral directors could have potentially been higher than 15%.

Responses to Survey Questions

Survey Question 1

Question 1 was designed to immediately eliminate any respondent who was not qualified to participate in the survey because they had never taught middle school choir. If participants answered “no” to this question, they were sent to the end of the survey and thanked for their participation. Of the 129 responses, 121 answered “yes,” (94%) they had taught middle school choir, and then were directed to complete the remaining survey questions.

Survey Question 2

This question recorded what grade levels the participants had taught during their careers. Predictably, the highest percentage was in the middle school grades, Grades 6 – 9. However, several participants also had experience at the elementary and high school levels (see Figure 1).

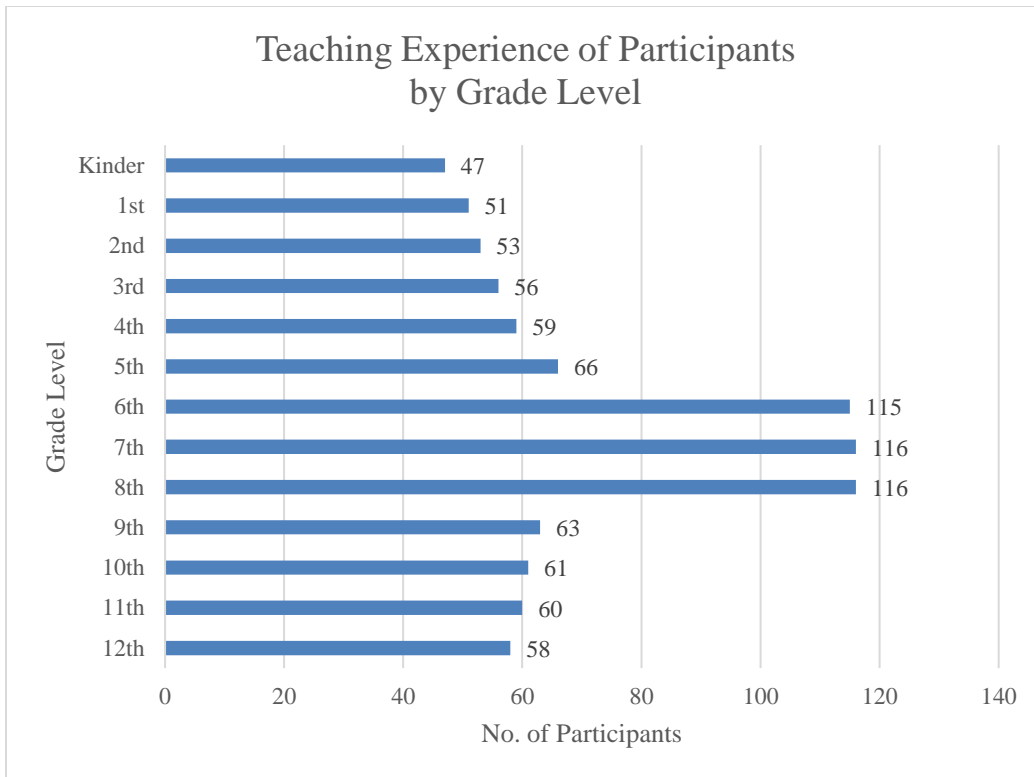


Figure 1. Teaching Experience of Participants by Grade Level

Survey Question 3

Question 3 asked participants to record the number of years they had taught in their current position. Responses ranged from 1-31 years, with the most frequent responses being 2 years (17%), 3 years (13%), 1 year (11%), 5 years (10%), and 4 years (8%). Early career teachers, with 5 or fewer years of experience, made up 61% of participants (see Table 2).

Table 2

Years Participants Spent in Current Teaching Position

Years in current position	Number of participants	Percentage
1	13	10.7%
1.5	1	.8%
2	21	17.4%
3	16	13.2%
4	10	8.2%
4.5	1	.8%
5	12	9.9%
6	3	2.5%
7	5	4.1%
8	3	2.5%
9	2	1.7%
10	5	4.1%
11	3	2.5%
12	2	1.65%
14	3	2.5%
16	5	4.1%
17	1	.8%
18	1	.8%
19	4	3.3%
20	2	1.7%
21	1	.8%

22	1	.8%
23	1	.8%
25	1	.8%
26	1	.8%
27	1	.8%
29	1	.8%

Survey Question 4

This question addressed the grade levels the participants currently teach. While participants had to teach middle school in order to participate, a number also taught either elementary music or high school choir (see Figure 2).

