

# How can Educators Motivate and Support Upper-Elementary and Middle School Singers?

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*Abstract: In many upper-elementary and middle school settings, music teachers have difficulty increasing or retaining enrollment numbers and keeping students engaged in classroom activities, particularly when they require singing. This paper provides a literature review of peer-reviewed studies that investigate both the factors that affect student motivation during these years as well as strategies that may increase student motivation to participate in singing. Due to the small number of studies focused solely on middle school students' motivation to sing, applicable studies that investigate student motivation to engage in general music making have also been included. Researchers have found that physiological changes due to the onset of puberty, social pressures, student beliefs around talent, and student perceptions around the relevance and enjoyability of their school's musical offerings are the main reasons students lose interest in singing. Providing individualized and targeted vocal support, fostering a supportive learning environment, giving students the opportunity to select repertoire, and increasing the amount of autonomous active tasks in class can help support and motivate students. Further research on the effects of vocal changes during adolescence for transgender, non-binary, and intersex singers and ways in which music teachers can support these students is needed.*

*Keywords: upper-elementary; middle school; singing; music; motivation; preferences*

## Introduction

Mention Taylor Swift among any group of tweens and teens and you will be met with both enthusiastic cheers and condescending jeers, perfectly demonstrating how the music preferences of this age group play a significant role in shaping their social identity and self-expression (Lowe & Coy, 2016; Menard, 2013; Monks, 2003). Popular media can be both a coping mechanism for dealing with difficult emotions and a preferred activity for socializing with friends (Orton & Pitts, 2019). Singing, in particular, is a source of enjoyment and self-expression for this demographic, whether done alone, with friends, or through karaoke (Monks, 2003; Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2015).

The benefits of listening to music, singing, and playing an instrument are well documented. For example, singing can strengthen the immune system (Beck, 2000; Kreutz et al., 2004), increase well-being and sense of belonging (Mellor, 2013), and reduce stress (Judd & Pooley, 2013; Mellor, 2013). General music-making, including singing and playing instruments, can improve peer bonding (Juvonen, 2019), increase self-confidence (Hallam et al., 2018), and cultivate students' appreciation for diverse talents and cultures (POPS, 2004 as cited in Juvonen, 2019). As music becomes an elective in high school in many Canadian school districts, upper-elementary and middle school may be the last opportunity educators have to convince students that they are musical (Menard, 2013). This is especially critical for adolescent boys as they are unlikely to return to singing if they stop during puberty (Freer, 2015). Moreover, this period is optimal for skill development, such as precise tuning, as suggested by neuroscience research (Kipke, 2001 as cited in Monks, 2003).

## Methods

Upon selecting the first iteration of my research question: "How can educators motivate upper-elementary and middle school singers?", I drafted the following search terms; 'sing\*' AND 'motivation' AND 'upper elementary' AND 'middle school' AND 'school\*' AND 'preferences'. Employing these terms, I conducted a search for peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2009 onwards through the U of A multi-database search, ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR Journals, and Elicit. I selected papers based on abstracts and expanded my search through related citations, cited articles, and backward chaining techniques to find more papers suggested by databases.

I used Ulrich's Periodical Directory to confirm each article was peer-reviewed, discarding any that were not, then employed Tracy's (2010) eight "Big Tent" criteria and Frambach et al.'s (2013) "Quality Criteria in Qualitative and Quantitative Research" to analyze my results. I eliminated one article that lacked "coherence" (Tracy, 2010) in that the design, methods, procedure, and analysis did not support the findings. Similarly, a couple more were removed due to low "reliability" (Framach et al., 2013) as I was not convinced that their findings could be replicated. Further articles were deemed unsuitable either because they did not address my target age group, were focused on singing but had no motivational component, or they examined motivation within the dramatic or visual arts. Due to the low quantity of articles focused specifically on motivating young singers, I expanded my search to include studies that addressed

motivating general music students in middle school, as findings in this adjacent area of study could be relevant and transferable to singers (University of Texas Libraries, 2024). I therefore added ‘*music*’ to my search terms, and then later replaced ‘*sing*’ with ‘*music*’. I also expanded the search to allow papers from the year 2000 onwards so I would have a larger quantity of papers at my disposal.

