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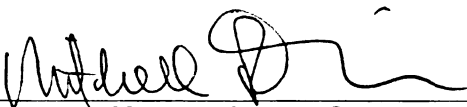
EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS: A CASE STUDY  
OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

presented by

BRIDGET MARY SWEET

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*EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:*  
A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

By

Bridget Mary Sweet

A Dissertation

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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## ABSTRACT

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

By

Bridget Mary Sweet

The purpose of this study was to explore, investigate, and describe the teaching and the characteristics of a middle school choir teacher who builds and nurtures a musical learning community in her classroom. This ethnographic case study was emergent; however the creation of a safe learning environment, development of musicianship, and empowerment of students remained central lenses throughout the project.

This research began under the assumption that the teacher's (Deb) classroom was democratic, in the sense that students contributed to discussions of subject matter and classroom policy. However, once immersed in the environment and culture of the Kinawa Middle School choir program, it became obvious that, although students accomplished several democratic goals, Deb did not share classroom power with her students. Although Deb's classroom functions as an autocracy, it is also extremely "student-focused."

Stories of Deb's life, as a developing musician and teacher, influence her choral program and work with middle school students. Values, beliefs, and morals are cornerstone to Deb's teaching philosophy and practice, as evidenced by her creation of choir as "Safe Place," endorsements of random acts of kindness, and the motto "SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles." Deb's focus on classroom community, with an emphasis on morality, is an integral part of the Kinawa Middle School choral program.

The interactions between Deb and her students influence and nurture positive and respectful relationships between all students during her choir classes. Through music,

Deb works to influence and educate each student about being the best person that he or she could be, both inside and outside of the Kinawa choir classroom. Students are also taught to be strong and thoughtful musicians. Therefore, Deb's teaching practices suggest it is possible to achieve democratic musical, intellectual, emotional, and community goals through an autocratic, yet student-focused, classroom.

Conclusions from this study of Deb Borton elicited six primary ideas: (1)

Democratic outcomes may be achieved in a middle school choir class through teacher-led teaching practices; (2) A safe classroom environment provides opportunities for middle school choir students to be themselves without inhibition, in a culture of acceptance; (3) Middle school choir teachers are in a position to make meaningful impressions on their students, especially with regard to morality and awareness of others; (4) A sense of humor is an important characteristic of an effective middle school choir teacher; (5) Exemplary choir teachers are valuable resources for professional development; and (6) Personal stories are important when working with people.

Implications for future research include examinations of middle school choir teachers' philosophies and their philosophical influence on democratic versus autocratic teaching methodologies, as well as examinations of classroom settings that appear or claim to be democratic and *how* they achieve democracy. Research on characteristics of safe classroom environments is also recommended.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Jason Sweet. It has been a wild ride and I share this accomplishment with you. There are no words fitting enough to express my love and gratitude, but I think you understand when I simply say, thank you for *everything*.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Democracy in Music Education.....	3
Professional Knowledge Landscape.....	6
Purpose.....	10
 <b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>12</b>
Teacher Expertise.....	12
Values, Beliefs, and Morality.....	21
Teacher and Classroom Stories.....	32
Stories of Professional Knowledge Landscape.....	36
Summary.....	40
 <b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
<b>METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>42</b>
Participants.....	42
Kinawa Middle School Choral Program.....	44
The City of Okemos, Michigan.....	46
Design and Procedures.....	46
Analysis.....	51
The Researcher’s Lens.....	52
 <b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
<b>DEB BORTON.....</b>	<b>55</b>
Personal Story.....	56
Austin, Minnesota to St. Olaf College.....	56
Student Teaching.....	57
The Borton Family.....	59
Dr. Chris Tyler.....	63
First Story: Dr. Tyler, Musician-Teacher.....	63
Second Story: Dr. Tyler, Teacher-Mentor.....	65
Humility.....	68
Music Teacher Story.....	71
Teaching Handbook.....	71
Teaching Middle School Choir.....	75
The Creation of the Kinawa Middle School Choir Program.....	76
Life-long Musicianship.....	79
Deb’s Own Life-long Learning.....	81
Deb’s Health and Wellness.....	82
Teaching Struggles.....	87
Summary.....	90

<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	
<b>“SAFE PLACE”</b>	91
The Creation of “Safe Place”	92
Story I: High School Austinaires Audition	92
Story II: St. Olaf Choir Auditions	93
Story III: Wardcliff Elementary	94
“Safe Place” Today	97
Student Perspectives on “Safe Place”	99
Additional Moments of “Safe Place” in Kinawa Choir	104
My Experience with “Safe Place”	105
Violations of “Safe Place”	107
“Safe Place” Summer Lessons	110
Student Perspectives on “Safe Place” Summer Lessons	113
Summary	114

<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	
<b>ESTABLISHING THE FRAMEWORK FOR A SUCCESSFUL MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR PROGRAM</b>	116
Choir Classroom Environment	116
Welcome to Choir!	117
Deb’s Personal Practical Knowledge	121
Repertoire and Music Learning	122
District Choral Festival	125
Playing the Piano	129
“Sectional Chocolate”	132
Humor	133
The “Neck Harp”	136
Classroom Management	138
Sarcasm	142
SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles	145
Summary	153

<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	
<b>MORALITY</b>	154
Morality	154
Random Acts of Kindness	155
The Magic Dragon Story	158
Developing Student Awareness	160
Valentine Caroling	163
Care and Concern for Others	167
Favorites	169
Summary	173



CHAPTER 8	
MY STORY.....	174
Phase I: Utopia.....	176
My Role During Utopia.....	180
Phase II: Comparison.....	182
Validation.....	182
Disconnection.....	183
My Role During Comparison.....	184
Phase III: True Observation.....	185
Honest Comparison.....	185
New Knowledge.....	188
Wrongly Perceived.....	190
My Role During True Observation.....	192
Summary.....	194
A Spring Choral Concert.....	195
CHAPTER 9	
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....	198
Summary.....	198
Purpose.....	198
Methods.....	198
Summary.....	199
Interpretations.....	201
Suggestions for Future Research.....	206
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Deb Borton's Information and Participation Request.....	209
Appendix B: Deb Borton's Consent Form.....	211
Appendix C: Intern Teacher's Information and Participation Request.....	212
Appendix D: Intern Teacher's Consent Form.....	213
Appendix E: Female Student Assent Form.....	214
Appendix F: Female Student Information and Participant Request Letter.....	215
Appendix G: Female Student Parent Consent Form.....	216
Appendix H: Male Student Assent Form.....	217
Appendix I: Male Student Information and Participant Request Letter.....	218
Appendix J: Male Student Parent Consent Form.....	219
Appendix K: Deb Borton's Interview Questions.....	220
Appendix L: Focus Group Interview Questions.....	221
REFERENCES.....	222

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

**You've gotta sing because you've gotta sing. You don't sing *for* somebody or not sing *because* of somebody. You sing because you've gotta sing. You're a kid who needs to be singing. Singing is going to outlast Borton or anybody else you're stuck with from any of us. You've gotta sing. (Deb, Formal Interview)**

A shift in the music education profession has encouraged more student-centered, democratic choir classrooms and a move away from “traditional” classrooms of dictatorship or authoritarianism (DeLorenzo, 2003; Greene, 1994; Greene 1995; Greene 2000; Woodford, 1996; Woodford, 2005). DeLorenzo (2003) identified democratic music educators as teachers who embrace the responsibility to educate students not only in music, but in ways of humanity. A goal of the democratic choir class is to musically, intellectually, and emotionally empower students and raise awareness of the impact students can have on others (DeLorenzo, 2003). In addition, “democracy” has been defined as “a community in the making” (Greene, 1994; Greene, 1995; Greene, 2000; Woodford, 1996; Woodford, 2005). Woodford believed:

Above all, democracy depends on the existence of good faith and generosity of spirit, of character and love for one's fellow men and women. These kinds of virtues are the glue that can bind us together as a society, for they motivate conversation and the forging of relationships leading to a sense of community (2005, p. 84).

This dissertation is an ethnographic case study of exemplary choir teacher Deb Borton, choir director at Kinawa Middle School in Okemos, MI. It began under the assumption that Deb's classroom was democratic, in the sense that students contributed to discussions of subject matter and classroom policy. Therefore, Deb's classroom was not considered to be an example of a "flip-top head" scenario, wherein the student's head is opened and the teacher "pours" the information into the head. Rather, it was perceived as a classroom with a sense of shared responsibility for learning between the teacher and the students. Instead of information flowing strictly from teacher to student, sharing of information is cyclical. With regard to music education, it is this second approach to teaching and learning that has been promoted as "democratic."

However, once immersed in the environment and culture of the Kinawa Middle School choir program, it became obvious that, although students accomplished several democratic goals, it was *not* a democracy. Deb was in charge of all classroom aspects, from curricular decisions to desired personal interactions; and although this was not a classroom of "student-centered, shared responsibility," it can be described as "student-focused." Deb's students were her primary focus; music was the secondary focus and utilized as a vehicle for student growth and development. Through music, Deb worked to influence and educate each student about being the best person that he or she could be, both inside and outside of the Kinawa choir classroom. Therefore, Deb's teaching practices suggest it is possible to achieve democratic musical, intellectual, emotional, and community goals through a more autocratic and student-focused classroom.

### *Democracy in Music Education*

Dewey (1929) described the history of school programs as a swinging pendulum. At one end of the pendulum swing was the school setting of authoritarianism, strict regulation, and rules. At the opposite end of the pendulum swing was the non-structured school setting designed to allow students to develop from within. Dewey (1929) criticized educational systems that switched between extreme educational settings. Often the pendulum “stuck” at one end of the swing and the approach was overdone, rather than the pendulum being in constant motion to maintain a balance of ideas.

According to Woodford (2005), music teachers are as responsible for educating students about their own values, choices, beliefs and ideas as educating them about music. “Unless children learn how to do this, they will not be able to understand the issues or exert intelligent control over their own musical lives, much less contribute to the improvement of the human condition” (Woodford, 2005, p. 31).

DeLorenzo (2003) expressed educational ideals similar to Woodford’s (2005) by stressing the importance of learning environments that not only adhered to musical standards, but also provided opportunities for students to problem solve, practice fairness, and gain knowledge of social justice through the arts that would impact and improve their musical experiences.

In order for our social and political system to prosper, music teachers, in addition to other educators, must provide students with an educational environment that allows for independent thinking, appreciation for the common good, and the ability to become change agents for social justice (p. 36).

Suggested activities included “peer-teaching activities for students, small-group performances for school staff, or opportunities to learn about the social implications of songs from oppressed cultures or groups” (p. 37).

Referencing Goodlad’s (1994) model of teacher empowerment, DeLorenzo (2003) suggested four ways to implement democratic practice in music education. The first, “enculturation of the young” (p. 37), involved raising awareness of living in a free society and how a person might contribute to that society. Such goals could be realized during the creation of classroom rules or through the support of objectives for listening to or learning music. The second method of implementation, “access to knowledge” (p. 38), addressed the need for an equal distribution of teacher quality and resources among all students in various educational settings, especially with regard to urban versus rural schools (DeLorenzo, 2003).

The third method pertained to teacher-student relationships and their development within “a nurturing pedagogy” (p. 38). Interactions with students, including how students could be selected for participation in various musical events, remained the focus of this method. The final method for the implementation of democratic practice in music education focused on “stewardship” (p. 38). Through stewardship, educators and administrators embraced all of the aforementioned aspects and incorporated them into best teaching practices (DeLorenzo, 2003).

When creating a democratic classroom, theory must be balanced with practice over time; democratic classrooms cannot be created simply and quickly (DeLorenzo, 2003). DeLorenzo believed it was best to consider democratization of classrooms on three levels. The beginning level involved classroom structure with regard to fairness,

trust and respect for others in the class. “An important component of this level is the way that we help students embrace those of different races, sexual orientations, or religions” (DeLorenzo, 2003, p. 39). Suggested ideas for implementation included allowing ensemble members to contribute interpretive decisions during rehearsal, having students listen to a recording and provide constructive critique, or having students listen to music composed or performed by “an openly gay musician and discussing differences in how students listened to the music” (DeLorenzo, 2003, p. 39).

Level two of DeLorenzo’s model developed critical thinking through examination of music and music structures. This also included consideration of the effect of democratic issues on music culture and personal freedom. Suggested ideas for implementation included connecting stories and music of musicians during world events or conflicts (such as the Cultural Revolution in China or the Holocaust) with discussions of how the music survived.

The third level of democratization in the classroom concerned social justice and advocacy. “This is a level in which students develop leadership skills for advocating fair practice and access to music in the school, in the community, and beyond” (DeLorenzo, 2003, p. 40). Suggested activities included performing music for social causes to encourage student awareness of how music can contribute to awareness of a social cause (DeLorenzo, 2003).

DeLorenzo’s (2003) push for democratic music classrooms was rooted in her belief that music educators shared a responsibility to prepare students not only as musicians, but also as contributing members of a just society. “Democratically based

thinking and musical excellence are just different components of comprehensive and authentic music teaching” (p. 40).

The concept of democracy in music education continues to gain momentum as strategies to establish such classrooms are shared and benefits of these classrooms are celebrated. Dewey (1929), Woodford (1996; 2005), Greene (1994; 1995; 2000), and DeLorenzo (2003) each stressed the importance of educating children beyond basic subject matter. They charged the music education profession with the task of teaching students about being *good people* in addition to building strong musicianship. With regard to Deb Borton, her goals for students align with those of Dewey, Woodford, Greene, and DeLorenzo. Students leave Deb’s class empowered with knowledge about being a good person and are also strong musicians. Therefore, the perceived schism appears to lie between Deb’s teaching methodologies and classroom environment and the prescribed formula for how to achieve a democratic classroom in music education, involving student contributions to classroom methods and policies.

### *Professional Knowledge Landscape*

Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006) have studied the influence of life stories on teacher development and classroom environment. They have established themselves as experts regarding the intersection between teacher knowledge and teaching practice with their model of the professional knowledge landscape. The initial concept of the landscape seems a simple one, but in reality it is complex and layered. The layers unfold and interact beautifully to provide a clearer understanding of teacher development.

“Stories” are a key element of this model and provide an understanding of influences and encounters between teachers and experiences and offer rich, valuable insight into teaching. Deb Borton’s “teacher stories” and professional knowledge landscape are important to understanding her autocratic, student-focused methodologies and teaching practices.

Clandinin and Connelly developed the model of “professional knowledge landscape” after observing teachers and interactions between teaching theory and teaching practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006). Teacher professional knowledge landscapes were unique as a result of having been shaped by individual’s past and present experiences. The professional knowledge landscape also included perceptions of personal identity. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) depicted identity as context specific because different home or social environments and situations, as well as encounters with others, influenced a person’s behavior within different moments. “Different facets, different identities, can show up, be reshaped and take on a new life in different landscape settings” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 95).

“Stories to live by,” integral parts of the professional knowledge landscape, referenced connections between individuals’ teacher identities and teacher knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) explained the importance of stories:

Teachers know their lives in terms of stories. They live stories, tell stories of those lives, retell stories with changed possibilities, and relive the changed stories. We mean more than teachers’ telling stories of specific children and events. We mean



that their way of being in the classroom is storied: As teachers they are characters in their own stories of teaching, which they author (p. 12).

Characteristics of teacher stories are dependent on the setting of each story.

Clandinin and Connelly identified two fundamentally different places on the professional knowledge landscape: the out-of classroom setting and the in-classroom setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006). The out-of classroom setting was described by Clandinin and Connelly (1996) as “a place filled with knowledge funneled into the school system for the purpose of altering teachers’ and children’s classroom lives” (p. 25). This “knowledge” includes textbooks, pamphlets, workshops, staff meetings, professional development sessions, and memos (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

While a part of out-of classroom settings, teachers employ “cover stories” when interacting with others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). In essence, cover stories are true, generic stories shared with others about happenings within their classroom that align with the perception of their particular area of teaching. Teachers use cover stories to represent themselves as experts in their own field, especially within school settings of generality, such as staff meetings where discussions included broad plans, results, and policy implications. The out-of classroom setting is not a place that welcomes detailed, individual teacher stories of children and in-classroom happenings because individual teachers could be “portrayed as uncertain, tentative, non-expert characters” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Cover stories allow teachers to “fit” into the story of the school and interact more easily with people from other academic areas.

If they respond to this accountability by talking about unit plans, lesson plans, evaluation, goals, and strategies, they are portrayed as certain, expert professionals. But this abstract talk, disconnected from their teaching situations, is mostly irrelevant to their practical concerns (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

In-classroom settings function altogether differently from out-of classroom settings. In-classroom settings provide safe places generally free from scrutiny, where teachers live “stories of practice” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). Teachers feel a sense of autonomy and ownership over their own in-classroom setting because of separation from other classes. An important part of in-classroom settings include “secret stories,” of which only those who had been present in class would have knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006).

Clandinin and Connelly also acknowledge “sacred stories” as an influential part of the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006). In essence, the sacred story defines a person’s core self. Clandinin and Connelly adopted the concept of sacred story from Crites (1971).

These stories [sacred stories] seem to be elusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told, because they live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of the celebrants. These stories lie too deep in the consciousness of the people to be directly told (Crites, 1971, p. 294).

Sacred stories, morals, values and relationships with other people, places, and things influence the shape of the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin &

Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). In fact, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) believe that nothing enters the professional knowledge landscape “value-neutral” (p. 11) and that teacher morals constantly sort and categorize all information. They acknowledge that, at times, out-of classroom authority figures, such as administrators or policymakers find it necessary to create vision statements to shape moral direction for the teaching profession. Such implementations are also subject to a teacher’s professional knowledge landscape filter.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) describe “teachers’ knowledge” as the specific knowledge of individual teachers, also known as “personal practical knowledge.” Teachers’ knowledge reflects all conscious and unconscious learning from formal and informal training and experiences, and is expressed in teaching practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006). A combination of teachers’ knowledge and morals directly influences decisions regarding curriculum and instruction. Because teachers’ knowledge is subject to influence from past and present experiences, decisions regarding curriculum and instruction also continually evolve (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

### *Purpose*

The original intention for this dissertation was to study an exemplary middle school choir teacher who builds and nurtures a culture of democracy through student-centered learning. Deb Borton strives for student self-discovery, life-long musicianship, and knowledge about qualities necessary for being a good person, confident individual,

and productive member of society – all goals of a democratic music classroom. However, Deb's methodologies and philosophies, largely based on stories from her professional knowledge landscape, do not include the facilitation of a student-centered learning environment. Throughout their time with Deb, the Kinawa choir students are the focus of her attention, but she achieves her goals through despotic methods.

The revised purpose statement for this study is to explore, investigate, and describe the teaching and the characteristics of a middle school choir teacher who builds and nurtures a musical learning community in her classroom. The creation of a safe learning environment, development of musicianship, and empowerment of students are central lenses for the study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of Literature

This literature review includes three sections: Teacher Expertise; Values, Beliefs, and Morals; and Teacher and Classroom Stories. The story of Deb Borton, Kinawa Middle School choir teacher, is one of a master teacher whose philosophy and beliefs about teaching are grounded in learning, life, and musical experiences. Through the three sections of this chapter, Deb's methodologies and status as an expert teacher, her work on influencing middle school students to be better people, and her own story as a choral music educator will be better understood.

#### *Teacher Expertise*

The three studies reviewed within the Teacher Expertise section examine characteristics and methods of effective, influential, and experienced teachers. Whether classified as an expert, master, or exemplary teacher in the following studies, the identifying qualities for teachers at the most advanced level are quite similar.

Berliner (1988) conducted several research studies that culminated in his general stage theory of expertise development. Although he examined interpretations of classroom phenomena through multiple projects, only two of Berliner's (1988) studies are highlighted in this literature review. These two particular studies pertain to this dissertation because they involve teacher interpretation of a classroom and of teaching practices. An explanation of Berliner's general stage theory follows the review of his two studies.

Subjects in Berliner's (1988) studies represented three teaching levels: expert, novice, and postulant. Expert teachers were nominated for participation in Berliner's research; novice teachers included first-year teachers who had received excellent evaluations during their student internships; postulant teachers included people who worked as engineers, computer specialists, and scientists and who had a desire to teach but no interest in completing formal teacher training.

The first Berliner (1988) study examining interpretations of classroom phenomena required all three participant groups to watch three television screens showing the same classroom lesson simultaneously. Each screen showed a particular group of students: the screen on the right showed only the students who had been seated on the right side of the classroom; the screen on the left showed only the students who had been seated on the left side of the classroom; the screen in the middle showed only the students who had been seated in the middle of the classroom. "When played simultaneously, a complex auditory and visual environment was created" (Berliner, 1988, p. 8). While each participant group viewed footage of the classroom, participants commented aloud and answered directed questions (Berliner, 1988).

Novice teachers had difficulty interpreting and explaining their observations of the filmed classroom; many interpretations contradicted each other (Berliner, 1988). Postulant teachers expressed difficulty and frustration during attempts to interpret the classroom footage. Most of the postulant teachers could only focus on one television screen at a time (Berliner, 1988). Both the postulant and novice groups tended to give a play-by-play of the video footage instead of actually interpreting what was occurring on the screens. Comments lacked inferences, conclusions, and evaluations (Berliner, 1988).

Berliner (1988) reported that expert teachers did not exhibit any frustration or confusion in interpreting the classroom footage. In fact, experts appeared comfortable while describing their observations and interpretations of instruction and classroom management (Berliner, 1988). The experts interpreted and evaluated events and behaviors effortlessly in real time, and Berliner (1988) acknowledged the expert group's ability to monitor all three screens simultaneously for "both visual and auditory cues" (Berliner, 1988, p. 10).

Deb Borton is an intelligent and astute middle school choir teacher. She works with large numbers of students at a time and is able to evaluate, interpret, and meet the needs of all individuals during a rehearsal, as well as maintain classroom control through caring and efficient methods. Her teaching is engaging; her methods are executed effortlessly. According to Berliner's (1988) descriptions, Deb is an "expert teacher."

An additional study by Berliner (1988) examined further interpretations made by expert, novice, and postulant teachers. Subjects examined a series of slides that depicted high school science or math instruction. Subjects viewed 50 slides at their own pace and stopped to comment on any slide they found interesting. Berliner (1988) reported that novice and postulant teachers showed no particular pattern with regard to slides on which they stopped and commented. In addition, novice and postulant teachers made many contradictory comments. Expert teachers, however, stopped on the same slides and made the same kinds of comments about those slides. Berliner (1988) concluded that expert teachers learned to focus on and interpret similar aspects of classroom environments.

The similarity in what is attended to and how it is interpreted is what we want when we visit an expert ophthalmologist or an expert tennis player for advice.

Postulants, novices, advanced beginners – anyone in the early stages of skill acquisition – simply will not have acquired enough experience for that (Berliner, 1988, p. 11-12).

Berliner's (1988) research culminated in a general stage theory of expertise development, with five stages of skill development based on work by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986): novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. The "novice" category encompassed students and beginning first-year teachers (Berliner, 1988). "The behavior of the novice is rational, relatively inflexible, and tends to conform to whatever rules and procedures they were told to follow. Only marginal performance is really expected" (Berliner, 1988, p. 2). "Advanced beginner" teachers tended to be those in their second or third year of teaching. At this stage, experience combined with knowledge allowed contextual similarities to be recognized. Although increases in experience guided behaviors of advanced beginners, teachers at this stage were unable to sense levels of importance while teaching (Berliner, 1988).

Stage three, "competent," most commonly occurred during the third and fourth years of teaching. Competent teachers demonstrated two primary characteristics: abilities to make conscious choices about their actions, and while carrying out their choices, capabilities of determining the level of importance of each action (Berliner, 1988). Berliner (1988) noted that competent teachers "are not yet fast, fluid, or flexible in their behavior" (p. 4).

By the fifth year of teaching, most teachers had developed abilities associated with the "proficient" stage. Intuition was a prominent characteristic of proficient teachers because accumulated experience allowed recognition of similarities and patterns within



various situations (Berliner, 1988). Proficient performers, although intuitive, tended to remain analytical and deliberative when deciding what to do (Berliner, 1988).

The final stage of Berliner's (1988) general stage theory was "expert." Experts tended to make decisions that "worked" and rarely appeared to be reflective about their actions (Berliner, 1988).

They [experts] have an intuitive grasp of a situation and seem to sense in non-analytic, non-deliberative ways the appropriate response to make. They show fluid performance, as we all do when we no longer have to choose our words when speaking or think about where to place our feet when walking. (Berliner, 1988, p. 5)

Deb Borton's status as an "expert teacher" is further confirmed by Berliner's (1988) general stage theory. She is a talented musician and has a strong intuition about middle school students. Deb's confidence in her methods and beliefs about teaching middle school choir, in combination with her compassion for people, allow her to positively impact her students both inside and outside of her Kinawa classroom.

Deb Borton can also be classified as a "master teacher," as defined by Dolloff (1994). Dolloff (1994) identified characteristics and techniques of a "master teacher" through her case study of an in-service teacher development program designed to promote and develop expertise in choral music education. The North York Choral Development Project was created to encourage and improve music education through choral singing in elementary, middle, and junior high schools of North York. Of the several teachers nominated for participation in this program, nine teachers accepted the invitation. The details of the program were emergent; however, the three phases of the

project included choral music rehearsals with Dr. Doreen Rao, a master teacher of choral music and director of choral programs on the University of Toronto. Teacher participants of the in-service program learned about teaching choral music through their work *with* Dr. Rao, a master music teacher; not lectures *from* a master music teacher.

The master teacher must not be seen as holding a set of finite answers that the participants recorded and memorized. Rather, through observing the master teacher at work, participants began to build new ideas or extend previously-held concepts about teaching and learning music. (Dolloff, 1994, p. 203)

Dolloff (1994) identified strategies of a “master teacher” that included modeling, knowledge of performance traditions, formal knowledge of performance practices, “on the spot” assessment of the group, thoughtful use of instruction, community building, and methods of response to requests for additional help.

The master teacher serves as a model of teaching practice, as a coach for teacher performance, and as a resource for teacher inquiry. Through modeling whole teaching episodes, participants are given the opportunity to observe the total activity not merely a set of individual steps. During teacher seminars, the master teacher acts as a coach, supporting and guiding participants’ attempts to perform the repertoire and approximate conducting or teaching strategies. As a resource for teacher inquiry, the master teacher directs reflective discussion on teacher implementation, and suggests solutions to problems arising from participants’ practice. The master teacher also acts as a resource for integrating theory and practice in the form of demonstration and lecture. (Dolloff, 1994, pp. 263-264)

Although Deb Borton is a middle school choral teacher and not a teacher educator, several of the strategies identified by Dolloff (1994) qualify Deb as a “master teacher.” At Kinawa Middle School, Deb is a vocal and musical model for her students and also acts “as a coach, supporting and guiding her students’ attempts to perform the repertoire.” (Dolloff, 1994, p. 264). Deb’s focus on classroom community is an integral part of her choral program; she is a resource for student inquiry and constantly offers solutions to improve her students’ skills.

In addition to fitting the criteria of an “expert teacher” (Berliner, 1988) and a “master teacher” (Dolloff, 1994), Deb is also an “exemplary teacher” according to research by Borst (2002). Borst (2002) examined the influence of two exemplary Michigan high school choral teachers’ attributes and actions on their ensembles’ learning processes and performance achievement. Research was focused on the identification of distinctive teacher personality traits that influenced performance excellence, as well as on teaching techniques, strategies, and other instructional actions within each individual classroom setting. Borst (2002) selected his participants based on their involvement and high achievement in state level choral events; each teacher was also nominated and awarded “Teacher of the Year” by peers from across Michigan. Data included observations of choral rehearsals and interviews with the two teachers. In addition, Borst (2002) interviewed students from each choral program, building principals, and parents for a variety of perspectives on each teacher.

Borst (2002) found that many factors influenced each participant’s methods of cultivating an exceptional choral classroom. He also acknowledged that choral teaching is

largely elusive because of the impact of individual personalities on teaching methods and beliefs.

The nature of choral teaching described herein supports the notion that teaching personality is an important feature of choral instruction, because it endorses individuality and personal freedom within a greater whole. Effective choral teaching appears to be multi-dimensional. It involves a complex rehearsal fabric, in which the teacher successfully weaves his or her personality into an overall excellent experience of learning and performing. The process is highly personal and situational. (Borst, 2002, p. 122)

Although Borst's (2002) study focused on two specific teacher personalities, he posits that a healthy classroom atmosphere "encourages choral students to the extent of feeling good about what they do and providing an avenue for learning that is savored, leaving the student to crave more" (p. 123). As a result of a positive classroom environment, "choral students behave in most any way to achieve the excellence for which the teacher-conductor is striving" (Borst, 2002, p. 123).

The positive moral fiber developed within the classroom starts with the teacher-conductor's ability to develop relationships with the singers through personable treatment. The singers, in turn provide hospitable behavior that in turn, generate the wholesome classroom environment. (Borst, 2002, p. 124).

Teacher-student relationships also impact the choral classroom environment. Borst (2002) explained that a primary emphasis on technical aspects of music, with no cultivation of teacher-student rapport, limited student potential on both an individual and group level.

This study suggests that technically accurate choral behavior without teacher-student relationship is incomplete. Without the cultivation of positive human relationships and personal identities, technically proficient choirs may be missing a key ingredient in the recipe for artistic excellence. Conversely, choirs experiencing deficient or static performance outcomes may struggle from dysfunctional relationship-building. The current study reveals that without a psychological component to singing in choral ensembles, the physiological mechanisms of singing cannot produce expressive outcomes to its maximum potential. This psycho-physiological relationship suggests that, as choral teachers perpetuate humanism within their choirs, the students physically produce an aesthetic and expressive sound-force that is pleasing and desirable. (Borst, 2002, pp. 124-125)

In addition to building teacher-student relationships, teacher consideration of students versus subject matter also influenced the dynamics of a choral classroom environment (Borst, 2002).

The social aspect of singing appears to involve a communal process of learning that is stimulated by the teacher, who engages students in such a way that they think first in terms of community as they learn. Complete musical knowledge is discovered through a communal source, from which aesthetic choral performance is a natural response. As the teacher stimulates the students to know choral music through social integration, a continuous cycle of teacher-student interaction ensues that nurtures a sense of self and identity within a greater whole. These

exemplary teachers reach their students first. The subject matter is a secondary component to learning. (Borst, 2002, pp. 125-126)

Exemplary educators evaluate, interpret, and meet a variety of student needs while teaching. Keen observation skills and intuition are important characteristics of exemplary teachers, as is a focus on maintaining a healthy classroom learning community. Following a review of Berliner (1988), Dolloff (1994), and Borst (2002), Deb is identified as an expert, master, and exemplary teacher. Deb Borton's personality is infused into everything she does. She nurtures and maintains a positive and healthy classroom atmosphere at Kinawa Middle School, with an emphasis on morality. The students are Deb's primary focus; music is the vehicle with which she teaches. Because of the love and respect between Deb and her students, relationships among students are positive and respectful.

### *Values, Beliefs, and Morality*

Teaching methods cannot be separated from a teacher's values, beliefs, and morals. Personal philosophy impacts curricular decisions, classroom environment, and interactions with others. This section of the literature review focuses on research conducted by Young (2002), Hansen (1992), and Beebe (1998) who examined values, beliefs, and morals within two middle school classrooms and one high school setting. Each of the three reviewed researchers sought to educate students not only in specific disciplines, but in ways that increase empowerment and awareness of improving the human condition. Deb Borton shares this philosophy of education, which is evident from her focus on morality, random acts of kindness, and enforcement of "Safe Place."

Young (2002) formed a grounded theory about the values and beliefs that shaped teaching strategies of middle level music educators. Preliminary definitions established a direction for research:

*A value* is a principle, standard or quality considered worthwhile or desirable. A *belief* is a firmly held conviction or opinion. A *strategy* is a plan of action. A *behavior* is an action or reaction of a person under a given circumstance. A *successful* teacher guides the growth and learning of students toward the achievement of carefully selected and researched goals. *Effective* teachers produce results that are often brought about by surmounting obstacles. (Young, 2002, p. 6)

Young (2002) conducted interviews with eighteen middle level music educators (grades five through eight), each of whom was selected based on peer recommendation and purposeful sampling. Each participant had at least seven years of middle level music education experience, although levels of expertise differed between general music, band, and choir. Participants' settings varied from public schools and private academies to Native American reservations. The eighteen teachers represented ten states: Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and Wisconsin. Evidence of values and beliefs was collected from classrooms during the interview.

I looked for items posted on the walls of their classrooms and offices that might signal a confirmation of a belief or value. Posters, sayings, achievement charts, classroom rules, photos and many other wall decorations were recorded in my field notes when I was able to conduct interviews on site. (Young, 2002, p. 19)

At Kinawa Middle School, the choir room is decorated with "SPAM" signs and logos to advertise the choir motto "Singing Produces Awesome Miracles." This motto is an

important part of the choral program and these signs display beliefs regarding the value of singing.

Young (2002) transcribed and coded audio recordings using QSR NUD-IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data) and selected 398 keywords from approximately 380 pages of transcript. Some discrepancy arose regarding “value” versus ‘belief.’ Ideals worthy of struggle and decisions based on ‘what is best’ were labeled a value (Young, 2002). With regard to belief, teachers expressed beliefs more frequently than they expressed values.

I found the idea that we have hundreds of beliefs, but only dozens of values to be extremely helpful when confronted with the “lopsidedness” of the numbers of beliefs versus the number of values in my category labels. There were so many more beliefs than values. (Young, 2002, p. 173)

Young (2002) created a central-peripheral belief system model, based on work by Rokeach (1968). This model outlined four primary types of beliefs: existential, shared, derived, and matters of taste. “Existential beliefs concern one’s own existence and identity in the physical and social world” (p. 176). The second type, shared beliefs, either connected people who shared beliefs or distanced people who did not share beliefs. Young’s (2002) third type included derived beliefs, gained from interactions with others; derived beliefs included “learned, adapted, remain flexible, and are subject to change” (p. 177). The fourth type, beliefs concerning matters of taste, were the least stable and least influential, and included the selection of music repertoire and teaching materials.

Young’s (2002) model was established as “concentric circles” that arranged beliefs from inside circles (most stable and strongly held) to outside circles (beliefs most



subject to change). Interactions between the different levels of belief shaped individual's music education philosophy and teaching practice (Young, 2002). From this model, Young (2002) developed a grounded theory; Deb Borton's philosophy of music education aligns with Young's (2002) finalized grounded theory.

Middle level music educators' strategies for teaching are shaped by their personal philosophies of music education, which are based on their value of the importance of music as an essential component for living and their belief in the importance of music education in the lives of their students. They teach music to middle level students because they value their students, and because they believe that all children must have music in their lives and that all children must be taught the skills that will enable them to listen to, understand, perform, move to and create a varied repertoire of music (p. 216).

Hansen (1992) examined how teacher values and beliefs connected with the morality of a classroom through the concept of "shared morality," which is how students conduct themselves in class. Some methodologies described by Hansen (1992) align with Deb Borton's approach to teaching; others do not. However, characteristics of Hansen's "shared morality" can be found in examples of Deb's teaching, as will be evident in subsequent chapters. "Shared morality" has four characteristics. It is a shared good of a community, regardless of whether it is a common value held by all members of the community. Shared morality is also an enabling good to establish standards of conduct and activities within a classroom. Therefore, while encouraging specific behaviors, shared morality also restrains other behaviors. Shared morality is an emerging good that develops over time, shaped by student and teacher characteristics. Lastly, shared morality

is “a fragile good, subject to shocks from within and without the community” (p. 347). Shocks include unexpected changes in classroom population or unavoidable changes in school policy (Hansen, 1992).