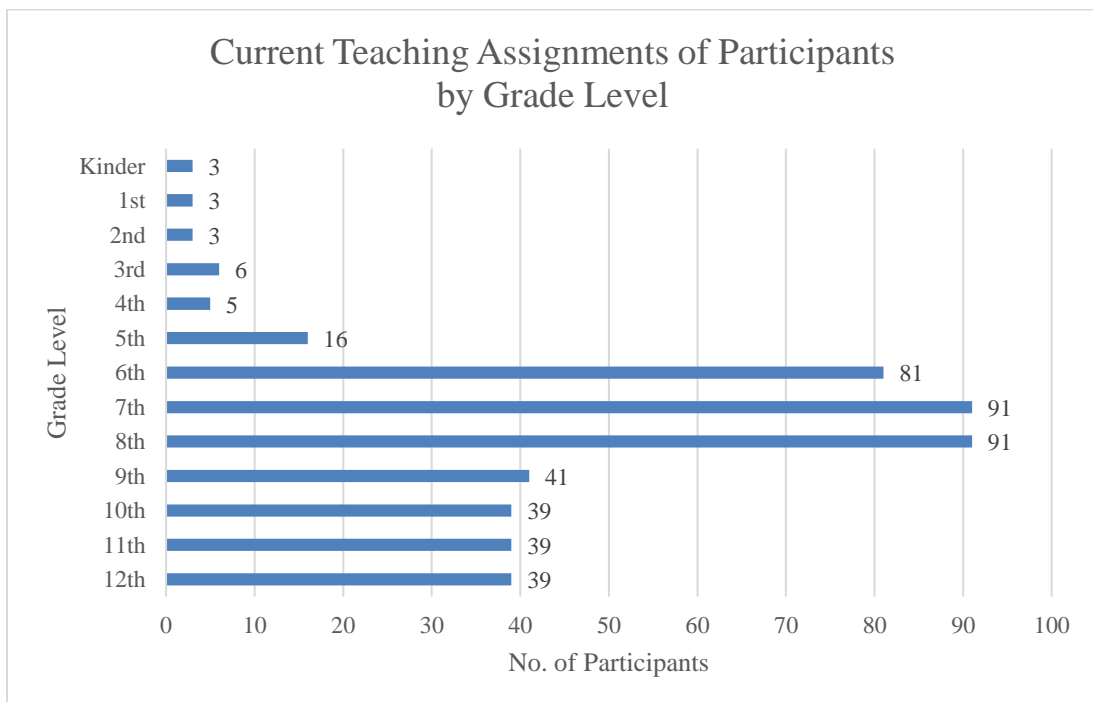


Figure 2. Current Teaching Assignments of Participants by Grade Level

Survey Question 5

When asked to select the school organizations they had participated in, choir (89%) was by far the most popular response, followed by band (43%), orchestra (12%), and percussion ensemble (11%). Other organizations received only one response (see Figure 3).

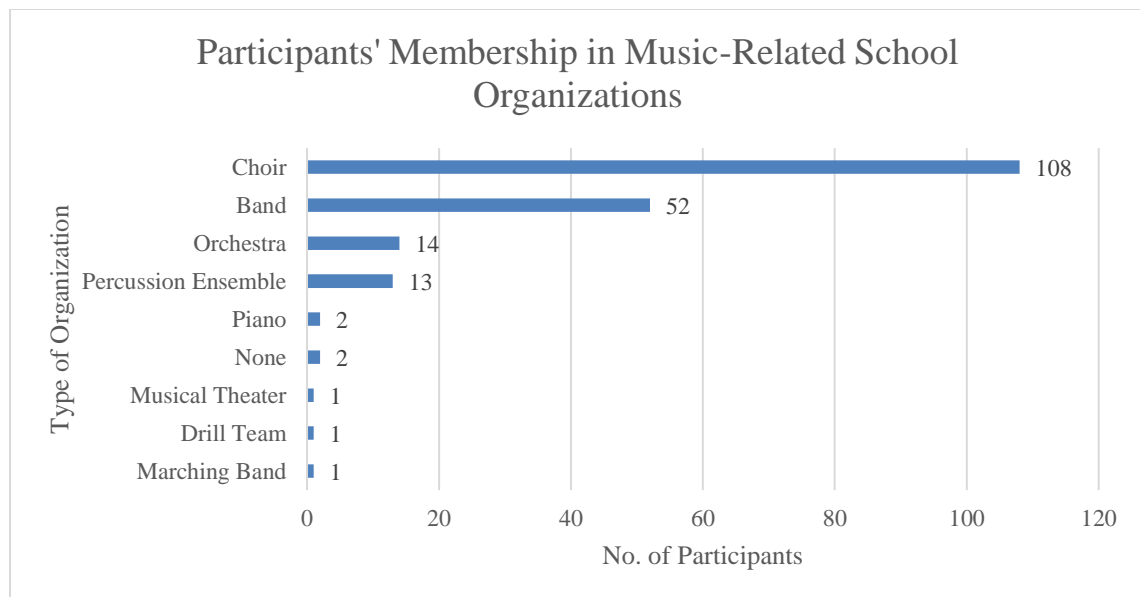


Figure 3. Participants' Membership in Music-Related School Organizations

Survey Question 6

When asked what instruments, other than voice, participants play proficiently, the responses were greatly varied. A majority of participants ($n=115$) responded with piano or some variation (i.e., “enough to teach”, “okay at piano” or “pianoish”, etc.). The next most popular instrument was guitar ($n=13$), followed by clarinet ($n=11$) and percussion ($n=11$) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Instruments Played Proficiently by Participants

Instrument	No. Participants
Piano	115
Guitar	13
Clarinet	11
Percussion	11
Flute	7
None	7
Violin	5
Saxophone	4
Trumpet	4
Baritone	3
Ukulele	3
Bassoon	2
Organ	2
Recorder	2
Cello	1
Euphonium	1
French Horn	1
Handbells	1
Oboe	1
Trombone	1

Survey Question 7

Participants were asked to document the sight-reading method books they used in their middle school choral classroom. The checklist contained the best-selling choral sight-reading books reported by JW Pepper Music Company and Pender’s Music Co. Participants were able to add any resources not listed, which are reported by the designation of “Other.” The books selected most frequently were *90 Days to Sight Reading Success* (55%), *Patterns of Sound Vol. I* (52%), *SOS – Simplify Our Sight Reading* (46%), and *Essential Sight-Singing Vol. I* (45%) (see Table 4).