After confirming the peer-review status of my new findings and analyzing them with the previously mentioned criteria, I identified five articles on singing and motivation and twelve on general music and motivation. I find it compelling to note that I also encountered literature reviews focused on both music students in general (West, 2013) and instrumentalists (Oliveira et al., 2021) but none specifically on singers. This underscores the need for further investigation into this topic. Furthermore, I realized that because students in this age group undergo challenging voice changes and complex social-emotional issues, feeling supported by their teachers can greatly influence their motivation to participate in activities. I therefore refined my research question to: How can educators motivate and support upper-elementary and middle school singers?

Of the seventeen articles, six were qualitative (Dill Bruenger, 2009; Freer, 2015; Menard, 2013; Monks, 2003; Sweet, 2010; Sweet, 2015), three were quantitative (Culp & Davis, 2023b; Juvonen, 2019; Lowe & Coy, 2016), five were mixed methods (Hadjikou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2017; Hallam et al., 2018; Lowe, 2018; Orton & Pitts, 2019) two were literature reviews (Andrews & Sokolowski, 2023; Culp & Davis, 2023a), and one was an article outlining suggestions for practice (Davis & Culp, 2024). Participants in every study but two were learners aged between eight and eighteen. Dill Bruenger (2009) and Hallam et al. (2015) were the exceptions, focusing on schoolteachers and administrators. All the quantitative and mixed methods studies used questionnaires. The research approaches employed by these studies were as follows; the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Hadjikou, 2022), Spearman’s Rank-Order Correlation test, cross tabulation, the  $\chi^2$  test, and the Komogorov-Smirnov test (Juvonen, 2019). Qualitative collection methods utilized by the researchers include field notes (Dill Bruenger, 2009; Sweet, 2010), individual interviews (Dill Bruenger, 2009; Freer, 2015; Hallam et al., 2015; Menard, 2013; Sweet, 2015), student observations (Menard, 2013), focus groups (Hallam et al., 2018; Hadjikou, 2022; Monks, 2003), group interviews (Freer, 2015; Orton and Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2010), long answer comments (Lowe, 2018; Sweet, 2015), and video documentation (Monks, 2003).

Table 1: Summary of Study Methods and Approaches

Qualitative Studies	Quantitative Studies	Mixed Methods Studies	Literature Reviews	Suggestions for Practice
Dill Bruenger, 2009 <i>Field notes; individual interviews</i>	Culp & Davis, 2023b <i>Questionnaires</i>	Hadjikou, 2022 <i>Questionnaires; the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences; focus groups</i>	Andrews & Sokolowski, 2023	Davis & Culp, 2024
Freer, 2015 <i>Individual interviews; group interviews</i>	Juvonen, 2019 <i>Questionnaires; Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation test; Cross tabulation; the x2 test; the Komogorov-Smirnov test</i>	Hallam et al., 2017 <i>Questionnaires; individual interviews; focus groups</i>	Culp & Davis, 2023a	
Menard, 2013 <i>Individual interviews; student observations</i>	Lowe & Coy, 2016 <i>Questionnaires</i>	Hallam et al., 2018 <i>Questionnaires</i>		
Monks, 2003 <i>Focus groups; video documentation</i>		Lowe, 2018 <i>Questionnaires; long answer comments</i>		
Sweet, 2010 <i>Field notes; group interviews</i>		Orton & Pitts, 2019 <i>Questionnaires; group interviews</i>		
Sweet, 2015 <i>Individual interviews; long answer comments</i>				

## Factors that Affect Student Motivation during Upper-Elementary and Middle School

Despite upper-elementary and middle school students' documented love of music (Monks, 2003; Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2015), choir directors, band leaders, and general music teachers of these age groups often struggle with student engagement, enrollment, and retention (Culp & Davis, 2023; Hadjikou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2017). While analyzing the studies included in this review, three overarching themes emerged; physiological changes experienced during puberty, questions of personal identity during these formative years, and the influence of school culture.