Hansen (1992) observed sixth grade social studies and English classes of veteran teacher, Kathy Smythe, to examine teacher authority and an environment of “shared morality.”

Kathy’s teaching provided students with repeated opportunities to construct a shared sense of membership in the class. Many of her students became more attentive, patient, and respectful of one another and their collective tasks. Kathy involved them in activities that made increasingly sophisticated demands on their ability and on their willingness to act responsibly (p. 346-347).

With regard to shared morality, Hansen (1992) explained that formation of a community was not “moral homogenizing – a smothering of individuality” (p. 355), but a creation of opportunity for personal growth and development of skills to strengthen the entire group. Kathy Smythe’s students received numerous opportunities to develop a sense of membership within the class. While establishing a role in the classroom community, Kathy’s students developed patience and respect for one another. In addition, Kathy involved them in “activities that made increasingly sophisticated demands on their ability and on their willingness to act responsibly” (p. 347).

Shared morality as an enabling good was expressed through Kathy’s student-centered atmosphere by the amount of attention she gave to individual students during class (Hansen, 1992). One example was Ben, who did not understand the concept of “social science” and openly admitted his frustration in front of his classmates. “Ben’s

honesty in admitting his continued confusion attests to the environment of trust emergent in this classroom” (p. 351). Feelings of trust in the classroom had also developed from Kathy giving individual students her complete attention, as evident from this description:

Kathy cuts short spontaneous reactions to a comment from a student by saying to the class, “Sh! Quiet! I want to *understand* this.” Leaning over the podium where she often sits, she looks intently at the speaker as the girl proceeds with her opinion. As Kathy does so, several students regard *her* wonderingly, almost as if impressed that she would be so interested in something one of them might say. (p. 352)

Kathy’s attentiveness and caring for her students encouraged the development of trust and openness in her classroom, which allowed students a sense of safety and freedom to contribute to their class environment.

Shared morality as an emerging good was evident in the ways Kathy facilitated classroom activities (Hansen, 1992). As the year progressed, students undertook individual assignments and taught lessons to fellow classmates. From those experiences students began developing mentor-mentee relationships with each other and the entire class developed a stronger sense of community. “They began openly to assist, to coach, to counsel one another about various matters” (Hansen, 1992, p. 352).

The fourth characteristic of shared morality, coined ‘fragile good’ by Hansen (1992), was also a part of Kathy’s classroom. As students acquired greater independence and leadership within the classroom setting, power struggles arose between students that led to uncooperative students and side-tracked lessons. In addition, Hansen (1992) described moments during class when Kathy and her students were unsure about who

was in charge. “When occupying the podium, for example, students sometimes looked at (implored?) Kathy for guidance, even though part of the purpose for their being there in the first place was to transfer reins of leadership” (p. 356). On some days, Hansen (1992) described Kathy as “distracted and aloof while teaching” (p. 356), which caused her to be curt with her students. As a result, students unconsciously mimicked her behavior and treated each other brusquely.

Kathy found it difficult to articulate what she ultimately wanted from teaching. She described her teaching as “an attempt to get it right,” and hoped her students would find genuine meaning in their classroom work (Hansen, 1992, p. 349). Kathy’s feelings were reserved because she felt that she, too, was also learning through her own teaching and classroom experiences about what “it” might mean. Oppositely, Deb Borton has a clear sense of what she wants from teaching, which is to make a difference in the lives of others. In addition, Deb understands the goals that she has for her students, morally and musically.

Because Deb facilitates her classroom differently than Kathy, Hansen’s (1992) “shared morality” does not apply to both classroom settings in the same way. There are similarities between Deb and Kathy’s classrooms with regard to Hansen’s (1992) first and second characteristics of shared morality, as a shared good of a community and as an enabling good. Both teachers maintain an environment that promotes personal growth and development, as well as a strengthening of skills to benefit the entire group. In addition, both teachers give students individual attention, promoting feelings of trust and a sense of safety.

However, there are differences between the two teachers when considering Hansen's (1992) discussion of the third and fourth characteristics of shared morality, as an emerging good and as a fragile good. Kathy's classroom is student-centered and democratic, almost to a fault; Deb's classroom is autocratic and student-focused. Whereas shared morality as an emerging good was present because of Kathy's willingness to relinquish control, this third characteristic of shared morality occurs in Deb's classroom because of her strong focus on community development and morality. Shared morality as a fragile good was a frustrating part of Kathy's classroom during power struggles between students; it is not a part of Deb's classroom because of her strong enforcement of a sense of community and morality. It is rare to see someone in Deb's classroom treating another person badly.

Morality development was the focus of research by Beebe (1998) who advocated a psychosocial approach to educating children. She believed that education was responsible for developing students in ways beyond the fundamentals of reading, writing, and math and stressed a need for awareness of students' feelings in order to maximize benefits of learning. A teacher may make perfect sense during a lesson, but if students were distracted by feelings of isolation and inadequacy in the class, emotions could override learning: "Feelings affect thinking and thinking affects behavior" (Beebe, 1998, p. 5). Therefore, Beebe examined teacher behaviors and the role of the teacher in developing a community environment in a secondary classroom.

The principal and department chairpersons of a suburban high school identified a number of possible participants for Beebe's (1998) research. A key criterion in selecting the final participants was each teacher's response to the question, "Do you believe that a

sense of community is a critical aspect of the classroom environment?” Coincidentally, each of the four selected participants was responsible for language arts instruction; however student populations varied with each of the teachers and included standard and honors English students, English as a second language, and Special Education for Learning Disabled and Behaviorally Disordered students (Beebe, 1998). Data were gathered through observations, teacher interviews, student interviews and a student survey. Although each language arts setting required a specialized focus, Beebe found similarities between teacher behaviors.

In general, all of the teachers created opportunities for students to know one another, they treated students with great respect and regarded all student contributions as worthwhile, they relinquished control so that students could develop ownership of the classroom and enjoy great latitude in decision-making and problem-solving, and they became co-learners, focusing on learning rather than classroom management issues (p. 258).

Beebe (1998) observed that each teacher created their own classroom environment and, although they did not agree on the same definition of “community,” each was committed to developing a community within their own classroom. “They sought to encourage an environment where students could feel free to risk, interact, experience, and build on prior knowledge” (Beebe, 1998, p. 280). The four teachers considered safety within the class atmosphere as the most important element of their environments. “Only in an environment where they can risk sharing their honest and sincere expressions, will they be motivated to put forth the effort” (p. 280).

Although each teacher stressed expectations for student respect and responsibility, Beebe (1998) reported that none of the teachers specifically commented on character development or moral values as outcomes of their classes. In fact, when asked about moral development as an outcome, two of the teachers reiterated their insistence on student respect, but did not consider respect and moral behavior to be the same.

Beebe (1998) summarized findings from the four teachers into a list of ten primary characteristics

- (1) Teachers treated students with respect and became strong role models.
- (2) Classes were facilitated versus dictated.
- (3) Respect was demanded for all opinions and ideas expressed in the community.
- (4) Emphasis was placed on conflict resolution and group problem-solving skills.
- (5) Students were expected to participate in decisions, procedures, and events that involved the class.
- (6) Teachers expected students to contribute to the development of student goals and evaluation of student work.
- (7) “Teachers recognized normal adolescent behaviors and needs, refraining from establishing unrealistic classroom rules. Teachers recognized that learning is a social activity and does not happen in isolation. They recognize that learning should be satisfying to the point of being fun.” (Beebe, 1998, p. 284)
- (8) Classroom focus was on community building and learning, not on classroom management (which naturally fell into place).
- (9) “Teachers took the time to know them as individuals, exploring the student expectation for growth and the class environment. They demonstrated a warm and

caring attitude. They allowed students to get to know them as people too.”

(Beebe, 1998, p. 284)

(10) It was assumed, with confidence, that students were highly capable of contributing to the classroom environment.

Students provided perspective on the four classroom environments that Beebe (1998) examined, expressing enthusiasm for their English classes for three primary reasons. Students appreciated the respect that they received from the teacher and their classmates. This respect made them feel like valued members of the class and kept them wanting to contribute to the overall well-being of the group. Students also appreciated that the classroom environment was a learning community in which the teacher did not supply all of the answers (Beebe, 1998). Thirdly, students felt a strong sense of satisfaction from class accomplishment of several goals (Beebe, 1998). The general student consensus was that, during their English classes, positive things would happen, lessons would be challenging but safe, students would have confidence to try new things, and it would be fun (Beebe, 1998). Regardless of educational needs within each class, students responded positively to the community environment that was established within each of these four classes. “Whatever variables comprised the makeup of a classroom, it appeared that the development of a community environment enhanced and facilitated the educational goals of the program” (Beebe, 1998, p. 286).

Beebe’s (1998) teacher participants and Deb Borton are similar in that they all nurture a classroom environment to emphasize morality and community. The biggest difference between the teachers in Beebe’s (1998) research and Deb is the methodology through which each teacher achieves these goals. Beebe’s (1998) teachers maintained



very democratic classrooms and relinquished much control to the students; Deb's classroom functions more as an autocracy.

### *Teacher and Classroom Stories*

Deb Borton's personality and teaching methods have been influenced by experiences thus far in her life. Much can be learned about Deb through the stories of her experiences, which will be shared throughout this dissertation. Mills (2008), Huber and Whelan (1995), and Huber (1999) conducted research that resulted in stories of teachers and classroom settings. These stories are presented here to provide insight on the power of teacher-student interactions for this study about Deb Borton.

Mills (2008) examined how participation in a community children's choir affected identity formation, including the influence of interactions with peers and the conductor. Participants included six members of the Northridge Children's Choir (NCC), one adult college student who was a former member of the NCC, and Mrs. Talbot, the NCC choir director. Data was collected through observation, focus group interviews, and individual participant interviews.

Participants considered the NCC to be a family. "The love that the participants have for each other is both implicit and explicit in their description of their choir friendships. This love is so strong that the choristers often compare their choir relationships to family relationships" (Mills, 2008, p. 259).

Nova: But that's the best thing about this choir, is because there is no groups.

We're all just one big happy family group.

Ingrid: We're all in this together (Interview, Focus Group #1, December 8,

2007).” (Mills, 2008, p. 259)

This finding relates to the current research on Deb Borton, whose students identified her choirs as “a family” and Deb as a “school mom.” Mills (2008) also found that, in addition to family-like bonds with NCC friends, members of the choir felt that they were treated differently by peers within the community choir versus peers at school.

MM: About your choir friends...what do your choir friends bring out in you?

Nova: Definitely the other side that I thought I'd never have, and that's the joy, happy, family, loving. They're all like my sisters and brothers and I'd stand up for 'em no matter what, even though they're not related to me.

MM: How is it that you develop so much love for the people in the choir?

Nova: I think it's just that they accept you for who you are. We don't judge in there. We accept you for who you are and what you are and there's nothing that's going to change our mind. We give you a clean slate. Whatever they call you at school does not happen there.

MM: Why doesn't it happen there?

Nova: I guess it's that it's one of Mrs. Talbot's rules, but we just automatically do it 'cause we're just a big loving family. That's the only way I could basically describe it. We accept people, we talk to them, we get to know them, we become friends with them and then we become family (Interview, Nova, January 11, 2008). (Mills, 2008, pp. 250-261)

Although there are similarities between Mills' (2008) findings and the current research with regard to classroom environment and student interaction, the relationship between the NCC students and their director, Mrs. Talbot, was very different from the

relationship that Deb Borton has with her Kinawa choir students. Deb enjoys knowing students on a personal level; Mrs. Talbot had no interest in developing a relationship with her choir members beyond the conductor-singer roles. “Mrs. Talbot’s comments make clear that she sees her role in the choir as that of music model and mentor, and that she wants to be respected – more than loved – by the choristers” (Mills, 2008, p. 264). The following two examples from Mills (2008) demonstrate Mrs. Talbot’s feelings about her interactions with students.

If they don't have a voice teacher and they're [preparing a piece] for their junior high solo and ensemble and the choir teacher asked them to do it, I'd be glad to listen to it and help in that way. And I always would help with their musical goals. I would not want to be a counselor. I don't want to know their personal problems. That's not my role, and I'm not trained to do that (Interview, Mrs. Talbot, January 29, 2008). (Mills, 2008, p. 263)

MM: What would you like your relationship with the choristers to be during rehearsal?

Mrs. Talbot: As a mentor and a model of beautiful singing. . . . I hope I'm a model. . . . When I think back on the teachers I love most, they were mentors. They were models. They were by no means friends and I knew that. You would never call them by their first name. They were people to be respected. And the frosting on the cake for a few of them... they were loved. But the most important thing is to be respected, and so that's all I care about (Interview, Mrs. Talbot, January 29, 2008). (Mills, 2008, pp. 264)

Although NCC members referred to the choir as a family, the choristers do not consider Mrs. Talbot to be a “mother” of the group. Rather, Mrs. Talbot is a “parental figure” who leads and trains the choirs, but the role of “mother” is usually adopted by a senior member of the NCC (Mills, 2008). The following excerpt is from a student interview with Mills (2008).

MM: What is Mrs. Talbot's role in this family? Is she the mother of the family?

Christine: (Laughs uncomfortably) She's very intimidating... to all the kids pretty much, I think, (chuckles) including us even today. (Chuckles). You don't grow out of being intimidated by her. So I don't know if I'd classify that as being... maternal because I mean pretty much like the first year when I didn't know if I wanted to come back or not, it was because I was scared of Mrs. Talbot. (Laughs). But in the way that she's the one that guides us, molds the choir to do the best we can do, then in that way she'd be a parental figure (Interview, Christine, February 12, 2008). (Mills, 2008, pp. 265-266)

Mrs. Talbot has no desire for a maternal role with the NCC members, but she does expect students to treat each other kindly and maintain a “safe” rehearsal environment.

MM: What kind of rehearsal environment do you try to create and how do you do it?

Mrs. Talbot: Well, I believe it is a place of sanctuary. As I said, they feel safe here.

MM: Do you have to set some boundaries for their behavior in order for them to feel safe, or do they do that on their own?

Mrs. Talbot: This might have occurred 10 years ago, 12 years ago, but what has occurred now is that we have enough kids who have stayed in long enough that they create the culture of sanctuary. I mean, look at Michelle for instance. She's sort of like the choir mother (Interview, Mrs. Talbot, January 29, 2008). (Mills, 2008, pp. 266-267)

### *Stories of the Professional Knowledge Landscape*

The professional knowledge landscape encompasses stories that influence teacher philosophy and practice. Huber and Whelan (1995) and Huber (1999) documented in-classroom stories in two elementary settings to provide insight on the interaction between teacher knowledge and practice. These stories demonstrate how interactions with students can be powerful enough to shift a teacher's philosophy or methodology. Deb Borton's creation of Safe Place was the direct result of an interaction with one student. Safe Place is the topic of Chapter Five.

Huber and Whelan (1995) documented the story of Whelan's classroom environment as it evolved into a safe place. Huber spent a year as a participant observer in the classroom of Kathy Whelan. An encounter with one student, Jason, was a pivotal experience for Whelan. The encounter instigated a more insistent move towards a safe classroom environment. Jason had a mean reputation and was labeled a troublemaker by everyone in the school; he had a horrific upbringing and home life. Few things brought Jason joy, especially at school, but an approaching class party had become an exciting and promising event for the boy. On the day of the party, Jason slapped a girl across the face, which resulted in his missing the class party as punishment; the girl was consoled by Whelan and allowed to attend the party. Jason was devastated because he missed the

party, but wrote Whelan an apology letter and expressed deep remorse for his actions. As it turned out, Jason struck the little girl because she made a derogatory comment about his mother. Whelan did not realize the cause for Jason's behavior until the end of the school day, after the party was over. Whelan reflected:

It was an experience I recognized right away at the time because this experience moved me to tears...I was really upset about it and it caused me to go back a year later and visit that kid and see if he was okay because I really did do him an injustice. You know, we talk about humanizing and dehumanizing kids and I dehumanized that boy that day and I don't think I've ever done it again to another kid....it had to happen that one time for me to know it" (pp. 143-144).

This story demonstrates how one experience can cause a change in beliefs about children and interactions with them. From this experience, Whelan developed "a personal creed" for her teaching that became a foundation for her teaching philosophy and approach to children:

I believe in honoring human potential. . . meaning that everyone has a place that they can move to. . . I believe in providing a safe, nurturing environment where children are free to explore their own gifts. . . I liken myself to a gardener because I believe that every flower in the garden can bloom. . . it's the idea that provided with the right care, with the right environment, every child can blossom. . . I believe in laughter in the classroom and love and friendship. I believe in trust because I think it's the foundation for meaningful relationships. . . I believe in faith, hope, and happiness as guiding forces in my life. . . By faith I mean faith in

God too and hope. . . I believe in the continuous process of becoming.

(Conversation, May 17, 1992). (Huber & Whelan, 1995, p. 145).

Prior to the incident with Jason, Huber described Whelan's classroom as a place reflective of her beliefs as a teacher (Huber & Whelan, 1995). However, following the incident, Whelan's philosophy evolved, and she developed a deeper understanding of her personal beliefs. The physical space in Whelan's classroom was synonymous with warmth, intellectual and emotional stimulation, as well as learning; the space had been established in a way that everyone in the class experienced a sense of classroom ownership. In addition, Whelan "nurtured a landscape for the children to awaken to and to celebrate their own lived stories" (p. 150). Sarah, one of Whelan's students, was asked if she felt valued and accepted for who she was. The girl replied:

Well-l-l-l, hum, not till I got to Karen's class. I always thought I had to be like everybody else, be perfect and stuff...Karen says, "Just be yourself to be perfect.

You are perfect in your own way." (Conversation, January 8, 1992). (p.150).

Following the incident with Jason, Whelan's classroom became a place where children "came together in a community of co-learners, they lived in safe relationships in which each unique, knowing voice was encouraged, listened to, and thoughtfully responded to" (Huber & Whelan, 1995, p. 150).

Huber (1999) focused on her own teacher story as part of an "exploration of the in-classroom place on the professional knowledge landscape of schools" (p. 10). Huber's first-person narrative took place within her Year 1 and 2 classroom that also included 22 students and Shaun, a two-year student teacher. Prior to the start of the school year, Huber and Shaun focused on their goals for the in-classroom place. "When the children

entered into the space we wanted it to feel warm and inviting, creating for them a feeling that it would be an exciting and happy place in which to live for the upcoming year” (p. 10). The classroom was decorated with color and meaningful phrases to promote a positive atmosphere. Creative centers and carpeted areas provided a cozy atmosphere to the room. Class work focused on the unique qualities each child brought to the classroom community and how the different qualities shaped the in-classroom place (Huber, 1999). A garden theme was established for the classroom, where children represented individual flowers and plants as well as “gardeners” within the community. Literature projects, stories, activities and guided conversations all linked to the garden metaphor and the constant promotion of a caring classroom community (Huber, 1999).

Although the classroom environment had been established as caring and supportive, students began treating each other unkindly following afternoon recess. Huber (1999) described her personal struggle between taking time to diffuse student conflicts so she could understand reasons behind them and maintaining a focus on classroom curriculum.

I felt trapped between the two voices conversing in my mind; one urged me to focus on the program of studies so as to ensure that the children were learning the material I was expected to teach, whereas the other continued to push me to look beneath the surface of what I was teaching and to uncover the stories the children were living (Huber, 1999, p. 15).

Following a conversation with the children, Huber and Shaun established an afternoon version of their morning “support circle.” Positive, unplanned changes in student behavior occurred, such as the acceptance of self-isolating students, support



shown for students moving to a different school, self-motivated conflict-mediation discussions, and class cooperation in the establishment of new class policies (Huber, 1999). The in-class landscape transitioned to “somewhat unfamiliar territory” (p. 18) after a student, Ameel, shared with his classmates the recent experience of his grandfather’s death, rituals, and impact on family members. The in-classroom place of the classroom landscape shifted as Ameel’s story prompted other students to share more personal accounts than before. “Concerns such as death, divorce, unemployment, and family difficulties to wonderings or theories about how and why events in the physical and manufactured world occur as they do became important threads in our conversations” (Huber, 1999, p. 19).

### *Summary*

The three sections of this literature review, Teaching; Values, Beliefs, and Morality; and Teacher and Classroom Stories, have provided a framework for the current research on Deb Borton with regard to teacher expertise, morality and community building, and the impact of classroom stories. Within the first section, Teaching, Deb was identified as an expert, master, and exemplary teacher through characteristics determined by Berliner (1988), Dolloff (1994), and Borst (2002), respectively.

The second section of the review, Values, Beliefs, and Morality, examined research by Young (2002), Hansen (1992), and Beebe (1998). These three researchers studied the influence of values, beliefs, and morals in secondary classroom environments, especially with regard to teacher modeling. There was an overarching theme in support of respect and interaction between teacher and students as well as a charge for the music

education profession to educate students through teacher modeling of values, beliefs, and morals.

Research by Mills (2008), Huber and Whalen (1995), and Huber (1999) was discussed in the third section of this review, Teacher and Classroom Stories. These three studies examined stories of community within a children's choir and elementary classrooms. Rich, detailed insight on classroom communities was provided through the authors' use of in-classroom stories as well as perspective on the influence of teacher-student relationships and the evolution of classroom environments.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

**Mrs. Borton has taught in Okemos since 1989. She presently teaches vocal music at Kinawa Middle School and Wardcliff Elementary School, but has also taught at Chippewa Middle School, Hiawatha Elementary School, and Cornell Elementary School.**

**Mrs. B is originally from Minnesota (SPAM country!), where she graduated from St. Olaf College with a B.A. in Vocal Music Education. She moved to Okemos in 1985, and has done graduate work at MSU, Marygrove College, and Vandercook School of Music.**

**She is the proud mom of two children. In addition to teaching music to young people, she loves to read, exercise, go to concerts, cook, and walk Ben and Isabel, the Borton hounds! (from the Kinawa Choir website)**

### *Participants*

Deb Borton, the vocal music teacher at Kinawa Middle School and Wardcliff Elementary School in Okemos, Michigan is the primary participant of this study. Although she also teaches general music classes at Wardcliff Elementary School, this research study will focus only on Deb's work with choir students at Kinawa Middle School. Our paths crossed on several occasions during my years as a local middle school choir teacher. I was consistently impressed by Deb's work with middle school students as well as her state-wide reputation of teaching excellence. Deb has the respect and admiration of university faculty, and her classroom is commonly utilized for pre-intern teaching observations and intern teacher placements. When first approached about her involvement with this research, Deb agreed to be a participant before the first meeting had concluded. She demonstrated great enthusiasm about the project and a willingness to

assist in any possible way. Her genuine excitement and enthusiasm further confirmed that she was an ideal participant for this study.

I first received permission and approval to conduct the study from Michigan State University Human Research. Permission and approval was also obtained from the Kinawa Middle School principal and the Okemos Public School District, where this research was conducted. Deb received a letter and participation form (see Appendix A and Appendix B) asking permission for her involvement in this study. Although given the opportunity to withhold the use of her name and school name, Deb waived her right to confidentiality and wished her actual name to be associated with this project.

Between eight and ten intern teachers have been placed with Deb during her sixteen years of teaching in the Okemos Public School District. Most of the interns have represented Michigan State University; one intern was from another institution. The Kinawa Choir program hosted an intern teacher from Michigan State University during the semester of my data collection. Although the intern was occasionally referenced during discussions and video transcriptions, her identity remained confidential. A letter and consent form (see Appendix C and Appendix D) was given to the intern for her permission to be referenced or indirectly videotaped during data collection.

A small group of choir students ( $N = 9$ ) answered questions and discussed the Kinawa choir program during focus group interviews. An assent letter was given to each selected student asking for permission to participate in the study (see Appendix E and Appendix H). A letter and consent form (see Appendix F, Appendix G, Appendix I, and Appendix J) was given to each selected student's parents or guardians asking permission for their child to participate in the study. Deb chose the focus-group participants using

purposeful sampling based on criteria of student involvement in the Kinawa Middle School choral program. Subjects were also selected based on their ability to articulate their perceptions about singing in choir and the amount of information they would be likely to share in a focus-group interview. Deb initially selected ten students, five females and five males, who all planned to participate in the focus group interview. On the day of the interviews, one of the female students was absent from school because of an orthodontist appointment; therefore the female focus group had four girls and the male focus group had five boys. All participants in this study, including Deb and her intern teacher, received a bagels and juice party before school following focus group interviews. The female student who missed the focus group interview was also invited to partake in bagels and juice.

### *Kinawa Middle School Choral Program*

This dissertation is a qualitative study, and therefore an understanding of context is crucial. Although the results of this study are not able to be generalized, they may be transferable to similar situations.

Kinawa Middle School runs on a seven-hour day. There are three choir classes at Kinawa Middle School, scheduled during fifth, sixth, and seventh hours. Each class lasts approximately 50 minutes on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. On Wednesdays, the schedule is altered to allow for two 42-minute BASE classes during the school day, one of which falls between fifth and sixth hour choir. BASE hours resemble a 'study hall' hour and give students opportunities to meet with teachers and catch up on assignments and work. As a result, the choir classes are shortened to approximately 42-minutes on

Wednesdays; however, Mrs. Borton uses BASE time to work with small groups or individuals in need of additional help with music or their singing.

Over the first half of the school year, sixth grade students may choose to participate in three singing-based exploratory classes: Singing for Fun, Sing It and See It, and Sing it and Ring It. During the exploratory session “Sing It and See It,” students learn songs from various musicals and then watch the musical(s) to which the songs belong. The “Sing It and Ring It” exploratory session involves learning holiday, winter, Hanukah, Christmas, and Kwanza songs while also learning to play hand-bell chimes. Following winter break, students continue to sing and work with hand-bell chimes, but songs do not pertain to the holidays. At the end of January, Sixth Grade Choir begins and is a graded elective class for the rest of the year. All students who have participated in the exploratory music classes are not able to join the sixth grade choir because membership has been limited to 50 students per choir class by school administrative policy. The sixth grade choir performs at the Michigan School Vocal Music Association District Choral Festival, the annual Fifth Grade Visitation Day, and the Kinawa Spring Choir Concert.

The Varsity Choir is for seventh and eighth grade students and is a year-long elective class. Because the Varsity Choir has 97 enrolled members, it is divided into two roughly equal sized groups between the fifth and seventh hour class periods. As with the sixth grade choir, class size has been limited to 50 students per choir class; therefore, Varsity choir never exceeds 100 members. Performances include public concerts and involvement within the Okemos community. In addition, the Varsity Choir has consistently received superior ratings at the MSVMA District Choral Festival, which has earned them an invitation each year to perform at the MSVMA State Choral Festival.

### *The Community of Okemos, Michigan*

As reported by the U.S. Bureau of Census, in 2000 there were 22,805 people, 9,194 households, and 5,645 families residing in Okemos, Michigan. The public school district comprises an area of 22.5 square miles and has a current population of 4,175 students. The Okemos Public School district consists of five elementary schools, a public Montessori school (pre-primary - sixth grade), two middle schools, and one high school.

According to a 2005-2006 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report, the demographics of Okemos by race/ethnicity are as follows: 74% White, not Hispanic; 16% Asian/Pacific Islander; 6% Black, not Hispanic; 2% Hispanic; 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 1% Unspecified.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, in 2000 the median income for a household in Okemos was \$62,810, and the median income for a family was \$88,459. Males had a median income of \$60,601 versus \$41,393 for females. The per capita income for the area was \$33,401. About 3.3% of families and 9.6% of the population were below the poverty line, including 5.0% of those under age 18 and 0.5% of those age 65 or over. The NCES 2005-2006 report indicated that nine percent of the Okemos Public School student population was eligible for the free or reduced lunch program.

### *Design and Procedures*

Primary data collection techniques included classroom observations, one think-aloud interview and a formal interview with Deb as well as focus group interviews with nine student participants. I observed Deb's middle school classes on nine occasions, in three hour blocks, and attended the Kinawa Winter Choral Concert as well as the Kinawa

Spring Choral Concert. Of the nine classroom observations, Deb was videotaped teaching on five occasions; classroom episodes were transcribed for coding. A Sony Digital 8 Steady Shot Digital Effect DCR-TRV140 NTSC digital video camera recorder was used to record Deb's rehearsals onto Sony Hi8MP 8mm video cassettes. The camera was placed on a tri-pod at the side of the classroom and was only used to film Deb teaching, never the students. The camera recorded entire class sessions and was paused only during transitions between classes. Artifacts such as concert programs, newsletters to parents, permission forms, word sheets, and student assignments provided additional information; special attention was also made to record the physical details of Deb's classroom and office.

Deb's "teacher talk" is unique and provided insight into her relationships and interactions with students, especially with regard to respecting one another and building community. A think-aloud protocol provided a more in-depth "behind the scenes" understanding of Deb's teaching methods.

Verbal reports, also called verbal protocols or think alouds, have been an important part of psychological investigations since the advent of the science of psychology. When used as a data gathering technique, participants are asked to essentially say out loud what they are thinking in their head as they engage in various activities. The value of the verbal report technique is that it provides researchers with information regarding the thinking that occurs as a subject performs a task. Other methods of research must rely on observation and the analysis of completed works. These forms of research can then only infer what thoughts actually occur within the mind of the subject. (Oare, 2007, pp. 29-30)



The think-aloud took place in Deb's home and lasted approximately one hour, although I was at her home for an hour and a half. My video camera was played through Deb's living room television and we watched specific segments of video that I had previously selected. While watching the video, Deb discussed aspects of her philosophy, technique and approach with middle school students, and answered my questions. Our conversation was recorded with an Olympus WS-311M digital voice recorder which was placed on the end table closest to Deb.

**Bridget (post-think-aloud notes):** I arrived at Deb's house at 11:15am and was greeted by her and her two dogs, Ben and Isabel (as in "is-a-pain" or "is-annoying"), whom Deb referred to as "fat" and "stupid." Her home is cozy and the walls are warmly painted with a sunny yellow kitchen and calm blue living room. She gives me a hug and calls me "friend," immediately asking about my interview at a state college the previous week. She offers tea or coffee or something cold and I gladly accept a cup of tea. As she heats water, she offers either chocolate mints or sugar cookies and I asked about her Extravaganza concert that occurred during my time out-of-state. She grinned, and with a huge smile said it went really well and that the kids were "really on." She showed me a stack of letters written on notebook paper on the kitchen table that are reflections written by her students about the concert. They are written in the form of a letter to her and are not graded, but read only by Deb. I asked to see them when she is finished reading them, as they are never returned to the students. She also shows me a photo on her computer of a picture of the choir during the annual SPAM song, which I promptly had her email to me. We sat in the living room with our

tea and the dogs and (after a little time of figuring the camera-tv connection) began the think-aloud. (February 9, 2008)

Deb's formal interview began at noon on Tuesday, February 19 and was held in an off-to-the-side booth of the restaurant Mitchell's Fish Market in Lansing, Michigan. The interview date was selected specifically because Deb did not teach this day, as it was a professional development day for teachers in Okemos. Students had the day off from school. Deb received approval from her administrators to meet with me for this interview in lieu of the district scheduled meetings, as it was a form of professional development. The interview lasted approximately two and a half hours as we ate lunch and dessert, for which I paid. Deb was given the interview questions in writing one week before the interview (see Appendix K).

**Bridget (post-formal interview notes):** We both expressed mutual excitement to be lunching together. Deb asked how the dissertation is going and if I felt I would get what I wanted from the project. I talked a little about how the literature review is in-process and that ideas are emerging for other directions for literature review as I have observed her classroom. "I am thrilled with everything I am getting." Will take time to sit and look at all the data I have collected. No one has a pre-conceived idea of where it is going exactly – we have a plan, and that is that there is no formal plan. Plus Deb's insight is valuable and wanted in the process. Ideas are shining through data collection – especially 'safe place.' I discussed how that aspect of my observations has carried over into my personal voice lesson and the Choral Method class I am teaching. The safe place concept is so important... (February 19, 2008)

To ensure trustworthiness, Deb received copies of transcriptions from classroom videos, interviews, and think-alouds for member checks. For member checks, Deb was given the following instructions.

Please find attached the interview transcript from our think-aloud on February 9, 2008. I am submitting this to you for a member check to help insure accuracy of data. Please feel free to make any corrections with regards to conversation fillers (such as “you know” or “um”) and grammar, keeping in mind that parts of the transcript may appear verbatim as vignettes in the final paper. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email [email address provided] or phone [home phone number provided]. I would like to begin my write up June 1, so completing the member check by then would be most helpful. Please feel free to write on and return this copy of the transcript. I would be happy to supply any additional copies of the transcript that you might want or need. Thank you!

Focus group interviews with students took place on February 13, 2008 at Kinawa Middle School during students’ regularly scheduled choir hour. On this particular day, all seventh grade students were gone on a field trip and, because the Varsity Choir is a seventh and eighth grade split class, it did not affect normal class functions to meet with the eighth grade students. The first interview involved four female eighth grade choir students. The other interview was with five male eighth grade choir students. Although all friends, gender separate interviews allowed for a more relaxed and less self-conscious setting for open discussions about Deb and the Kinawa choir program. The four girls and five boys each picked their own pseudonym for this research and are referred to only by their pseudonym in transcriptions and discussion.

Students received written copies of interview questions one week prior to the focus group interviews (see Appendix L). During both interviews, participants and I sat in a circle formation around a small cluster of tables in an empty science classroom near the choir room. Interviews were recorded with an Olympus WS-311M digital voice recorder that was placed on the center of the tables. The girls' interview lasted 30 minutes and the boys' interview lasted 27 minutes. To ensure trustworthiness, a copy of the transcribed interview was given to each student with a letter asking the student and parents to complete a member check on the enclosed transcript; protocols were similar to the ones established with Ms. Borton. Any changes to the transcript were to be returned to me in an enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope.

### *Analysis*

Following member checks, transcripts were analyzed for emerging codes and themes. During early data collection, I anticipated certain aspects of Deb's personality, classroom, and teaching methods to provide important codes for what I was observing. However, as it became apparent that Deb's classroom was autocratic and not democratic, early codes changed meaning or became obsolete and new codes emerged. This has been a living and breathing project, in that codes have been adjusted, discarded, or added throughout data collection, interpretation, and even during final written drafts of this dissertation. The overarching topics for chapters four through eight, Deb Borton, Safe Place, Establishing the Framework for a Successful Middle School Choir Program, Morality, and My Story are the primary themes for this research. Each chapter contains many smaller-scale codes that provide a framework for discussion. Particular statements

are typed in bold Times New Roman font throughout this dissertation. These statements are presented to highlight specific ideas or quotes as they were captured, word-for-word. Vignettes are presented in bold Arial font and are all based on real experiences during my time at Kinawa Middle School.

The perspective of chapters four through seven is that of an outside observer examining the characteristics and methods of exemplary middle school choir teacher, Deb Borton, and her choir program. These chapters are presented through my lens of participant observation, defined by Creswell (1998) as “a prolonged observation of the group, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people or through one-on-one interviews with members of the group” (p. 58). This perspective is different from that of chapter eight, My Experience, which is a collection of my own personal observations during this research. It also includes a discussion about my own personal growth and development as a result of being a former middle school choir teacher studying Deb Borton. The coding process for chapter eight was conducted separately from the coding of chapters four through seven. The entire process of writing chapter eight was a “personal member check,” and, with no preconceived notions for what the final draft would entail, it was truly an emergent section of this research.