Table 4

Percentage of Participants Who Used Different Methodology Books In Their Middle School Choral Classroom

Book	No. Participants	Percentage
<i>90 Days to Sight Reading Success</i>	67	55.4%
<i>Essential Sight-Singing Vol. I</i>	54	44.6%
<i>Insight Sight Singing</i>	6	5%
<i>Patterns of Sound Vol. I</i>	63	52.1%
<i>Patterns of Sound Vol. II</i>	36	29.8%
<i>Sing at First Sight Vol. I</i>	33	27.3%
<i>Sing at First Sight Vol. II</i>	22	18.2%
<i>Sing on Sight Level I</i>	15	12.4%
<i>Sing on Sight Level II</i>	4	3.3%
<i>SMART</i>	27	22.3%

<i>SOS – Simplify Our Sight Reading</i>	55	45.5%
<i>The Rhythm Reader (Supplement for SOS)</i>	34	28.1%
<i>The Rhythm Reader I</i>	32	26.4%
<i>The Rhythm Reader II</i>	20	16.5%
<i>The Sight Singer</i>	32	26.4%
Other - Patti DeWitt <i>Sight Reading Literacy</i>	15	12.4%
Other - Tim Winebrenner’s <i>Sight Reading Series</i>	7	5.8%
Other - Self-Created Exercises	6	5%
Other - <i>Vocal Connections</i> , Whitlock	4	3.3%
Other - <i>Sight Reading Factory</i> (Online Resource)	3	2.5%
Other - <i>Rhythm Bee</i> (Online Resource)	3	2.5%
Other - <i>Sight Sing a Song</i> , Audrey Snyder	2	1.7%
Other - <i>Oxford Books</i>	2	1.7%
Other - <i>Snap Cards</i>	1	0.8%
Other - <i>Songs for Sight Singing</i> , Dr. Vivian Moon	1	0.8%
Other - <i>The Singing Musician</i>	1	0.8%
Other - <i>Breezing Thru Theory</i>	1	0.8%
Other - Snippets from Octavos	1	0.8%
Other - <i>The Folk Song Sight Singing Series</i>	1	0.8%
Other - Jenson <i>Sight-Singing Course</i>	1	0.8%

Survey Question 8

In response to the question regarding how many minutes a week they focus solely

on rhythm instruction, the highest percentage (18%) of participants reported 30 minutes, followed by 20 minutes (12%), and 50 minutes (11%). The remaining responses ranged from 2 to 90 minutes (see Table 5).

Table 5

Number of Minutes Participants Spent Teaching Rhythm Each Week

Minutes Spent Teaching Rhythm Per Week	No. Participants	Percentage
2	3	2.48%
5	2	1.65%
7	3	2.48%
10	11	9.09%
15	8	6.61%
20	15	12.4%
24	1	.83%
25	11	9.09%
30	22	18.18%
35	3	2.48%
40	9	7.44%
45	5	4.13%
50	13	10.74%
60	9	7.44%
75	2	1.65%
80	1	.83%

Survey Question 9

This question focused on the number of days per week teachers taught rhythm. The majority of participants (52%) reported that they taught rhythm every day of the school week. All participants except one indicated that they taught rhythm at least once a week. Three participants gave responses greater than 5 days—2 said 25 days and 1 said 60 days. This may be related to the previous question which was based on minutes of rhythm instruction (see Figure 4).

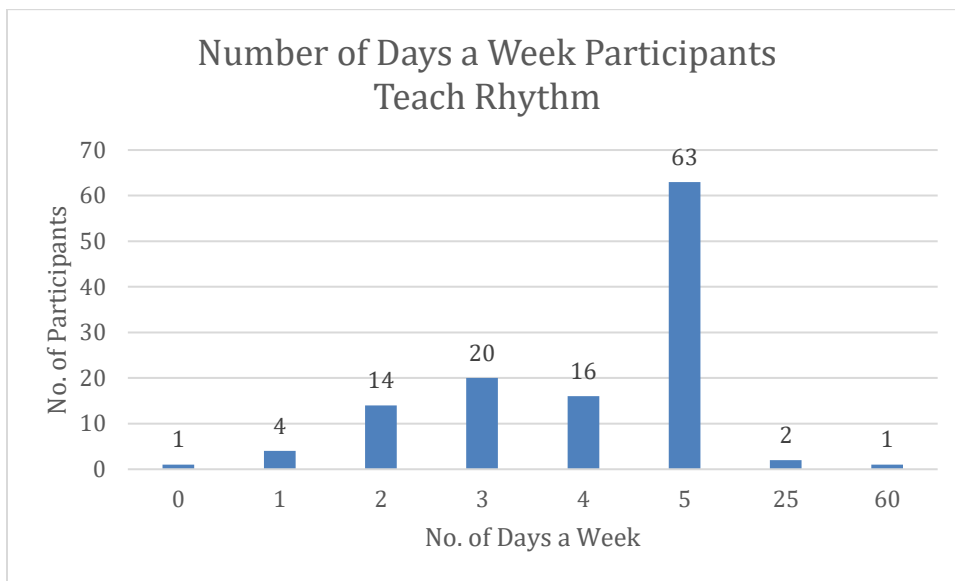


Figure 4. Number of Days a Week Participants Teach Rhythm

Survey Question 10

Responses to Question 10, which asked about the method used for rhythm instruction, revealed that 54% of participants taught rhythm independent of pitch and

24% taught rhythm in conjunction with pitch. The remaining 22% of participants provided a variety of responses, including: (a) both in conjunction with pitch and separate from pitch; (b) by rote; (c) instructional method varies on the time of year; (d) independent of pitch, but pitch is added in quickly; (e) rhythm is practiced on a neutral pitch so more sections can be taught at one time; and (f) the down-up system (see Figure 5).