### Physiological Changes

Vocal change, which occurs in individuals of all genders during puberty, is one reason many students stop singing or are hesitant to sing during these years (Freer, 2015; Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2010). These changes present new challenges for young singers, often leading to anxiety-inducing experiences that students may feel ill-prepared to handle.

As a disclaimer, my use of the terms 'boy', 'girl', 'male', and 'female' refer to sex assigned at birth and not gender identity. At times, I have chosen to make these distinctions because the vocal changes discussed in this paper are due to the onset of puberty and have different effects for children of the male and female sex. I acknowledge that gender is a spectrum and that further research is needed to investigate how these vocal changes affect transgender, non-binary, and intersex singers, and how teachers can best support them. The most notable changes are the enlargement of the larynx (which creates a protruding Adam's apple in males and a rounder shape in females), and the growth of the vocal folds. Both transformations lead to the deepening of the voice. The pace at which these shifts occur often outstrips the ability of surrounding muscles and breathing techniques to adjust, resulting in singers experiencing increased difficulty controlling pitch, audible 'breaks' in the voice, and husky, breathy, or thin vocal tones (Monks, 2003; Sweet, 2015). These changes, which can be traumatic for some (Freer, 2015), are poorly understood by young singers and in some cases their teachers (Freer, 2015; Sweet, 2015). As such, students often feel ill-equipped to navigate these vocal transformations and thus perceive singing as an activity which is too difficult and embarrassing to pursue in school (Freer, 2015; Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2010). Similarly, some students view school singing activities as too formal and high risk as there is often an element of competition (Dill Bruenger, 2009; Lowe, 2018), a perceived 'correct' and 'incorrect' way to sing, and an ever-present danger of drawing negative attention to oneself by making a mistake or singing too loudly (Sweet, 2015).

### Personal Identity

Throughout the middle school years, students may lose interest in singing due to societal and peer influence, gender stereotyping (Freer, 2015; Monks, 2003; Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2010), lack of representation (Freer, 2015), or too much emphasis on ensemble development over individual skill development (Freer, 2015; Hadjikou, 2022). Upper-elementary and middle school students also feel that the musical activities offered at school are neither enjoyable nor relevant to their lives or futures (Hadjikou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2018; Lowe & Coy, 2016). Employing Identity-Based Motivation Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory, some suggestions for how to better align teaching practices with students' identities are offered by the authors.

According to Identity-Based Motivation theory examined by Freer (2015), Monks (2003), and Orton and Pitts (2019), students are motivated by relevant repertoire, aligning personal objectives with self-perception, developing individual vocal styles, interacting with relatable role models, and having performance and sharing opportunities. This echoes findings by Davis and Culp (2024) and Hallam et al. (2017), indicating that tailoring music activities to students' interests enhances motivation and promotes positive musical experiences in adolescence. Self-determination theory explored by Hadjikou (2022) indicates that students need to feel they have autonomy, are competent musicians, and have a community in which they belong. This mirrors Andrews and Sokolowski's (2023) findings that self-directed learning, where students set and plan their goals based on interests, is intrinsically motivating. Similarly, Sweet (2010) and Hallam et al. (2017) suggest that students are often motivated to participate in group musical activities for socializing, forming friendships, and benefiting from peer support networks. This is especially true when all group members are equally committed to developing their musicianship (Sweet, 2010). Hadjikou (2022), Juvonen (2019), and Lowe (2011) investigated the Expectancy-Value Theory which posits that students are inclined to engage in an activity if they anticipate success and attach significance to it. This involves

setting achievable, differentiated musical goals, engaging in practical tasks like performance preparation and composition, and employing a skills-based curriculum perceived to develop transferable skills (Lowe, 2011). Hallam et al. (2018) connected informal peer performances with positive feedback exchange to fostering a sense of achievement, enhancing student enjoyment and motivation.