### *The Researcher's Lens*

I was raised and attended public school in Grand Ledge, Michigan and earned my Bachelor of Music in Music Education degree from Western Michigan University (WMU) in 1998. Following graduation, I was fully prepared to teach high school choir, but found employment as the choir teacher at two Michigan junior high schools (grades

seven through nine). The following year I was hired by the Grand Ledge Public Schools in Grand Ledge, Michigan to teach choir at Kenneth T. Beagle Middle School. I was delighted to teach in my hometown district, especially with the prospect of taking over for the high school director following her eventual retirement.

In the summer of 1999, I began my Master of Music Education degree at Michigan State University (MSU) and completed my degree over summer and fall semesters while continuing to teach full time at Beagle Middle School. The combination of my class work at MSU and my work as a middle school choral teacher resulted in a greater appreciation for middle school students. As a result, I became more interested in remaining with middle school students than eventually taking over the high school choral position. Following graduation from the masters degree program in 2003, I was urged to pursue a doctorate in Music Education. At that time I had no interest in leaving my position at Beagle Middle School to be a full-time student.

In the winter of 2005, a conversation with a high school choral teacher who had completed his Ph.D. in Music Education at MSU while teaching full time rekindled my interest to pursue a doctoral degree. I decided that a sabbatical from Beagle Middle School would allow me to complete my “year in residency” requirement for a Ph.D., and I began my doctoral degree at MSU in the summer of 2005.

While beginning doctoral study, I continued to teach full-time. Because my role as a middle school teacher meshed with that of a doctoral student and developing researcher, I became aware of a lack of advocates and research regarding teaching adolescent singers. As a result, my own research focus began to turn from the perspective of middle school students to the perspective of teachers of middle school students. One

persistent question remained unanswered: What could be learned from exemplary middle school choir teachers that could be shared with pre-service teachers, developing teachers, and experienced teachers to assist in the facilitation of student-centered middle school choir classes based on democratic principles of music teaching and learning? This question led to the development of this dissertation as well as to my resignation as the choir teacher at Beagle Middle School. During the final year of my degree program, I embraced life as a full-time doctoral student and prepared to answer this question to promote middle school choir students and develop advocates for this population.

The purpose of this study was to explore, investigate, and describe the teaching and the characteristics of a middle school choir teacher who builds and nurtures a musical learning community in her classroom. The creation of a safe learning environment, development of musicianship, and empowerment of students are central lenses for the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Deb Borton

**I tell my students all the time, “Nobody’s ever going to ‘gack’ as much in here as I do, you guys. You could ‘gack’ until the cows come home. (voice quiet) No one will ever ‘gack’ as much as I do. I feel like an idiot when you laugh at me, so don’t do that. I don’t want to feel stupid.” And I tell the kids...I share a lot more about my life than probably most teachers do. But I’ll ask kids – how many of you come from a divorced home? And I’ll say “I’m part of a divorced home.” And the kids go, “oh geez. Well I am too.” And I say, “I am so sorry for you. That just bites doesn’t it? I’m so sorry you are part of a divorced home.” So they hear that it’s okay. I tell them about my niece, sick and dying and about her being called a retard – she was multiply severely disabled...so the kids know about my life and it just gives me credibility. I mean, you know how that is. They see that you’re a real live person and not just a teacher. (Deb, Think Aloud)**

This study tells the story of exemplary choir teacher, Deb Borton. To understand Deb’s story, one must start at the beginning and consider both personal and professional parts of her life. Chapter Four is divided into two sections, Personal Story and Music Teacher Story. The first section, Personal Story, is about Deb’s formal development as a music teacher as well as personal and environmental factors that influenced her development. The second section, Music Teacher Story, is from Deb’s perspective as a music teacher and provides the groundwork for understanding Deb’s philosophies, her



development of the Kinawa choir program, and the infusion of her personality into everything that she does.

### *Personal Story*

#### *Austin, Minnesota to St. Olaf College*

Deb was born and raised in Austin, Minnesota and attended public school for kindergarten through twelfth grade. “Was baptized at St. Olaf Church after being born at St. Olaf Hospital. And was confirmed and married at St. Olaf Lutheran Church” (Formal Interview). Deb’s father was an employee of the Hormel Company and her mother sang professionally with the Greg Smith Singers Choir. In fact, her mother’s professional singing experience contributed to Deb’s involvement in high school choral music.

**Deb:** Was a band kid. Never planned to sing, ever, because I didn’t like having to sing in elementary class by myself. I became a flutist and then was talked into singing in choir at the beginning of tenth grade by our high school choir director who knew of my mom’s musicianship (my mom was a professional singer) and knew of my musicianship in the band and orchestra. He told her that he thought I should be singing, so he invited me to join the choir and I did. (Formal Interview)

Following high school graduation, Deb attended St. Olaf College to pursue a degree in music education, but was undecided between vocal or instrumental music concentrations.

**Deb:** I knew by early elementary that I would go to St. Olaf and be a music teacher because my mother had gone there and was a music teacher. Went for a Bachelor of Arts in Music Ed. I didn’t know when I got to St. Olaf if I would be a

band director or a choir director. The second week of school there I knew I wanted to be a choir director, but never wanted to teach elementary or middle school. I was going to be the next great high school director. I made a token effort in my elementary methods classes, but it was sort of a moot issue because I wasn't going to teach at that grade level. They didn't have middle school methods classes there, back in the late 70s... '75 to '79. (Formal Interview)

### *Student Teaching*

Deb's student teaching experience lasted a total of seven weeks. She student taught for three weeks in an elementary school and four weeks in a high school. "And that was my entire student teaching experience" (Formal Interview). Because of her brief time in the elementary setting, Deb was unable to do more than teach two lessons. Within the high school setting Deb was allowed more opportunity for musical growth. Unfortunately, her relationship with her high school cooperating teacher turned sour following his inappropriate advances.

**Deb:** My high school director cooperating teacher was a man in a very highly respected program in a Minneapolis suburb. Pretty *strong* personality. Arrogance. I mean, just the kind that goes with the ego of music teachers. He had a great program. To his credit, he could tell pretty quickly that I was a good musician. And so I got to conduct three days into my four weeks and on the concert which was great.

**Bridget:** Seems pretty good for only being there four weeks...that he let you do all that.

**Deb:** Yeah, he certainly had my recommendations from St. Olaf and knew that he was getting at least a competent musician. He didn't know anything about my conducting abilities. Um (*speaking slowly and carefully*)...unfortunately...the downside of my four weeks with him was that there was a sexual harassment issue. Which was unfortunate, but it was also a good learning experience in terms of forcing me to advocate for myself. He would...he gave private voice lessons to kids during the school day and so part of my assignment was giving some private lessons. He came in and observed a couple of them with young girls and then after they would leave, he would have me stay at the piano and play through some of the stuff that I was working on with them. He would sit up on the piano bench with me and he would put his hand up on my thigh and keep the beat and just....(*grimacing*) *slimy...smarmy*...so that was tough. That was tough. And he certainly cleaned up his act after I had my whatever, my supervisor...I was really, really struggling because I didn't want it to taint my recommendation. But I also didn't want to be afraid to go to work in the morning. It was tacky. So he certainly cleaned up his act when the supervisor...and boy he gave a great recommendation but he was *all* business. And the only thing he faulted me on in my evaluation was...(*squinting eyes as she attempts to remember correctly*) "She appears staunchly moral, which comes off as uptight." (Formal Interview)

Deb studied music education and attended St. Olaf College because her mother was a music teacher, who also earned her degree at St. Olaf College. However, Deb's reasons for entering the music education profession initially and reasons for remaining in the profession have shifted significantly.

Why am I a music teacher now? *(long pause)* Because I feel like God gave me really, really strong gifts in that area and that's a way I can minister. That's the "off the record" answer. Now, in this "P.C" public education world, I'd have a chance to make the world of a child better because I'm in it. And I can ignite a fire for choral music in them, secondarily. *Secondarily*. It feels like I'm bragging. I feel like I have a good eye for what children's hearts need...in general, the kids' hearts who walk through my door. And I think that I have a responsibility to use that intuition. But I'm not the one giving the gift. I *get*...you know how it is...we get infinitely more than we'll ever give. They make me feel good. *(Very long pause)* And I get to touch their lives permanently. My hope is that 40 years from now they will think of being safe or having the courage to try something. Or making their own children feel safe. That would be the legacy I would hope. I don't need people to go onto The Met or success *that* way. But I hope their lives will be better. I hope they will take their eyes, their "Mrs. Borton eyes" which is one of the phrases that I use. "Look around the school and use your Mrs. Borton eyes. There's somebody here today, boys and girls, whose parents are getting divorced or some teacher who has just gotten word they've got cancer. Or there's somebody who's just dyin' inside. Put your Mrs. Borton eyes on." That's why I teach. There could be more people making other people's lives better. That's it. *(long pause and then a coy smile)* And the money. *(Formal Interview)*

### *The Borton Family*

Deb met her former husband at St. Olaf and they married immediately after graduation. Deb taught public school music in Minnesota and in 1985, the Borton's

relocated from Minneapolis to Michigan so her former husband could begin doctoral studies at Michigan State University. Deb spoke highly of her husband's musical abilities, which included playing the organ and conducting.

**Deb:** I had a good self concept or self-image about my musicianship until I got really close to him because he was *brilliant*. In terms of a four-point doctorate student. I mean *really* good brain and an academician. I am *not* an academician. And so, where I have “kid smarts” perhaps, on a good day, he...oh my God...it's just a techno-brain. (Formal Interview)

Tragically, in the years following their divorce, Dr. Borton was badly injured in an automobile accident. At the time their daughter, Christine, was nine and their son, John, was six. As a result of sustained brain injuries Dr. Borton will never speak, conduct, or play the organ again; he uses a computer to communicate. Deb could not emphasize enough how horrific the experience was for the family as she shared the story of Dr. Borton's accident.

Deb's son and daughter, John and Christine, are “the loves of my life.” Being a mom is a core aspect of Deb's life and her face lights up when she talks about her children. Sometimes Deb unconsciously pats her hand over her heart in a loving gesture when she tells stories about John or Christine. For Spring Break, Deb flew to Denver to spend time with her daughter who was engaged to be married. “Denver is Deb's Spring Break trip destination – many mother-of-the-bride things planned. She GLOWS. Her daughter is her ‘Sweetie’ and she really misses her” (Personal Notes). During one observation, John called Deb's cell phone during her planning period and Deb was instantly giddy to speak with him.

Continuing the family tradition, Christine graduated from St. Olaf College and sang in the St. Olaf Choir for one year; John is currently a student at St. Olaf College and sings in the St. Olaf Choir.

**Bridget:** Now you said you have perfect pitch?

**Deb:** I do! If I could slightly digress...I was emailing Christine and John this morning – my two Borton delights – and I was telling Christine in this email to both of them that my two favorite nerd moments in this concert where they [St. Olaf Choir] were doing the spiritual “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord” because Christine sang that when she was in the choir. She was only in St. Olaf choir one year. And so, seeing John sing that piece just kind of brought it full circle. And then they sang this set of three a cappella Nocturnes...and John, between each of the Nocturnes, [the conductor] would finish one of the Nocturnes and look at John for the yes or no - whether they could go on, whether they were still in the same, in the right key, because John has perfect pitch. And honest to God, that was the pinnacle of pride in my life. So much more than me ever getting in the choir or anything like that was to see them communicating and to see John singing the last note and seeing him nod so quietly.

**Bridget:** Now did you know ahead of time that it was up to him?

**Deb:** He didn’t tell me before Saturday night, but we had lunch together on Sunday. I had him bring his folder because I just wanted to look through it. So we were talking about the Nocturnes and I asked how often they go out of tune. How good was the choir at being able to stay in tune? He said that only a few times during tour did he have to let Dr. A know to give a pitch. And so I said, “What?”

And he said, oh, that's...I mean...Dr. A and me, at the end of each Nocturne...

And he didn't tell me about it on his own, which I also liked. It wasn't (*super high, obnoxious voice*) "Look at ME!" (*normal voice*) you, know? (Formal Interview)

Deb and her children have "written" many stories as a family including divorce, Dr. Borton's tragic accident, teacher-student relationships as members of the Kinawa Middle School choir program, the death of "Little Debbie," her beloved niece, John's struggles with self-identity and homosexuality, a family tradition of college education at St. Olaf College, and participation in the St. Olaf Choir. Deb credits these experiences for influencing who they are as a family and as individuals.

**Deb:** It's been a hell of a road. I have a great life, but it's been...yeah Christine and John, it's been pretty tough. Very tough. But it's surely made them two of the most empathetic *lovers* of people and empathetic in terms of somebody with disabilities. (*Voice grows icy cold*) *Oh*. You don't ever make fun of somebody in front of my two kids or they'll take ya' down.

**Bridget:** I would imagine that if they have *half* your spirit that they would be a force to reckon with! (*laughing*)

**Deb:** Oh yeah. *Oh yeah!* They are amazing. They are *oh my God frigging a-mazing* people. Just the combination of their dad's accident and them going through divorce, John being gay, they've had a lot of chance to learn about lives of integrity and diversity and even what's important and what's not important. Oh yeah. Yeah, they are forces to be reckoned with for this world. (Formal Interview)

*Dr. Chris Tyler*

**Bridget:** Tell me about people who were or are influential in shaping your methods of teaching. You talked about some negative influences that you'd had definitely...

**Deb:** Oh I've had some great positive ones though too. Leon Roberts, high school guy, both negative and positive. Positive he was a hell of a musician. Man. And he got us excited about text. So that was good. He played favorites and that influenced me in terms of....the column of what I don't want. I loved Dr. Long, Simon Long, who was the director of the choir when I sang. I so wanted to be good enough to get into the choir. I had huge respect for him. And was section leader for Dr. Jennings and all of that...and that was very affirming. Let me think...my teaching methods...*Dr. Chris Tyler.* (Deb is smiling broadly.) He's the man. (Formal Interview)

Dr. Chris Tyler was Deb's theory and ear-training teacher at St. Olaf College. Deb considers Dr. Tyler to be the greatest teacher with whom she has worked. She credits Dr. Tyler for having influenced her teaching methods and approach to students. Deb told two stories about Dr. Tyler; the first story with regard to him as a musician-teacher and the second story with regard to him as a teacher-mentor.

*First Story: Dr. Tyler, Musician-Teacher*

**Deb:** He was my theory and ear training teacher at St. Olaf. I had him for two years. He's brilliant. *Oh God.* Brilliant theory comp guy. He composes and has written a lot of *bea-u-tiful* things. *Beautiful.* He and I hit it off *r-really* well. Partly because of the perfect pitch thing. I mean, ear training classes were candy. I mean



there was, honest to God, they were just nothing but fun. And so he was geeked because he didn't have to work hard for me to get the subject. Far, far beyond that...well he was a little guy and there were times in my life where I've outweighed him. But he was always *present*. He always showed up to play. His eyes, he was just *right there*. And so you never felt...you know beginning theory. What a snore for a teacher. Poor guy. My God. *(long pause)* It's like doing Zip-a-friggin'-Doo-Da for me with my kindergarteners for the ninety-frigginth time. It had to be for him. But never talked down to anyone. Then second year, fourth semester theory he gave an assignment. We had to take a piece and arrange it for a different group. I took *All Good Gifts* from *Godspell* and arranged it for my high school choir. I worked hard on it and I did a nice job. And this guy gave me an "A double plus." I still to this day...A plus plus [A++] was my grade. This man who was....*is...brilliant...he gave me an A++*. *(Long pause as Deb swallows hard and looked incredibly surprised and excited at the same time. She is speaking very softly.)* He gave me an A++. Oh my God. That meant *s-s-o-o-o much* because he didn't believe in grade inflation and he thought that what I had done was good, not swarthy, but it was *good*. Oh that was huge. That was huge! *Huge*. Because he didn't coddle, "Oh that was great" no matter what anybody put down. And he had standards and for me...much of the class was easy, but those creative things are hard. I'm not creative. I don't see myself as creative. I'm a good technician. Good technician but not creative. And so I created this arrangement for SATB and *oh*, that was just the most wonderful affirmation from him. (Formal Interview)

Deb's story about Dr. Tyler reveals his influence on her own teaching methods and approach to students. Deb upholds high standards for her students and respects each of them as individuals. As with Dr. Tyler, Deb is straightforward and does not "coddle" her students; however, she works diligently to provide a safe and caring classroom environment, as well as positive affirmation about who they are and the good things they do.

*Second Story: Dr. Tyler, Teacher-Mentor*

**Deb:** But the biggest thing he did for me and actually I told him about this *again* over the weekend (*while she was home visiting Minnesota*)...

**Bridget:** Well, I was going to ask if you'd ever said anything to him.

**Deb:** You'd better believe it. Yeah. My greatest joy is that each of my kids had him for a semester. And they've known since little kids that if I had to name one teacher who'd changed my life it was him - in kindergarten through end of education life. I had him for my freshman and my sophomore years. At the end of my freshman year, I think I told you, I auditioned for the St. Olaf choir. I had perfect pitch...good musician, strong musician, little voice. Shouldn't have gotten in, wouldn't have gotten in vocally. Had the brain. Went to the recall auditions, went physically mute in front of the entire section...okay? (*grimacing as she recalls the events in her mind*) God! They talk, obviously. I mean the professors all talk. So I'm sure that in my perception I was the laughing stock of the faculty in the music department. And I was pissed at myself. Once again I couldn't do it, didn't have the balls to do it, I couldn't sing...*blah blah rah rah rah*. So I went out and ate some worms and I felt better. (*pretending to cry*) Because nobody

loved me, everybody hated me (*sniffle sniffle, then immediately stops again*). So then! Second semester sophomore year, and Dr. Tyler had never said a wo-o-rd about it, never good bad nothing. I had never brought it up; he had never said anything. He knew I was a vocal music ed major and here came tryouts for the choir for junior year. And I wanted it so badly. Went and did my audition and made the recall list again. Well, so what? Obviously we know that's no guarantee! And so the day before the recall audition, it was a Wednesday, had recalls on Thursday, had class with Dr. Tyler Monday, Wednesday, Friday. So Wednesday I'm leaving ear training and he says "Debbie...Debbie could you hang for a minute?" So I stuck around. And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "You belong in the St. Olaf choir. There is no reason for you to not go in there and put yourself in that choir." And I just went...(*Big eyes, open face in awe*) and he just stared at me. I started to say *something* about "I'm just...I can't sing by myself" and he just, he said, "Your musical brain and your musical ear *will be* a gift to that choir. So go put yourself in that choir tomorrow. See you in class Friday." And he walked out. (*long pause*) He changed my life. There was no "I have faith in you, come on you can do it, oh golly, let's...!" It was simply "There is no reason that you will not be in this choir. Go do that tomorrow. See you Friday." Absolute faith in me, whether he had it or not, he had it that day. He simply let me know without any rah-rah, any "one for the Gipper" or you know, "Just breathe from your..." *Nothing*, nothing like that. Simply...simply "Go do that." (*voice very soft, hardly audible*) "There is no reason for you to not be in that choir. *No* reason for you to not be in that choir. Go do that." And I did. (*voice a little louder*) Look

what that man did. So I thanked him again Saturday...*(eyes glossy) oooh I'm gonna get all verklempt here. (long pause as Deb gets a little emotional)* "I know you hear it from hundreds of students" I told him, "You changed my entire life that day, Dr. Tyler." And like, I can't call *him* Chris! Hell, I'm old enough to be a grandma! "You will *never* know what you did for me that day." *(smiling)* He was *all that* and a large bag of chips! *All that*, Chris Tyler. *(Deb starts to act out a worshipping motion and we both say "I am not worthy" at the same time.)* I am *not worthy*. Oh my God. That man. (Formal Interview)

Deb was amused by Dr. Tyler's genuine humility in response to her comments. I was amused that Deb did not recognize the same trait in herself.

**Bridget:** What did he say when you told him that?

**Deb:** He said "I have been really blessed. St. Olaf is such a wonderful place. We get such wonderful students." Took it right off him. He's the one that's blessed because he gets to work with great kids.

**Bridget:** That part sounds familiar...*(laughing and giving Deb a look, indicating Deb's own humbleness.)* (Formal Interview)

Deb's second story about Dr. Tyler further demonstrates his straightforward, but affirming manner with students. Through his approach and interactions with Deb, he instilled confidence that allowed her to have confidence in herself. Dr. Tyler's influence has contributed to Deb's focus on building confidence in her own students. As with Dr. Tyler, Deb also remains incredibly humble about such work with students.

## *Humility*

Throughout my time with Deb, she has remained incredibly humble about her own teaching and methodologies. At the beginning of this project she had difficulty with the primary focus on her. “It just...feels just terrifically like narcissistic. Can we just talk about me now? I mean, honest to God, it does. It just kills me. *Augh*. *Augh*.” Deb repeatedly commented “I have so much to be humble about” and often prefaced comments or stories with “I just suck at...”

**Deb:** I have *so much* to be humble about. I’m like, *gifted* in what I have to be humble about. Honest to God. If I were to leave Kinawa, oh my God, there’d be eight million much better qualified people than me who could walk in there. I mean truly, I *truly* believe that. I *so* believe that. So that’s okay. (*quietly*) I have *so* much to be humble about. Oh my God! There are so many things I just *s-s-s-uck* at. (Think Aloud)

Similarities existed between Deb’s stories of Dr. Tyler and my experiences speaking with Deb’s classes about this dissertation project. During my conversations with her students, Deb shifted the focus off of her and onto the students, just as Dr. Tyler had done while speaking with Deb.

**It is January and, as I sit in a chair off to the side of the choir room at the beginning of Sixth Grade Exploratory, I am a new novelty at Kinawa. Deb tells her students my name but not why I am visiting. The students are given opportunities to guess my purpose and I am visually scrutinized by every sixth grader.**

**“Is she here to learn how to be a teacher?” one of them asks.**

**“No,” Deb gives a little clue, “Mrs. Sweet was a teacher just like me for many years at Beagle Middle School in Grand Ledge.” A few students glare at me teasingly, as Beagle is a rival of Kinawa Middle School.**

**After several questions, one sixth grader moves in the right direction with her question, “Is she a college student?”**

**Deb answers slowly and thoughtfully as she responds, “Yes, she is a college student, but not like our intern. Mrs. Sweet is a *different* kind of college student” and this dance between the students and Deb continues for a solid five minutes. Each student with a raised hand, and a *serious* question, is allowed to ask his or her question. I sit and smile, not exactly sure what to do. Eventually Deb reveals my identity as a college student who wants to be a *professor* and I am asked to explain why I am specifically observing their class, program, and teacher.**

**As I speak to the students, Deb watches me intently from her stool with a slightly embarrassed look on her face. She looks down briefly, arms linked around her knee which crosses her other leg.**

**“You need to just know that you have a phenomenal teacher here and that we need to share all the little tidbits and things that she does here, and *how* she does them, with other people. Because if we had more teachers like your teacher, this world would be a much better place...”**

**One small, dark-haired boy in the front row blurts out “Agreed!”**

**I continue, "...especially for middle school choir students." Some of the kids gesture that they want to clap for Deb. "You can go ahead and clap for her!" The kids clap heartily for Deb and she smiles a little smile and playfully dismisses them with her hand "Oh stop! Stop! Come on!" With a big, open-eyed expression, she looks at me, "Thanks, Mrs. Sweet, for the kind words."**

**"Well, it's true!"**

**With a serious face, Deb says sincerely, "Well, it honors me." She immediately turns back to her students with a serious tone in her voice. "But I gotta tell ya, how many of you have an older sibling who has been part of the choir program here?" Almost the entire class raises their hands. "Anybody know somebody? You guys are much of the reason, your siblings are much of the reason, that Mrs. Sweet is here. Because she's not just writing this dissertation about 'Borton' – she's writing about Kinawa kids. So that's a huge compliment to you guys that our reputation was known before you ever got here. Wow. That's cool."**

Deb deflected attention off of herself during a similar conversation with her seventh hour Varsity Choir class about intern teachers. The students asked why intern teachers wanted to work with Kinawa Middle School choirs. I noted the conversation in my Field Notes, "They asked questions about having interns in general. She talked about because of WHAT THE STUDENTS do here, interns want to come and work with them. Not anything about her being the 'establisher' of a setting" (March 19).

Deb is incredibly humble about her own teaching and methodologies. She shifts focus off of her and onto her students whenever possible, as evident from the preceding conversations, even when the focus is *supposed* to be on her. Deb's comments regarding this dissertation always credit students as the reason for interest in the Kinawa Middle School choral program, and never her.

### *Music Teacher Story*

**I am, personality-wise, I am a great musician. And my St. Olaf choir experiences in fine choral music have been awesome. That's not where my love is. I mean, I'm so grateful to have had those experiences, but I'm a...Kids are my love and I get to use music. It's a different focus. My love is the child who's just learning to match pitch or who has a gift in there but they can't find it yet or they can't see it yet or believe it yet. (Deb, Formal Interview)**

The story of Deb's philosophy of music education will be shared throughout the second part of Chapter Four, Music Teacher Story. In addition, this section will provide background information on the development of the Kinawa Middle School choir program, from the beginning to present day, including Deb's role within her choir program.

### *Teaching Handbook*

During her twenty-nine years as a music educator, Deb has hosted ten intern teachers and an uncountable number of pre-intern observations and mini-internships for nearby college music education programs. In spite of Deb's assistance to colleges in such



a capacity, she does not consider her involvement as supplemental to programs of music teacher education.

**Video clip of Deb speaking to her students:** *I couldn't be a Prof at MSU. I don't have enough degrees. So, the big degree is the doctorate degree and that is what Mrs. Sweet is working on. And at the end of your doctorate degree, your Ph.D., one of the requirements is a [moving head around in circles, blinking madly] honkin', huge, monstrous research paper. Like, a few hundred pages long. Like a book. Yeah, it's not like a paper, it's truly, truly...which is one of the reasons I've never, ever, EVER had any desire to go...I just don't know that I...I don't know that I'd ever have the confidence to do such a project. (Video Notes 1/16/08)*

**Bridget:** *(I turn off the video.)* Okay, so for that section...I'm curious when you say things like that, do you ever stop and think about all that you *do* to teach developing teachers through MSU, even though you are not "officially" a professor?

**Deb:** *(pause)* No. I don't think about that.

**Bridget:** Ever?

**Deb:** No. Actually I don't think that I'm a great teacher of young teachers. I'm a good teacher of middle schoolers. When I have interns, what comes to my mind more often than "Damn, I'm giving her really good stuff" is 'I should write better lesson plans'...'I should be really the master.' And when I make mistakes it kind of comes right to the forefront for me. (Think Aloud)

Although Deb has a reputation as an exemplary middle school music educator, she does not feel that observers are able to *really* see how she teaches because her focus in the classroom is not the same focus of a beginning music teacher.

**Deb:** And I know, like you know – we’ve both taught long enough – we don’t have to write down every sentence. We don’t need to write down every transition, those things. But I feel like when I have an intern or when I have kids visiting from MSU, or U of M or wherever, I would like to be able to hand them a handbook for success, for what I do. And I don’t have anything like that.

**Bridget:** So what would be in your handbook, if you had one?

**Deb:** Teach the kid. Music is my hook. Choral music is my hook. I get to teach the child, I get to be in their heart. That’s what I teach. I teach kids about being human and about striving for excellence and about striving for integrity. And about making the world better because they were there. *That’s* what I teach. That’s the handbook that I would give. So the lesson plans aren’t vitally important to me. Partly because, you know, I’ve got a good ear. I can do the musical things pretty well. But I teach *children* rather than teach them choral music. That’s just my hook to get them in the door.

**Bridget:** What do you think would happen if you actually made some sort of a handbook like that and handed it to people when they walked in the door?

**Deb:** Well they would probably think, “Who is this arrogant da-da-da-da?” and a lot of things you can’t put on paper. I don’t think you can. I’ve never in any book I’ve gotten in classes. *(voice grows softer)* You know, look in the eyes of the child when you are teaching eighth notes. *(running questions together)* Has the child

been beaten that morning? Has the child had breakfast? Is the child dying for affirmation? You can't put that in a handbook. You just don't get it. So hopefully, what [Deb's intern] is getting from me is seeing that I'm working baritones over here but over there I see the kid crying looking across the room at an alto, knowing that her friend has hurt her heart that day. You can't teach that in a book. *(slowing down)* And I don't know if you can *teach* that anyway...I don't know. I'd like to think we could. We had a group of MSU kids visit – one of the earlier years, in terms of sophomore, junior years where they come out five or six times and the last couple times they are presenting. There was a boy...I had the choir do a critique of the MSU people...and there was *one* kid, seemed to be a very intelligent musician, and he got up and did a warm-up or something. Then he said, "Why do you think?" or "Why would I do that?" or "What do you think about this?" and one of the altos raised her hand. He said, "Yes" and she said her answer and he didn't even *acknowledge* "that was a sucky answer." He *simply ignored* her after she spoke and he went *(turning her head, looking in a different direction as if looking at a different student)* "How 'bout you?" *(A serious look and tone)* Well you should have seen the choir. Well they [the other choir members] were *pissed*. They were upset afterwards on her behalf and on our choir's behalf. "He didn't even show respect to that girl by acknowledging she had given an answer, Mrs. B. He didn't even..." Oh. And so that empathy piece – that's what I'd put in the handbook. I don't think that my kids would understand it if I gave it to them, or [Deb's intern] or *me* thirty years ago. So getting into the heart of it...the essence of the kid...that's a hard thing. Then you start teaching and that's hard.

There's so much more to it than anybody walking into a classroom has any idea. There's *so* much more to being effective, or a teacher that will make a difference than simply transitions and fitting this much into 47 minutes and keeping these records and getting this page memorized. And then the discipline and then all the other crap that's going on. Yeah. It's huge. *(Softly)* Huge.

**Bridget:** There's so much that gets in the way of the teaching.

**Deb:** Yeah, yeah. And it's a hard line. You know I could spend 47 minutes every day sitting on that wonderful little stool talking about life things with the kids and never give them at all what they signed up for, which is choir. It's a tough line ...so...okay...*(smiling)*. (Think Aloud)

#### *Teaching Middle School Choir*

Although Deb once aspired to be "the next great high school director," she has never taught high school music; her career has involved teaching elementary and middle school music students.

**Deb:** Have never taught a high school class in 29 years. Got a k-6 job *(laughing)*...*totally s-s-sucked*. Aw my God. It was just...just an absolute embarrassment. I had no interest in doing it so I had never paid the attention to the classes I should have, whoopsie-do, and learned so much that first year because I spent it on my butt. I mean I was *constantly* falling on my butt professionally. Unbelievable. Oh yeah. I really reeked. Hired into Okemos in 1989 and here I am. Never in a high school. Amazing how you kind of have plans for your life and your life puts you where you're gonna be. (Formal Interview)

### *The Creation of the Kinawa Middle School Choir Program*

When Deb was hired into the Okemos Public School District in 1989, the Chippewa building housed the high school and Kinawa was the only middle school. In 1993 Deb began teaching sixth grade choir at Kinawa Middle School; the high school choir director continued to teach the seventh and eighth grade choirs at both Kinawa and Chippewa. It was an adjustment for Deb to teach middle school students after having only worked with elementary children. “Elementary kids were very safe. I didn’t have to worry about singing in front of them because they wouldn’t know. I knew I was better than *them*” (Formal Interview).

**Bridget:** So what did you think when they [the administration] came to you and said, “Hey! Let’s add a middle school program to your teaching load!”

**Deb:** *Oh God* I was terrified! OH! Oh my goodness. Besides the high school choir director, of all the other vocal music teachers in Okemos, I had the most choral background at that time. They moved me and changed my assignment from two different elementary schools to Wardcliff Elementary and just *one* class to start out at Kinawa - sixth grade. And oh my God, I was *just (whispering) terrified*. Truly. It was made easier by the fact that some of the sixth graders I had at Kinawa, when I started, had been mine since kindergarten. So I brought Wardcliff kids and that felt safe for me. Ugh. I was terrified. *Just absolutely terrified*.

(Formal Interview)

Following construction of a new high school, Chippewa was designated as a second middle school to relieve overcrowding at Kinawa. “We’re [Kinawa Middle School] a school built for 500 and we had 1050 or something like that in the building. It

was *absolutely horrible*.” Prior to two middle schools, Kinawa’s oversized student body was able to sustain separate sixth, seventh, and eighth grade choirs. Following the establishment of Chippewa as a middle school, Kinawa’s smaller enrollment impacted the choir program. “When we split there weren’t the numbers for a seventh grade choir and an eighth grade choir in each building, so that’s when it combined.” Varsity Choir still remains a combined seventh and eighth grade choir.

For logistical reasons, the high school choir director eventually took over the entire choral program at Chippewa Middle School and Deb was assigned the entire Kinawa choral program, which included the combined seventh and eighth grade Kinawa Varsity Choir.

**Deb:** And then, oh man, I was *really* scared. Because then I had to do sixth, seventh, and eighth grade choir. I mean, yeah, I’m musical. But I had no experience with doing a mixed voice choir of middle schoolers. I had taught high school choirs in church and adults and all that, but...it was tough. It was really scary that first year. Yeah, I’d had no training in voice change. Zero. (Formal Interview)

Despite Deb’s lack of interest in middle school music education early in her teaching career, she has developed an enthusiasm for middle school students. In fact, Deb would consider it ideal to remove the elementary portion of her current position and work in both of the Okemos middle schools.

**Deb:** If I could write my job description right now I would teach both middle schools. Period. I am very, very well suited to the middle school child. I think my personality, my sense of humor, my being a mom...(long pause) and I think that I

could...I could get a lot more kids excited about singing *longer* if I could have both middle schools. (Formal Interview)

When asked about specific reasons why she enjoys middle school students, Deb had a difficult time narrowing her answer. In fact, she found it easiest to compare a middle school child to a Whippet, a rare dog breed.

**Deb:** What do I enjoy? They want to be close to you. I like that they're...oh my God. Where do I even start? They're empathetic. They eat it up when I let them into my "real life." They take care of me, in terms of they know if I'm "off," and I enjoy their willingness to go out on a limb and cross that line from student-teacher to caring person to person who needs caring about. I love that they love stupid jokes. I *love* their sense of humor. Oh my God. I *love* their sense of humor. In general, I find them willing to try most anything. And they're, at least in my space, they're willing to be *nerds*. Several years ago I had a couple of students who made t-shirts that said, "Be a nerd, it's fun!" in terms of the SPAM (*Singing Produces Awesome Miracles*) song. It's okay to be laughed at when it's a good laugh. It's okay to be silly. So I like they're willingness to do that for me. I love that they're trying to grow into adults. I love seeing them strive for that. They are trying to be mature, trying to look mature, trying to dress maturely, and trying to act mature. I love that they're still little kids. That they are just tender little kids in these bodies that are betraying them even as they live and breathe. Their bodies are humorous.

I got a chance to spend 24 hours with a whippet! Honest to God they don't even qualify as a dog - he's like a *cat* in a dog body! One of the funniest damn dogs!