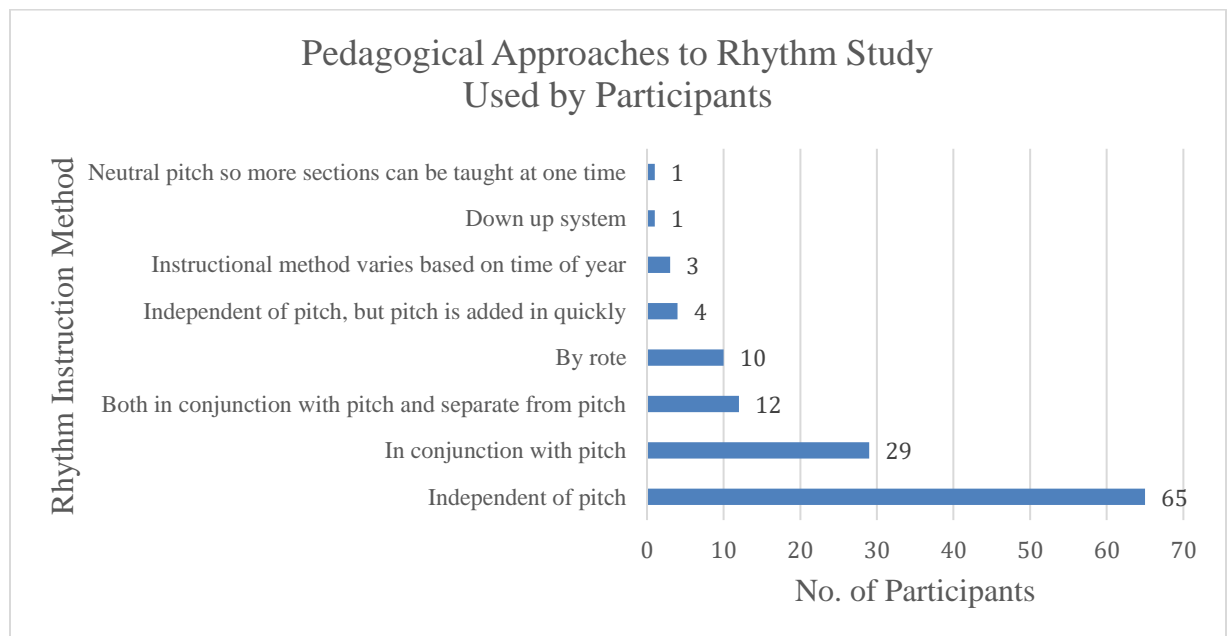


Figure 5. Pedagogical Approaches to Rhythm Study Used by Participants

Survey Question 11

When asked to indicate the type of materials used to teach rhythms, from a provided checklist, the six most frequently selected responses were: I create my own rhythm drills (74%); I use rhythm drills in sight-reading methods books (80%); I use a rhythm methods books (37%); I extract rhythms from students' repertoire (81%); I have students chant rhythms from their score (79%); and I use materials shared by other music directors (29%). Many participants used multiple resources and materials when teaching

rhythm. One participant added the comment that, “Choir directors need to adapt to how band teaches, it is faster and better” (see Table 6).

Table 6

Source of Rhythm Materials Used by Participants

Materials	No. Participants	Percentage
I create my own rhythm drills	89	73.6%
I use rhythm drills in sight-reading methods books	97	80.2%
I use a rhythm method book	45	37.2%
I extract rhythms from students’ repertoire	98	81%
I have students chant rhythms from their score	95	78.5%
I use materials shared by other music directors	35	28.9%
Students write their own	1	0.8%
I use Kodály based rhythm teaching	1	0.8%
Moorehead Rhythms	1	0.8%
Rhythm Bee	1	0.8%
Rhythm Flashcards	1	0.8%
PowerPoint Slides	1	0.8%
Sight Reading Factory	1	0.8%

Survey Question 12

Question 12 addressed participants' self-assessment of their rhythmic proficiency. Participants' ratings were quite high, with "superior" (44%) and "excellent" (40%) being the most frequently selected ratings. Fifteen percent of participants rated their rhythm proficiency as "good," a designation that falls in the category of average. Only one participant rated their rhythmic proficiency at the novice level (see Figure 6).

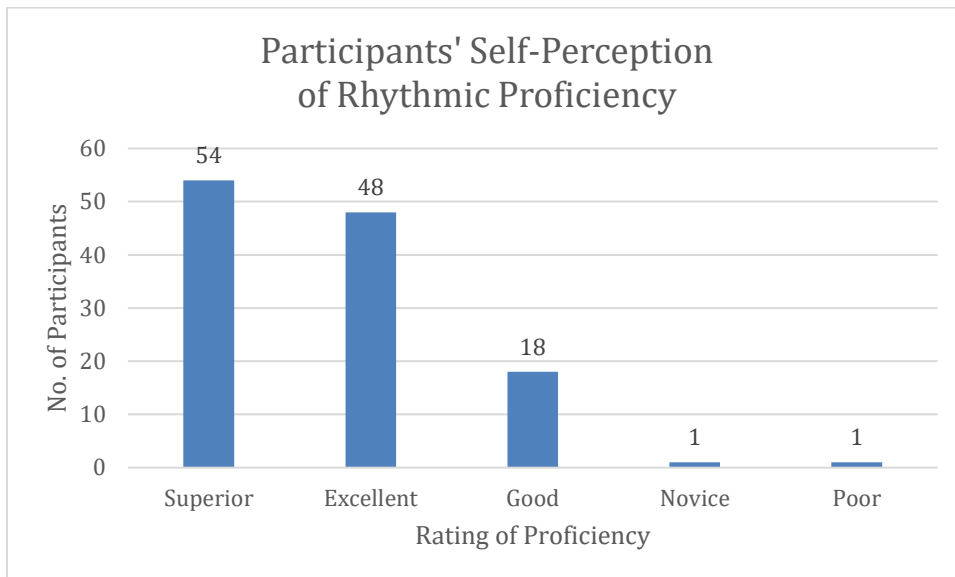


Figure 6. Participants' Self-Perception of Rhythmic Proficiency

Survey Question 13

Participants were asked to rate the rhythmic proficiency of their students at the end of their 6th grade year. Only 3% of participants rated their students' rhythm skills as "superior" and 30% rated their skills as "excellent." Most of the participants (54%) rated their students' rhythmic proficiency as "good," with diminishing percentages rating students' rhythmic skills as "novel" (12%) or "poor" (2%) at the conclusion of their 6th grade year (see Figure 7).

