

The book cover features a vibrant, abstract design of overlapping concentric circles. The colors are primarily pink, blue, and white. The top right corner is dominated by a large circle with many thin, concentric lines in shades of blue and purple. Below this, a large white circle is partially visible, containing the subtitle and author's name. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic, suggesting a focus on music and growth.

GROWING *Musicians*

*Teaching Music
in Middle School
& Beyond*

BRIDGET SWEET

Growing Musicians

GROWING MUSICIANS

*Teaching Music in Middle School
and Beyond*

Bridget Sweet

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For Jason, Luke, and Evelyn

You are the absolute loves of my life.

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PREFACE

Even as kids reach adolescence, they need more than ever for us to watch over them. Adolescence is not about letting go. It's about hanging on during a very bumpy ride. (Ron Taffel)

When I graduated from college with my bachelor's degree and certification in music education, I proclaimed, "*I am going to be a high school choir teacher!*" To me, that was it—go big or go home. However, my intentions fell victim to circumstance, and I found that my two choices for employment were either to build a K–12 music program from scratch within a small, rural community or to work as a junior high choral music teacher shared between two urban schools. In an effort to maintain the most secondary focus possible, I accepted the junior high choral position and kicked off the school year two days later. *No matter, as I would soon be a high school choir teacher.*

In the midst of my first year as a junior high music educator, my former high school choir teacher encouraged me to apply for the posted middle school position in my home district, placing me in alignment to succeed her following her imminent retirement. It was *perfect*. I would bide my time in the middle school until I could step into my dream job at the high school. Therefore, my second year as a music teacher began at Kenneth T. Beagle Middle School in Grand Ledge, Michigan. *I can see the light at the end of the tunnel! Soon I will be a high school choir teacher!*

John Lennon wrote in his song "Beautiful Boy," "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." While continuing to teach full time at Beagle Middle School, I began my Master of Music Education degree at Michigan State University (MSU) and completed my degree over summer and fall semesters. 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. I found that I took pleasure in the students' goofiness and quirkiness, and how every day was different and

slightly unpredictable. I appreciated that I could be a powerful influence in my students' lives and reap the benefits of their youth and willingness to be silly. I enjoyed not "living in a fishbowl" with regard to public perception of my music program, as high school choral teachers sometimes experience. I immensely enjoyed how free I felt to be myself with middle school students—my own goofiness and quiriness fell right in step with theirs. As a result, my interest in remaining with middle school students grew stronger than my interest in eventually taking over the high school choral position. Following graduation from the MSU master's degree program in 2003, I was urged to pursue a doctorate in music education. However, 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 an eventual sabbatical from Beagle Middle School would allow me to complete my one-year residency requirement for a Ph.D., from which I could return to Beagle Middle School and continue teaching. The best of both worlds! I began my doctoral degree at MSU in the summer of 2005.

For the first two years of my doctoral program, I continued to teach full-time at the middle school. I found that my role as a middle school teacher meshed with that of a doctoral student and developing researcher, and I became strongly aware of a lack of research about, and advocates for, adolescent singers. As a result, my research focus shifted from the perspective of middle school students (as it had been throughout work on my master's degree) to the perspective of *teachers* of middle school students. What could we learn from exemplary middle school choir teachers to share with preservice teachers, developing teachers, and experienced teachers to assist them in facilitation of student-centered middle school choir classes based on democratic principles of music teaching and learning? This question led to the development of my dissertation (Sweet 2008), as well as to my resignation as the choir teacher at Beagle Middle School in order to complete my Ph.D. and pursue a collegiate music education position. During the final year of my degree program, I embraced life as a full-time doctoral student and prepared to answer this question in order to promote awareness of middle school choir students and develop advocates for this population.

Middle school students truly seem to be "my people." I feel a strong connection with their musical and personal needs and development, as well as their sense of humor. As previously mentioned, throughout my

undergraduate degree program I considered teaching high school to be the pinnacle of the music education profession and anything else was, to my mind, less prestigious. Today, as a teacher of music educators, I see that version of myself in my students every semester of every year: young adults completely fixed on their futures as high school band, orchestra, or choral teachers. Regardless of where they land and whom they ultimately teach, I am honored to support and teach them and to provide opportunities for growth and reflection as they navigate the transition from student to teacher. However, I do find great enjoyment in educating my college students in the ways and joys of working with adolescents, which includes dissipating fears about puberty and fending off their own bad memories from middle school.

There is no precise span of years to define “adolescence.” However, there is general agreement that the emotional, psychological, and physical transitions of adolescence can span from upper elementary school through high school and into adulthood. By looking beyond grade levels and focusing on developmental characteristics, I have developed an affinity for adolescents, whose unpredictability and sense of humor never fail to fascinate and amuse me, and whose journeys from childhood to adulthood never fail to intrigue and concern me. I recognize the potential power of middle-level music classes, from general music to ensemble participation, and believe that teaching methodologies and practices rooted in a safe and structured learning environment truly allow students to empower themselves *while* developing their musicianship.