Their whole head is this wide! *(Deb holds up her thumb and pointer finger, just inches apart from each other)* And his tail was like a possum! *(grimacing)* Ugh! Ryker the Whippet. *(laughs)* See, I'll tell the kids about Ryker the Whippet. I think that's a dog I can appreciate because that's like a middle schooler. I mean this *anomaly*, this physical anomaly of boobs and hair and impulse and childhood and the whole middle school child just delights me. And they still love you. They are still young enough to be able to love you openly which I think is quite delightful. (Formal Interview)

### *Life-long Musicianship*

Deb is a strong advocate for middle school vocal music because of the ways it can translate into every person's life.

**Deb:** Middle school vocal is so huge, comparatively, because you carry that until the day you die. You sing "Happy Birthday" at the office party, you do Christmas parties, you sing at church or during seventh inning stretch and so that singing voice is the one you carry...you don't carry your piccolo experience day to day and year to year. Unless you are very actively choosing to. (Formal Interview)

When specifically asked about middle school choir's role in lifelong music participation, Deb's animated response reiterated her beliefs about the importance of singing.

**Bridget:** The next part of the question was "Discuss your thoughts about the role of middle school choir in lifelong music participation or..."

**Deb:** *(Deb interrupts, singing like an opera singer)* H-U-U-G-E! It's huge!  
*(pause)* Huge! *(pause)* Huge! *(pause and then leaning in very close to the recorder)* Huge!



**Bridget:** (*laughing*) Capital H-U-wait for it...

**Deb:** (*still incredibly close to the recorder, speaking in slow motion*)

H....EW....(*sits up*) Yes. Huge. Because it...if you do it right, the kids leave knowing that singing is a cool thing to do. Honest to God. Seriously. I can't ask for better than that, that kids leave going, "Singing is cool." And it doesn't matter what they sing, whether it's Beach Boys to the radio or their church choir slogging through a piece and they're listening to text, not ever thinking that they would listen to text. Or singing to their kid in a rocking chair. (Formal Interview)

Deb's goals for her students include an awareness of humanity and a developed sense of morality. She never minces words when she speaks about her teaching and she has a strong sense of who she is and what she wants. In addition, Deb also has specific musical goals for her choir students.

**Bridget:** What do you want your students to know and be able to do?

**Deb:** (*speaking slowly*) I want them to be able to read music. I want them to be able to interpret text. By "read music" I don't mean simply go up and down with their voices on pitch, but be able to decipher a map that is an octavo. I want there to be a sequential...by the time a child has been in my program for two and a half years at middle school I want them to be able to sing more technically difficult things. I'd like them to pull apart more technically intricate poetry or analyze music in terms of why...who...just analyze music all the way through. I want them to be able to *feel* music more...not effectively....more *deeply* as a result of learning and experiencing "making it" not just listening and feeling it but being able to *make* that music and feel it. Those are musical things I want for them. I

would *love* for them to be able to, at some time with me, sing something that swept them away. That took them away to a different place. I would love that if each child could have some moment in their time with me where they got *lost* because the music did that. Where just the *music* – not Borton or being with their friends or not Safe Place, but the music in and of itself just *transported* them because I think that would stick with them for life. Those moments in my life are *just*...I mean there are still so many pieces that are so evocative *that way* - I can't listen to them without going far, far away in my mind. Oh I want that. So I'd like that. (Formal Interview)

#### *Deb's Own Life-Long Learning*

Deb has earned post-bachelor college credits from different educational programs, but has never officially completed a graduate degree. In spite of the fact that Deb enjoys learning, she has no interest in writing a thesis or dissertation and therefore, no interest in completing a graduate degree.

**Deb:** I have enough *classes* to have my doctorate. I'm at the top of the pay range in terms of course work, but not liking academia, as it were, I don't have my degree, my masters or my doctorate, in terms of writing the big papers. No way. Okemos had two options for promotion on the pay lanes and they were the degree or the grad course work toward it so I just did all the classes so I wouldn't have to write. So yes, I've got course work at Michigan State and Vandercook over in Chicago... (*rolls her eyes*). (Formal Interview)

Although Deb considers writing a research paper as unpleasant, she genuinely feels that writing is a "deficit" for her and would rather spend her time with kids.

**Deb:** I've got some great strengths and have some huge deficits. Like, putting things down on paper – that's a deficit for me. You know I've got great grammar and I am intelligent enough and articulate enough that I can do it. But – to sit and teach – my least favorite things have been when I've presented to adults. I don't like that. It's just...let me have my kids. (Think aloud)

### *Deb's Health and Wellness*

Deb consistently gives one hundred percent of herself while teaching, even when not feeling well. Deb has been officially diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and, during difficult times with this condition, she continues to teach. In fact, during past rough spells she has used her lunch time to sleep so that she is able to teach afternoon classes with her usual vigor. Deb only mentioned this condition once, in passing. To the outside observer, it appears to never cross her mind.

Deb has recovered from serious vocal health issues and, having adjusted her teaching style, only uses a soft speaking and singing voice. She rarely raises her voice and when she wants to come across as intense or angry, Deb softens her voice to a “chilling” volume.

**Bridget, Personal Notes:** When Deb models the new songs, sings through, she sings so softly – I wondered why?...but you really have to listen as she sings – she pulls you into her with her voice. Because of having asked for Safe Place up front, they don't speak or whisper, but follow right along. She also is able to really demonstrate dynamics. ALSO, she is preserving her voice...I have really noticed she saves her voice *so* well during her teaching. (February 20)

Deb seemed very pleased that I had noticed her efforts to use her voice in a healthy manner.

**Bridget:** You speak very softly the majority of the time. Your voice never gets super loud.

**Deb:** Really? Good.

**Bridget:** Um-hm. Just your normal speaking voice. I think that's wonderful.

When I was teaching I would rarely yell, but I would have a lot of problems with my voice because I spoke too loudly. But I think that, also, kids are really there with you. They listen...

**Deb:** *(Same time as me)* They listen. Yeah, yeah. See I prefer that. There was a year that I was down at the U of M vocal health clinic. I was scoped and had nodules that were *coming*. So they had me wear a "box" for the whole year – the microphone and the box.

**Bridget:** Did you?

**Deb:** Yeah. I mean I lost...yeah. *(Voice getting softer)* Sheesh...I lost most of my range. It was horrible.

**Bridget:** And that's all gone now?

**Deb:** *(speaking VERY softly)* Yes. I just became smarter. I just quieted down.

In mid-March, during the week prior to District Choral Festival, Deb cut her finger opening a metal can, which required stitches and a splint. Deb continued to play the piano with her splinted finger and, although intended to accompany her choirs at Festival, did hire an accompanist for the festival performances. Despite pain and difficulty playing, she made the finger a novelty in her classes. "Deb talks about tasting

her gooey cut finger...tastes like peanut butter and jelly. The sixth graders all say, 'OOOO! GROSS!' but they are laughing all the same" (Video Notes, March 12).

**I arrived at Kinawa Middle School at the end of March for a scheduled observation. District Choral Festival was over and the Varsity Choir had sung beautifully and earned a top rating. The Winter Choral Concert was scheduled for the following evening so today would involve last-minute polishing of performance pieces. I was slightly embarrassed because I was running late and knew I would arrive at Kinawa just as Deb was beginning class. I dreaded being a distraction for Deb and, since I would have to set up my video camera, I walked as quickly as I could down the empty hallway to the choir room without violating the "no running" policy.**

**Passing the familiar yellow and blue "SPAM Boulevard" sign outside of the choir room, the Varsity Choir students could be heard talking and laughing loudly. All students sat on the risers, but obviously not in their normal places; they did not seem to mind the opportunity to talk with their friends. Something seemed out of place however, as Deb rarely permitted students to be this loud. Deb was nowhere to be seen and the piano looked oddly alone at the front of the room.**

**As I set up my camera to videotape the rehearsal, I was able to see Deb on the phone in her office. She was seated at her desk and, because she was positioned away from her office window, she could not be seen by**

any of her students in the classroom. The door to the office was closed and Deb looked concerned. I thought to myself, “Well, I am here to help if need be” and began to prepare myself for any scenario. I did not know why Deb was on the phone, but it must have been important because I had never known her to be “absent” from her students. The students did not seem concerned.

A large metal stereo cabinet door was leaned against a table leg near the front of the classroom and, while we all waited for Deb, it tipped over on its own and made an enormous sound. Immediately the students stopped talking and looked up; Deb poked her head out from her office, with the phone still on her ear, to see what was had happened. I smiled at her and assured her that all was well.

The longer we waited, the louder students became until I told the kids, “She is in there on the phone instead of out here with you, and so I have to guess it is a pretty important phone call. I bet she would really appreciate it if you turned down the volume a notch.” They agreed and spoke softly for a short time before she came out of her office.

The first thing Deb did was to make sure that I was okay because I was late and that was not normal. “I am fine. I was just running behind.” She expressed relief, “I am so glad that you are okay.” She smiled and began to play and sing “I love to sing,” a choral warm-up that was familiar to the students. Not a word was spoken to her students and they immediately stood, moved to their proper places on the risers, and began

**to sing with her. Deb launched immediately into “super-upbeat work mode” and caused her students to laugh and focus on their impending concert performance. It was an incredibly focused rehearsal, but she kept students laughing and smiling throughout.**

**I observed from my normal place at the side of the classroom and wondered what had happened. Was she in survivor mode from bad news? Was someone hurt? Had someone died? Was her job threatened? Were her children okay? She seemed almost too focused on the kids and seemed to work extra hard at making them laugh. The students never seemed concerned, so I worried for them.**

Following the dismissal of Varsity Choir Deb shared her story with me. During parent-teacher conferences the previous evening she suddenly developed a tight band of pain across her chest and became immediately dizzy, nauseous, and broke into a cold sweat. She was scared because her father had died from heart failure at Deb’s age. “She said she’s scared and feels ‘off’ today” (Personal Notes 3/20/08). Despite how she was feeling, physically or emotionally, she taught her afternoon classes with energy and enthusiasm.

**Bridget, Personal Notes:** She is so strong in front of the kids – they would NEVER guess she is feeling this way. She told them she is low energy, but I’m not seeing this AT ALL. She’s going beyond an effort to keep them engaged. I have been there – not felt well and worked so hard, almost over-compensating for

– and it is *exhausting*. I am experiencing phantom/sympathetic exhaustion *for* her... (March 20)

Deb underwent a battery of tests the following week and doctors determined that her heart was healthy. She did not miss the Winter Choral Concert and hardly missed school for the medical exams. Her students were never the wiser.

### *Teaching Struggles*

**Bridget:** She cares a *great* deal. Spoke BRIEFLY about being “tired,” but not of the kids. It makes me sad for her to feel that way, but I understand how the aspects outside of teaching are so draining – politics, paperwork...exhausting. (Personal Notes 2/19/08)

The Varsity Choir is a seventh and eighth grade choir split between two class periods, limited to a total of one hundred students. Deb has fought to eliminate the capacity number on her choir classes, but has been denied repeatedly. Every year students are unable to participate in Kinawa Choirs because of the enforced enrollment capacity. From the perspective of students and parents, “Deb’s Story” depicts her as a dedicated, caring, and enthusiastic teacher who has a great love for her students. As viewed from the Kinawa administration, “the Story of Deb” is that of a teacher who works too diligently to promote her program; she threatens other school programs (especially band and orchestra) by tipping the student enrollment numbers in her favor.

**Deb:** (*Deb spoke of fighting administration to get the cap lifted from her Varsity Choir. It was very upsetting for Deb and comments made to her were “devastating.”*) It has made me wonder if what she [the principal] has seen is the too much caring for kids and not enough quality in the program, and yet we’ve



never...we're consistently...we've never had a "II" [at choral festival], you know *all* of those things. She's getting very high quality...I mean, objectively.

Musically speaking, technically speaking. You know I could show her all of the judges' sheets, I could do all that to prove that really...but she would say, "See that proves my point because even when you don't get kids all the way through when there are too many, so a kid can't sing this year so they come back, you're still able to produce "I's." So that's been very tough. Where middle school vocal music is, it's not where I'd like it to be. (*Big silence from both.*)

**Bridget:** That's hard.

**Deb:** It's very hard. And I think it's got to be an ignorance thing, not a stupidity, but ignorance meaning "not understanding." But it still pisses me off.

**Bridget:** I think you're completely justified.

**Deb:** Yeah, but you're a music geek like me. In the meeting, she also said that I fight too hard for my program. She hears me all the time telling kids, "Oh you should be singing. You ought to be singing." I said, "I feel like it!" Can you believe it?! Feel like I'm in an alternate universe!

**Bridget:** Yeah, wow. What does she want? I would think as an administrator that's what you want. (*We contemplated the troubling issue a little longer.*) One of the things that, you know that when we started thinking about "Deb Borton" as a candidate for this dissertation project...one of the things is not only the environment that you have, but it's the *quality* of the program too. It seems that in a lot of cases you get "nurture versus music" but you have this wonderful balance

of all of that and I think that for someone to not recognize that, and not be excited that's the program and how much the kids are getting...

**Deb:** Yeah, I've never overtly sabotaged...I've never felt that. But I am slapped down if I work too hard toward it. And it's hard. *(long pause)* It makes me tired. *That's* the stuff that makes me tired in my career. (Formal Interview)

Although Deb has not decided when she will retire, she spoke of retirement and life beyond Okemos Public Schools.

**Deb:** I hope I leave the field before people want me to. Yeah. Because you know how you start knowing people and you go *(makes a grimacing face)* "I'll throw you a going away party if you'd just go away!" "God! Yeah, we're so excited about your retirement bash! Yeah!"

**Bridget:** I don't know. You strike me as a person that will know when it's time.

**Deb:** Part of me feels it now. Yeah. But it's not the *kid* part. You know? That's the tough thing. That's not what makes me tired.

**Bridget:** It's all the other crap?

**Deb:** Yeah, yeah. (Formal Interview)

Deb is fifty years old and does not see herself teaching as long as some of her colleagues. The Okemos High School orchestra director recently retired after teaching 42 years; Deb specifically said that she does not see herself "teaching 42 years." The Borton children could impact Deb's future plans. She wonders if she will move near her daughter, Christine, and future husband after they settle; her son, John, "will not necessarily settle, so we'll see what happens." More than likely, Deb envisions returning to Minnesota, her "true love place. With a capital 'L.' Love, love, love!" She would like

to live near St. Olaf College and become a “St. Olaf Mom.” Her duties would involve the preparation of meals at her home, for as little as five to as many as fifty college students, so they can “go home for dinner.”

### *Summary*

Many experiences have influenced Deb’s philosophy about teaching, middle school students, and music education. Mentors have inspired her. Adversity has challenged her. Humor has grounded her. Within this chapter, stories of personal and professional development have provided a framework for understanding Deb Borton, person and teacher, largely from her own point of view. In addition, Deb shared her philosophy on the importance of music in a middle school student’s life as well as perspective on her own career in music education. Stories of Safe Place, Kinawa Middle School, and Morality, all key stories in Deb’s teaching and philosophy, will be shared in the next three chapters.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### “Safe Place”

**We understand how important and how precious it is when somebody has the guts.**

**And I’ll tell them, “I don’t care...I don’t care if a small ferret flies out of your throat, nobody’s going to laugh at you. Even if it looks darn funny if a ferret flies out of your throat, we’re not laughing.” And I never say *you’d* better not make fun of a kid, it’s always “if somebody you are sitting next to makes *you* feel bad they are *so* out of here.” (Deb, Think Aloud)**

“Safe Place” is paramount in Deb’s classrooms at both Wardcliff Elementary School and Kinawa Middle School. “Safe Place” guides all interactions in the classroom, whether between teacher and student or student and fellow student, and allows for a risk-free, no-pressure singing environment. “Safe Place” is open to all, whether a person is a permanent fixture in the classroom or a guest passing through. All activities in choir are executed with “Safe Place” in mind and students understand they are in a safe place.

**Deb:** And this whole concept of “Safe Place” that is *so* integral to my classroom – that not only when you are singing a solo, you get to be safe in here. You answer a question, we are respectful of you. Period. And nobody gets a second chance to hurt somebody’s feelings because it’s not *ever* accidental if you are unkind.

(Think Aloud)

## *The Creation of “Safe Place”*

### *Story I: High School Austinairres Audition*

During the Think Aloud interview, Deb told three stories, each about an incident in her life that influenced the creation of “Safe Place” as an official, “capitalized” classroom philosophy. The first story took place during Deb’s junior year in high school during her audition for the top choir, the Austinairres.

**Deb:** (*speaking slowly*) The concept of it [“Safe Place”] percolated from my own experience... had its root in my own experience. And I never even tried out to be in a choir until tenth grade. Never sang in a church choir, never sang in a middle school choir, never sang in an elementary choir, and would not have sung in a choir period. I was going to be a band director. I was a musician of the year at my big ol’ honkin’ high school for piccolo. I’ve still got my trophy.

So in tenth grade the director of the choir program, Leon Roberts - a good conductor - he approached my mom and said, “You know, Deb ought to be in the choir program.” So I joined the choir program and the big, cool group - it’s Someko here [at Okemos High School] - in Austin it was the Chamber Choir, which was the nerd cool group that did the “madrigally” stuff. I was invited to join Chamber Choir because they knew I had perfect pitch and all that. But then the really *cool* group was the Austinairres, from Austin, Minnesota...the Austinairres. And...*ohhh*...so I signed up to audition to be an Austinairre because I mean...I was a really good musician. So many things I just suck at, but I had a good brain, a good music brain. And so, I went into my audition and couldn’t sing. I was just too scared. Just plain was too scared. Instead of *anything*...you

know "throw me a bone" was what I was screaming inside. Something. Save me. And he just said, "Maybe you'll try again next year. Good-bye." And I didn't try again next year. I mean, it just *ripped* me. Went to St. Olaf and...

**Bridget:** How old were you when you auditioned for the Austinaires?

**Deb:** Beginning of my junior year so I had just turned 16. And that was it for me...after that I never auditioned for a solo. I mean there was just no way. After that. Hell no. And I was President of the choir. (Think Aloud)

### *Story II: St. Olaf Choir Auditions*

Following high school, Deb attended St. Olaf College. As previously discussed, Deb wanted to follow in her mother's musical footsteps by becoming a music teacher. However, in addition to a music education degree, both Deb and her mother aspired for Deb to be a member of the St. Olaf Choir, something her mother was not able to experience. The second story that influenced Deb's development of Safe Place occurred during her audition for the St. Olaf Choir.

**Deb:** But *then* I went to St. Olaf and I knew I was a musician. I wanted to sing because my mom was a professional singer who sang with Greg Smith Singers Choir out of New York. And I wanted to sing. Got to St. Olaf and was in the freshman women's choir. I had to audition and it was *O-K* audition - I mean it still sucked. It was okay *better*...I mean she could tell that I had musicianship. I had the little teeniest little mousy voice - I never would have gotten in on my voice - but I had the ear and she could hear that, so I was in the choir and wanted very much to be in the St. Olaf Choir. So at the end of my freshman year, I auditioned for the St. Olaf choir and somehow lived through my first audition and made it to

the recall auditions. *(Deb sarcastically laughs quietly)* My God. And, so went to recalls at the end of my freshman year. My mom had never made it in the St. Olaf Choir and wanted *desperately* for her daughter to make it and I wanted *desperately* for her daughter to make it. I got in there with all of these Norwegian Valkyries, *(starts imitating opera singers and their warbling voices)* these vibrato-y women singing. Went in there and Dr. Long had us all lined up and sang a line of something and then it was *chh-a-chh-a-chh* down the line. And it was getting closer and closer and I was just absolutely truly going crazy. And he got to me and I went...*(Deb opens her mouth, silently pantomiming singing)*. And *physically* was mute. I mean couldn't even squeak. Couldn't. *Truly*. Couldn't audiate, couldn't even *sa-ay* anything. *(Voice very cool)* And he stopped and he looked and he said, "Debra" and gave me, whatever, a measure intro and *(Deb opens her mouth, silently pantomiming singing)* and he said, in front of the St. Olaf Choirs, I swear to God, *(in a very quiet, cool voice)* "Well, obviously you are not ready for this choir. You may audition again next year. You're dismissed." So I had to walk out in front of *all* of these absolutely in my mind best singers ever. *Thought I would die*. That was it. Oh man. (Think Aloud)

### *Story III: Wardcliff Elementary*

The third and final story that contributed to the establishment of Safe Place happened ten years after Deb graduated from St. Olaf and was teaching at Wardcliff Elementary School in Okemos, Michigan.

**Deb:** So about ten years ago at Wardcliff...fast forward to Wardcliff (which is the first place I've ever taught long enough - and now I've taught there forever - that I

could actually see my program, kids coming in kindergarten and I still had them in fifth grade) and having kids sing their name in kindergarten, (*Deb begins to sing-song names with the second name an echo of the first*) “Bridget Bridget” “Ben Ben.” Well I had a girl... and the Wardcliff and Kinawa kids all know this story because I tell them all and I change the name. I always say “Okay I’ll use the name Bridget for today but it wasn’t her real name.” And in kindergarten Bridget wouldn’t sing by herself. It would be “Marcus [echo Marcus]” “Bridget [no echo – silence]” and I didn’t make a big deal of it. I just would go on around the circle. By the end of kindergarten the kids knew we were going to do the circle game, the name game, and nobody expected Bridget to sing. I still sang Bridget’s name and it would go right on: First grade, same thing. Remember that kindergarten game? We’d always end on it “Marcus [Marcus]” “Bridget [silence]” “Marvin [Marvin]” and we’d go on and nobody expected it. Second grade, nobody expected it. Third grade, I said, “OH man! Just humor me! Humor me! Let’s take a walk down memory lane!” “Marcus [Marcus]” “Bridget [*very, very softly* Bridget]” and the whole class went (*looking sharply to her left, where Bridget sat, eyes open in amazement*). Honest to God. They were just...*She’s a-live!* And I didn’t make a big deal of it. I mean I kind of went (*sits up with a surprised look on her face, slightly shaking head*) and went on. And by the end of third grade “Marcus [Marcus]” “Bridget [*very softly* Bridget]” “Marvin [Marvin]” and Bridget got to be *consistently* singing her name. Not more than that, but she would do that. I mean the class cheered for her, they made her feel good, and I’m thinkin’ “God, I have got it so well together, I am like teacher extraordinaire.” I



think you can sense what's coming. Fourth grade. "Anybody wanna..." (not safe place, didn't know about "Safe Place" yet, but wanted kids to be singing)

"Anybody want to sing a...let's do solos today! Let's do solos on *America the Beautiful!*" I always have started out with little solos and kids have been very good about doing little solos in my space. Well, third or fourth or fifth time that year, "Who wants to do part of a line on *America the Beautiful?* and *whoosh!* Eighteen hands went up and all of a sudden....here's Bridget (*Deb bashfully and tentatively raises her hand, imitating Bridget*). Bridget! She goes...(imitating Bridget, who shakes her head no and takes down her hand). So we all went on and then a month later, two months later whatever, "Anybody want to....okay, Marvin and Ralph and...Bridget would you? Would you like to?" (*Deb shakes head no*). A couple months later...you could just see it...(imitating Bridget looking interested in singing solo, subtly nodding head yes.) "Bridget?" And she said...(Bridget nodding yes.) So I'm thinkin' for "purple mountain majesties," you know, it's low, it's in a *sa-afe* range...oh and being the master teacher, I would be one to pre-think that. And so we gave out our eight solos and cool and by this point people were so used to this song it just wasn't a big deal. And so the first kid sings "Oh beautiful for spacious skies" and the second kid sings "for amber waves of grain" and I can see Bridget's just...(looking down the line "at" her impending solo) I mean, she's *me*. *She's me* just seeing it coming. And she starts to sing "for purple mountain" and her voice clacks (*Deb makes a sound with her voice that resembles sliding from a higher pitch to a lower pitch*) and it was the damn funniest thing you'd ever hear. The kids laughed. *Not* to make fun of her

– they were *so* excited. They giggled because it was, it was friggin’ funny it sounded like a...like a...frog or something comin’ out of her throat. She burst into tears and ran out of the room. Next time in music I said, “You guys remember that darn name game?” I’m thinking “back it up, back it up.” “Marcus [Marcus]” “Bridget [silence]” Never sang another word in my class. I lost a kid and I spent four and a half years workin’ this kid. Oh my God. That is one of the darkest moments of *my* teaching was when I lost this kid. Clink. The concept of...in official capitol letters: “Safe (*mouths an expletive between words*) Place.” And so, to this day I tell the kids why and how “Safe Place” got started. And they know I lost a kid and that just still grates at me that I lost a kid. (Think Aloud)

### *“Safe Place” Today*

Deb maintains “Safe Place” at both Wardcliff Elementary School and at Kinawa Middle School. Even her youngest elementary students are educated about “Safe Place.” In addition to the classroom environment of “Safe Place,” the term “Safe Place” is also used to identify specific times for students to perform for each other, pressure-free, in a guaranteed safe place.

**Deb:** And they know, oh and they’re good. I’ll say “Safe Place” and at elementary somebody runs and closes the door and they all know it doesn’t matter if the Principal walks in. I’ll simply stop the piano because even though I’m sure Mr. [Principal] at elementary would *never* make fun, he doesn’t get it like you and I get it, you guys. We understand how important and how precious it is when somebody has the guts. (Think Aloud)

At Kinawa Middle School, Deb speaks openly about “Safe Place” to all of her students, including sixth grade exploratory classes. Although the exploratory classes are not official “choirs,” these classes sing and uphold “Safe Place” in the same manner as students do in sixth grade choir or Varsity Choir.

**Deb:** In here, one of the things that is important to me, of many, is that because I’m a singing lady (and Mrs. Sweet knows this so very well) it is important to me that people feel safe in here. And *[turning to the kids]* particularly, this Varsity Choir Extravaganza that you will see in a couple of weeks, there are a bajillion kids doing solos and trios and duets and quartets. I never had the guts to do that. Hated it. Still hate it actually, to sing in front of people. It’s the hardest part about my job. Give me anything. Let me conduct in front of a million people or play the piano. Singing alone *kills* me. *[Looking back and forth from me to the kids.]* And sooo...what I want for these guys is to feel better about that process than I did. Because I didn’t have a teacher...I had a teacher who mocked me for being afraid. And I hated that. And it obviously still rather berates at me. So...in here, I think we’ve talked about the concept of safe place? *[turning to kids]* And so, how many of you guys have done a solo, duet, or trio sometime during this exploratory? *[Most sixth grade students raise their hands.]* A small groupy-thing? Or some other exploratory this year? *[More hands go up in the air. No one complains about standing all this time and no one is talking unless prompted.]* I think that is a cool thing. So the way I work it in here, whether it’s this class or a choir, is that nobody will ever be *required* to sing a solo in my space. Everyone is invited to try because I promise a safe place. That means the first kid that is rude or snickers or

makes a comment - they don't need a second chance. They're gone. They're at the office. Period. Because once you do it once, once you make somebody feel stupid once...it's already stuck. "I'm just joking" will never cut it. So, I think that makes people feel safe. [*One boy says, "Yup"*] So...what we've done, hopefully...[*to the boy*] Thank you. Hopefully what we've done is I try to start with the teensiest, three-word, one-line solos so, by now, most people would be happy to do half a song. [*Looking at the kids*] An opera some of you, [*the kids giggle.*] which is a really cool compliment. I like that a lot! (Video Notes, January 16)

### *Student Perspectives on "Safe Place"*

Students who participated in focus group interviews made several comments regarding Deb and her establishment of "Safe Place." Always referred to positively, "Safe Place" was a major component of students' experiences in choir. Over the course of the interview, the eighth grade girls focused on their enjoyment of singing and how within "Safe Place" they gained "confidence to try" which allowed them to develop their musical skills. Students are identified in conversations throughout this dissertation by pseudonyms they selected for themselves.

**Bridget:** What do you like about choir class?

**Banana (B):** Like when you sing *alone* we have this "Safe Place" thing and you're never made fun of for *anything*. And if you are, Mrs. Borton will kick you out of the class for the day...

**Oreo (O):** Not you, but the...

**B:** ...not you but the person who does it to you. And it's a good way to learn and get your confidence higher.

**Freddie:** That's what I was going to say. You have the chance to do things that you couldn't do outside of the classroom. Because there are a lot of things that I've done in choir. I mean I've gotten opportunities to do things in choir that I wouldn't have gotten in other classes because Mrs. Borton started a summer camp thing for "Safe Place." It helps you because you get a chance to sing a solo or a duet and I think that would help in high school if you want to try out for Someko and for solos - you get help. From the things that she's done.

**O:** It's a great class to build your confidence and build skills without worrying that you're gonna be made fun of. (Girls' Focus Group Interview)

The boys repeatedly commented that within choir they enjoyed being themselves without pressure to be "incredible" singers.

**Bridget:** What do you love about it?

**Alejandro (A):** You can sing interesting stuff. You can sing, in the first place, you know... it's, like...it's not a lot of pressure to do incredible well. It's like just do your best and it's fun.

**Bridget:** (*Looking at all the boys*) Why is that, do you think?

**A:** I think Mrs. Borton has strong opinions on pressure and stuff because she has had bad experiences with too much pressure and singing and it gets kind of personal when you're singing so she likes to keep as little pressure on us as possible.

**Ben Dover (BD):** Yeah and “Safe Place” is where you can sing in front of your peers and stuff without having to be embarrassed or anything if you *do* mess up and they won’t laugh or anything. And if, like, you’re just telling Muffin Man “You’re doing really good” she’ll be like, “What are you saying?” or “Don’t whisper to people” because the person will think that you’re saying something bad *automatically*. Then they’ll feel bad and then it completely ruins the safe place.

**Bridget:** So not only do you not say anything to him you don’t even talk to your friend to say, “Hey, I like your new shoes” because they could think you were saying something mean.

**BD:** She...she just...she doesn’t allow it. It’s a really cool thing.

**Naruto Uzumaki (NU):** Well, from that you get the feeling of being *secure* and that when singing you shouldn’t feel nervous being on stage. (*The boys agree with NU with “Yeahs”*) That it’s just easy going you shouldn’t be worried and get stage fright. It’s just something to be enjoyed. (Boys’ Focus Group Interview)

The boys also discussed their experience of working with a different choir director as a clinician at a recent choral festival. According to their comments, although the choir upholds “Safe Place” as a group outside of the physical classroom at Kinawa, “Safe Place” is dependent largely on Deb.

**Magic Hippo:** I loved at festival, that dude that was trying to get us to *sw-ay*. (*laughing with the other boys*) I could not stop laughing.

**Alejandro (A):** Because whenever Mrs. Borton tries to give us a warm-up, like move your arms in a laser beam or do crazy dances or all her...

**Naruto Uzamaki:** Throw the darts!

**A:** Yeah! Whatever her weird warm-ups are, we're all okay with it. But as soon as some guy from district festival teaches us, or tells us to sway or like...

**Ben Dover:** It ruins it! It's just not happen...*(The boys express similar sentiments of "no" or are indicating such from body language. Muffin Man is shaking his head "no" from side to side.)*

**Bridget:** Muffin Man says "no?"

**Muffin Man (MM):** No. No...No...No. *(Everyone laughs)* No...

**Bridget:** Just because it's not her? Or...

**MM:** Yeah. (Boys' Focus Group Interview)

During the focus group interviews, students were asked "If you could change one thing about your other classes that would make them more like choir class, what would that be?" The boys unanimously agreed it would be Deb. "Every single class! I'd bring Mrs. Borton to every single one!" (Ben Dover). Alejandro commented, "Mrs. Borton is sort of different because of like the whole peace love to the extreme thing." "Safe Place" was also the focus of the girls' discussion when asked this question.

**Banana (B):** I think it would be cool in other classes if you had as much of a "safe zone" as you did in choir because if you, like, mess up on an answer....*(all the girls chime in "Everyone laughs.")* I messed up and yeah...everyone laughed at me once when I answered this question wrong and I was, like, "Ah dang it! I wish I was in choir."

**Freddie (F):** Like this morning I said "line graph" and it was a "time line" and this boy started laughing at me and I was like, "Oh thanks!"

**Stuart Little:** I know and if you were in choir, you know Mrs. Borton would be like, “Um, go sit out in the hall and maybe we’ll talk about this later if you’re *not* out of choir until then!”

**Bridget:** So you can be more of yourself in there too.

**B:** (*All the girls say, “Yeah!”*) Because no one can say anything to you that’s mean.

**F:** She doesn’t say anything if you do something weird ‘cause...she makes it possible to make fun of yourself. (Girls’ Focus Group Interview)

Both groups of students offered many comments when asked, “Would you recommend taking choir to other kids coming into Kinawa Middle School? Why or why not?” However, the boys specifically focused on the concept of “Safe Place” as an advertising point for incoming Kinawa students.

**Alejandro (A):** Yeah, choir’s like...I would recommend it for new kids ‘cause even if your voice isn’t great, the way Mrs. Borton teaches it sort of brings out the best in everyone. (*Lots of “Yeah”*) Because you feel so relaxed and unpressured and she picks the right scenarios for you. And you really never have to worry about anything. If you don’t really want to do something she won’t make you do it.

**Muffin Man:** Yeah, she won’t make you sing a solo or anything.

**Naruto Uzamaki:** She’s not, (*Voice becomes nasty and mean sounding*) “Well you weren’t paying attention, how about *you* do the hard work now?” I know in my math class, my teacher’s idea of getting someone to answer a question is to pick the person who is the *least* focused (*Everyone laughs*) and be like, “Okay



that's how we're going to get everyone back on track." Mrs. Borton's idea of getting someone to answer a question is someone who feels comfortable with answering questions (*lots of "yeah"*) and they're not shy or anything and they're willing to. And if you get the wrong answer it's not, (*Nasty mean voice again*) "HA! You just like lost a million dollars" it's "Oh that's okay! This is how you're wrong, but we can fix that" and "That's not really that...a half note has two beats if you're in this measure...and it's not seven." So yeah.

A: Sometime she kind of tries to nudge people to push themselves. (Boys' Focus Group Interview)

#### *Additional Moments of "Safe Place" in Kinawa Choir*

"Safe Place" was a common phrase throughout Deb's classes and did not always refer to singing. For the piece *Siyahamba*, student volunteers played a conga drum while the choir sang. Deb reminded each class, "Even when we are drumming, it's Safe Place" (Video Notes, January 16).

In preparation for choral festival, students honed their sight-reading skills by singing in small groups in front of the class.

**Bridget, Field Notes:** Then, by two's...she picks one person from each part and each of them picks a buddy. By two's, lined up in front of class – go to a new [sight-reading] exercise. The class "judges" for chocolate. Announcement by Deb: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is SAFE PLACE." Door is closed and they sing. Boys lose their note at the *very* end. What happened? Quick look over and all do it again. "Gentlemen you nailed it! You just need to move in measure seven." One

more run-through, PERFECTLY performed. Deb runs in front of them “Yeah baby!” All applaud and kids put books away while sextet gets chocolate.

(February 13)

Deb is also the recipient of “Safe Place,” and she often expresses her gratitude for how her students treat her. “[*Deb struggled with the piano part at intro*] Thank you for making me feel safe, even when I mess up the piano.” “Going to be sung by me in ‘Safe Place’” and again “Thank you for Safe Place.” “Give me ‘Safe Place’ and tell me about this song when I am done. [*She sings through ‘Goodnight’ for the sixth grade choir.*]”

“Safe Place” was not only for Deb and her students but was also extended to the intern teacher who spent the semester with Deb at Wardcliff Elementary School and Kinawa Middle School.