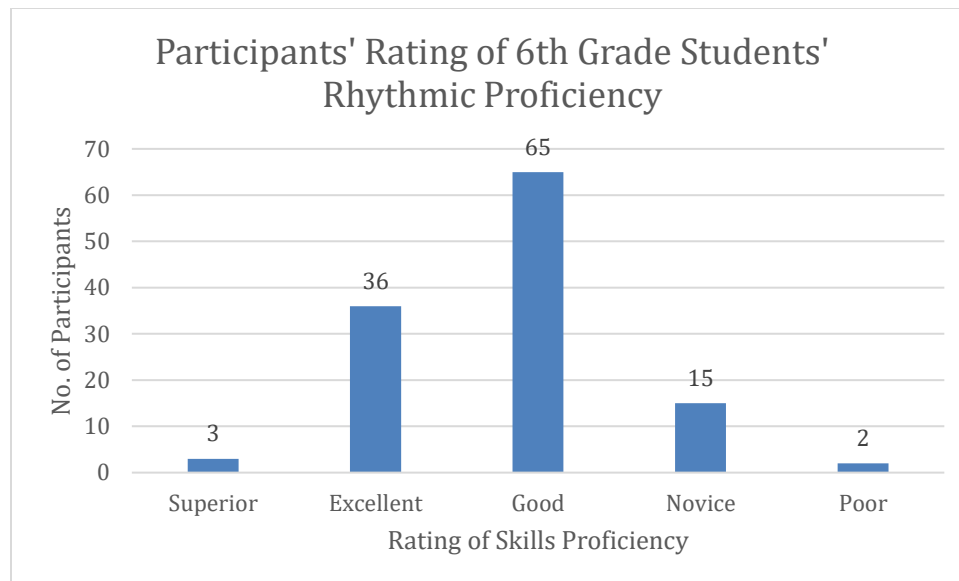


Figure 7. Participants' Rating of 6th Grade Students' Rhythmic Proficiency

Survey Question 14

Participants were asked to rate the rhythmic proficiency of their students at the end of their 7th grade year. Fourteen percent of participants assigned superior ratings to their 7th-grade students, followed by 44% rating their students' rhythmic skills as excellent, and 37% providing a rating of good. Only 4% rated their students' rhythmic proficiency at the novice level, and 1% reported that their students had poor rhythmic proficiency at the end of their 7th grade year (see Figure 8).

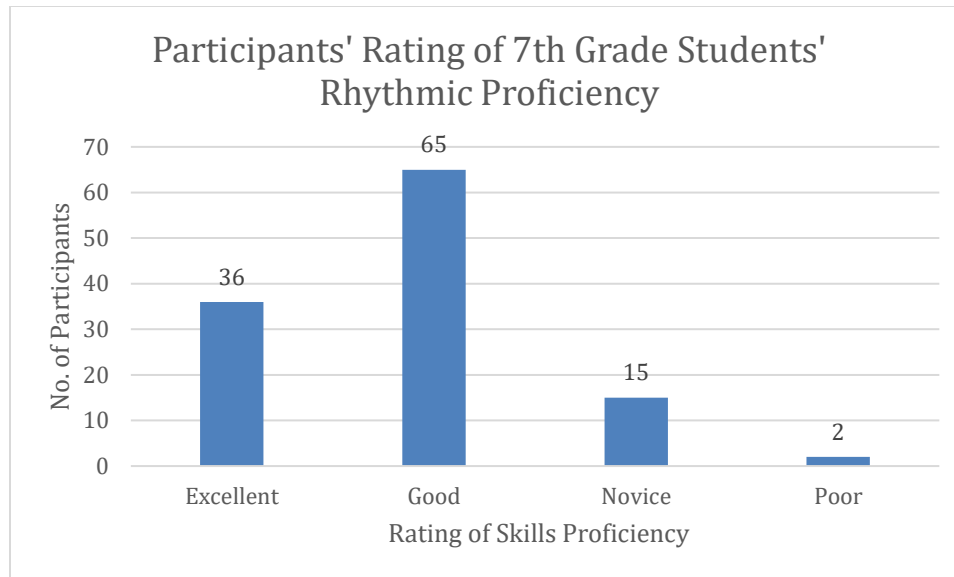


Figure 8. Participants' Rating of 7th Grade Students' Rhythmic Proficiency

Survey Question 15

Participants were asked to rate the rhythmic proficiency of their students at the end of their 8th grade year (see Figure 9). Most participants reported their 8th-graders as either having superior (26%) or excellent (48%) rhythmic skills. The remaining participants either rated their students' rhythmic proficiency as "good" (24%) or "novice" (3%) at the end of their 8th grade year (see Figure 9).