ADDITIONAL VOICES

Although my middle school teaching background is rooted in choral music, this book is intended for all disciplines of middle school music teaching—choral, instrumental (band and orchestra), and general music. Throughout the book you will find commentary from middle school music teachers whom I interviewed about their work with adolescent music students. A constructivist approach helped me to examine how these middle school music teachers perceive and construct their own reality within a variety of teaching settings. As defined by Michael Crotty (1998):

Constructivism points out the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect than any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. (Crotty 1998, 58)

I contacted colleagues at universities across the United States to gather names of exemplary choral, general music, band, and orchestra teachers. Colleagues provided a total of twenty-eight names and, following initial contact, sixteen teachers agreed to participate in my research. I have also included the insights of Deb Borton in this book, who was the primary participant of my dissertation.

Interviews took place either in person, over the telephone, or via Skype. Although each participant answered the same questions, interviews ranged from fifty to a hundred minutes in length, depending on the time each participant took to answer the questions. Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed, with a transcription provided to the respective interviewee to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. The teachers answered follow up questions via email.

It is important to emphasize that my sharing of these teachers' perspectives and stories is not to claim their thinking as right or wrong, but rather to provide a variety of perspectives from which the reader may glean ideas, validation, and encouragement in working with adolescent musicians. Professor Michael Quinn Patton wrote in his 2002 book *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* that, through examination of different perspectives, "the constructionist evaluator . . . would not pronounce which set of perceptions was 'right' or more 'true' or more 'real'" (Patton 2002, 98). Thus, as he suggests, it is up to the reader to decide which of the discussed ideas, approaches, or philosophies best mesh with their own.

At the time of our interviews, the seventeen participants primarily taught middle school choir, band, strings, and general music; two of the teachers additionally taught guitar classes and/or a guitar ensemble. Because all of these middle school teachers differed in years of teaching experience, school settings, and teaching responsibilities, the following short biographies situate each person within his or her own teaching context. However, please keep in mind that these details indicate where each person was teaching at the time of data collection. Several of the teachers are no longer currently working at the school identified below; updated biographies can be found in Appendix A. Actual teacher names and school names are used throughout this book, unless a pseudonym was requested.

Deb Borton

Deb is a middle school teacher in Okemos, Michigan with a focus on choral music.

Bethany Cann

Bethany is a general music teacher at Penn Treaty Middle School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Robyn Chair (a pseudonym)

Robyn is an orchestra teacher at two middle schools and two elementary schools in Illinois.

Jay Champion

Jay teaches chorus, general music, and electronic music composition at Lost Mountain Middle School in Kennesaw, Georgia.

James Cumings

James is the middle school choir teacher at Kidder Middle School in Jackson, Michigan.

Matthew Dethrow

Matthew is a middle school teacher at Kennedy Junior High School in Lisle, Illinois with a focus on band.

Jason Freeland

Jason is the middle school band teacher at Central Middle School in Tinley Park, Illinois; he also teaches general music one hour per day.

Seth Gardner

Seth is a middle school teacher at Haverford Township Middle School in Havertown, Pennsylvania with a focus on choral music.

Sean Grier

Sean is one of the two choir teachers at the Durham School of the Arts (DSA) in Durham, North Carolina.

Michelle Limor Herring

Michelle is a middle school teacher at Lamar Middle School in Austin, Texas with a focus on choral music.

David Hirschorn

David teaches choral music and guitar at Durham Middle School in Cobb County, Georgia.

Michael Lehman

Michael is the middle school band teacher at Edison Middle School in Champaign, Illinois.

Marsha Miller (a pseudonym)

Marsha is a middle school teacher at Philip East Middle School in Illinois with a focus on band.

Andrew Nickles

Andrew teaches at Gridley Middle School within the Tucson Unified School District in Tucson, Arizona where he has integrated his string orchestras with his guitar ensembles.

Gretchen Pearson

Gretchen is a middle school teacher in Illinois with a focus on orchestra.

Kate Tyler (a pseudonym)

Kate is a general music teacher in Illinois and also teaches a middle school choir one day per week after school.

Tavia Zerman

Tavia is the middle school band teacher at Hayes Middle School in Grand Ledge, Michigan.

GROWING MUSICIANS

More than anything, middle school pulls in children and pitches back teenagers. It is a time of change, which means, at this age, many things. (Perlstein 2003, 6)

Each chapter in this book is designed to address different facets of working with adolescent music students. As will be discussed throughout, there is no single, clear-cut way to define or explain adolescent actions or thinking because each student progresses through adolescence at his or her own pace; nor is there just one way to teach adolescent music students. That said, this book will provide a variety of perspectives and considerations on which to reflect with regard to your own work as a music educator.