**Deb:** Here’s the question: Who am I? Who am I? This song is sung in first person. I am going to sing it in first person. If you’ll give me “Safe Place” I’ll be *so* appreciative. Ms. [intern teacher] is going to be introducing you to a song in a few minutes and boy she is sicker than a dog and has got, like massive gackage so you can practice “Safe Place” that you’ll use on her. (Video Notes, February 20)

### *My Experience with “Safe Place”*

During my time observing the Kinawa Choirs, I was asked to sing *Some Enchanted Evening* with the intern teacher so students could hear the melody of the song. Before we sang Deb reminded the students, “Remember Ms. [intern] and Mrs. Sweet are in ‘Safe Place’” (Field Notes, February 13). In my Personal Notes, I wrote about my first “Safe Place” experience and reflected on my own story of singing in front of others.

**Bridget, Personal Notes:** “Safe Place” – *I* got to experience FIRST HAND! With the sixth grade choir, students were preparing old-time Valentines and songs, one of which was *Some Enchanted Evening* from *South Pacific*. Deb asked [intern] and I to sing with her for the kids so they could hear it. She said to them, “And remember we are all in ‘Safe Place’ before we began...it made such a feeling of calm for me. My own baggage of not liking to sing in front of others – it just went away. I wasn’t worried what anyone thought or about messing up words or the need to *impress* anyone...I could just SING. And I really, really enjoyed it.

(February 13)

Following my experience I was struck by the fact that I am an adult and felt so comfortable about singing in front of those students simply by knowing I was in “Safe Place.” The longer I observed Deb and her students, the more I witnessed the impact and implications for “Safe Place” for students.

**Bridget:** Being in Deb’s class has changed me and *really* brought this issue of a “safe place” to the surface. Just calling it “SAFE PLACE” makes it so reachable and tangible. And I find my excitement for and feelings about developing, cultivating, and maintaining a safe place to learn and be...*even* with college students, even with ADULTS, even with *me*...we all need a safe place. And it makes me wonder – why isn’t this such an obvious, stressed issue or topic with other teachers – either in training them or in demonstration? Is it *too* touchy-feely for some? (Personal Notes, February 13)

### *Violations of “Safe Place”*

Serious consequences result from violations of “Safe Place,” which range from temporary to permanent removal from choir. In reality, no student has ever been permanently removed from choir because of a violation of “Safe Place,” but Deb told stories of students who had felt her wrath.

**Deb:** It was this sixth grade group – an interesting group. It was the third exploratory, the final sixth grade exploratory I do before Sixth Grade Choir started. And in it I have...or *had*...one tough sell kid. I think it was his second or third choice – it wasn’t where Brian wanted to be. This whole concept of “Safe Place” that is *so* integral to my classroom – that not only when you are singing a solo, you get to be safe in here. You answer a question, we are respectful of you. Period. And nobody gets a second chance to hurt somebody’s feelings because it’s not *ever* accidental if you are unkind. And so, one day the class and I were talking about Extravaganza and some of the kids had siblings that were going to be in it. I said, “You know it is just a *way* cool concert.” And Brian says, and Brian doesn’t know me – I’ve never had his siblings – Brian from the back says (not raising his hand to say, but just says), “I bet it will suck.” And he says it not half-way, but three-quarters voice. And the kids saw the dragon come out of the cave in me. (*voice gets softer*) I practically climbed over the piano at this kid and just *reamed* him because he’s pretty cocky kid - a fairly solid kid - and so I just came out and just said (*voice growing softer and colder with each word*), “Brian, don’t you *ever* say something so unkind. I have worked my butt off for that concert. And you hurt my feelings. And I am *not* happy that you said something

like that in my class. *(Deb's voice drops to an icy whisper)* Don't you ever speak like that again." About that loudly and the kids were just...*(Deb's voice rises in volume and her face brightens again, although her tone remains matter-of-fact.)* And the kids know – I'm the most *fun* teacher you'll ever have until you piss me off. And you won't ever piss me off if you're trying and you make a mistake. You hurt somebody, oh God help ya. And they also know – you make a mistake, even if you hurt someone, you know what? We can get over that. *(Deb's voice gets softer again.)* You *lie* to Mrs. Borton and that's tough. That breaks something. If you're gonna to make a mistake, have the manhood, have the womanhood, have the integrity...fess it up. Then we can get on with it. So Brian just sat there and his eyes *(Showing wide eyes, voice still quiet)* and I just waited for a second after I got done just...taking him apart...and said, "Are you tremendously clear about what I just said to you?" And he didn't say anything, he just...*(nodding head up and down)*. (Think Aloud)

Deb told another story about a boy who violated "Safe Place" by shunning another student with Down syndrome. Deb openly admitted that the situation was especially upsetting for her because of the story of her own niece who, as a special needs child, experienced a great deal of negativity from classmates as a result of her developmental disabilities. Deb's second story of Safe Place violation was about how this student learned from his encounter with Deb, modified his behavior, and become a leader within the Kinawa Choir program.

**Bridget:** Have you ever had anybody...any problems with Safe Place with kids...?

**Deb:** Mmm-hmm. Once every few years I'll have a kid kind-of snicker. Once. And boy, I come down. I'll stop it right then. "I'll meet you in the office after class. You are dismissed." And they'll often go, "I didn't mean it." You are so gone. And I had one kid who I just, oh man, he was smart, good looking...kid named Simon. Came from a pretty successful socio-economically-speaking home, athletic. He came from an elementary that had a Down syndrome child in his class at elementary. I didn't know the kid because he was the first kid in the family. And Zachary, the Down syndrome child, and Simon were both in my exploratory first hour, first week of school. And Simon, I knew, had signed up for choir for the second semester.

**Bridget:** He had a sister with Down syndrome, is that what you said?

**Deb:** No, he had a kid in his class from elementary who now was in middle school and they were both in my exploratory. And so Simon had gone to school with Zachary for years. And about the third or fourth day of school...and I've never done this with a student before or after to a kid...Simon was already in the class. The class was almost all there and the bell was just about to ring. In came Zachary and sat down next to Simon. Simon got up, walked across the classroom and sat down somewhere else. Didn't want to sit by a Down syndrome kid; didn't want to sit by a retard. *(In a very angry voice, growing increasingly quiet)* Ohhh...took the kid out into the...oh my God...ohhh...ohh. And I know part of much of that is colored by my niece. Seeing her, just...like just...just let him [Simon] have it. How dare you. This kid not only has to wake up every morning with a syndrome he sure as heck never asked for, but he has to have some *jerk*

(and that's just not me), some jerk sit down and make him feel like a retard. (*voice very soft and hissing*) H-h-how dare you. I said, "You know what? I don't want that kind of kid in my choir. You've got a really important choice to make. Because if this is really who you are, *please*. Go take 'Foods' or something like that. I don't want you in my choir if that's who you are." Kid stayed in choir and was the biggest supporter of the program. By the end of the sixth weeks Simon would seek out Zachary to sit by him. But I don't know if kids just never get told or just really called on the line...you know, "called on the carpet" about how much *power* they have to change. I tell my kids, "I want, when I die – next week, fifty years from now – I want people who have known me to wonder how in the world, *how in the world* this world can get along without me. I want them to know that nobody was ever a bigger supporter than Mrs. B. (*Voice growing softer and softer until barely audible*) I want people to go "Oh my God. Now what do we do without Borton?" So the last thing, the worst thing, the saddest thing that I can imagine would be me dying and somebody saying, "Well thank God she's gone." Who are YOU going to be? I want to grieve when you leave my class. I want to wonder how the heck this choir is going to go on without you. (Think Aloud)

### *"Safe Place" Summer Lessons*

"Safe Place" summer lessons began seven years ago as a way for Deb to supplement her income. Deb is a single parent and financially responsible for her two children. When "Safe Place" summer lessons began, her son, John, was preparing for St. Olaf College and her daughter, Christine, had just completed her first year at St. Olaf

College. Although it began as a way to make extra money, Deb enjoys working with the students more than making a profit. “It’s more important to me that they sing than that I get paid.” “Safe Place” summer lessons maintain her philosophy of a safe, risk-free environment for students to sing, gain confidence, and develop musical skills.

**Deb:** “Safe Place” summer lessons. It’s called “Safe Place” – what a surprise!

Um, six years or so ago, maybe, I started it. Maybe seven years ago now. It’s a six-week program in the summer where kids have small group voice lessons. It started out just for middle schoolers and if a child signs up, they can sign up with a group of friends to be a class. Four to six kids in a class. One hour lesson once a week. And we do voice building and vocalizing and all sorts of those exercises together. Then the rest of the hour is them choosing and working on music and, as I tell them, it’s their program. They can do solo stuff, they can do nothing as a solo, a small group, or just a big group. If they’ve got the courage to come and do this, I want them to feel great about what they are doing for six weeks. Then at the end we do a “Safe Place” recital. It’s titled “The Safe Place Recital.” It’s grown...I usually do two now because there are enough kids and I want them to have them a little more chance to be up...

**Bridget:** Do you pick the music or do they?

**Deb:** No, they pick the music. I help them pick if they have absolutely no direction. I bring all my materials over from Kinawa...Broadway, Disney, I bring a couple of God books, contemporary things if there are kids that want to do Christian stuff. I’ve got one into the old Italian standby book. Many different musical vocal piano scores.



**Bridget:** Do they pay to do the camp or is it a free thing?

**Deb:** No, it's not a free thing. I charge \$150 for the program and music patrons have scholarships that are available. And every summer there are between three and six kids who do it for free. It's more important to me that they sing than that I get paid. And at the end of the six weeks we do a recital at night and they get to invite their audience. It's only people that they invite...parents, friends from school, grandma and grandpa, whatever. And then I bake. I throw them a party afterwards. We use Faith Lutheran, my church where I work, and so it's a nice big air conditioned room, microphones, grand piano, comfortable place and we have the run of the sanctuary, as it were, for those six weeks. So we can do whatever we want. Can put them in the far corner of the sanctuary and get them to learn to project. Oh, it's a cool program. And it's grown now. And I usually have a high school class and an elementary class too. Siblings hear about it or I had a couple of Chippewa kids that I've never met and they come to me in the summer. And it's a nice thing in terms of it's not \$1000, like Blue Lake [Fine Arts Camp].

**Bridget:** Oh gosh, yeah. Plus it's not a super intensive program like some of those other programs.

**Deb:** Well, I meet the kids where they are. If they want...I mean there are kids that can't match pitch and that's what we do for six weeks is just work one-on-one and find something simple that they can feel good about singing. They all know I want them to progress in six weeks and there are many different ways that that might mean, whether its confidence or vocally or literature or socially. You know every year I get kids in there who just don't have [social skills] (*grimacing*

*her face up, sitting in silence, but looking disturbed) Well, well...(she takes a sip of her hot water with lemon). (Formal Interview)*

### *Student Perspectives on “Safe Place” Summer Lessons*

The eighth grade girls’ focus group spoke with enthusiasm about “Safe Place” summer lessons, to which both focus groups referred as “camp.” As with discussions about “Safe Place” within the Kinawa choir program, the girls told stories about “Safe Place” summer lessons and how the experiences developed their confidence in singing.

**Bridget:** Talk about the summer thing. Does that still go on?

**Freddie (F):** Yeah! You can do it from any grade to...right? *(looking at the other girls)*

**Oreo (O):** ...graduation. But I don’t think you want to come back as a college kid because that might be a little *(the girls laugh and add similar comments)* weird singing with, like...eleven-year olds...

**Banana:** *(laughing)* Forty-years old and then come back...

**Bridget:** But even in high school you can come back?

**All girls:** Yeah! Oh yeah!

**F:** I want to come back in high school. *(The other three girls say the same, “I want to come back in high school!”)* I recommend it to anybody who wants to do it because in sixth grade I did it and I did a solo...

**Bridget:** What do you do at the summer camp?

**F:** You learn songs. Basically you just have an opportunity to sing any song that you want to sing and you work on the song for a couple of weeks and at the end of the *class*, I guess...

**O:** There's a recital...

**F:** ...there's a recital, yeah. In sixth grade I did it and sang a solo and I was shaking. I think it was so bad but I think it helped me get over my nerves for singing because I knew I could do it.

**Stuart Little:** And now you sing solos *all the time* and you sound *awesome*...

**F:** Yeah, but...yeah...(sheepishly looking at Stuart Little, with a smile) Thanks!

Yeah, but I think that the camp it gives kids confidence to sing solos and helps when you are coming back to choir. You have a lot of fun doing it because you get, like, folders and you decorate them and you get, like, chocolate and stuff for doing it.

**Bridget:** And who are the teachers at the camp?

**F:** Just Mrs. Borton.

**O:** It's just basically semi-private lessons instead of more like a "camp."

**F:** You can do groups and stuff. Like, you come in on a Wednesday afternoon for an hour or in the morning. You just sing. It's fun because you get to see your friends over the summer too because you can pick who's in your class and what time you do it.

**Bridget:** It's here at Kinawa? *(All the girls say "It's at Faith Lutheran Church" at the same time.)* (Girls' Focus Group Interview)

### *Summary*

"Safe Place" is more than just a concept or a place. It is an integral part of Deb Borton and is reflected in her philosophy and all interactions she has with people. Deb

can pin-point three life stories that led to the creation of “Safe Place.” The first two stories involved her own feelings of angst and humiliation with regard to singing in front of others; the third story is one of an elementary student who experienced angst and humiliation while singing in Deb’s class.

As a result of “Safe Place” and of these stories, which are openly shared with Deb’s students, Kinawa choir members take advantage of Deb’s safe environment to be themselves, enjoy an increased sense of confidence, and take risks to try new things. They feel no pressure to be perfect people. I experienced “Safe Place” first-hand and it was incredibly empowering to sing in such a safe environment, even as an adult. During focus group interviews, Deb’s students shared their wish that “Safe Place” could be a part of all of their classes and that they could be themselves more often with no fears about being “less than perfect.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### Establishing the Framework for a Successful Middle School Choir Program

*(A coy smile on Deb's face)* The kids will tell you, it is a *loving* dictatorship. Don't like it? *Not* a problem! Go take shop! Go do another class. It's not a democracy. *Nobody* will love them like me, but *my* class, thank you. I'm the boss. Any questions? The only classroom rule I have is "You are required to show respect" and that's *all* that it takes. That's respect for the stuff and respect for the people. I have to follow the same exact rule that you do. *I have* to be respectful of you. Do I have to like you? No. But I do. Do you have to like me? No, but you'd better show me respect. If that doesn't work for you, I respect that...get out of here. And that's the *glory* of having an elective. I mean how lucky are we? Oh my God. (Deb, Formal Interview)

Chapter six examines Deb Borton's teaching philosophy and methods from the perspectives of Deb and her students. Student comments made during focus group interviews validate Deb's intentions and efforts to promote a friendly, respectful, and caring classroom environment that is infused with humor and musical learning.

#### *Choir Classroom Environment*

**Ben Dover:** It's seventh hour. It's the end of the day and I look *forward* to coming to choir. It brings up my day, I don't know...I guess it's a Mrs. Borton thing, I guess because in choir I can definitely make a lot more jokes than I could in any other

**class (*Immediately all the other boys start loudly agreeing that Ben Dover gets away with much more in choir than from other classroom teachers.*)**

*Welcome to Choir!*

Deb's classroom environment is a result of many factors including Deb's personality, sense of humor, the implementation of Safe Place, and Deb's teaching philosophy and practice. The "welcoming" feeling of choir as a result of Deb was one prominent area of discussion during focus group interviews. Magic Hippo, one of the focus group boys, was a new student at Kinawa last year and joined Varsity Choir when he began at the middle school. His story as a new student in choir focuses on how Deb welcomed him from day one, as if he had always been a part of the class. Although the other boys had attended Kinawa since sixth grade, they shared similar sentiments about having been welcomed into choir.

**Bridget:** Tell me if you could change one thing about your choir class that would make it more like one of your other classes, what would that be? (*Looking at Magic Hippo, who has not said anything in a while*) What do you think, Magic Hippo? (*The boys giggle*)

**Magic Hippo (MH):** Well I don't know if I would change *anything* about choir because it's like, last year I was a new student here and that was the only class I felt completely comfortable in because of Mrs. Borton.

**Ben Dover (BD):** She really welcomes you. (*Immediately "Yeah!" from the other boys.*)

**Muffin Man (MM):** She makes you feel like you are part of the choir from the *first* day.

**Bridget:** For people coming into Kinawa Middle School, would you recommend choir?

**MH:** *Definitely.*

**Bridget:** Why?

**MH:** Well it doesn't really matter if you've got the greatest voice because the main idea is just to have fun in that class, and to *kind of* learn something. And I mean, when you are a new student you don't know anyone. Mrs. Borton just kind of makes it *so fun* and you're like *totally* comfortable with everything. (*All the boys start talking at once*)

**BD:** She's like that friend that you made the first day. (*Lot of "Yeah"*) She will be your friend and it's really cool.

**MM:** She makes...yeah...she makes you feel really comfortable when you're new.

**Naruto Uzamaki:** She'll be your friend and she'll *make you* have friends. You will automatically make friends after a few days.

**MM:** Like I was in the exploratory "singing for fun" in sixth grade...it was the very first exploratory and it was for choir, obviously. And there were *all* the kids from the other school and it was just me from my school and so I didn't know anybody. But Mrs. Borton just made me feel like I'd known her and everybody for months and months.

The girls echoed similar sentiments about Deb's way of welcoming and nurturing students. Members of the girls' focus group consider Deb to be more than a choir teacher; she is deemed a friend, confidant, and parent figure.

**Freddie:** Yeah. I don't think we even realize sometimes how much she actually does for us. But she does so much.

**Banana (B):** She means so much to *all* of us. Like, she's kind of like our school mom (*all the girls agree with Mmm-hmm and similar sentiments.*) in a weird way.

**Stuart Little (SL):** 'Cause if you're having a problem, I would feel more comfortable talking with her about it instead of...

**B:** Instead of a regular class teacher.

**Oreo:** Instead of the counselors... (*the girls all laugh and loudly agree with Oreo.*)

**SL:** (*loudly*) I choose her over a counselor! (*All the girls agree loudly, laughing and lots of "Yeah! Yeah!"*) She's like a combination of mom, teacher, best friend, and girlfriend. She's like one of those girls where you can just sit down and, be like, "Hey, what's up?" (*voice rises in pitch*) "Oh not much, how are you?" (*B laughs at SL.*)

The classroom environment nurtured by Deb promotes student participation, question asking, and honesty about what students do and do not understand. Students are always encouraged to try and to not worry about making mistakes. "If you are going to make a mistake, I want to hear it. If you are going to crash and burn, let's let the whole school hear the landing." In addition, students are honest about their own levels of



understanding or performance and Deb praises students for their honesty. Such occurrences were observed on several occasions:

- As students answer questions regarding time signatures, each are acknowledged - even if answers are wrong. Deb always responds “Fair answer” to incorrect answers before moving on to another student for the correct answer. (Field Notes, February 13)
- **Deb:** Is there anyone who wouldn’t get an “A” if I asked you all those questions? Be honest with me. Anybody for whom this is quite new and you’re just...? (*one girl raises her hand.*) Thank you for being honest. *Oh man* do I respect your honesty. Yeah, (*referring to the music*) it’s just weird. It’s a whole different language and I think it’s tougher than Spanish or French. It’s like Korean or Chinese or Russian where the actual characters are different than the characters we know. These aren’t letters; these are a whole different language. I appreciate, again, your being honest with me, Rebecca. (Video Notes, February 20)
- **Deb:** How many of you would get an “A” if I asked, “What does this time signature mean?” [*some kids raise hands*] How many would get a “C?” [*kids raise hands*] How many would probably fail? [*one student raises his hand*] Be honest with me. (*to the student who raised his hand*) Thank you for being honest. I don’t think you’re the only one. I appreciate the honesty. I respect that a lot. (Video Notes, February 20)
- **Deb:** What would you see in the key of F? How many know? How many think you know but wouldn’t want to bet any money on it? How many have absolutely

no idea? Thank you for being honest with me, I appreciate your honesty. (Field Notes, March 12)

- **Deb:** “Raise your hand when you make a mistake.” And they DO! It’s not often that they make a mistake, though. (Field Notes, March 12)
- **Deb:** “Raise your hand if you are lost. Thank you for being honest. Boy I respect your honesty!” (Video Notes, March 26)
- **Deb:** How many people know what is going on now? Most kids raise their hands except for one. “Wow I respect your honesty” and she sits with that child and briefly shows how to follow the voice part in the octavo. (Video Notes, March 26)

*Deb’s Personal Practical Knowledge*

**Bridget:** If you could change *one* thing about your choir class that would make it more like one of your other classes, what would that be?

**Oreo (O):** *(In one long, fast moving sentence.)* I don’t think I would change it to be like my other classes ‘cause I don’t really want it to be because that’s why I take it if I wanted it to be another class I would just take another math class or something ewww.

**Banana:** We’d change everything else to make it more like...

**O:** Choir!

### *Repertoire and Music Learning*

Deb exposes her Kinawa students to choral music from a variety of genres. Occasionally Deb's choice of music is restricted by students' religious affiliations, but she works hard to teach an array of musical styles.

**Oreo:** We've done lots of work on different styles (*lots of "Yeah!"*)...like the styles for the German song was different than from...

**Stuart Little (SL):** Shenandoah and the others.

**Banana (B):** She exposes us to...instead of just one type, she does a mixture of like, something in a different language and then you go to something all like jumpy and then to a slow song and then sad and...

**Freddie (F):** During the holidays, she'll give a Jewish song then a Christian song and then a Kwanzaa song. Like she switches around so you don't get a majority of Christian songs, a majority of Jewish songs.

**SL:** You get a little bit of everything.

**F:** Yeah, and that's really good because it helps you learn about cultures and more about songs.

**B:** It's kind of like a rainbow, you know (*all the girls respond to this analogy with sounds of excitement*) like every color...

**SL:** It's kind of like we're taking a tour of the *world* because we sing songs from Africa, yeah! And we sing (*the other girls start to help Stuart Little by identifying different cultures represented with past songs.*) German, Latin, Medieval...she just opens up so many different genres.

The boys' focus group enjoyed learning the song with German text, and appeared proud of their efforts in learning the proper German pronunciations. It seems that the boys also appreciated the opportunity of working with someone who spoke German fluently.

**Alejandro (A):** But it's really interesting the whole experience of it. Being around all of your friends and learning about music and different ways to do it and different styles. We sing a lot of different stuff in choir.

**Ben Dover (BD):** Yeah, last year we sang a...what was it? A German song...*(All of the boys start talking at once about how much they enjoyed learning the German song and working with the text. "That was fun! That was great!" The volume increases with excitement as they recall details, all at one time, which made it difficult to understand what they were saying.)*

**A and Muffin Man:** We got her German friend to come in and teach us how to say it...*(BD is laughing and clapping in the background)*

**Magic Hippo:** It was really cool!

**Naruto Uzamaki:** It was great! She took full credit for the song too and that was cool. *(Boys laugh and share similar sentiments)* She was like, "Oh! They're singing my song..."

Overall, the students enjoy the music that Deb selects for them. They seem to understand that if they do not care for a piece at first, if they stick with it they will usually end up liking it.

**Bridget:** Tell me about the songs Mrs. Borton chooses for you to sing in choir – too hard? Easy? Boring? Fun? Classical? Modern? Fast?

**Oreo (O):** I don't think I've ever had a boring song in choir. (*The girls started talking loudly all at the same time about whether they've ever disliked a song in choir.*) But I think all the songs this year have been really fun to work on.

**Freddie (F):** So far.

**Stuart Little (SL):** But sometimes even when you don't like a song it grows on you after you work on it...and sing it...(all the girls agree with "Yeah!")

**Banana:** Sometimes you don't like the song, but you get so *into* it you kind of just...(they start talking loudly all at once)

**O:** But you like the *feeling* of it!

**SL:** But sometimes you like a song and then you start singing it so much.

**F:** And then you're like...wow...

Deb's main criterion when selecting music is that the piece has to excite *her*. In addition, Deb approaches repertoire selection differently for her Varsity Choir than for her Sixth Grade Choir.

**Bridget:** What criteria do you use when you choose music?

**Deb:** I have to like it. If it's considered to be a great piece of music and I don't like it, then I'm not doing it! And by liking it...(long pause and choosing words carefully) I want to be authentically excited about the music I am teaching. About the piece. And thus, the "if I don't like it, I'm not teaching it." (*Thinking of other aspects*) Certainly range, style, what's the textbook answer you want? Things that hit me...things that hit my heart, I like to do. In terms of I *love* when there is a history behind the piece, whether it's *Inscription of Hope* you know, the Stroope

[the composer], or those sorts of things. They get me. Those sorts of things get me. Text is *huge*. *(long pause)* Worthy text.

**Bridget:** Do you approach picking out things for sixth and seventh graders and eighth graders differently?

**Deb:** Yeah, I guess a little bit differently. Sixth graders, I know what the Wardcliff kids can do, I know what they've been taught. Sixth graders I do a lot more rote things, *especially* at the beginning.

Deb's Sixth Grade Exploratory classes do not learn to read music during their six week class. "I only have them for six weeks. I want them matching pitch, feeling good about it, having the guts to get up and do it. So it's all rote teaching in that class." When the Sixth Grade Choir begins in January, students learn their first songs by rote and their musical knowledge is expanded throughout the remainder of the school year. Deb views rote teaching as a valuable educational tool.

**Deb:** *(Speaking slowly)* Rote is how your average person who goes and visits a new church, they're gonna learn by rote. Or the person who goes to a Christmas party and wants to sing along. Or a person who listens on the radio. It's all rote. They're all learning by rote. I mean, should that mean you shouldn't learn to read? No. But I see all the time, huge successes by doing something from rote that hooks them into being successful and *then* I slide in the academic part of it.

(Think Aloud)

#### *District Choral Festival*

**Deb:** The first year that I taught...Oh God it was so embarrassing! The high school director was talking me through district festival. I'd never been to festival, I'd never

sung in a choir that went to district festival and had never taught...I had *no experience*.

**Bridget:** Right! Because you hadn't even been in choir in school!

**Deb:** No! Now it was simply, "Okay, you're gonna take them in, they're gonna sing two songs, you'll sight-read...walk them through sight-reading in front of a judge.

*(Looking incredibly panicked as she recalls this experience)* So...*(laughing)* Whoo-ooo-ooo! The only voice you can hear on the [festival] CD...is *mine!* I sang along the entire performance, both songs! *(both laughing loudly)* What a scene, too! Judges' comments: Conductor's not supposed to sing.

**Bridget:** Seriously, they wrote that on your sheet? *(laughing)*

**Deb:** *(laughing)* Y-y-es! I was *so mortified*, God! I had no idea I was singing, but by God I wanted to make sure they did it right! *(both laughing very hard)* Oh! Oh! *S-s-s-uckage!* Absolute! Oh! Oh! It was *so mortifying!* G-o-d! I was *so scared!* Yah, I'm like, you know "wet pit city" and it was sixth grade choir! Two songs! *(both laughing throughout)* O-o-h man! It was horrible! *Horrible!*

**Bridget:** *(Laughing)* I love that you sang with them! That's *fantastic!*

**Deb:** I did! *(laughing throughout)* You can hear my voice! After festival, "We're going to listen to you sing but you have to listen *really hard*...you're going to hear a little bit of Mrs. Borton singing too....*(whispering)* sorry!" (Formal Interview)

During observations at Kinawa Middle School, Deb prepared her students for participation in the Michigan School Vocal Music Association (MSVMA) District Choral

Festival. Although she and her students took the process and event seriously, festival preparations did not dominate choral rehearsals.

**Deb:** I love choral festivals and I like that, at least in middle school, at least in my own little world, I don't feel any competition except with myself. I would not be interested in taking my kids to festival if somebody was going to win and somebody was going to lose. I have huge issues with that at this level. I feel bad for kids, for whom the expectations are low or the quality of instruction is low and they come in and they suck. I mean, I feel for kids. I *love* going to festival.

(Formal Interview)

Varsity Choir participates in District Festival for a rating, but Deb takes comments and ratings with a grain of salt. "This cannot be a 'bigger picture' accurate grading or evaluation. Because they [the judges] can't tell. They have no idea how much we *bled* last week to get seventh hour boys to match pitch" (Video Notes, March 19)

**Bridget:** What is your philosophy of festival?

**Deb:** If it were my own choice, if the world were mine, there would not be ratings. I mean I want the kids...my kids know I expect them to be at the top of their game, whether we are going for a rating or not. But that's not why I'm going to festival. I'm not going to get a "I." I want them absolutely on top of their game. "Well, what happens if we don't win?" Then that means you didn't perform your best. You perform your best, you win - whether we go to State Festival or not.

*That's* the goal. You got to give 100% of what you've got. Period.

**Bridget:** So even if they were to get a "II" that would be...?



**Deb:** That would be *fine* with me...if that was the best they could do. And that's how the Borton kids were brought up. If a C is 100% for you, go get 'em! If a C means crap effort, oh God help ya. (Video notes, March 19)

Some years are easier to earn an overall "I" rating than other years, but Deb tries to avoid a primary focus on ratings or qualification to State Choral Festival. Nonetheless, Varsity Choir receives an overall "I" rating and qualifies for State Choral Festival every year. "Am I competitive with myself? Yeah. I would like to think that I'm a good enough director to take every group I ever had to State. That somebody else's evaluation of us is that we are [good enough each year]" (Video Notes, March 19).

The Sixth Grade Choir also participates in District Choral Festival, but for "comments only." Because Sixth Grade Choir begins at the end of January and Choral Festival typically occurs in March, Deb does not believe that six weeks of rehearsal allows for an accurate adjudication of the choir. "I don't want my focus to be 'Hi! Welcome to choir! Now sit your ass down I have to teach you to sight-read in six weeks'" (Formal Interview). Deb is pleased with a "comments only" approach for the sixth graders and her primary goals for this choir are to experience Festival and hear other middle school choirs.

**D:** [the "comments only" option] It's a *great* feature. I wish...if the world were mine...I don't need to go to state festival. The best thing about state festival for me, and it would be plenty for me, would be to take my kids and let them *hear* groups. That's the best part of state festival. It's never the singing part for me. I *love* having my kids get a chance to listen to groups that are producing beautiful music. So in that way, I'm glad there is a vehicle to say "Yes, these groups are

doing something right. Come and listen.” But that’s all I need. I know...you know...we know if we’ve taught well. I know if my kids are doing what they are supposed to be doing. I don’t need a judge to say “yes, you are” or “no, you’re not.” I don’t like when I’ve gotten a “II” from a judge because they didn’t like my interpretation. (Formal Interview)

Deb considers participation in District and State Choral Festivals to be important learning experiences for her students. Although Deb maintains high standards and expectations for each choir, student focus is encouraged to remain on striving for personal best and not a specific adjudicator rating.

### *Playing the Piano*

Deb is the Kinawa Choir accompanist during rehearsals and performances. Although Deb obviously reads music, she plays the piano mostly by ear and can transpose music to any key. Her ability to transpose music is an incredibly useful skill, especially when working with middle school students. “When changing keys in warm-ups, she does not move from key to key in the traditional sense. But she creates a melody with the piano accompaniment that really supports their singing in tune” (Field Notes, March 12). Deb rarely uses music when she accompanies, whether in class or during performances, and conducts with head nods and facial expression. She usually faces the students head-on in class, but turns the piano on stage during performances so that students are off to her left.

Deb accidentally cut her finger in March, the week prior to District Choral Festival, and the stitches in her finger and splint limited her piano abilities. Because of her inability to play, Deb hired an accompanist for District Choral Festival at the last

minute. Following Festival, Deb and I discussed the students' responses to having both an accompanist *and* a conductor.

**Deb:** The kids sang better [at District Choral Festival] than I thought they would. And it was *so* fun! It was like Christmas. It was like a candy store being *able* to have an accompanist and being able to get music out of them this way (*begins conducting with her arms*) which was *un-believable* compared to (*conducts with her facial expression*).

**Bridget:** How did they respond? Were they able to...?

**Deb:** First time through they didn't know what the heck to do with that! They did not know what to do. Because they were used to (*conducts with face and head nods*). But they had great self-reflection. On Friday...we had worked with the accompanist Thursday morning and on Friday we were just kind of spot checking and so I asked the kids, "So how are you feeling?" and one of the boys in the baritone section said, "You know it was hard getting used to Mr. Draves playing because when *you* want us to crescendo, you just play louder. And so we just pick up the cue. But when Mr. Draves was playing, he'd play what was written and so we had to be responsible and that was hard to get used to." (*Deb sits with a look of amazement on her face.*) It was a *H-H-UGE* moment for me. Oh! I mean what a *great* self reflective statement! That was just *so* awesome, *so* awesome for me to hear. In terms of what I *don't* want to be doing. It was a *great* comment! *Whoa*. It was like a V-8 kind of moment. So anyway, by the end of Thursday's 40-minute rehearsal, they were kind of geeked about having hands up there. And they could reflect, oh my gosh it was so much easier doing cut-offs together and crescendos.

We could do all those things easier. Easier. So...the bumner is that next Thursday when we do these songs plus Ms. [intern's] piece, I'll be back at the keyboard. Well, oh well. It is what it is. So it will be interesting to see if they can... (Video Notes, March 19)

Although Deb has been largely successful as a simultaneous accompanist and conductor of her choirs, she has received criticism from other directors for fulfilling both roles during performances.

**Deb:** *[Telling a story of a past festival experience]* I wanted to take an accompanist to State Festival because that was the only s-slammng remark that I got at District Festival. "If you want to conduct, conduct. If you want to be an accompanist, be an accompanist. Don't do both." Oh just nailed me to the wall... two years ago? Three years ago? Just nailed me. *Oh not happy.* Not happy. And at State Festival I got the same comment. "If you're a conductor, then you conduct." Well, Okemos won't pay for an accompanist. So the parent group stepped in because some of the parents heard the comments at State Festival. They heard *her (a well-known choral conductor within the state of Michigan)* as our clinic judge.

**Bridget:** She said that *to* you in front of the kids?

**Deb:** Mm-hmmm. Oh yeah. "Your kids sing beautifully. But if you want to be a conductor, then conduct. If you want to be an accompanist, be an accompanist." And *so* the next year the parent group put money together [for an accompanist] but it was very difficult because the amount of money they gave allowed for an accompanist to come in for one rehearsal and the performance. So what happened the following year when I used an accompanist, the performances weren't as

good. Because, I mean, this (*the conducting gesture*) was fine, but for me the bottom line is that I need to do what makes the kids comfortable. (*After previously working with the accompanist for only 45 minutes at the last minute, the students had not been comfortable singing during the performance. However, this year with Mr. Draves, an exceptional accompanist, the kids felt very comfortable singing.*) My loyalty is to the kids because it's their performance, it's not mine.

(Video Notes, March 19)

Deb works to build students' confidence at every opportunity. Despite criticism regarding her simultaneous conductor-accompanist roles, Deb maintains her practice of playing and conducting so that her students feel safe and comfortable during performances.

#### *"Sectional Chocolate"*

Deb occasionally offers chocolate Hershey's kisses as a reward for something well-done or as a way to boost choir morale. Chocolate can go to individuals, a section of the choir, or an entire class. She, alone, decides who receives chocolate.