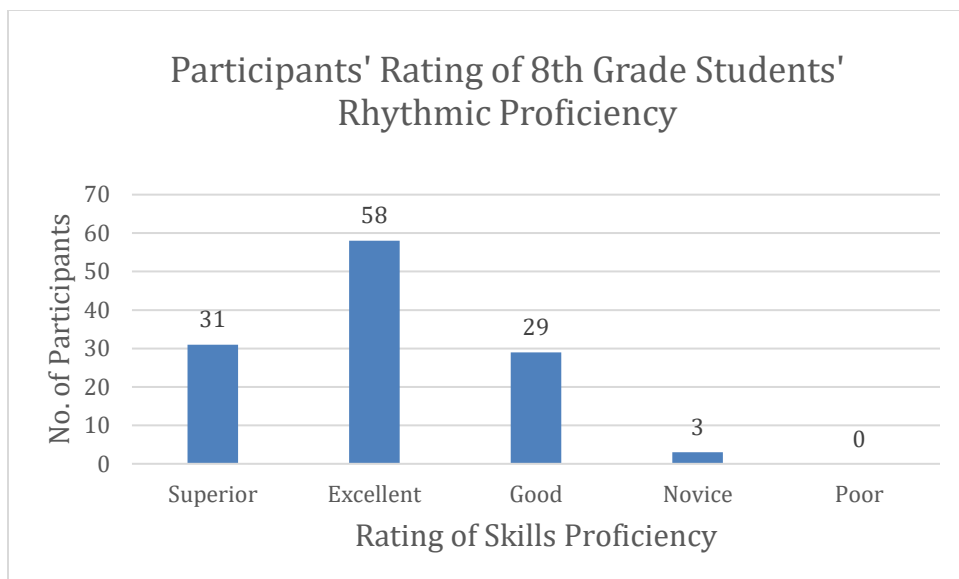


Figure 9. Participants' Rating of 8th Grade Students' Rhythmic Proficiency

Survey Question 16

Question 16 focused on counting systems used by participants in their choral classrooms. The most popular counting systems used by participants were numbers (1 ee + ah) (72%), numbers (Eastman) (24%), and Kodály (25%). Other responses provided by participants were: Down-Up, 1&2&3&4&, Ta-ti, Syllabic: Ta-ka-di-mi, 1-2-ti-4, words with syllables correlating to rhythm, and no consistent counting system (see Table 7).

Table 7

Counting Systems Used by Participants in the Middle School Choral Classroom

Counting System	No. Participants	Percentage
Numbers (1 ee + a)	87	71.9%
Numbers (Eastman)	29	24%
Kodály	30	24.8%

Down-Up	9	7.4%
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &	1	0.83%
Ta ti	1	0.83%
Syllabic: Ta-ka-di-mi	1	0.83%
1 - 2 - ti - 4	1	0.83%
Not consistent	1	0.83%
Words with syllables correlating to rhythms	1	0.83%

Survey Question 17

Participants were asked to indicate what counting system they had been taught in middle school, to determine if their educational experience impacted the way they teach. Participants fell into two primary categories: numbers (1 ee + a) (57%) and numbers (Eastman) (20%). Other counting systems mentioned by participants including Kodály and down-up, but 22% of participants stated they had not been taught a counting system while in middle school (see Table 8).

Table 8

Counting System Participants Learned In Middle School

Counting System	No. Participants	Percentage
Numbers (1 ee + a)	69	57%
Numbers (Eastman)	24	19.8%
Kodály	4	3.3%
Down-Up	6	5%

I was not taught rhythm counting in middle school.	27	22.3%
I don't remember	4	3.3%

Survey Question 18

When asked what counting system they were taught in high school participants fell into two primary categories: numbers (1 ee + a) (65%) and numbers (Eastman) (18%). Other counting systems mentioned by participants included: Kodály and Down-Up, while 18% of participants stated they had not been taught a counting system while in middle school (see Table 9).

Table 9

Counting System Participants Learned In High School

Counting System	No. Participants	Percentage
Numbers (1 ee + a)	79	65.3%
Numbers (Eastman)	22	18.2%
Kodály	4	3.3%
Down-Up	5	4.1%
I was not taught rhythm counting in high school.	22	18.2%
I don't remember	4	3.3%

Survey Question 19

When asked what counting system they were taught in college, participants indicated three primary systems: numbers (1 ee + a) (69%), numbers (Eastman) (36%),

and Kodály (31%). Other counting systems mentioned by participants included down-up, no standardized system, syllables, and Gordon. However, 11% of participants stated they had not been taught a counting system while in college (see Table 10).

Table 10

Counting System Participants Learned In College

Counting System	No. Participants	Percentage
Numbers (1 ee + a)	83	68.6%
Numbers (Eastman)	43	35.5%
Kodály	37	30.6%
Down-Up	11	9.1%
I was not taught rhythm counting in college.	13	10.7%
No standardized system	2	1.7%
Syllables - ta-ka-di-mi	2	1.7%
Gordon	2	1.7%

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study focused on how rhythm is taught in middle school choral classrooms. The participants ($N=129$) represented diverse educational backgrounds and reported using a variety of pedagogical approaches to teaching rhythm to their choral students. These results are a step towards better understanding rhythm instruction in the choral classroom and how we can eliminate the adage, “singers can’t count.”

1. How much emphasis is placed on the development of rhythm skills in the middle school choral classroom?

The results of the survey show that instructional approaches and the amount of time devoted to teaching rhythm in middle school choir classrooms are widely varied. Although most of the literature recommends separation of pitch and rhythm, many educators still present rhythm and pitch concurrently. The lack of a uniform system for rhythm instruction and the failure to select pedagogical techniques supported by research may be contributing factors in the challenges choral students face with rhythm proficiency.