### **School Culture**

School culture, as highlighted by Dill Bruenger (2009) and Lowe (2018), significantly influences student motivation. Prioritizing effort-based goals and fostering a growth mindset among pupils, may help counteract middle-school singers' belief that being able to sing is an innate trait rather than a learned skill (Burenger, 2009; Culp & Davis, 2023; Freer, 2015; Hallam et al., 2018; Orton & Pitts, 2019). Valuing arts equally with other subjects, ensuring inclusivity in musical activities, and eliminating competition can create a less stressed, more confident student body with positive long-term intrinsic motivation. Some studies have even found that these approaches can result in students receiving higher scores on musical aptitude tests (Roher, 2002 cited in Lowe, 2018) and a higher number of graduates pursuing music in university (Arnwine, 1996 cited in Lowe, 2018).

### **Implications for Singing-Focused Instruction**

Freer (2015), Monks (2023), and Orton and Pitts (2019) highlight strategies for teachers to support adolescents during voice changes. These include understanding physiological changes and providing personalized warm-ups, exercises, and techniques to facilitate continued singing. Targeted skill development in phonation, posture, and breath support were other areas to focus on (Sweet, 2015). Freer (2015) and Orton and Pitts (2019) suggest tailoring lessons to address specific vocal challenges during voice changes, encouraging students to explore and accept their voice. This may involve seeking expertise from outside sources and inviting older peer role models to provide guidance. Allowing students to take breaks or sing different vocal lines if they are struggling on a particular day was also mentioned (Sweet, 2015). Similarly, reassuring students that this is a transitory phase which is experienced by all adolescents and leading students through reflective exercises may help them feel less isolated (Freer, 2015; Monks, 2023). Sweet (2015) emphasizes the importance of female students practicing singing across all vocal ranges (soprano, second soprano, and alto) to avoid limiting development in upper and lower registers. Learning how to experiment and play with different tones and styles in a healthy way (Sweet, 2015), forming specific singing ensembles that rehearse but do not perform, and choosing fun and easier to sing repertoire, including karaoke, were other suggestions (Freer, 2015; Sweet, 2015). Monks (2003) suggests that recording rehearsals and performances, watching the recordings collectively, and facilitating reflection may help students identify strengths, areas for improvement, and feel positive about their progress. Monks (2003) cautions that teen singers can be very self-critical but mentions that encouraging teacher feedback can help offset this. Focusing rehearsals on developing students' individual voices rather than solely aiming for vocal blending can also help increase students' confidence and motivation to continue singing (Monks, 2003). Creating special groups or choirs for more motivated and advanced singers, where a higher level of commitment is expected, can cultivate their continued growth and limit their frustration (Sweet, 2010).

Connecting and getting to know students, integrating composition and improvisation activities, and fostering collaboration are other ways to motivate upper-elementary and middle school students to sing (Freer, 2014). Sweet (2010) suggests an optimized learning environment has a low tolerance for disruptive or negative behaviors and comments (which can be mitigated by strict seating arrangements), plenty of praise for effort, accountability from all members, and opportunities for individual singing and small group work.

### **Implications for Teaching, Learning, Policy, and Curriculum**

Many of the studies in my review found that students would prefer to study popular music, utilize digital music tools and programs, and have greater autonomy in selecting repertoire and activities (Culp & Davis, 2023; Hadjickou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2017; Hallam et al., 2018; Lowe, 2018). Using an active approach in which students engage in practical work including choosing their own instruments and composing their own songs and lyrics may be one way to achieve this (Hadjickou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2017; Hallam et al., 2018; Menard, 2023).