**Deb:** I've always had a canister, a little holiday canister, and I put smooches [Hershey's kisses] in it. And one of the things, in terms of when I talk to the kids everyday, every year-in-year-out, is that there are days when I need a hug and there are days when a person just needs a kiss. And it's not anything inappropriate, it's not anything sexual, it's not romantic. There are just times when a kid needs a kiss from a mom, when a mom needs a hug from a dad, when a teacher needs a hug from a kid, when a student needs a hug from somebody. And so here you go! We're doin' kisses in this class. And so there are days when

I'll bring the canister out and I won't say a word about it. I'll just shake it and set it on the piano. And it's Pavlovian, you know! (*Pants like a dog.*) And they sit and they, "Shh! Shh! Shh!" And there are days when the motivation for rehearsing isn't great, whether it's Friday or kids are sick or just bored or whatever. It will be sectional chocolate day, sectional kiss day. Let's just see who is just puttin' it out. And I will always try to get the kids to laugh somehow.

(Think aloud)

The majority of Deb's teaching methods focus on intrinsic motivation and building student confidence and morality awareness. "Sectional chocolate" reveals Deb's rare use of an extrinsic reward during which a piece of chocolate is given to individuals, a section of the choir, or an entire class because of a job well done.

### *Humor*

**Deb: I would have liked to have finished [writing] the SPAM (Singing Produces Awesome Miracles) song by now. I'd like thinner thighs and more money, but those aren't going to happen.**

**(Video Notes, January 16)**

Describing Deb without using words that imply "funny" or "entertaining" would be difficult. Humor is the cornerstone to Deb's personality and an integral part of her interactions with others, her classroom environment and her story of teaching.

**Deb: I like to make kids laugh. And a lot of it is that nobody laughs at me more than me. You know, I am the biggest nerd. My hero is Carol Burnett. Carol**

Burnett is my all-time favorite. I think she is *un*-believable. She just looks so ridiculously stupid and she's just okay with that. I'll never be a classic beauty. No boy is ever gonna have a crush on me. Which is not good or bad, it's just, you know, I'm not a physical specimen of absolute beauty. So I try to get 'em with my humor. And they know it's *safe* for them to not be perfect. You know I'll point it out when I've got a great big ol' honkin' zit. And go, "You know if you can't look me in the eye – you know I want eye contact - but if you can't, just look at the beacon on my nose. Look at something! Look at this mole. Here, look at the hair, find the hair in this mole. Here we go! Old ladies unite!" (*in a high-pitched voice, she imitates the response with which her students have been "trained" to respond when any comment is made about Deb's age.* ) "You're not old Mrs. Borton!" "No, I know I'm not, but if I *were* you'd see the hair comin' out of here! You give me your eyes!" And they know that it is okay when they've got, you know, a zit that I just want to go up and go (*gestures popping a zit...laughing*) God! *Please!* I'll be talking to them and going (*grimacing*) *Oh God!* Give me five seconds with a hot compress! You're killin' me! (*laughing hard*) (Think Aloud)

Part of the charm of Deb's humor is how she uses it. She infuses her classes with humor in various ways whether being mildly funny, outright funny, sarcastic, or silly. For example, during one observation, the students sang beautifully with a full, warm sound and solid harmony parts. She occasionally tweaked dynamics, but was in full "work mode." During the places of the song where solos would be assigned, Deb suddenly rolled her tongue in her mouth and made a *loud* gargling noise. At one point, she looked at the video camera and made a wide-eyed funny face while rolling her tongue. The

students laughed loudly at her sudden silliness and then Deb immediately returned to “work mode.” On another occasion, “In the midst of finding their part, she tells a story about her dogs and the cat. The kids are laughing. She moves right back into rehearsal and they are right with her” (Video Notes, March 26).

Deb enjoys making her students laugh and often does so with passing comments. “Good for you! That was really quite luscious!” “Oh *inteligente* ones! Hey! I’m bilingual!” “Look up here! I’m being *fascinating*!” During a rehearsal, an eighth grade girl took off her jacket and tossed it out of the way, but it was thrown much farther than intended. Deb watched the jacket fly by her and then commented out loud, “That was Emily’s grade I saw! It almost went over the entire horizon!” To another boy, moving slowly to get his folder, “I’ve seen sleeping animals move faster.” While explaining logistics for a joint concert with the elementary, Deb tells Varsity Choir, who are behaving incredibly lethargically, “Obviously, the energy is going to come from the elementary students.” When the baritones sang a low note, Deb exclaimed to one of them, “You just popped a whisker! *I* just popped a whisker...” and added, looking at me and smiling, “...but that’s menopause.”

**Magic Hippo:** She kind of like, I don’t know...like, most guys by eighth grade, there’s got to be at least a little ADD [attention deficit disorder] factor goin’ on there, and she kind of uses that because she’s *completely random* which is, like...amazing.

**Alejandro:** Yeah, she’ll go off on stories...

**Naruto Uzamaki:** Tangents and everything.



*The “Neck Harp”*

Deb uses many tricks and gimmicks to make her students laugh. One prominent gimmick involves the tendon in her neck which demonstrates Deb’s philosophy that it is safe to be different and goofy.

**Deb:** *(voice gets louder, as if a middle school student was egging her on)* “Do your ‘thing,’ Mrs. Borton!” Because I’ve got this tendon thing...

**Bridget:** *(laughing)* In your neck?

**Deb:** *(Deb lowers her chin and tenses all the muscles in her lower face and neck, causing a tendon in her neck to jut out as she “plucks” it like a string instrument.)*

I pretend it’s a string bass. I get the boys with it...*(starts singing “da ding ding ding ding” as if she were playing a string bass. I am laughing hysterically.)*

**Bridget:** I like that!

**Deb:** I know! Hey anybody want to hear it on string bass? *(Imitating the students)*

Yeah! Cool! Cool! *(da ding ding ding ding...)* *(pausing)* They love it!

The girls’ focus group laughed about Deb’s “neck harp” and how she is willing to poke fun at herself. The students recognize that Deb’s silliness is for their benefit and “gives them permission” to also be silly.

**Freddie (F):** She’s so funny.

**Banana (B):** She has such a good sense of humor...

**Oreo (O):** She’s so funny!

**Stuart Little (SL):** Ye-ah! She’s so funny!

**B:** ...she can make something, like really negative such a *positive*. *(There is a moment of silence as the girls ponder Deb’s sense of humor and personality.)*

**SL:** Or like something completely crazily weird into, like, the most hilarious thing you've ever seen!

**F:** Next thing you know the entire choir is...*(for the next 30 seconds the girls are extremely loud, laughing and talking about the funny things Mrs. Borton does. One item mentioned is her "playing the thing in her neck like a harp" and "popping her vein out" and "She is the funniest person!" The volume and energy of the girls is very high and they are smiling broadly as they talk.)*

**O:** *(In reference to Mrs. Borton "popping out" and playing the tendon in her neck like a harp)* And if we are not smiling, she'll go up on stage and be like *eeeeaw (grossed out by Mrs. Borton's neck-harp playing, but laughing)* and then....

**Bridget:** She does that on stage?

**O:** Yeah! *(loud laughing and "Yeah!")*

**F:** She walks in and turns towards us to make sure the audience can't see and she's like *(motions to pluck her neck tendon).*

**SL:** My parents can tell when she does something funny on stage. Like she'll make the funniest faces sometimes and we'll be like *(tries to stifle a laugh)* start cracking up and my parents are like, "What did she do?" and I'm, like, "I'm not telling you!" *(laughing)*

**F:** She is *so* good at making fun of herself too.

The girls agreed that a large reason choir is fun is because Deb is funny. Not only does Deb's humor make choir entertaining, her sense of humor helps students through other aspects of their day.

**F:** Sometimes when we're in choir she'll say something really funny and I can't stop laughing or start singing and I'm still standing up and cracking up and everyone's singing and I'm like...I can't even finish the song. I think that's the class I laugh the most in because it's so much fun.

**B:** It's definitely the place to go if you're upset or something bad happened or like your boyfriend dumped you (*all the girls burst out laughing*) or if you're in a fight with friends...or even just family problems. (*The girls all respond with "Yeah"*)

Humor is an integral part of Deb's personality and she enjoys being silly and making people laugh. Through humor, Deb maintains a safe and positive classroom atmosphere where her students also feel safe to be goofy, laugh at themselves, and have fun.

### *Classroom Management*

Deb is consistent with her expectations of student behavior and, as a result, problems rarely arise. Different techniques are used to gain student focus and attention during rehearsals and pre-performance warm-up sessions. For example, Deb will hum a tone and, as her students hear her, they hum it with her; she never says a word. Other techniques include a countdown, or Deb will freeze in place and wait for student attention. When the class is especially noisy, Deb will play only one note or one chord on the piano and hold it until the class is silent and focused on her. In promoting respect, anyone (student or adult) who says "shut up" must type out fifteen intelligent alternatives to "shut up," as demonstrated by the following list composed by a Varsity Choir member.

## **!!!15 Awesome Alternatives to “Shut-up”!!!**

**By Rosie Allen  
Hour 5**

- 1. Cierre su boca por favor**
- 2. Sheket bevakasha**
- 3. It takes more muscles to talk than it does to just sit there with your mouth closed**
- 4. Less talking, more singing**
- 5. This is what you’re doing... :o  
This is what I’d like you to be doing... :)**
- 6. One time, I heard that someone permanently paralyzed their face from talking too much...I would never want you to do that!**
- 7. Have you ever played the silent game?**
- 8. I would appreciate it if you could temporarily refrain from any movement in the jaw area**
- 9. Hey, can you fit your fist in your mouth?**
- 10. Can you touch your tongue to your nose?**
- 11. I’ve got \$5 in my locker, wanna stop talking?**
- 12. Let’s take a trip to paradise! Close your eyes, close your mouth, and listen to the waves crashing with the beat to the Hawaiian tune.**
- 13. Have you ever tried eating a tissue? There’re really yummy, why don’t you get into the office and try one!**
- 14. Over-talking is a symptom of your own anxiety. I think you should consider taking a break.**
- 15. Extravaganza’s coming up! Don’t you want to rest your voice so you can sound your best?**

Deb insists on full attention and respect for anyone addressing the class, whether an adult or another student is speaking. The intern teacher commented that “Deb gives such focus to *everyone* and she works really hard to have everyone know and respect everyone else.” For anyone addressing the class, Deb insists on full attention and respect, whether it is from an adult or another student.

**(Video Notes)** As each of them speaks, she focused on each student, giving each her undivided attention. (*Looking at a student who is not supposed to be speaking*)

“Oops! Only one person has permission to talk” and she looks right back at the kid who was talking to the class. Deb really commits to respect for that person.

(March 19)

When students are talking and Deb is waiting, she will say, “I’ll wait for you, but I won’t wait again.” Students respond immediately. “Her voice never gets loud. Always a medium-loud speaking volume or softer volume. Never pushed, hardly raised. Healthy vocal model. Always a feeling of calm over her” (Video Notes, January 16). Deb discussed her expectations of students and their behavior in choir.

**Deb:** They know that if I’m doing, you know, the stuff where if I’m gathering my papers, if I’m moving the piano, or if I’m getting something out of my office - I don’t care if they sit and talk. Good God, I don’t need them. When it’s my turn, when I’m ready (*pauses and speaks softly*) “Knock it off – it’s Borton time.” And so, what I’ve heard myself saying more in recent years or months is, (*voice gets quieter*) “I’ll wait. But I’m not happy about it.” And I don’t even have to say it loudly. I say it one time, (*voice practically a whisper*) “I’ll wait, but I’m not happy.” And boy! Then they (*gasps quietly*). They want to please me and I don’t

know... There's a teeny bit of fear factor there. I mean, I don't know what the hell they think I'm really gonna do, because I'm not a big screamer. I don't "go off." They know that I'm really, really angry when I get quieter. And there are kids that will say, *(in a slightly pleading voice)* "Don't do your eyes, Mrs. Borton, just don't do your eyes!" because I can make a kid just...I can cause road kill.

**Bridget:** With a look?

**Deb:** Oh! I can look at a kid and I... *(laughing)* I don't want to show it to you because, honest to God, it's *horrible*. I get it from my mother and when she does it, I just want to go...*(makes a popping noise and gesture)* pop 'em out of her head because I just *hate* those eyes when she does those eyes. But I can look at a kid and I just...I mean I can just...*(starts to change expressions with her incredibly expressive eyes, but changes her mind and smiles a broad smile)*

**Bridget:** It's just "the look." *(laughing)*

**Deb:** So...*(us both laughing)* I love the children! So I guess for, at least these guys, I have a commanding presence. They can tell *physically* when I'm ready to work. And so yes, I'll set it up at the beginning of the year or like at the beginning of sixth grade choir, "When you come in I want you in your places. You can sit and talk; I would want to sit and talk too. When I'm ready to get your attention I'll play a chord on the piano." And I tell them straight up, I'd rather do that then yell *(nasty look on her face)* "Shut up!" because here in this room, we don't allow that. Then I'd have to make up fifteen intelligent alternatives and that would be a waste of my time. So if you hear the chord that means quiet up. And there are times when I'll play the chord and it doesn't seem to have an affect. And I'll just

say (*voice grows quiet and a touch chilly*) “That’s one.” And I’ll play a second one. And they know if I get to three, we have a talk about it after the bell which really *pisses* them off ....and it should piss some of them off because they haven’t been the talkers. I don’t like to do that. I don’t like to punish a whole group if somebody’s being a pain. But I’ll do one, “That’s one. And then after two it’s a little more pointed eyes...(*face becomes more stern, voice quiets and chills*) “That’s two.” And...(*voice very soft*) it doesn’t usually have to go to three chords. (Think Aloud)

*Sarcasm*

**Deb: (*discussing her students and singing abilities*) Typical clientele this year.**

**Bridget: Interesting.**

**Deb: Interesting? *Herpes* is interesting... (Field Notes, March 12)**

Deb has an incredibly quick wit and a fondness for sarcasm that is used inside and outside her classroom. Sarcasm is also an element of Deb’s classroom management. When Deb quips at them, the students always laugh at her and then do what she asks. Deb openly admits that she enjoys being sarcastic with her students, but she is never mean or belittling. “I’ll make you a deal. You quit playing the bongo and I won’t break your wrists.” (*Deb tells two students to move away from each other*) “The ‘Save Your Grade Foundation’ says to move!” “Get rid of your gum now and we won’t mention any names, Erica.”

**(*During the Think-Aloud, watching a video clip*) One boy begins to talk about getting a “sweet from Sweet” (me) and is cracking himself up.**

**Deb:** *(In a very dry tone, giving the boy “a look”)* We have a new name for this class. It’s called “Nerds of America.” Deb immediately starts to play the introduction to the next song and smiles a coy smile at the boy. *(Video clip off)*

**Bridget:** So you look at him...you give him “the look” and you *do* smile at him.

**Deb:** Oh *yeah*.

**Bridget:** So your “Nerds” comment - that’s your sarcasm? Would you consider that your classroom management?

**Deb:** Yes. Yes. Which is absolutely against what everybody’s ever taught me, “Sarcasm has no place in the classroom.” I use sarcasm all the time. And I would like to think that *they know* I am just teasing when I call them “Nerds of America.” That they think, “Oh yeah, we’re the “Nerds of America.” You know my boys in the Varsity choir this fall, they did something *right*...Oh my God. I told them, “You are *super* musically intelligent studly muffins, all in one group on the risers.” *(imitating students)* “We *are*? We’re SMISMS!” They made t-shirts and walked in the next day with “SMISMS – Super Musically Intelligent Stud Muffins” on their shirts! “That’s a SMISM look, oh yeah, *that’s* studly.” I’m so used to giving kids shit all the time. It’s sarcasm and they *know* that I’m *loving* them. I don’t know how I feel like I know that they know – maybe I’m full of myself. But, oh yeah....I tease ‘em all the time. *(Think Aloud)*

There is an understanding between Deb and her students that her teasing is a form of fondness for them. From student behavior in choir and interactions with Deb, it is obvious that her students understand that Deb never laughs *at* them and laughs *with* them. *(Video Notes)* “She pokes fun at individuals and everyone laughs, but *with* that student,



never at them. They almost laugh waiting and wanting for her to single *them* out” (March 26). Another observation, “At one point, one of the baritones kept making a mistake and Deb turned and looked *right* into the video camera and said, ‘That was [student’s name], front row baritone.’ All laughed and he laughed too. Again, they LOVE being the focus of her attention and teasing” (Video Notes, March 19).

**“Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!” The students finish singing *This Little Light of Mine* and can tell from the look on Deb’s face that she has something to say. Without a word, Deb walks over to the dry erase board and writes “lid” on the board.**

**“What’s a lid?”**

**Blank faces stare back at Deb.**

**She asks again, “Baritones. Define ‘liddle,’ please. As in, this liddle light of mine.”**

**One short boy, with dark skin and a mass of dark curls, raises his hand. With a straight face, he says “Small and petite.” The entire class bursts out laughing as the student high-fives with his friends. “That was awesome! That was so funny!”**

**Deb looks at the boy without cracking a smile. “No.” Another outburst of laughter from the students causes Deb to give the boy a wide-eyed stare and then a little smile to acknowledge his cleverness. Following a short discussion regarding diction on the word “little,” the choir sings**

**through the song again. After the final note, Deb looks at the baritones,  
“Men! That singing was *quite lovely*...in a small and petite way.”**

Members of the boys’ focus group believe that Deb’s sense of humor earns her the students’ respect.

**Alejandro (A):** She’s not strict or...because everyone in the class sort of respects her a ton so she doesn’t really have to worry about losing control of the class.

**Bridget:** Nobody crosses that line?

**Ben Dover:** Oh no.

**Magic Hippo:** No...

**Naruto Uzamaki:** She earns respect by going along with the class and working with you in your own manner. She uses (*grinning slyly and making a “quoting” gesture in the air*) “potty humor” as we call it. (*the boys laugh*) She uses the word “petunias” a lot and “smackin’ the rumpus” or something like that (*everyone laughing loud and rowdy*).

**A:** All the baritones are studly muffins. (*All the boys say “Yeah! That’s right! SMISMS”*)

**A and Muffin Man:** (*looking very proud*) SMISMS – Superbly musically intelligent studly muffins.

*SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles*

**All members of the Varsity Choir are wearing their SPAM shirt over their dress clothes. The boys have pulled their neck ties out from**

underneath the t-shirt so that it drapes over the middle of the blue and yellow SPAM logo. The audience begins to cheer loudly as “Spammy” appears to greet the crowd.

“Spammy” is an enormous blue wooden box painted with the SPAM logo across the front and designed to be worn as a costume. Above the logo is a cartoon-esque smiling face. To allow the Spammy to walk, the bottom of the box is open; a narrow arm hole has been cut out of each side of the box and there is a hole in the top of the box just large enough for someone’s head to poke through. This year, Spammy is the physical education teacher who, although mostly hidden under the blue box, is wearing a black turtleneck, tight black leggings, black dress shoes, and dark black sunglasses.

The students laugh as Spammy moves awkwardly around the auditorium and makes his way on stage. Following a quick pose for the audience, Spammy turns and wobble-runs across the stage near the risers, slapping high-five’s with the singers. Everyone claps, cheers, and laughs loudly as Spammy leaves the stage.

Deb begins to play the introduction for the tune “Y-M-C-A,” although the Varsity Choir is premiering a new version tonight. Each year Deb creates new words to a familiar song and the students perform the piece in the middle of the Extravaganza concert. Past pieces have included “My Favorite Things” to “Fame” to “Mr. Spam-man.” This year Deb has rewritten “Y-M-C-A” to honor SPAM.

**The students suddenly begin popping their hip to the beat of the song. As the music increases in volume, the energy on stage surges! The singing is loud and strong and carefully choreographed. Whenever S-P-A-M is sung, students shape the individual letters with their arms.**

**Young man, here is something to eat,  
We said, young man, it is really a treat.  
We said, young man, when you're ready to dine,  
There's no need to go away hungry.**

**Young man, try some SPAM if you dare.  
We said, young man, it'll curl your hair  
You can fry it, top it off with some cheese;  
Take a bite; it's sure to please you.**

***Come on, and join us for S-P-A-M,  
Can you believe it? It's S-P-A-M.  
It is made out of pork; at least that's what they say,  
Won't you give it a try today?***

***Come on and join us for S-P-A-M,  
You're gonna love to eat S-P-A-M.  
Try a SPAM pizza pie or maybe SPAM stir-fry;  
We just eat it and don't ask why.***

**Young man, SPAM is really good!**

**We'd like to eat every day if we could.**

**If I could somehow say that with a straight face,**

**It could help my grade in choir.**

**Young man, whatever it's called,**

**Singing Produces Awesome Miracles.**

**So thanks for coming to our concert tonight,**

**'Cause we love performing for you!**

***Come on, and join us for S-P-A-M,***

***Can you believe it? It's S-P-A-M.***

***It is made out of pork; at least that's what they say,***

***Won't you give it a try today?***

***Come on and join us for S-P-A-M,***

***You're gonna love to eat S-P-A-M.***

***Try a SPAM pizza pie or maybe SPAM stir-fry;***

***We just eat it and don't ask why.***

***Come on and join us for SPAM!***

**The audience bursts out with cheers and applause as the students laugh, frozen in their last choreographed position. The second half of the concert begins as the SPAM students leave the stage.**

**Following the Extravaganza concert, students and family members gradually move into the hallway for a SPAM reception. One of Deb's friends has constructed the annual SPAM trees for the reception, which involve pieces of SPAM and cheese on toothpicks arranged in a large cone shape. A group of boys gather near the SPAM trees, looking at the snacks.**

**"Sick," says Joe. "No one eats it."**

**The boys laugh at Joe's comment as they watch people hesitantly walk by the SPAM display.**

**Matt approaches his friends. "I ate it! I ate it! I so ate it!"**

**Joe asks, "What exactly IS it?"**

**Matt explains, proud to be the brave one. "It's basically a sweet meat, but it's not....it's not very good."**

**Jason admits, "I tried it last year and it was *nasty*. It was cold and salty and...ew."**

**"Yeah," says Matt, "But it's here every year. It would NOT be the Extravaganza concert without it. Something would definitely be missing."**

**The boys all agree, snickering at the faces of people around them tasting SPAM for the first time.**

The Kinawa choir motto is SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles. Deb has associated the acronym with the Hormel pork product SPAM© and uses the product logo to promote her acronym. Hundreds of SPAM logo signs, magnets, and pictures decorate the choir room and Deb's office. All choir students purchase a SPAM logo t-shirt and wear it to school on the day of a choral concert and during the SPAM song at the Extravaganza concert. Deb explained the idea behind SPAM was explained in the context of her sixth grade exploratory classes.

**Bridget:** When you are teaching them songs in the sixth grader exploratory, do you get into *reading* a lot of music?

**Deb:** No. No. Absolutely not. It's sixth grade exploratory. The idea, for me, of my sixth grade exploratories is to get them hooked on singing in this room. That they want to be part of my program and that they want to see that middle school *singing* is different than elementary. So many kids come out of elementary knowing that it sucks and that it's boring and it's...*ugh*...thank God they're done with that. So I want them to go, "Oh my gosh! Yeah! This is a real..." And has energy with what the teacher's doing and the hook is that singing really is cool. That's the whole...that's the SPAM thing. All of that. There's something that grabs a kid of that age.

Members of the boys' focus group provided background information on the creation of SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles and how this creation was a tribute to Deb's late father.

**Bridget:** Talk to me about SPAM.

**All boys:** Singing Produces Awesome Miracles! Yes!

**Alejandro (A):** SPAM's sort of like a way of life.

**Muffin Man (MM):** It's from her hometown. *(The other boys contribute a "yeah" here and there while others are talking.)* Her dad had to work there so that....

**Naruto Uzamaki (NU):** And she's got a whole story beyond it. *(Looking at the others)* I think we could sum it up? Anyone want to say it? *(They all look at each other and Muffin Man shrugs his shoulders to volunteer.)* You want to?

**MM:** Okay, so SPAM is an acronym for Singing Produces Awesome Miracles. And Spam was made in her hometown of Austin, Minnesota. And her dad had to work there, even though he hated it, just so she could go to college.

**Ben Dover:** *(softly)* To make money.

**NU:** And what his job was, was like cleaning up....

**MM:** Was cleaning up all the dead animals and all the dead parts...

**A:** Cleaning up dirt and the dead parts, yeah...

**NU:** Butchered parts that fell on the floor of the factory...every day.

**MM:** So that meant a lot to her so she made it into the acronym for our Varsity choir.

**NU:** *(At the same time as Alejandro)* And then ever since then, we've been touring around doing things for nice people. Like tomorrow is Valentines Day, so we're going to the senior center where we'll sing love songs to the old people.

The girls' focus group also spoke fondly of SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles. During their contemplations on SPAM they identified "miracles" that they associated with choir and singing.



**Bridget:** Talk to me about SPAM.

**Banana (B):** It rocks.

**Freddie (F):** Best thing *ever*. (*All the girls talk at once in excited voices.*) I thought it was so cool...

**B:** It doesn't really taste good. (*laughs*)

**Stuart Little (SL):** I love how she came up with that! I love how she's actually from Minnesota and the whole SPAM-fab thing that she brought SPAM in...*and* she made the acronym and everything...*and* the shirts...

**B:** I think it kind-of does represent what it says. Like produces awesome miracles...it really *does*.

**SL:** Yeah, I think singing does help. Like last year, my voice was *not* strong and I think that the miracle for me was that it actually got stronger and I got *so* over my nerves.

**B:** I think that was the miracle for me. I just have so much more confidence. (*All the girls immediately start telling Banana how much she has improved and complimenting her singing and newly gained confidence in singing.*)

**F:** (*to B*) For Extravaganza, you were *so* good. But I think one of the miracles is actually Mrs. Borton because she does so much for us.

**Oreo:** I think singing also produces miracles because it makes you *feel* so good when you sing. I'll have a really bad day and I think it's awesome because singing is just like...it's like a *feel-good* factor.

### *Summary*

The Kinawa Middle School choir program would not be what it is today without Deb Borton. Her strong emphasis on a welcoming and supportive classroom environment has impacted her students in many positive ways, which they discussed at length during focus group interviews. From day one, choir students feel like an important part of the class and view Deb as a caring person to whom they can talk and trust. Students are not worried about making mistakes in Deb's classes and they understand that their individuality, efforts, and honesty are valued.

Deb's personal practical knowledge has guided her successful teaching career and she is an incredibly strong musician. Students benefit from Deb's knowledge and experience through quality choral repertoire, daily rehearsals, and festival participation. However, in addition to Deb's musical skills, her use of humor is an integral part of how she teaches. Through humor, Deb maintains a positive classroom atmosphere where her students feel safe to be goofy, laugh at themselves, and have fun. In addition, humor and sarcasm are safely used for classroom management purposes. Student morale is encouraged through the choir motto SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles, which all choir students uphold and respect.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Morality

One of Deb's favorite stories from *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993)...

*I was living in Chicago and going through what was a particularly cold winter both in my personal life and the outside temperature. One evening I was walking home from a bar where I had been drinking alone, feeling sorry for myself, when I saw a homeless man standing over an exhaust grate in front of a department store. He was wearing a filthy sport coat and approaching everyone who passed by for money.*

*I was too immersed in my own troubles to deal with him so I crossed the street. As I went by, I looked over and saw a businessman come out of the store and pull a ski parka out of a bag and hand it to the homeless man. For a moment both the man and I were frozen in time as the businessman turned and walked away. Then the man looked across the street at me. He shook his head slowly and I knew he was crying. It was the last time I have ever been able to disappear into my own sorrow. (p. 64)*

Moral is defined as "Of or relating to principles of right and wrong; conforming to a standard of right behavior; capable of right and wrong action" (Mish, et. al., 2004, p. 469). Morality is defined as "moral conduct: virtue" (Mish, et al., 2004, p. 470). Deb's teaching philosophy is centered on teaching children and adolescents how to be good, caring people; her medium is choral music. Through discussions, activities, and classroom environment, Deb constantly works to develop the morality of her students.

### *Random Acts of Kindness*

Random acts of kindness are important in Deb's classroom and are defined as "things that are done for no reward." She encourages the concept by occasionally reading stories from the book *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993) as well as through conversations with her students. Deb's endorsement of "random acts of kindness" has encouraged many students to embrace the concept.

**Ben Dover (BD):** She's really into the "random acts of kindness" thing. Every week at least once a day she'll read out of this little random acts of kindness book and they're examples of people that...*(All the boys start talking at once.)*

**Naruto Uzamaki (NU):** How you can be nice and stuff.

**Muffin Man (MM):** Short stories about it, too.

**Alejandro (A):** People who, like, give horses to their friends for no good reason and like...

**MM:** Like short stories. *(All start talking at once about different stories they have heard from Mrs. Borton about random acts of kindness.)*

**NU:** Clean the lady's car who lives down the street who couldn't do it...

**Bridget:** She reads once a week?

**A:** It's not on a schedule. It's whenever she feels like it.

**BD:** Like if we have time at the end of class or something.

**Bridget:** How do people respond when she does that?

**NU:** We are in awe by some of the things that have been said and done I guess.  
*(The boys are saying "Yeah" and "Yes" to agree with comments expressed.)*

**A:** It's pretty cool!

**BD:** And we react well. We'll do it. We'll do random acts of kindness. Like there was one time, Little Debbie... *(the other boys say "Oh yeah" with a serious tone.)*

**Magic Hippo (MH):** That was so depressing.

**NU:** Mrs. Borton's sister's daughter. *(the other boys offer the word "Niece")* niece, has passed away due to an illness.

**A:** Heart defect, I think.

**NU:** She was, I think, mentally ill. She was twenty-two. I heard that someone in her school called her a "retard" so she went home and she asked Big Debbie...

**A:** Yeah, that's Mrs. Borton.

**NU:** Because Mrs. Borton is Deb. And she's Deb too, so it's Little Debbie, Big Debbie...

**Bridget:** Okay. Got it.

**NU:** So she [Little Debbie] asked her [Big Debbie], "Am I really retarded?" and she was like, "No, the person who called you 'retarded' would be the one who is actually the stupid one." To realize it's what's inside a person as opposed to *how* they act and stuff and that was just downright wrong and mean of them.

**MM:** [Following her death] And then people made signs that said, like, "We love Little Debbie" and stuff.

**NU:** "In memory of her death."

**BD:** We made shirts and stuff. *(Lots of talking at the same time about what students did for Mrs. Borton during this time.)* We hung signs up on Mrs. Borton's door.

**Bridget:** When was this?

**MH:** It was this past year because we sent it to the mom.

**NU:** She had a staff infection or something. (*"Yeah."*)

**MM:** And her immune system was so weak. (*"Yeah."*)

**Bridget:** Oh my goodness.

**A:** Yeah, it was pretty sad.

**NU:** So we all pitched in and signed cards and did things.

**Bridget:** I bet that meant *a lot* to her.

**A:** Yeah. (*"Yeah, it did."*)

**NU:** But like I said, the whole choir works as a *group* opposed to being all individuals trying to sing our own parts and that's not all. It's inside choir and outside choir. (*Several boys say "Yeah"*) All around the school, we're always tryin' to help someone else.

**Bridget:** Why do you think that is?

**NU:** I guess it is Mrs. Borton's impact on us.

**A:** It's just sort of the whole *experience*, we've all sort of shared something.

**NU:** It's like a chain reaction. Like Alejandro said, we all share something...

**A:** We all shared something that's so powerful and...*different* that it kind of makes us work together and be...

**NU:** Who we are, who we are.

### *The Magic Dragon Story*

Another of Deb's favorite stories from *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993) is the "Magic Dragon" story.

*Several years ago, when I was living in Chicago, I read in the newspaper about a little boy who had leukemia. Every time he was feeling discouraged or particularly sick, a package would arrive for him containing some little toy or book to cheer him up, with a note saying the present was from the Magic Dragon. No one knew who it was. Eventually the boy died, and his parents thought the Magic Dragon finally would come forth and reveal him or herself. But that never happened. After hearing the story, I resolved to become a Magic Dragon whenever I could, and I have had many occasions. (p. 18)*

Deb often references the Magic Dragon Story, especially when she is aware that someone at Kinawa is hurting or grieving. For example, the mother of a Kinawa teacher passed away and, after reading the story to the sixth grade choir, she discussed what it means to "be a Magic Dragon."

**Deb:** This story hits me where I live. Boys and girls, there is a teacher walking around today who has lost their mother. It doesn't matter who it is. Their heart is broken today. There is probably a student here at Kinawa Middle School whose parent is sick or whose parents are divorcing and their heart is broken. It is YOUR choice to put your dragon on. (Field Notes, March 19)

Although Deb encourages her students to carry out random acts of kindness, she is occasionally the recipient of an “act.” Whenever someone does something for her, and it is usually anonymous, she thanks the person in each of her three classes.

**Deb:** Someone randomly acted upon me. If it was you, I want you to know how much it meant to me. This was in my mailbox: (*holding up a heart-shaped piece of paper*) “Roses are red, Violets are blue, Choir is cool and so are you!” Group sigh! (*entire class breathes in and says “Awwwww.”*) Thank you so much for whoever that was. Please know that this note will be up on my bulletin board for the rest of my teaching career. And I don’t believe I ordered any girl scout cookies from Kinawa kids, because church kids got me first so I bought from them, but nonetheless there’s this box of my favorites sitting up here with my name on it. If that was from you, thank you! (*holding the box up to her thigh*) They’ll look lovely! Thank you for randomly acting upon me! I feel so acted upon! *I like it!* My Magic Dragon...made me feel like a queen today! (Video Notes, March 19)

Another student of Deb’s began leaving her anonymous notes written on yellow paper, each shaped and decorated differently. One particular note was the shape of the sun and colored like a rainbow. On it was written, “I hope that this sun will help to brighten your day. You said before that the day was full of clouds, and this is to break through them and SHINE. From: the mysterious yellow-object giver.” (Personal Notes, March 12)

On a different occasion, Deb received an anonymous birthday card from a student, in which was written, “Even though it’s not your birthday, you mean the world to



me! There are millions of ways to show it, but through music, how can we not be joyful?  
You'll never know how much you mean to me. Your student." (Field Notes, May 22)

*Developing Student Awareness*

**Deb: Joys that are shared, become larger joys. They grow somehow when you get to share something with somebody. And when you've got something just breaking your heart, at least I know in my life, if I've got somebody to share it with, it lightens up. (Video Notes, March 26)**

Stories about people, sometimes fictional and sometimes real, are used to build student awareness of human emotion and a sense of morality. Deb told her students the true story of the high school orchestra director who was retiring after 42 years of teaching.

**Deb:** This is an unbelievable ending year for her. Talk about Magic Dragon moments! Her *life* has been teaching orchestra here. *Her life*. Her days, her evenings, her weekends. Boy oh boy. Between now and June 10, if you get the chance to thank her...she is one of the reasons that Kinawa is so highly respected and that Okemos high school is so highly respected. Not just in Okemos but around the whole state because of what that woman has done. She is *un-*believable. She has done such a great job. It was very hard for her to do all these last concerts; she gets very teary-eyed when nobody's watching. This is shutting down a huge part of her life. (Video Notes, March 19)

In Mid-March, the intern teacher's grandmother died. On the day I observed, the intern was gone for funeral services. One of Deb's sixth grade students had written a letter of sympathy and support to the intern and Deb thanked the choir member for the letter, anonymously, in front of the class. In addition, because of the sixth grade choir's fondness for the intern teacher, Deb spoke with them at length about how the students could "take care" of the intern when she returned.