Participants were also asked how many days a week they incorporated rhythm instruction in their choral classroom and how much time (in minutes) they devoted to rhythm instruction weekly. The majority of participants ($n=63$) stated they taught rhythm

m every day of the school week, followed by 3, then 4 days a week. When examining the amount of time spent in rhythm instruction each week, responses ranged from 2 to 90 minutes. The most frequent response was 30 minutes of rhythm instruction weekly, followed by 20 minutes, then 50 minutes a week. Looking at the responses to these two questions in relation to one another leads to a basic pedagogical quandary. Is the frequency of instruction or the duration of instruction more important? Skill development involves frequent repetition, such as daily practice, yet how much time needs to be allotted for rhythm instruction daily?

Although the questions addressed how much time participants taught rhythm, they were not asked for a detailed lesson plan, indicating the content of instruction and the sequence of presentation. How do the participants use the time they have designated for rhythm instruction? What pedagogical techniques are used to teach rhythm in middle school choral classrooms?

Participants reported using a variety of sight-reading methods books in their middle school choir classrooms, but the top five books selected (in rank order) were *90 Days to Sight Reading Success*, *Essential Sight-Singing* (Vol. I), *Patterns of Sound* (Vol. I), *SOS – Simplify Our Sight Reading*, and *Patterns of Sound* (Vol. II). The method book most frequently selected, *90 Days to Sight Reading Success*, does not present rhythm and pitch separately, but rather introduces them concurrently. In *Essential Sight-Singing* (Vol. I), pitch and rhythm are occasionally introduced separately. However, in *Patterns of Sound* (Vol. I), *Patterns of Sound* (Vol. II), and *SOS – Simplify Our Sight Reading*, pitch and rhythm are consistently introduced separately.

When asked what materials and resources they used for rhythm drills in their middle school choir classrooms, 80% of participants reported using sight-reading method books, which could provide a more sequential approach to rhythm reading. Other pedagogical approaches, which included “I extract rhythm from student repertoire” and “I have students chant rhythms from their score” demonstrate the use of application of knowledge and authentic assessment. Some participants reported, “I create my own,” which is too vague a response to determine its pedagogical value. Given that educators use such varied pedagogical materials and resources, it is difficult to create firm benchmarks and summative assessments that can be applied to all middle school choral students.

2. What influences the director’s approach to rhythm instruction (i.e., counting systems used and musical background)?

Several questions were included in the survey to determine what factors could have an influence on the participants’ approach to teaching rhythm. Participants were polled regarding what grade levels they had taught, and although the middle school grades, Grades 6-9 were selected most frequently, a number of respondents had prior experience teaching on the elementary and/or high school level. This prior experience may affect not only how they teach rhythm, but their philosophies connected with rhythm instruction. Another potential influence on rhythmic instruction and counting systems used is respondents’ ensemble membership while in school. Almost 90% of respondents had been members of choir, which was expected, however, 43% were members of band, an ensemble that focuses on rhythm skills. Perhaps they were not only aware of different

pedagogical methods but saw the value of spending more time solidifying rhythmic skills.

While a variety of counting systems were used by the participants, a strong majority used a number system in their classroom. One of the most revealing aspects of the survey results was the number of participants who said they were never taught a counting system from middle school through college. This may have been due to assumptions made by instructors that students had previously been taught a counting systems and how to perform rhythms. This further outlines the need for a better understanding of how to approach counting rhythms within the choir classroom. Creating a standard of practice among choir directors may lead to fewer students reaching the collegiate level having never been taught how to count rhythms.

Participants were asked to rate both their personal rhythmic proficiency and the proficiency of their students at the end of each middle school grade level. Most participants rated their rhythmic proficiency as excellent or superior. Their students from grades 6 through 8, showed progress, based on the participants' perceptions of their rhythmic proficiency. Sixth grade students received ratings concentrated in the good or excellent level, with several novice ratings. By 8th grade, however, students' rhythmic skills were rated primarily as excellent or superior. How can this data be interpreted? As there are no set standards of rhythmic instruction or proficiency expectations, these ratings are completely contingent on the rhythmic challenges presented by the teacher and her students' ability to perform them. Without a standard of assessment, there is no true way to understand student rhythmic proficiency as presented by this question.

Recommendations

Based upon the results of this study, future research should focus on how specific rhythm instruction and practice within the choral classroom affects not only the accuracy of student musicians in performance, but also its long-term effect on students. Further studies are needed to understand why rhythm instruction in the classroom is largely unexamined. Although much of the literature and resources available to music educators outlines a separation of pitch and rhythm, little research is available on rhythm teaching practices within the choral classroom; specifically, best practices for rhythm instruction and the desired outcomes.

One participant stated, “Choir directors need to adapt to how band teaches—it is faster and better.” Is there validity to this statement? If so, what are the reasons rhythm is not taught in choral classrooms as it is taught in band classrooms? The disparity between rhythm training in band and choir is another area for further study. Can the methods used in band and orchestra be adapted for use in the choral classroom? Why is this not done more often? Future research should focus on finding the most effective rhythm instruction methodologies and expanding upon them for choir directors. The establishment of age-appropriate rhythmic achievement levels and a clear set of guidelines for sequential rhythmic training and assessment for each grade level would make benchmark testing more well-defined.

Finally, research into the philosophies of choir directors regarding rhythm instruction would be beneficial. Do choir directors place importance on rhythm instruction? Why or why not? This could also lead to research on curriculum

development and district alignment. By understanding how choir directors view the importance of rhythm instruction and providing them with an outline of best practices, more students may receive a more thorough and well-rounded music education. If, indeed “singers don’t care when to sing until they know what to sing” (Henry, 2011, p. 81), there needs to be a shift in choral education. The goal of music education should be musical literacy and independent musicianship. Being able to perform rhythm accurately is an important tool that every singer should have readily available. Perhaps the day will come when people say, “Oh, she is a singer; she can perform any rhythm you give her!”