Chapter 1 provides foundational information and focuses on characteristics of young adolescents, ranging from physiological, emotional, and social development to identity development and self-esteem. As chapter 1 specifically focuses on the adolescent music student, chapter 2 concentrates on the music teacher. Conversation in chapter 2 addresses the development of our individual philosophies of teaching adolescent musicians and the varied roles that a music teacher plays in the lives of young adolescents. Within chapter 3, discussion centers on the music classroom climate, including acknowledgment of student diversity and cultivation of the music classroom as a safe place. Chapter 4 is focused on the equilibrium of flexibility and structure in a music program, as well as matters of classroom management, discipline, and bullying in the music classroom. Ideas of humanity and empathy are explored within chapter 5, as they are easily situated within the context of an adolescent music class. Humor is the overarching topic of chapter six—specifically, humor as a teaching tactic with adolescent musicians. When used mindfully, humor can be an effective and powerful teaching tool.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The ideas within this book have been rattling around in my head, heart, and soul for a very long time. It has been quite an adventure exploring and embracing these ideas over the past years, and it is thrilling to see this project realized. So many people have assisted me along the way—truly an endeavor of this magnitude is never done alone. However, there are four main people who influenced my contemplation of the ideas contained in this book and, in varied ways, very much contributed to the formation of this book. I would like to acknowledge them in chronological order.

I know the first moment that I ever contemplated the idea of empowerment of adolescent musicians was during a doctoral advising meeting with my co-dissertation chairs, Dr. Sandra Snow and Dr. Mitchell Robinson, at Michigan State University. As we hashed out topics for my dissertation research, the two of them wholeheartedly encouraged me to study with middle school choir teacher, Deb Borton. I distinctly remember them saying, “If we could bottle and sell what Deb is doing over there with those middle school students. . . .” It took convincing for me to approach the idea of studying the teacher’s perspective because I had been very interested in the student perspective for so long. But after my advisers lovingly poked and prodded at me, I embraced the idea and have never looked back. So, thank you Sandra and Mitch for starting me on this wonderful path long ago.

I surely would not be where I am today if I had not started my research project on Deb Borton, middle school choir teacher extraordinaire. She completely took me down the rabbit hole of empowering adolescent musicians; she taught me about Safe Place; and she embraced me as a colleague and a friend. She inspires my work every day and (even though I’ve tried to tell her) will have no idea of the magnitude of the impression that she has made on me and so many other people. I am a better music educator and human being for knowing her; the world is a much better place with her in it. Thank you, Deb.

The fourth person who has been key in the creation of this book is my editor at Oxford Press, Norm Hirschy. It was his vision to take the ideas from my dissertation and put them into a book to share with the world. He has been endlessly patient with me throughout this process—through changing university positions and moving across the country, through the arrival of both of my children—and has been nothing but 100 percent supportive and encouraging. His feedback is elegant and insightful; he is so good at helping me to see the forest for the trees. Norm, you have strengthened my voice as a music educator and I cannot thank you enough for believing in my work.

This project would not have been possible without the influence of the hundreds of adolescents with whom I've worked over the years. I am incredibly grateful to be a music educator and to work with so many remarkable students—both in my past and in my present. Thank you to all of the *amazing* middle school music teachers who shared their stories and love of teaching middle school students with me during this project: Michelle Barrientes, Bethany Cann, Robyn Chair (pseudonym), Jay Champion, James Cumings, Matthew Dethrow, Jason Freeland, Seth Gardner, Sean Grier, David Hirschorn, Mike Lehman, Marsha Miller (pseudonym), Andrew Nickles, Gretchen Pearson, Kate Tyler (pseudonym), and Tavia Zerman. I feel very fortunate to have crossed paths with you and am honored to share a bit of you with the music education profession.

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To Luke and Evelyn, the greatest little people on the planet, I thank you for providing me with unlimited love and encouragement through your giggles, snuggles, spontaneous dance breaks, and silliness; and for allowing me breaks in my professional life to just be Momma. I love you madly and look forward to our time together when you are adolescents—it is going to be so much fun! And lastly, and most important, I am humbled by the unwavering love and support from my husband, Jason. I am not sure how I could have completed this book without you by my side and I am forever grateful for all of the kind and encouraging words, the hugs, and the Keurig coffeemaker that I have used a zillion times while writing late in the wee hours of the night or early in the wee hours of the morning. You have been so unselfish in giving me the time and space necessary for this project to come to fruition, always with a supportive or encouraging word. I love you and thank you for *everything*.