**Deb:** [When she does return] She will be tired and fragile. If she is here, you know what to do – just love her up. Thank you in advance for loving her up. Did we talk about what to say to her when she walks back in the door? (*Students reply with "No."*) Hey, it's a little bit awkward. I don't know if you feel awkward but many people do and I used to feel awkward *especially* when somebody dies. My friend would come back to school or a teacher would or a student would and you just didn't want to make them cry. You would be worried that "If I say something, it's just gonna make them sad." You didn't want to make them think about it. Well here's a news flash: Ms. [intern] is going to be thinking about her grandmother whether you or I say anything or not. It's just going to be on her heart. *Deb then spoke about the Wardcliff elementary kids who were nervous and did not want to upset the intern teacher.* I will tell you, if you are in choir with me for any length of time, you will see me cry. I'll tell you that because you are let into a place in my life, and you have to know what's going on in my life, because you are my support system. I count on your friendship. In the same way, I will see many of you cry. I hope that I will never have to go to a funeral for someone that you love, but I may have to. But it's hard to see an adult cry. So if

Ms. [intern] comes back tomorrow, and you know I'll be huggin' up on her, and if she does start to cry, well yeah for her. What a compliment to you that she feels safe. Things to say to her... Welcome back Ms. [intern], I hope your trip was safe. Ms. [intern], I'm so sorry for your loss again. Even though we heard her say it in here yesterday, why she was leaving, it's still okay to acknowledge that we know she's still thinking about her grandma. Your grandma must have been a wonderful woman. How are your parents doing? We're really glad you're back – we missed you. Those sorts of things are appropriate. Or even just Hi, Ms. [intern], welcome back. Just something that connects is a really, really kind thing to do. And if you can't, no problem. Watch somebody who can and then give it a try sometime. It makes me feel good when I've been able to connect with somebody who's hurting. (Video Notes, March 26)

Another of Deb's favorite stories from *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993)...

*When I was in college, I worked part-time at a sporting goods store. There was a kid who would come by two or three times a week to visit with this baseball mitt that he wanted to buy. My manager and I would joke about him not only because he was so dedicated and persistent, but also because he had picked the best and most expensive mitt in the shop to get obsessed about.*

*This went on for months. The kids would come in, and you could tell he was so relieved that the mitt was still there. He would put it on, pound his fist into the pocket a couple of times, and then very carefully put it back onto the shelf and leave. Finally, one day he came in with a shoe box and a smile about eight miles wide and announced that*

*he wanted to buy the mitt. So the manager brought the mitt over to the cash register while the kid counted out a shoe box worth of nickels, quarters, and dimes. His stash came to exactly \$19.98.*

*The mitt cost \$79.98, not including tax. My manager looked at the price tag, and sure enough the 7 was a little smudged, enough that a desperately hopeful seven-year-old could imagine it to be a 1. Then he looked at me, smiled, and very carefully recounted. "Yep, exactly \$19.98." Wrapping up the mitt, he gave it to the boy. (pp. 106-107)*

### *Valentine Caroling*

#### **"Happy Valentine's Day!"**

**The senior citizens smile and welcome Deb and the Varsity Choir members to the Senior Center at Chippewa Middle School. It is Thursday, February 14, and the students are dressed up in shades of pink and red. Many of the senior citizens also wear Valentine colors and several ladies show off heart-shaped jewelry. The students carry pink papers on which words of love songs are typed in 14-point font. The Kinawa students are not here to perform, but to sing *with* the people at the Senior Center.**

**The second year of Valentine's Day caroling has drawn a large crowd to the Center and everyone is excited. In fact, although the Senior Center did not serve lunch yesterday, the Center ladies met and baked dozens of heart-shaped sugar cookies. The smell of baked goods still hangs lightly in the air. This morning, the women arrived early to frost and decorate the**

cookies so that the students could enjoy fresh, homemade sugar cookies, as if they had been to Grandma's house.

**"Awesome!"**

**"Oh wow!"**

**"Look at all of those cookies!"**

**"Thank you so much!"**

The senior ladies look delighted as the students react to the beautiful cookies. With two or three cookies in hand, the Varsity Choir members scatter around the room and sit at tables with the seniors. Deb addresses the room with a smile.

**"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! We are here to make music with you and sing some mushy love songs on this lovely Valentine's Day. Now, some of these songs the kids are not as familiar with as some of *you* may be, so please feel free to sing loud and proud and teach these classics to the younger people."**

**"How about..." *(Deb dramatically sings the title of the first song)***  
***...Love Me Tender.***

Deb plays an introduction to the first love song on the piano. A small crowd of men at the far end of the room tease Deb and the students about having to stop their poker game to sing, as they walk by the cookie table before joining in the singing.

The crowd sings through *Tea for Two, They Can't Take that Away from Me, Some Enchanted Evening, You are My Sunshine, L-O-V-E, That's*

***Amore, Heart and Soul, Sentimental Journey, and Hello Young Lovers.***

**Both young and old are smiling, laughing, and singing. The intern teacher takes many pictures of students and seniors as they interact and enjoy the sugar cookies.**

**During a break, Deb approaches her long-time friend, Bill, who is seated at a table by himself. Bill smiles at Deb with sadness in his eyes. Bill's wife of 50 years, Gladys, passed away in November. Deb, having been at Gladys's funeral, recognizes that Bill is hurting. Waving over some of her "safe girls," Deb introduces the students to her friend.**

**"Girls, I want you to meet my sweet boy, Bill. He needs some music over here and we are not about to let him sit alone on Valentine's Day!" The girls smile, "Hello!" and sit at the table with Bill. Emily shares her word sheets with Bill and he sings softly with the students. The girls are unaware of Bill's sadness and Deb watches him smile at the giggly girls.**

**Before the final song of the day, a senior woman named Mary stands up at her seat. "You know Ruth and Ollie," gesturing to the couple sitting next to her at the table, "They won't tell you this, but they met here at the Senior Center and they're getting married in August!" The room explodes into a round of applause, cheers, and an "Awww" from the students. Ruth and Ollie cuddle against each other, smiling, sharing a pink word-sheet. Ruth's cheeks turn as pink as her sweater and Ollie smiles a broad smile from underneath his dome hat.**

**“What wonderful news! Congratulations!” Deb smiles broadly, “And what a wonderful time to sing our last song that just happens to be *Goin’ to the Chapel!* This is so cool! We expect you to sing extra loud, Ruth and Ollie!” Everyone in the room laughs and Ruth blushes even more. One more fancy piano introduction and the crowd breaks out into song. People sway from side to side, bouncing their heads with the beat of the music.**

**“Goin’ to the chapel and we’re...gonna get ma-a-arried....”**

**As the caroling draws to a close Deb addresses the crowd, “Remember, we’ll be back in May for Memorial Day caroling. It will be all patriotic songs then. Thank you so much for having us! The cookies were such a special treat! You all take care, see you in May, and Happy Valentine’s Day!”**

**At Kinawa Middle School the following day, photographs from Valentine caroling have been arranged on two large pieces of poster board and are on display in the choir room. Deb begins each class period by drawing attention to the photographs. She points out Bill, the widower, who is smiling in the picture with the Varsity Choir students.**

**“I didn’t get a chance to see you after our trip, but I wanted to tell you about one man. And what you didn’t know about Bill yesterday, unless you know Bill is that...” Deb tells her students about the death of Bill’s wife, Gladys. The students listen to Deb in respectful silence. Several of the students offer a soft “That’s so sad” as Deb tells Bill’s story. “And so Valentine’s Day was his first Valentine’s Day without the love of his life. So**

**while we were there singing gooshy mushy ridiculous love songs, he was sitting there feeling like his heart was being ripped out of his chest because of not being with Gladys. And you did something very, very cool for him. Many of you were standing near Bill when I was over lovin' him up a little bit and so a number of you also had a chance to be near Bill."**

**Deb's reflection on the caroling turns to Ruth and Ollie and their approaching wedding. Again, many students "Awww" and "Ohhh." "They were sitting in the front sharing a pink word sheet! How darn cute could they be? It was so lovely to be singing them onto a wedding with *Goin' to the Chapel of Love* and then to heal Bill with your love. It was rather special. Thank you."**

#### *Care and Concern for others*

Deb's interactions with students builds awareness of "caring" and reinforces an understanding of morality. So many incidents of "caring" take place everyday in Deb's classroom. "She takes time to work with individual students on their solos and duet pieces – giving them feedback, focused attention, and a smile" (Video Notes, January 16). The individual attention that Deb gives to others also extends beyond her students. "Guests in the room, me included, are given such attention – *sincere* attention and time. Deb never seems in a rush to move on with activities; she is always willing to pay attention where due – EVEN with the big Extravaganza approaching" (Field Notes, January 16).



Because choir students always stand on choral risers in the classroom, Deb constantly monitors their stance and safety. “Are your feet safe?” was asked at least once during every observed class. In preparation for the Extravaganza performance, students practiced singing a piece in the dark. Deb was very concerned for the students’ safety. “Put your feet where they are totally safe. Do not sway at all. I take this so seriously. This place is so many concussions waiting to happen. Feet are safe?” (Video Notes, January 16). Deb is also aware if a student is not feeling well. “A seventh grade boy was not feeling well – Deb sat right down on the risers and talked to him about symptoms and his approaching swim meet. Intense conversation, Deb is focused on his comments.” (Field Notes, January 16).

In addition to physical ailments, Deb works to be conscious of students’ emotional issues.

(Field Notes) One of her sixth grade gals came in and Deb called her right over and, sitting on the risers, asked her “Are you better today?” The gal sat right down and spilled her guts and Deb listened intently, so focused on what the girl was saying. At the end of the conversation, Deb said to her: “I’m glad you’re better and that makes me happy” with a BIG HUG! (March 19)

### *Favorites*

**Deb:** The thing is, in *my room*, everyone's a "who's who." (*long pause and then Deb moves incredibly close to the recorder*) *Everyone* is a "who's who" in *my room*.

#### **(Formal interview)**

Student morality is also influenced by the way Deb treats all of her students as equals. In maintaining an environment of equals, Deb identifies every student as her "favorite."

**Deb:** Every kid in there, I think, knows that they are my absolute favorite child. And I'll tell them to their face. There are times when a kid will actually say "I'm her favorite." And I'll say, "It's absolutely true." And the next kid will say, "But I thought I was your favorite?" "It is true. You *are* my favorite...you are my favorite." (*pausing, looking like a quizzical child.*) "What?" "Absolutely you are! You got earwax goin' in today?" So that they know it's an equal-opportunity love fest.

Students appreciate the "everyone is equal" environment because it removes any semblance of favoritism and cliques in choir.

**Banana (B):** I think that sometimes teachers maybe pick favorites and then those people get grouped together. Then there is another group of people who aren't classified as "the favorites." And Mrs. Borton always says, "Everyone's a favorite" and we're all treated the same. All hundred of us...we're all like that one group classified as the favorites because none of us are treated any differently than anyone else.

**Oreo (O):** There are no cliques in choir.

**B:** So coming into choir you are going to be part of that huge group.

**Stuart Little (SL):** I think choir *is* a clique! No, just kidding! (*Girls all laugh*)

But I mean, with this school there's just specific groups of people who we feel comfortable with and that's not a bad thing. I totally have a group that I mostly hang out with.

**O:** I think everyone does.

**SL:** But, I think in choir that I kind of forget that I have a group because it feels like choir...(*all the girls chime in at the same time*) *it is* a group! I think in choir you kind of learn more about people because, like we said before, you can be yourself in there. So when you are out with friends, maybe you're putting on kind of an act, but like in choir you are really yourself.

**O:** I think that because everyone is doing one activity, you bond with a lot of different people. Like in the play I made friends with eighth graders when I was a sixth grader. And then you make new friends and stuff.

**B:** And then you're part of that. Being in choir, you're maybe different or don't really have a social...skill...I guess you could say...But then you come into choir and you are just part of a group and it's sometimes good to know that you *have* people that maybe you don't hang with outside of choir.

**O:** But you also have a common bond because you all share a common group; you're all in choir.

According to the girls, cliques are nonexistent in choir class. Outside of choir class is a different story. The girls acknowledged that once they left the choir room, they resumed their position within their own social groups.

**Bridget:** So when you leave choir class, do all the stigmas come back? Like do people kind of fall into those roles again, but when you are in choir there it's just *gone* so then everybody's just on an equal playing field?

**Freddie (F):** I think so.

**Banana:** Yeah.

**F:** Yeah because there are people who I am friends with in choir that I don't talk to outside of choir. There are people who I can think of that I probably wouldn't talk to unless I had choir with them, because I wouldn't know them or people who are in my classes who I don't talk to outside of choir.

Deb was annoyed after hearing the girls' comments about friends inside and outside of choir class.

**Bridget:** One of the things that the kids said...about the cliques? That you even the playing field. And that they can be friends with people in there that they would never be friends with outside of any of the other classes, but that in there it's cool to...

**Deb:** (*annoyed*) They ought to be friends with them outside of my class.

Dufus-es.

The boys shared different, and more positive, sentiments about friends inside and outside of choir. They agreed that students in choir treated others differently than those outside of the class.

**Bridget:** Do you think people in choir treat each other differently because of that [the environment established by Mrs. Borton]?

**Alejandro (A):** I would say so. I think that if you met a kid in choir that you would probably be....

**Magic Hippo:** Friends with them outside of it [choir class].

**A:** ...friendlier...like better...get to know them better than if you just met them outside of choir because choir is such a great place.

**Naruto Uzamaki:** It's like a friendship you can't have anywhere else.

**Ben Dover:** Yeah. I know a couple people that aren't in choir that are slightly...meaner (*Muffin Man saying "yes, yes" while Ben talks*) than all of us that are in choir and they'll like make fun of you and stuff....

**Muffin Man:** Yeah the people in choir kind of seem nicer.

One of Deb's favorite stories from *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993)...

*I have a friend who lives in a small village in Austria. She will be eighty next March.*

*During the war her husband, a simple, uneducated Catholic farmer, decided he couldn't*

*serve in Hitler's army because it would be an immoral act. My friend, Franziska,*

*supported his decision even though they were desperately in love. Eventually, he was*

*convicted of treason and condemned to death. The day before his execution, Franziska*

*went to visit him for one last time in Brandenburg prison in Berlin. After watching him*

*being cruelly hurled off a truck, hands and feet bound, she was led by two guards into a*

*room with a long table and two chairs. As she and her husband began to sit across from*

*each other, one of the guards moved the chairs so that when they were sitting, they would*

*be barely able to reach their hands across the table and touch. After an unimaginable*

*last conversation, it was time to part. The other guard offered to bring the prisoner out,*

*and the heartless guard left. The second guard then turned away from the couple long enough for them to rush into a last embrace. Waiting until their sobs quieted somewhat, he then said quietly, "It's time to go." A token of kindness for a Nazi soldier, perhaps, but that man gave them one more moment to experience an extraordinary love. (Random Acts of Kindness, 1993, pp. 50-51).*

### *Summary*

Evidence of Deb's concern for her students' well-being and development has been presented throughout this dissertation. Chapter seven showcases Deb's student-focused efforts to educate middle school students about morality and being a good person. Through her use of the book *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993), sporadic class conversations, and activities such as Valentine caroling, Deb exposes her students to a perspective outside of themselves and helps them to gain awareness of others. She teaches morality and human decency "part and parcel" with musical knowledge and singing. Deb's students appreciate her focus on humanity and recognize that she is, herself, a model of decency and human compassion, and that they are better people from all that Deb teaches.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### My Story

**Bridget (Personal Notes): I was thinking about Deb and her classroom environment. What is the first thing you notice when you walk into Deb's room? SPAM. Spam signs, logos, pictures are all over. And not in a distracting, obnoxious way – except for maybe the SPAM magnet-covered file cabinets in her office; but *still* there is something charming about those. And *right* in the back of the room is “Singing Produces Awesome Miracles” on the bulletin board. When *I* wear my SPAM logo t-shirt, I feel transformed somehow. I'm so PROUD to wear it – to be part of the SPAM club...and it *never* occurs to me that someone might think it strange, or *me* strange, to be wearing a SPAM shirt. I wear it with such pride for SINGING and advocating for the producing of MIRACLES. *That's* what I think I'm promoting. Never the ham-wanna-be in a can. And I'm an adult and I have only been a SPAM-er for half a year. How *powerful* for those students of two or three years to feel this way. How IMPACTING. (March 31)**

During my time with Deb and the Kinawa Middle School choirs, I kept a journal of personal notes. These notes reflect my own story as an observer, researcher, and former middle school choir teacher observing within another middle school choral setting. My personal notes focus on many different aspects of Deb's teaching practice and have documented my own story of transition in the ways I observed Deb and her students between November and June. My story can be divided into three phases: Utopia,

Comparison, and True Observation. There was no definitive end to one phase and start of the next because they gradually transitioned over time.

Utopia was the first and shortest of the three phases of my experience. Within Utopia, everything I observed appeared to be nearly perfect, and I was completely in awe of every aspect of Deb's teaching practice. The realization that I would have a role within Deb's classroom surfaced unexpectedly.

The second phase of my experience was Comparison and involved my making two primary types of comparisons between Deb's teaching and my own. One type was Validation, in which I accurately compared similarities between both of our teaching styles. The second type of comparison was Disconnection, during which I experienced feelings of self-doubt about my own teaching practices as well as feelings of inadequacy as a teacher.

True Observation was the third phase of my experience. During True Observation, I was able to step away from the initial "honeymoon period" at Kinawa and let go of fears about teaching differently than Deb. As a result, I was able to more objectively examine the "bigger picture" of Deb's teaching practice. Areas of reflection and realization during this third phase included Honest Comparison, New Knowledge, and Wrongly Perceived. It was through Wrongly Perceived, that I came to the realization that Deb's class was student-focused and autocratic versus student-centered and democratic.

The three phases of my experience with Deb, Utopia, Comparison, and True Observation, are presented here in detail. I use vignettes, observations, and reflections to



allow an examination of Deb's classroom and teaching practices from my personal point of view.

*Phase I: Utopia*

**The wind whips as I walk into Kinawa Middle School on the crisp November day. Today I am here to meet Deb's students so they will be prepared for my presence in their choir classes following winter break. Butterflies in my stomach remind me that it is my first time in a choir classroom since I resigned as a middle school choir director last spring. "Why am I so nervous?" Walking into the school, I can smell that it is lunchtime and I hear boisterous middle school kids making great amounts of noise in distant corners of the building.**

**As I sign in at the office and am directed towards the choir room, there is a tugging in my chest. I keep thinking, "Why am I so nervous?", but I know why. I fear pain and agony and (dare I say it?) *regret* for leaving my own middle school job. I am afraid that although I completely stand by my decision to pursue this Ph.D., I will REGRET what I have done. I do not *feel* regret, but fear that I *will* after spending time in Deb's classroom.**

**Outside of the choir room, I pass a blue and yellow street sign proclaiming "SPAM COUNTRY." Inside the room, I am immediately "hit" by the bright colors of SPAM signs and logos *everywhere*. It is a clean room and smaller than I imagined. Choral risers to my left face a blond upright piano; there is no piano bench. Behind the risers a bulletin board is**

decorated in orange and gold with pictures of SPAM cans and “Singing Produces Awesome Miracles.”

Deb’s office is straight ahead at the far end of the room. The file cabinets in her office are literally covered with SPAM magnets; dozens of SPAM cans are stacked along the back end of Deb’s desk. SPAM Original, SPAM light, turkey SPAM, SPAM low sodium – such the variety! Large framed group pictures from choral festivals hang on the office walls, some with matting autographed by students. Little notes from students are pinned on a bulletin board in Deb’s office, as well as two obituaries and pictures: one of a former student and the other of Deb’s niece, Debbie. A “Commitment Excellence Award” from the Okemos Education Foundation plaque hangs on the wall, as does a plaque honoring Deb’s work with the State of Michigan Honors Choir. The window of Deb’s office would offer a view of the choir room if not covered with cartoons about singing or music. The majority of them are square “Far Side” cartoons and I chuckle at the warped humor. More notes expressing love and gratitude to Mrs. Borton have been thoughtfully stuck here and there amongst the cartoons.

As Deb enters the choir room from lunch, she greets me with a smile and hug. She oozes warmth and welcome. We are both excited to kick off this project and within moments students begin wandering into the room. With raised eyebrows, Deb looks at the early-comers. “And we are walking over to our guest, Mrs. Sweet, and shaking hands with her and welcoming her to Kinawa Middle School choir, right?”

**The students chuckle and immediately introduce themselves and welcome me with a smile and handshake. EVERY STUDENT who enters the choir room makes his or her way over to me to shake my hand and welcome me to Kinawa Choir – with hardly a word from Deb. I am amazed and impressed by the respect, sense of maturity, and sense of community that the students demonstrate.**

**The energy level in the room surges as students arrive to class. Goofiness runs rampant as loud, boisterous talking and laughing fills the room. The temperature of the classroom rises. Clumped together with friends, there is no way to tell which students sing what voice part. I think to myself, “This is crazy chaos!” Deb answers questions from individual students who approach her behind the piano and speak loudly to be heard over the roaring noise.**

**BUM.....Deb plays one low note on the piano. Just one note. It is held and not played again as it resonates throughout the chaos. The students respond immediately and move to their assigned places on the choral risers. Their goofiness and boisterousness go dormant once again.**

**It is incredibly impressive. Unbelievably impressive.**

**Deb never uttered a word or clapped a rhythm to capture their attention. I am in awe of her classroom control and additionally impressed by the respect students show for her as well as for one another. Wow. “This place is magical and I have only been here for five minutes. I cannot**

**begin to imagine how my dissertation will unfold in this setting.” I suddenly feel grossly inadequate as a teacher.**

**As the afternoon progresses, Deb welcomes me warmly at the start of each new class. Throughout the afternoon I notice students straining their necks to watch me as I observe and I cannot help but smile at their excitement and curiosity about my presence. The rehearsals are quick and full of energy as pieces for the December concert are polished.**

**“Remember, they see you before they hear you. We want to make a great first impression as soon as that curtain opens. Give me *Wonderland*, please.” Deb plays a beautiful, rolling introduction to the song and the singing is smooth and warm and full. It is a beautiful sound. Most of the students have wonderful facial expression. A few of the men struggle to hit some of the higher notes and Deb smiles reassuringly at them, “Men, if you cannot sing that note, I want you audiating in a handsome manner.”**

**Technical aspects of student singing are addressed including dynamics (using proper terminology), pitches, and vowel shapes.**

**I am enjoying myself immensely. What an honor to hear these students sing. They have an amazing tone. Such a full, warm, and beautiful sound, especially for a middle school choir. I am in the presence of genius here. Truly.**

**I have been impressed since day one by the teaching practices, classroom environment, interactions, and quality of singing and musicianship nurtured and**

maintained within Deb's choir classes. During the first phase of my observation experience, Utopia, I was only able to observe the quality of the "big picture" and missed many small nuances. "These kids sounded beautiful – stood beautifully, sang beautifully. Deb plays beautifully – full, strong, rolling harmony" (Personal Notes, November 16, 2007).

I was aware of a lack of facial expression with some students but dismissed this observation to focus and reflect on what I *wanted* to see. "Not as much facial expression as a group, but individuals have such wonderful facial expression! The sound is SO expressive!" (Personal Notes, December 18, 2007). Another example, "Warm, happy, fun sound. Don't look it, but sound very enthusiastic! I love the *tink tink tink tink* of the jinglebells" (Personal Notes, December 18, 2007).

### *My Role During Utopia*

**Bridget: I didn't expect for *me* to have to get used to being there; that I would have to figure out *my* role in the classroom... (Personal Notes, November 16, 2007)**

It was never my intention to develop a role within Deb's classroom, as I planned to be just "a fly on the wall." However, interactions with Deb and her students during my first observation foretold my developing a role within the class environment. During Utopia, the specifics of my role were unclear, and I found myself caught between the persona of "researcher" and that of "former middle school choir teacher."

**Bridget (Personal Notes):** I have to remember next time to watch *her* [Deb] more – SHE is the study. However, I find myself feeling somewhat uncomfortable

watching her for long periods of time because I didn't want her to feel uncomfortable, like I was STARING at her. Even though we both know why I am there – to watch HER and how SHE teaches. I remember how I felt during observations of ME – I added a little more flair, more humor, more playfulness, and more energy. I guess, just like the kids, ultimately I showed off a little more. [At Kinawa] I want everyone to be *themselves* and *I* want to be myself too. One of the aspects of teaching middle school that I DO NOT miss is the utter and absolute exhaustion at the end of the day. The almost drunken feeling – trying to remember to *breathe*. I watched Deb work with the kids, using humor and moving all over and I felt shades of a post-traumatic stress exhaustion as she expended all that energy. I just sat there all day, but was exhausted as I went home. I worry and I FEAR feeling that way again during this project – taking on the exhaustion of the teacher. So, in this respect especially, I want to truly separate myself as a RESEARCHER. I hope that this first time in Deb's classroom was a similar experience for me and for the students and Deb... and that the novelty of my presence will wear and we will all assume our natural tendencies. Mine, hopefully, as a deep breather and observer versus putting myself in Deb's place, emotionally. (Personal Notes, November 16, 2007)

When I began observing Deb, I was concerned about confusing personal emotions as a former middle school choir teacher with observations of Deb's classroom and teaching. My role as a participant observer became unclear as I realized I could not be just "a fly on the wall" because of my own stories and personal practical knowledge.

### *Phase II: Comparison*

**Bridget: Observing, meeting with, and working with Deb makes me realize I have a lot to still learn. It is an honor and very humbling to be learning from her.**

**(Personal Notes, February 13)**

Comparison was the second phase of my observation experience. Occasions when I accurately compared Deb's and my teaching styles and practices have been identified as Validation; occasions when I inaccurately compared our teaching styles and practices, resulting in negative perceptions of my own teaching, have been identified as Disconnection.

#### *Validation*

I observed similarities between Deb's teaching style and my own. However, I rarely documented such occurrences. In hindsight, I believe that, although we share similar foundational ideas about middle school students, I was so enamored by Deb's teaching and classroom environment and, as a result, saw more alignment between us than what realistically existed. Of the few Validation observations recorded in my personal notes, two specific passages demonstrate true instances of similarity between our work with middle school choir students.

Bridget (Personal Notes): I used to tell my students something like, "I don't have favorites – I love you all the same." However, I love Deb's positive spin of "Yes! YOU are my favorite! And so are YOU! And YOU!" The students have really picked up on this too – no cliques in choir...we are *all* her favorite. (February 13)

A second example:

Bridget (Personal Notes): It is the start of last hour and Deb looks tired. *I'm* tired too, but hardly room to complain. She seems to be dragging energy-wise, and I *remember* that exhaustion. However, she maintains her personality, humor, interaction to keep up with them. I remember doing the exact same thing! Overcompensate to mask your exhaustion!" (January 16)

### *Disconnection*

Observations of Disconnection resulted in negative thinking about my own teaching practices. For example, on many occasions I compared the sound quality of Deb's choirs with that of my former middle school students. "I used to let my own students sing in the dark. They [Kinawa singers] sound so great! *Siyahamba* – I did this song with my kids too...but did they ever sound *this* beautiful?" (Personal Notes, January 16)

Disconnection instances often referred to interactions with students. Two passages from my personal journal reveal that I second-guessed my past practices after observing Deb with her students.

Deb is super willing to accommodate kids – rehearse with them, change and adjust keys in music, and *continually* offers comments and suggestions. She never seems tired and never put out. She is always *honest* with them. Was I that honest with my own students? (Personal Notes, January 16)

In my own classroom, I always strove for respect and equality, but this environment and atmosphere is unlike one I've ever experienced before. I was a



great teacher and advocate for all, but my classroom [as much as it pains me to openly admit by writing this] was never as safe as Deb's. There is an absolute ZERO tolerance policy in place. What did *I* do? I thought I did well, I felt like I nurtured a great environment...and I don't think I am mistaken. I DID do well. I DID nurture a great environment. But Deb's room and all of her "random acts of kindness" take everything I wanted to the "-nth" degree. It is so tangible in her room, in that safe place. (Personal Notes, February 13)

### *My Role During Comparison*

My role in Deb's classroom continued to emerge during the Comparison phase. I did not have a definitive title, such as "teacher assistant" or "accompanist." I was simply known as "Mrs. Sweet the observer" and I spent most of the semester on a blue chair at the side of the room. Yet, students responded to my presence and sought me out for conversation and interaction. The students created a place for me within their environment. In my personal notes, I commented on the warm reception I consistently received from Deb's students. "Her kids are well-mannered and smart. So respectful. Friendly kids...so sweet! They remind me there are great kids everywhere" (Personal Notes, January 16).

I love being in her classroom and the kids call me by name. "Hi Mrs. Sweet!" I'm enjoying being around them and just KIDS in general. I am getting to know them a little. My interviews with the focus groups were fun and I really cracked up at how an eighth grader in Okemos is pretty darn similar to an eighth grader in Grand Ledge. (Personal Notes, February 13)

It was during the Comparison phase that I truly began to contemplate middle school students as a general population and consider common characteristics between most adolescents. Observations of the Kinawa choir students reinforced my fondness of the age group, but also allowed me to realize how much I simply enjoy being around adolescent students, even those with whom I have no teacher-student relationship.

### *Phase III: True Observation*

**Bridget (Personal Notes) It is somewhat frustrating to me that Deb seems so insecure about so many aspects of her career or the way she runs/feels about things.**

**I wouldn't want her different, ego-wise. I would just wish her a *little* pleasure in knowing that what she is doing and HOW she does it are making such a difference for people. (February 19)**

The third phase of my experience at Kinawa Middle School was True Observation. Unlike earlier phases of observation, during True Observation I was able to release fears regarding my own teaching practices and more objectively observe Deb and the Kinawa Choirs.

### *Honest Comparison*

Honest Comparison allowed me to acknowledge significant differences between Deb's and my teaching methodologies. During this phase of observation, I was able to reflect upon my own practices without chastising and dismissing my methods. I often contemplated how my former students might respond as members of Deb's classroom versus mine; largely because my middle school students participated in a variety of

activities beyond singing, including weekly listening logs, stretches to music, abstract musical notation projects, and “soundtrack of my life” presentations. Deb’s classes are engaged in singing activities most of the time, although she does integrate music theory and stories from *Random Acts of Kindness*.

I think about some of my students...would they have given more here than they did for me? Been here at all? She does not do extra things like I did, such as stretches, stretch to music, listening logs...truly much more CHORAL. Singing is the only activity. (Personal Notes, March 12)

Although my students explored additional areas of music, Deb’s focus on singing has contributed to the high level of musicianship of her choirs. The following excerpt from my personal notes acknowledges Deb’s expectations for musicianship, as well as reflection regarding my own expectations of students.

The demand for musicianship is so high here. In our discussion regarding middle school festival, Deb said that if kids were giving their 100% *all*, best effort and didn’t get a “1” rating, then she’d be okay with that. However, if you don’t get all 1’s because you weren’t giving your 100% all, then that’s not good enough. I was somewhat taken aback by that comment because I expected her to say something like, “it’s not really about the rating.” Although last week, students asked what the “1” stood for [ratings-wise] and she said “an A.” And a “II” rating? And she said “a B.” I was always pushing pushing pushing that “the rating doesn’t matter”...did I push in the wrong direction? DOES IT MATTER? This is the first aspect of our teaching that I really notice a lack of alignment. YET, the entire experiment is a lack of alignment because she is so efficient and so calm and so

effective – much more than I...although I could see me going that way more if I were to return to public school teaching. Or *would* I? I never demanded things the way she does. There are no excuses. “Just do it” and they just do it...could I do that? Did I offer too many excuses for kids if they were soft singers or changing voices? My groups’ musicality was never as strong as her’s. Man. (Personal Notes, March 19)

During a rehearsal of *Coming Home*, Deb began a conversation about the text of the song. She solicited thoughts from her students, but also made powerful statements and posed questions about possible interpretations of the text. I was very aware of our differences during this conversation with her students.

Deb gives all sorts of scenarios for evoking emotion on this piece. She discusses a soldier coming home, a parent getting to see child again after leaving prison...later she actually talked about a soldier who maybe *won't* get home and that maybe it was THAT kind of “coming home,” as in a casket arriving home for a funeral. I was shocked by this discussion – so open and RAW...but I am not sure why I was shocked. Would I have been too concerned about hurting someone with a mention such as this? Was I not brave enough to “go there?” Did I rob my students of developing a part of their humanity through my avoidance of discussion of death by war? Honestly, I think my *own* baggage of my Dad and Vietnam and my avoidance of all things “war” caused this discussion to hit me the way it did. But BRAVO to Deb for going there. She doesn’t shield them from

ugly, but acknowledges all things possible in a completely SAFE way. (Personal Notes, May 22)

During Honest Comparison I was able to observe student-behavior objectively, especially when compared to Utopia observations. I noticed many more things about the students and their responses to Deb.

It is interesting to be here at Kinawa over time. I get to watch the kids and notice lots of things about them. Such as there *are* actually kids who seem to not really be interested in being here, but are. I was blind to those kids for a while. I think because there is such an incredible sense of teamwork and demonstrative behavior – anyone not contributing is absorbed by all the other hard work. They definitely have eighth graders who have morphed to high school kids... With the sixth graders, almost everyone is 100% with her and singing – the personalities are great! Really outgoing, goofy, FUN kids (like Thomas and Travis in *my* classrooms) and kids who are appearing to be lurkers, but you can tell they *really* enjoy it. (Personal Notes, March 26)

### *New Knowledge*

One of the fun parts of observing Deb was that I learned smart new ways to teach musical concepts. For example, Deb introduced beat durations to her sixth grade students by having them all face one direction and “tap” both of the shoulders of the person in front of them at specific intervals. She played an accompaniment while students tapped, which reinforced the beat. Students eventually tapped one duration with one hand and a different duration with the other (such as right hand quarter notes, left hand half notes). Because of the kinesthetic qualities of the activity, Deb’s students internalized the

concept very quickly. The activity lasted no more than five minutes and was revisited every so often. As a result of Safe Place and community expectations, students did not attempt to “tap” their neighbor in inappropriate ways.

*Genius* way of teaching rhythm durations to sixth graders. Kinesthetic and with critical questions. Not only are students DOING the durations, they are FEELING them at the same time – and it’s FUN for them! Genius! (Personal Notes, February 20)

Another teaching technique of Deb’s was a “rapid-fire” method of asking questions to reinforce and assess musical knowledge. It was common for her to ask several short questions at key points of the rehearsal to solidify concepts and knowledge of the subject matter.

All being said, Deb does an *incredible* job of getting the sixth graders to contribute to the discussion of a new piece. They offer MANY comments. I think a big key to her kids’ awareness of the score and musical aspects is from such a solid foundation in sixth grade. QUICK and EASY things she is doing. I could have done lots more of this...fear of losing them? Her pacing is so fast – does *that* keep them so engaged (in combo with her personality and fun)? Does her smaller number of kids help? I had 60 kids in the sixth grade classes. It would be so interesting to try these techniques with my former enormous classes. I could have done more. I could have been a better teacher, or at least made them stand on their OWN a bit more. (Personal Notes, May 29)

Deb's methods of reinforcing musical knowledge contributed to the strong musicianship of her middle school choir students. Students learned and retained incredible amounts of information during their time in Kinawa choirs.

I realize how much I observed Deb teaching music fundamentals in the sixth grade choir and then observed reinforcement and maintenance in Varsity Choir.