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Appendix A



Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
<http://www.twu.edu/irb.html>

DATE: November 10, 2017

TO: Ms. Shelby Morgan
Music & Drama

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: Exemption for An Investigation of Rhythm Reading Practices in Texas Middle Schools (Protocol #: 19850)

The above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU IRB (operating under FWA00000178) and was determined to be exempt from further review.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt PRIOR to any data collection at that agency. Because a signed consent form is not required for exempt studies, the filing of signatures of participants with the TWU IRB is not necessary.

Although your protocol has been exempted from further IRB review and your protocol file has been closed, any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Pamela Youngblood, Music & Drama
Dr. Vicki Baker, Music & Drama
Graduate School

Appendix B

Good morning,

My name is Shelby Morgan and I am currently a graduate music education student at Texas Woman's University. Under the supervision of my professor, Vicki Baker, PhD, I am in the process of collecting data for my thesis entitled "An Investigation of Rhythm Reading Practices in Texas Middle School Choirs." The purpose of this study is to investigate the rhythm instruction practices of Texas middle school choral directors.

Completion of the survey will take approximately 10 minutes.

By completing this survey, you are indicating consent to participation in the study. While there is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, and internet transactions, the data will remain confidential as far as possible in compliance with state and federal law. An additional risk is the loss of time. Since the survey is online, you can take the survey whenever it is convenient. You may stop at any time, take breaks, and come back to the survey.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please complete the survey at the link below:

 [**Rhythm Reading Practices in Middle School Choir...**](#)

If you are interested in the results of this survey, you can contact me at

smorgan4@twu.edu.

Thank you for your participation in my research.

Sincerely,

Shelby Morgan

M.A. in Music Education & Music Therapy Candidate

Texas Woman's University

Department of Music

Smorgan4@twu.edu

This research study has been reviewed and approved by Texas Woman's University

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Appendix C

Survey

1. Are you currently employed as a middle school choral director?
 - Yes
 - No
2. What grade levels have you taught? (Mark all that apply)
 - Kindergarten
 - 1st grade
 - 2nd grade
 - 3rd grade
 - 4th grade
 - 5th grade
 - 6th grade
 - 7th grade
 - 8th grade
 - 9th grade
 - 10th grade
 - 11th grade
 - 12th grade
3. Including the current school year, how long have you been in your current position? _____
4. What grade levels are you currently teaching? (Mark all that apply)
 - Kindergarten
 - 1st grade
 - 2nd grade
 - 3rd grade
 - 4th grade
 - 5th grade
 - 6th grade
 - 7th grade
 - 8th grade
 - 9th grade
 - 10th grade
 - 11th grade
 - 12th grade
5. Were you ever a member of a school
 - Band
 - Orchestra
 - Percussion ensemble
 - Other ensemble: _____
6. Besides voice, what instruments do you play proficiently?

7. Check all of the following sight-reading method books that you currently use in your middle school choral classroom:

- *90 Days to Sight Reading Success*
- *Essential Sight-singing Vol. I*
- *Insight Sight Singing*
- *Patterns of Sound Vol. I*
- *Patterns of Sound Vol. II*
- *Sing at First Sight Vol. I*
- *Sing at First Sight Vol. II*
- *Sing on Sight Level I*
- *Sing on Sight Level II*
- *SMART*
- *SOS – Simplifying our Sight Reading*
- *The Rhythm Reader (Supplement for SOS)*
- *The Rhythm Reader I*
- *The Rhythm Reader II*
- *The Sight Singer*
- Other: _____

8. On average, how many minutes do you spend on rhythm instruction each week?
_____ minutes

9. On average, how many days a week do you teach rhythm? _____

10. Which of the following most closely describes your instructional approach to rhythm?

- Do not teach rhythm
- Teach by rote
- Independent of pitch
- In conjunction with pitch
- Other: _____

11. What type of materials do you utilize to provide your students rhythm practice? (Mark all that apply.)

- I create my own rhythm drills.
- I use rhythm drills in a sight-reading methods book.
- I use a rhythm methods book.
- I extract rhythms from students' repertoire.
- I have students chant rhythms from their musical score.
- I do not teach rhythm.
- Other: _____

12. How would you rate your rhythmic proficiency?
- Superior
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Novice
 - Poor
13. How would you rate your student's rhythmic proficiency at the end of their 6th grade year?
- Superior
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Novice
 - Poor
14. How would you rate your student's rhythmic proficiency at the end of their 7th grade year?
- Superior
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Novice
 - Poor
15. How would you rate your student's rhythmic proficiency at the end of their 8th grade year?
- Superior
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Novice
 - Poor
16. What rhythmic counting system do you use in your middle school choral classroom?
- Numbers (Eastman) – 1 ti te ta
 - Numbers (1 ee + a)
 - Kodály
 - Down-Up
 - I have no rhythm counting system
 - Other: _____
17. Which rhythmic counting system were you taught in middle school?
- Numbers (Eastman) – 1 ti te ta

- Numbers (1 ee + a)
- Kodály
- Down-Up
- I have no rhythm counting system
- Other: _____

18. Which rhythmic counting system were you taught in high school?

- Numbers (Eastman) – 1 ti te ta
- Numbers (1 ee + a)
- Kodály
- Down-Up
- I have no rhythm counting system
- Other: _____

19. Which rhythmic counting system were you taught in college?

- Numbers (Eastman) – 1 ti te ta
- Numbers (1 ee + a)
- Kodály
- Down-Up
- I have no rhythm counting system
- Other: _____