Establishing personalized, effort-based goals tailored to each student fosters a growth mindset, enhances motivation, and promotes flow during classroom activities (Andrews & Sokolowski, 2023; Dill Bruenger, 2009; Hadjickou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2018; Juvonen, 2019). Introducing musical concepts through listening, improvisation, and call and

response activities prior to musical notation (known as the sound before symbol approach) is also seen as less intimidating for students (Hadjikou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2017; Menard, 2023). Furthermore, Lowe (2018) and Juvonen (2019) found that fostering cooperative learning over competition increases long term engagement and motivation. Providing timely feedback and teamwork strategies, demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject, and fostering independent learning boosts intrinsic motivation in students (Andrews & Sokolowski, 2023; Hallam et al., 2018; Juvonen, 2019).

Considering the findings described above, implementing a curriculum that emphasizes “sound before symbol” and vocal exploration, integrates information about voice changes, incorporates improvisation, composition, popular music, student choice, and digital technologies could enhance student motivation. Similarly, teacher education programs and professional development focused on these practices could improve music programs and engage previously disinterested students to reach their potential (Hallam et al., 2017).

## **Limitations**

While the studies in this review suggest potential for replication, schools face challenges such as budget constraints, complex student needs, large class sizes, and shortages of trained specialist teachers (Hallam et al., 2017). Menard’s (2013) study offered limited explanation into the methodology employed, reducing its credibility (Frambach et al., 2013). Hadjikou (2022) provided few details on the curriculum that was investigated, decreasing the study’s confirmability (Frambach et al., 2013). Sample sizes not representative of the general population (Hallam et al., 2017) and short study durations (Culp & Davis, 2023; Lowe & Coy, 2016) decreased dependability. The researcher’s position as the participants’ teacher (Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2010) may question the credibility of the results (Frambach et al., 2013). Finally, the intricate nature of analyzing and grasping student motivation hampers the generalizability of the findings of this literature review as a whole.

## **Areas for Further Research**

As mentioned in my discussion on physiological vocal changes, further research is needed to explore the psychological, social, and motivational effects of vocal changes during adolescence on transgender, non-binary, and intersex singers, as well as how teachers might better support these students in navigating these changes. This echoes the calls for the exploration of individualized singing curricula as well as the practical application of such approaches in the classroom. Investigation into the link between students’ perception of a subject’s importance and its practical utility (Lowe & Coy, 2016) and gaining a better understanding of the disconnect between students’ singing habits in and out of school (Orton & Pitts, 2019) would also benefit the field. Studying the effectiveness of professional development aimed to educate teachers about both student motivation and strategies to better engage learners is another gap in the literature. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, given the complexity of student motivation and the dearth of studies focusing specifically on adolescent singers, there remains ample opportunity for ongoing exploration and inquiry into this subject in general.

## **Conclusion**

In upper-elementary and middle school, students often lose interest in music and singing due to physiological changes and social pressures (Freer, 2015; Orton & Pitts, 2019; Sweet, 2010). To engage them, individualized voice lessons (Freer, 2015; Monks, 2023, Orton & Pitts, 2019), student involvement in repertoire selection (Culp & Davis, 2023; Hadjikou, 2022; Hallam et al., 2017; Hallam et al., 2018; Lowe, 2018), and active music-making tasks (Hadjikou, 2022, Hallam et al., 2017; Hallam et al., 2018; Menard, 2023) can be effective. However, just as teachers will receive varied student reactions to the mention of Taylor Swift in their classes, there is no universal solution due to the diverse nature of each class, school, and district. To create a learning environment where students in this age group can thrive, attempting to understand the unique motivations of their student community and adjusting their teaching style and curriculum accordingly is a good place to start (Davis & Culp, 2024; Hallam et al., 2017). This is a significant undertaking, particularly considering the many challenges music educators face (Hallam et al., 2017). For many, however, the potential benefits of engaging music education on students’ mental well-being (Judd & Pooley, 2013; Mellor, 2013; North & Hargreaves, 2010), physical well-being (Beck, 2000; Kretuz et al., 2004), and self-confidence (Hallam et al., 2018) make it worth the effort.

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