Even with only a half of a year under their belts, the sixth graders have learned so much in a short time span. I'm sure that having the seventh and eighth graders together really helps motivate those kids to know their stuff. The seventh grader would want to know the answer with the eighth graders there; and vice-versa, what eighth grader would not want to have the answers with the younger, "less informed" seventh graders there? The EGO of middle schoolers plays a part here, I am sure. (Personal Notes, June 2)

Along with learning new methods and techniques for teaching music, my observations of Deb led me to feel validation for my own methods and techniques. I could not help but examine my teaching in new ways during my time at Kinawa and, as a result, I am more confident about my teaching and teacher personality. "It has been validating hearing the things she is saying, with regard to my own teaching philosophy and methods" (Personal Notes, February 19).

### *Wrongly Perceived*

Wrongly Perceived describes the shift in my view of Deb's classroom from a student-centered, democratic environment to a student-focused, autocratic environment. This realization that Deb's classroom had originally been perceived differently than what it truly was, came late in the research process, long after several codes and themes had

already been decided. It was difficult for me to consider Deb's classroom as anything but democratic, especially because I had viewed our teaching approaches to be incredibly similar. At the start of data collection, I wrote, "Many things she is saying and sharing are *so* similar to my own philosophy and the way I ran my own classroom" (Personal Notes, January 16). Deb's classes had supportive community environments, a focus on morality, and reached many democratic goals, which allowed me to keep believing that Deb's class was democratic, even *after* Deb identified her class as "a loving dictatorship" during her formal interview. However, as my research progressed and deepened, I was unable to ignore signs that indicated this was not a democratic classroom.

As I read and research for my literature review, I am again struck by an idea I had yesterday, but dismissed. However, worth exploring? Reading DeLorenzo's (2003) discussion of "Teaching Music as a Democratic Practice" and I found myself only highlighting or focusing on the aspects of democracy that Lorenzo discusses based on how *I* observe them to be present or evident in Deb's classroom. Some of the democratic practices discussed are completely a part of Deb's environment, such as "fairness, trust and respect for others in the class." HOWEVER, with regard to activities that call on students to make interpretive decisions or listen to "an openly gay composer and discuss whether it makes a difference in how they listen to the music," or ACTUALLY *listen* at all...NONE of this has been part of my observations. She does not call on them to offer suggestions or input. I remember her saying something about a dictatorship and I really think this *is*... a student-centered dictatorship. Can you be student-centered and *not* democratic? Hmm. Worth contemplating... (Personal Notes, April 1)



Towards the end of the Kinawa school year, I was still unwilling to label Deb “authoritarian” based on the caring environment she nurtured at Kinawa. For some reason, I had associated authoritarian with cold and uncaring, which were the last words that I wanted associated with Deb from this project.

She still makes ALL the calls, but the students are the focus. Does that make this a “student centered” classroom? TOUGH call. Also, “safe place” is *imposed* and reinforced in the classroom, so therefore a democratic aspect? NO WAY. Even with student response via behaviors towards each other. But is it *student centered*? Not in the sense I expected it to be...linked arm in arm with democracy. And what’s more is that what I had formed in my mind as an *ideal* situation for a middle school choir class – a student-centered, democratic, working together making decisions together classroom environment – is perhaps not the *only ideal* option. This is CRAZY how my perceptions are all topsy-turvy. (Personal Notes, May 29)

#### *My role during True Observation*

As previously mentioned, I never intended to carve out a role of my own within Deb’s classroom. And although I knew at the outset of this research that “Deb Borton” was my study and that I would observe her teaching, I did not realize that the project would become so personal and that I would gain a dear friend.

I feel so lucky to be getting to know Deb and feel like I’m gaining a new friend. What a person to have in my life – truly someone on which I could rely and find guidance from after the project is over. (Personal Notes, February 19)

As I spent more time in Deb's classroom, I also formed relationships with Kinawa choir students. It was a wonderful experience meeting new middle school students and I feel that they filled a void for me as I transitioned out of being a full-time middle school choir teacher.

Each time I am here, I "see" kids who I've never noticed before, which is interesting to me for some reason. I HAVE been here often enough to *really* recognize certain students and to look forward to seeing certain kids. A great reminder that there are great kids everywhere! I feel that these are my interim students this year. They notice things like my students did...highlights in my hair, what I'm doing, how often I have been there, etc. I don't feel like an outsider here, which I enjoy MUCH! (Personal Notes, March 19)

I was sitting here and my mind wandered to the time when I'm not going to be here after this project and I had a huge twinge of heartache for not being in a classroom with these kids. (Personal Notes, March 12)

Following the completion of data collection, I did not visit Kinawa regularly. I did return to observe occasionally, even though it was unnecessary, because I wanted to say hello and spend more time in Deb's environment.

I have missed being here...the kids have been so friendly and genuine to see me again, which has felt fantastic. Deb said that they have missed me! (sigh) So nice to be here, especially when I consider I wouldn't have met them or Deb if I hadn't left my position in Grand Ledge. (Personal Notes, May 22)

### *Summary*

During my time with the Kinawa Middle School choir, my personal story as an observer, researcher, and former middle school choir teacher transitioned through three phases: Utopia, Comparison, and True Observation. These three phases allowed me to examine Deb Borton's teaching practices and beliefs, but also unexpectedly caused me to examine my own teaching practices and beliefs. Throughout these phases, I experienced a myriad of emotions and realizations, ranging from strong feelings of confidence as a teacher to feelings of weakness and inadequacy. However, because of the development of my own personal story during the formation of this dissertation, I am more self-assured and confident in my own beliefs about teaching than ever before.

So, the question is "Do I regret leaving my own middle school job?"

No. I do miss my own students – the ones with whom I worked and knew. But through this time with Deb at Kinawa, I have developed relationships with students with whom I never would have met otherwise. I have gained a new, dear friend in Deb. And most importantly, I have learned an incredible amount about teaching, music, humanity, and my own philosophy of teaching and learning.

*A Spring Choral Concert*

**It is the evening of June 3, 2008 and the Kinawa Spring choral concert will begin in a half hour. Family members and friends file into the auditorium looking for the perfect seat; the lights are dim, but people move about and chat with friends. Although the climate in the auditorium is quite comfortable, the orchestra room across the hall, housing all of the evening's singers, is hot and stuffy.**

**In the orchestra room, all members of the Varsity Choir and the Sixth Grade Choir, totaling 150 students, stand in concert formation facing the piano. Deb is behind the piano dressed in a hot pink pant suit, playing through pieces with her students, alternating between the two choirs. The room smells like sweat and anxiety, and the adolescent energy adds an electric quality to the pre-concert atmosphere. Varsity Choir students look beautiful in their black and white concert uniforms; the sixth graders look small, but brave, as they observe the Varsity Choir members.**

**In the corner of the orchestra room, I am positioned perfectly to observe last-minute concert preparations. Deb notices me, grins broadly, and proclaims loudly to her students, "It's Dr. Sweet! Say hi to Dr. Sweet, everyone!" The students all turn and greet me with smiles and waves and a hearty, "Hi, Dr. Sweet!" I blush and smile and wave back. The focus returns to Deb and the rehearsal continues.**

**Every moment is a teaching and learning opportunity as Deb tweaks vowel shapes and diction to perfect her students' singing. She is especially**

concerned with posture. "Stand as tall as those beautiful long legs will allow. Stand tall and proud! Never small!"

An eighth grade girl named Stephanie is singing a solo on the concert. Before rehearsing the solo in front of everyone, Deb addresses the sixth graders. "Stephanie's solo is quite challenging because, boys and girls, the piano accompaniment does not play Stephanie's notes. I am only playing these fingers" and Deb raises her right hand to show only her thumb and pinky finger. "Stephanie's note is the one between these two notes. See? Because of that, Stephanie has to be really confident to sing this solo and find her own part while I play. That's just something that I could never do." At that, Deb plays the open-chord introduction and Stephanie's solo is executed flawlessly. Deb sincerely praises Stephanie's singing with "Beautifully done my sweetie girl!" Stephanie smiles and returns to her place in the choir. As I leave the warm-up room to find an auditorium seat, Deb reminds the students about appropriate concert behavior. A specific trio of eighth grade girls are singled out and addressed, "Please make a smart choice, my sweeties. I have great faith. And big ears."

On stage Deb welcomes the crowd with a smile. "Good evening and welcome to the Kinawa Spring Choral Concert! It is wonderful to have you all here this evening to show support for your singers." As she reminds the audience to turn off their cell phones, a phone rings. Deb looks towards the

ring and jokes, "Tell them I'll call back around nine o'clock!" Deb finishes her welcome and sits down at the piano on stage.

The concert begins and is a triumphant success full of music, laughter, and bittersweet tears as the eighth grade students conclude their time with Mrs. Borton. I feel a tugging at my own heartstrings as I watch Deb hug her students and realize that my time at Kinawa has also drawn to a close.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Summary, Conclusions, and Suggestions for Future Research

#### Summary

##### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to explore, investigate, and describe the teaching and the characteristics of a middle school choir teacher who builds and nurtures a musical learning community in her classroom. This research was emergent; however the creation of a safe learning environment, development of musicianship, and empowerment of students remained central lenses throughout the project.

##### *Methods*

Deb Borton was selected for this ethnographic case study because of her exemplary work with middle school choir students as well as her state-wide reputation of teaching excellence. Interviews, observations, artifacts, and field notes provided data for this research; Deb participated in one formal interview and one think-aloud interview. The think-aloud protocol provided a more in-depth “behind the scenes” understanding of Deb’s teaching methods, as validated by Oare (2007). Observations of Deb’s middle school choir classes occurred on nine occasions, five of which were videotaped and transcribed for Deb’s unique “teacher talk.” Deb conducted a member check of her interview transcriptions prior to transcription analysis and coding.

Focus group interviews with four eighth grade female and five eighth grade male choir students provided additional insight on Deb’s teaching and the Kinawa choir program. The boys’ and girls’ focus group interviews took place separately to provide a

more comfortable atmosphere for the participants without worries about their behavior in front of the opposite gender. Students conducted member checks to ensure the accuracy of interview transcriptions prior to transcription analysis and coding.

Data also included field observations and notes, classroom artifacts, and my own written reflections during this study. The analysis and coding of interview transcriptions and classroom video resulted in four primary themes: Deb Borton, “Safe Place,” Establishing the Framework for a Successful Middle School Choir Program, and Morality. Member checks and data triangulation established trustworthiness of the data. “My Story,” an additional theme that was added following the establishment of the four primary themes, allowed for an examination of Deb and her choir classes through my lens as a former middle school choir teacher.

### *Summary*

Deb Borton is an intelligent and astute middle school choir teacher. She works with large numbers of students at one time and is able to evaluate, interpret, and meet the needs of all individuals during a rehearsal, as well as maintain classroom control through caring and efficient methods. Her teaching is engaging and her methods are executed effortlessly. According to Berliner’s (1988) descriptions, Deb is an “expert teacher.”

Deb also demonstrates the characteristics that Dolloff (1994) associated with a “master teacher.” These traits include modeling, knowledge of performance traditions, formal knowledge of performance practices, “on the spot” assessment of the group, thoughtful use of instruction, community building, and methods of response to student requests for additional help.



In addition to being an “expert” and a “master teacher,” Deb also qualifies as an “exemplary teacher” according to characteristics identified by Borst (2002). Deb’s personality is infused into everything that she does. She nurtures and maintains a positive and healthy classroom atmosphere at Kinawa, with an emphasis on morality. Students are Deb’s primary focus, and music is the vehicle with which she teaches. There is great love and respect between Deb and her students and, as a result, student to student relationships within her choir classes are also positive and respectful.

Values, beliefs, and morals are cornerstones of Deb’s teaching philosophy and practice, evident by Safe Place, her endorsement of random acts of kindness, and her motto “SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles.” Research by Young (2002), Hansen (1992), and Beebe (1998) validates Deb’s emphasis on values, beliefs, and morality in her classroom. Deb strives to educate students not only in specific disciplines, but in ways that increase empowerment and awareness of improving the human condition.

The stories of Deb’s life as a developing musician and teacher have influenced the middle school choral program she has established through her demands of middle school students, her use of humor, and the classroom environment she nurtures. Research by Mills (2008), Huber and Whalen (1995), and Huber (1999), as well as work referenced in chapter one by Clandinin and Connelly, authenticate connections between Deb’s stories and her work at Kinawa Middle School and provide guidance for interpretation of her stories and methods of teaching practice.

This study began under the assumption that Deb’s classroom was democratic, in the sense that students contributed to discussions of subject matter and classroom policy.

However, once immersed in the environment and culture of the Kinawa Middle School choir program, it became obvious that, although students accomplished several democratic goals, Deb did not share classroom power with her students. Although Deb assumes an authoritarian role in her classroom, she is also incredibly “student-focused.” Through music, Deb works to influence and educate each student about being the best person that he or she could be, both inside and outside of the Kinawa choir classroom. Therefore, Deb’s teaching practices suggest it is possible to achieve democratic musical, intellectual, emotional, and community goals through an autocratic and student-focused classroom.

### *Interpretations*

Deb Borton, the Kinawa Middle School choir teacher, was the primary focus of this research. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, it is difficult to generalize these results to all middle school settings or other middle school choir teachers. However, parts of the following discussion may be transferable to similar middle school choral settings.

### **Democratic outcomes may be achieved in a middle school choir class through teacher-led teaching practices.**

Goals established by classroom teachers typically dictate their teaching methodologies. In a democratic choir class, power is shared between teacher and students through the facilitation of activities and/or questioning; democratic goals include a supportive environment and community, student awareness of others, and musical

independence. Deb Borton strives for musical, intellectual, emotional, and community goals that are democratic, but she has not worked towards those goals with the specific intention of building a democratic classroom. For example, “Safe Place” contributes to an incredibly kind and supportive democratic classroom environment; however Deb *insists* on “Safe Place.” There are no alternative options for student behavior in the Kinawa choir program outside of the parameters of “Safe Place.” Therefore, this research suggests that middle school choir teachers can achieve democratic classroom goals in non-democratic ways through the implementation of key teaching structures.

**A safe classroom environment provides opportunities for middle school choir students to be themselves without inhibition, in a culture of acceptance.**

A safe classroom environment is important to middle school students who, as adolescents, often struggle with self-consciousness while determining their own identity through increased social interaction. In a safe middle school choir environment, students are more willing to take risks and not worry about consequences from unexpected results; students can be themselves. A safe setting is especially important for middle school singers because of adolescent voice change during those years. Voice cracks, squeaks, and other noises are common during voice change and can elicit peer laughing, teasing, and embarrassment. However, when middle school singers feel safe, they tend to keep singing and work through vocal issues because, as Deb’s students said, there is no pressure to “sing perfectly” and “you can be yourself.”

Peer support is essential to the perseverance of middle school singers. Within a safe classroom environment, middle school students are more able to receive, as well as

provide, support for others. As middle school choir students learn to work together and trust each other in a safe environment, they develop musical and interpersonal skills which contribute to the sense of community within their choir class, as well as to the broader school community. Music educators, as well as developing teachers in any field, should be knowledgeable of the power and benefits of a safe classroom environment so that they may provide the most beneficial educational experiences possible.

**Middle school choir teachers are in a position to make meaningful impressions on their students, especially with regard to morality and awareness of others.**

Middle school students are at an impressionable age and subjected to a variety of influences. Choir teachers are in a prime position to influence critical thinking about morality and the treatment of other people through discussions of music's emotional implications and connections to adolescent experiences. Music and meaning can inform and educate students about values, morals, and beliefs that contribute to their own personal welfare, as well as that of the larger community. The story of Kinawa Choir Valentine Caroling is an example of how Deb's students impact others through their music.

As connections are made between students and the power of music, topics of conversation can expand to include deeper discussions of students' roles in society, as Deb did with stories from *Random Acts of Kindness* (1993). Through conversations, teacher modeling, and a safe classroom environment, middle school students learn about tolerance of others, not judging a book by its cover, and being a good Samaritan, as in Deb's story of the Magic Dragon. These sorts of activities and discussions are

transferrable to many different school settings and subject areas beyond middle school choir. However, as demonstrated by Deb, it is important that conversations and discussions are common occurrences that become engrained in the fabric of the classroom community to promote a true awareness of morality.

**A sense of humor is an important characteristic of an effective  
middle school choir teacher.**

Middle school students experience a great deal of change during adolescence, including aspects of their physical, emotional, and spiritual selves. As a result, adolescents become increasingly self-conscious as they navigate the transition from child to adult. Deb uses humor in her classroom to take the focus off of students and reduce their self-conscious feelings and behavior. Through humor, Deb teaches that it is okay to laugh at yourself and that you should not take yourself too seriously, as demonstrated by her use of the “neck harp.” Deb identified Carol Burnett as her comic hero because she is so talented at making fun of herself, which Deb strives to do as much as possible.

Deb also uses humor as a form of classroom management, including sarcasm, which she had been taught to never use with her students. However, Deb actually uses sarcasm in safe ways to maintain a caring classroom environment. Students commented repeatedly on Deb’s sense of humor and how it is a positive contribution to their choir classes and singing experiences.

Beginning teachers are often told to not smile until after Christmas during their first year in the classroom. However, this research with Deb Borton provides evidence that humor, when used safely and appropriately, is a valuable and powerful teaching tool.

**Exemplary choir teachers are valuable resources for professional development.**

During my time with Deb Borton, I gained a great deal of knowledge, including new teaching techniques, new ideas, as well as validation of my own teaching methods. Teachers of all experience levels are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to observe or work with master or exemplary teachers and keep themselves fresh and charged up about their own teaching. Opportunities to learn from a master teacher, as discussed by Dolloff (1994), can guide teachers down a new track of self-discovery that expands their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006), promotes creativity, and introduces new ideas for their own classrooms.

**Personal stories are important when working with people.**

Stories provide valuable insight on teacher's music education philosophies and beliefs about teaching. Every teacher's own Professional Knowledge Landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin et al, 2006) has been influenced by stories and experiences from his or her life.

Students' stories are also valuable. An awareness of students' stories provides the opportunity for teachers to structure more meaningful music experiences. Because middle school choir students progress through developmental stages at different rates, including emotional development and singing ability, they must be "treated" individually and not with a one-size-fits-all methodology. Teachers are encouraged to consider each student and provide the appropriate attention that nurtures individual learners according to his or

her own needs. In addition, it is important that middle school choir teachers be aware of their own stories and experiences to better understand how they teach, as well as to what extent their methods are based upon their own past experiences, both positive and negative.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

At first glance, it was assumed that Deb Borton maintained a democratic choir classroom. However, as research progressed, it became obvious that Deb's choir classes are structured in a unique way. Despite her autocratic, student-focused teaching methods, Deb achieves many democratic goals with regard to classroom environment, morality, and musicianship. Suggestions for future research begin with the recommendation to study other exemplary middle school choir teachers and examine the philosophy behind their methodologies. Research would provide insight on whether middle school choir teachers primarily focus on democratic or authoritarian methodologies. In addition, do other middle school choir teachers achieve democratic goals through non-democratic methodologies? To what extent are excellent middle school choir teachers student-focused versus student-centered?

In the same vein of research, what constitutes "democracy" with regard to middle school choir programs like Deb's? An examination of other middle school choir programs could provide information on whether democracy is more about the teaching methodology, as far as the facilitation of activities, or the facilitation of the environment in individual settings. What are the differences between democratic environments and

democratic activities? Further examination of classroom settings that appear or claim to be democratic and *how* they achieve democracy is also recommended.

Deb Borton's "Safe Place" allows students access to tangible experiences of safety and community support. Future research is suggested to examine other middle school choir programs for characteristics of structure similar to "Safe Place." Is this concept rare or commonly found in middle school choirs? Is a safe environment in other choir classrooms as tangible as it is in Deb's choir classes? An examination of methods and techniques used in maintaining other safe choir classes would provide valuable information for teachers working to maintain safe classroom environments. Do other choir programs identify their classroom environment by a specific name, such as "Safe Place," and what stories contributed to its creation? In addition, what are common characteristics of teachers who implement structure for a safe class environment? An examination of middle school choir class environments in different socioeconomic settings is also suggested. To what degree is safe place implemented in other grade level settings, such as high school choir? Information gathered from such inquiries could provide valuable ideas for new approaches to music education.

Additional suggestions for future research include an examination of Professional Knowledge Landscapes. How are individual Landscapes reflected in teaching philosophies and methodologies? To what degree have past experiences influenced present practice of individual teachers?

As a former middle school choir teacher, I encourage research to better understand the needs of middle school singers and to develop strategies to meet those needs. Although middle school singers can be complex people during this time of



transition in their lives, an awareness of philosophies, techniques, and learning outcomes of exemplary middle school teachers like Deb Borton continue to build support for the benefits of working with middle school students and the impact that choir teachers can make on the life of an adolescent singer.

## Appendix A

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

January 8, 2008

Dear Ms. Borton:

You are being asked permission to take part in a research project I am doing for my dissertation for Michigan State University. The title of the project is "Everybody's Somebody in My Class: A Case Study of an Exemplary Middle School Choir Teacher."

You are being asked permission to videotape your teaching during sixth grade choir and one of the seventh/eighth grade Varsity choirs. Videotaping would take place a minimum of four to a maximum of six class periods per choir and would not visually record any students. In addition, you are asked to be interviewed regarding your history and development as a music educator, your philosophy of music education and middle school education, as well as techniques, methods, and strategies you utilize in your teaching of middle school choir students. You would be given a list of interview questions in advance. It is anticipated that this interview will last between one and two hours. I would like to audio-tape the interview for me to transcribe. When I have completed transcriptions of teaching video and of our interview, you will be given a copy to read and ensure it is an accurate representation of what was said or what occurred. It is anticipated that the reading of classroom transcripts will take no longer than 30 minutes per transcript. The transcript of your interview may take between 30 minutes to one hour to read, depending on the length of the interview.

You previously indicated your desire to have your legal name associated with this research and wish to waive the opportunity for your identity to remain confidential throughout this project. Participation is voluntary and you may choose to not participate at all. You may also refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or may discontinue the experiment at any time without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks to you for participating in this study or for refusing to participate. You will not benefit directly from your participation in this study. However, the music education profession would benefit greatly from the exploration, investigation, and description of your teaching and teaching characteristics demonstrated through your work as the choir teacher at Kinawa Middle School in Okemos, Michigan. Your work nurtures a culture of democracy and student-centered learning, develops the musicianship of middle school choir students, and promotes student empowerment within your classroom. Knowledge gained through observation, data gathering, and interviews surrounding you and your choral program will provide a valuable perspective on music education philosophy, strategies, techniques, and working successfully with middle school students. Education communities will benefit from this knowledge on many levels as information is shared and implemented into pre-music teacher education, beginning and experienced

music teacher advising and education, middle school choral education, middle school general music education, and high school choral education.

As compensation for your time, you and a guest will be treated to dinner at the Michigan State University Kellogg Center State Room.

With regard to your choir students, data gathered from students during focus group interviews will be kept completely confidential. Their privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. The only personal information about your students necessary for my purposes is gender and current grade level. All interviews will be transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Participants and their parents will be given a copy of the interview transcript to ensure it is an accurate representation of the focus group interview. Interview tapes will be destroyed when all research is complete. Students participating in this research study will receive a before-school bagels and juice party as compensation for their time.

If you have any questions about this study please contact Dr. Mitchell Robinson at (517) 355-7555 or by email at [mrob@msu.edu](mailto:mrob@msu.edu). If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu), or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,

Bridget Sweet  
Doctoral Student in Music Education  
Michigan State University

Appendix B

*EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:*  
A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

CONSENT FORM

Please check one of the following, sign below, and return THIS PAGE to me. Please keep the first pages for your records.

Thank you!

Bridget Sweet

\_\_\_\_\_ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I waive confidentiality and would like my legal name,  
\_\_\_\_\_, to be associated with this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like my identity to remain confidential at this time. I understand I have the option of revealing my identity at any time during this research and will request this change in writing at that time.

\_\_\_\_\_ I will NOT be participating in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

January 8, 2008

Dear Ms. Reddick:

During the semester of your internship at Kinawa Middle School in Okemos, Michigan I will be conducting research for my dissertation for Michigan State University. The title of the project is "Everybody's Somebody in My Class: A Case Study of an Exemplary Middle School Choir Teacher."

This project will focus on your cooperating teacher, Deb Borton. She has been asked permission to videotape her teaching during sixth grade choir and one of the seventh/eighth grade Varsity choirs. Videotaping would take place a minimum of four to a maximum of six class periods per choir and would not visually record any students. This study will not require your teaching to be video or audio taped at any time. However, because you will be assisting Ms. Borton, your image may be included briefly in the background as I film Ms. Borton's teaching.

Participation is voluntary and you may choose to not be included in videotape at all. You may also refuse to participate in certain procedures that may capture you on film at any time without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks to you for your image to be included on video tape or for refusing to participate. You will not benefit directly from your participation in this study. However, the music education profession would benefit greatly from the exploration, investigation, and description of Ms. Borton's teaching and teaching characteristics demonstrated through her work as the choir teacher at Kinawa Middle School in Okemos, Michigan. Your identity will be kept completely confidential. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. You are welcome to choose a name by which you would be referred within video transcripts; otherwise I will refer to you as 'the intern teacher.' For example, if I were to describe something funny that happened within a class period: "As Ms. Borton began to laugh out loud, the intern teacher also began to laugh, which caused the students to laugh along with them." The only personal information about you necessary for my purposes is gender and purpose within the classroom (intern teacher). When I have completed transcriptions of teaching video, the portions in which you may be mentioned will be available for you to read and ensure they are accurate representations of what occurred. Video tapes will be destroyed when all research is complete.

You will be invited to participate in a before-school bagels and juice party as compensation for your time.

If you have any questions about this study please contact Dr. Mitchell Robinson at (517) 355-7555 or by email at [mrob@msu.edu](mailto:mrob@msu.edu). If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu), or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,

Bridget Sweet  
Doctoral Student in Music Education  
Michigan State University

Appendix D

*EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:*  
A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

CONSENT FORM

Please check one of the following, sign below, and return THIS PAGE to me as soon as possible. Please keep the first page for your records.

Thank you!

Bridget Sweet

\_\_\_\_\_ I voluntarily agree for my image to be shown in passing on videotape of my cooperating teacher while she is teaching. I understand I may be referred to occasionally within video transcripts, but I understand I will not be solely videotaped. I will not be interviewed. I am not the subject of this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ I will NOT give consent to participate in this research study in any way. Please refrain from including my image in all video filmed during choir classes at Kinawa Middle School in Okemos, Michigan.

Intern teacher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

January 21, 2008

Dear

I would like you to participate in a research project I am doing for my dissertation for Michigan State University. The title of the project is "Everybody's Somebody in My Class: A Case Study of an Exemplary Middle School Choir Teacher."

You and four other seventh and/or eighth grade girls currently in choir would be given a list of questions in advance and then all of you would be asked to meet with me at the same time to share your answers. The questions would ask different things about your experiences in choir class. I would like to audio-tape the interview so I can later transcribe it. When I have completed the transcription, I will give you a copy so you can read it to make sure it is an accurate representation of what you said. I recognize how busy you are and the interview should not take long, perhaps an hour of your time. Reading through the transcript should take no longer than 30 minutes.

This is simply a request and participation in the study is strictly voluntary. You may also refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw at any time without penalty. Anything said during the group interview will not affect your grade or performance in choir class or in any other class. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your responses will be kept confidential and you will not be identified or referred to in any way. You are welcome to give yourself a name that everyone will call you during the group discussion. Ms. Borton will never hear the group interview tape. All audio taped data will be stored under secure conditions and no identifying information will be sorted along with this data. The only information I will need from you is your gender and grade. Students participating in this research study will receive a before-school bagels and juice party as compensation for their time.

If you have any questions about this study please contact Dr. Mitchell Robinson at (517) 355-7555 or by email at [mrob@msu.edu](mailto:mrob@msu.edu). If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu), or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Thank you for considering taking the time to participate in this research. Please sign the consent form if you are willing to participate.

Sincerely,

Bridget Sweet  
Music Education Doctoral Student  
Michigan State University

## Appendix F

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

January 21, 2008

Dear Choir Parents and/or Guardians:

You are being asked permission for your child to take part in a research project I am doing for my dissertation for Michigan State University. The title of the project is "Everybody's Somebody in My Class: A Case Study of an Exemplary Middle School Choir Teacher."

You are being asked permission for your child to participate in a group interview with four other seventh and/or eighth grade girls currently enrolled in choir class to discuss perceptions of choir. Your child would be given a list of questions in advance and all five students would meet with me at the same time to share answers. Each girl would choose a name by which she would be referred for the entire interview. I would like to audio-tape the interview so I can later transcribe it. When I have completed the transcription, I will give you and your child a copy to read and ensure it is an accurate representation of what was said. I recognize how busy your child is and the interview should not be a lengthy process, perhaps an hour of her time. Review of the interview transcript should take no more than 30 minutes.

Participation is voluntary and students may choose to not participate at all. They may also refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or may discontinue the experiment at any time without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks to you or your child for participating in this study or for refusing to participate. You or your child will not benefit directly from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of adolescent female singers' perceptions of choir and how to better meet the needs of these developing singers to maintain retention within a choral program. Data gathered from the students will be kept completely confidential. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. The only personal information about your child necessary for my purposes is gender and current grade level. All interviews will be transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Interview tapes will be destroyed when all research is complete.

Students participating in this research study will receive a before-school bagels and juice party as compensation for their time.

If you have any questions about this study please contact Dr. Mitchell Robinson at (517) 355-7555 or by email at [mrob@msu.edu](mailto:mrob@msu.edu). If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu), or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,

Bridget Sweet  
Doctoral Student in Music Education  
Michigan State University



Appendix G

*EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:*  
A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

CONSENT FORM

Please check one of the following, sign below, and return THIS PAGE to me or to the school office as soon as possible. Please keep the first page for your records.

Thank you!

Bridget Sweet

\_\_\_\_\_ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I will NOT give consent to participate in this research study.  
My child will not be participating.

Student's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

January 21, 2008

Dear

I would like you to participate in a research project I am doing for my dissertation for Michigan State University. The title of the project is "Everybody's Somebody in My Class: A Case Study of an Exemplary Middle School Choir Teacher."

You and four other seventh and/or eighth grade boys currently in choir would be given a list of questions in advance and then all of you would be asked to meet with me at the same time to share your answers. The questions would ask different things about your experiences in choir class. I would like to audio-tape the interview so I can later transcribe it. When I have completed the transcription, I will give you a copy so you can read it to make sure it is an accurate representation of what you said. I recognize how busy you are and the interview should not take long, perhaps an hour of your time. Reading through the transcript should take no longer than 30 minutes.

This is simply a request and participation in the study is strictly voluntary. You may also refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw at any time without penalty. Anything said during the group interview will not affect your grade or performance in choir class or in any other class. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your responses will be kept confidential and you will not be identified or referred to in any way. You are welcome to give yourself a name that everyone will call you during the group discussion. Ms. Borton will never hear the group interview tape. All audio taped data will be stored under secure conditions and no identifying information will be sorted along with this data. The only information I will need from you is your gender and grade. Students participating in this research study will receive a before-school bagels and juice party as compensation for their time.

If you have any questions about this study please contact Dr. Mitchell Robinson at (517) 355-7555 or by email at [mrob@msu.edu](mailto:mrob@msu.edu). If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu), or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Thank you for considering taking the time to participate in this research. Please sign the consent form if you are willing to participate.

Sincerely,

Bridget Sweet  
Music Education Doctoral Student  
Michigan State University

## Appendix I

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

January 21, 2008

Dear Choir Parents and/or Guardians:

You are being asked permission for your child to take part in a research project I am doing for my dissertation for Michigan State University. The title of the project is "Everybody's Somebody in My Class: A Case Study of an Exemplary Middle School Choir Teacher."

You are being asked permission for your child to participate in a group interview with four other seventh and/or eighth grade boys currently enrolled in choir class to discuss perceptions of choir. Your child would be given a list of questions in advance and all five students would meet with me at the same time to share answers. Each boy would choose a name by which he would be referred for the entire interview. I would like to audio-tape the interview so I can later transcribe it. When I have completed the transcription, I will give you and your child a copy to read and ensure it is an accurate representation of what was said. I recognize how busy your child is and the interview should not be a lengthy process, perhaps an hour of his time. Review of the interview transcript should not take more than 30 minutes.

Participation is voluntary and students may choose to not participate at all. They may also refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or may discontinue the experiment at any time without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks to you or your child for participating in this study or for refusing to participate. You or your child will not benefit directly from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of adolescent male singers' perceptions of choir and how to better meet the needs of these developing singers to maintain retention within a choral program. Data gathered from the students will be kept completely confidential. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. The only personal information about your child necessary for my purposes is gender and current grade level. All interviews will be transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes. Interview tapes will be destroyed when all research is complete.

Students participating in this research study will receive a before-school bagels and juice party as compensation for their time.

If you have any questions about this study please contact Dr. Mitchell Robinson at (517) 355-7555 or by email at [mrob@msu.edu](mailto:mrob@msu.edu). If you have any questions about your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail [irb@msu.edu](mailto:irb@msu.edu), or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,

Bridget Sweet  
Doctoral Student in Music Education  
Michigan State University

Appendix J

*EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:*  
A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

CONSENT FORM

Please check one of the following, sign below, and return THIS PAGE to me or to the school office as soon as possible. Please keep the first page for your records.

Thank you!

Bridget Sweet

\_\_\_\_\_ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I will NOT give consent to participate in this research study.

My child will not be participating.

Student's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix K

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

Interview Questions for Deb Borton, choir teacher at Kinawa Middle School

1. Where are you from? Where were you raised?
2. Describe your education or preparation to be a music teacher.
3. Why did you become a music teacher?
  - a. Now that you are one, have your reasons changed?
4. Describe how you came to teach middle school choir.
5. What is your philosophy on middle school choir?
6. Tell me about SPAM: Singing Produces Awesome Miracles.
7. What do you enjoy about middle school students?
  - a. Not enjoy?
8. Tell me about people who were or are influential in shaping your methods of teaching (positive and negative influences).
9. Discuss the role of middle school music programs in the total music program in Okemos.
10. What do you want your students to know and be able to do?
11. What are your perceptions of retention in choir as students move from Kinawa Middle School to Okemos High School?
  - a. Discuss your thoughts about the role of middle school choir in life-long music participation or involvement.
12. How do you perceive 'middle school education' in terms of what the profession does well?
  - a. What aspects does the profession *not* do well and/or what would you view as improvements to the profession?
13. Are your middle school students required to be in your choir classes?
  - a. Does that make teaching easier? More difficult?
  - b. If required, in what ways do you integrate the 'required' students with the 'want to be here' students?
14. What criteria do you use to select music?
15. Discuss your thoughts on choral festivals and competitions.
16. What is your philosophy on classroom management?
17. Anything else you would like to share or ask of me?

## Appendix L

### *EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:* A CASE STUDY OF AN EXEMPLARY MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOIR TEACHER

#### Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Describe why you are in choir class.
2. Describe what you like about choir class.
3. How has Ms. Borton made you a better musician?
4. Tell me about the songs Ms. Borton chooses for you to sing in choir. Too hard? Easy? Boring? Fun? Classical? Modern? Fast? Slow?
5. If you could change one thing about your choir class that would make it more like one of your other classes, what would that be?
6. If you could change one thing about your other classes that would make them more like choir class, what would that be?
7. Would you recommend taking choir to other kids coming into Kinawa Middle School? Why or why not?

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