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**The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning Strategies on Performance Anxiety in the
Fourth-Grade Music Classroom**

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project aimed to answer the question, “In what ways can music students relieve their performance anxiety around their peers while singing and playing instruments in music class?” The setting of this study was three different 4th-grade public elementary music classrooms in Minnesota, with 276 students participating in the study. This research took place over six weeks with three different Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions being implemented. Data was collected in the form of student surveys taking place before and after interventions, student attitude scales that were taken each day, teacher self-assessments completed daily, and field notes. The results of this study and the interventions that took place showed a decrease in student music performance anxiety by the end of data collection. In the future, the authors of this study aim to implement specific SEL interventions throughout the school year in an attempt to mitigate music performance anxiety before the stress of a public performance.

Keywords: music performance anxiety, social-emotional learning, music classroom

The elementary music classroom is a unique environment where students can sing, dance, play instruments, and create music with their peers. From an observer's perspective, it appears to be joyful and exciting. Though this can be true, a growing number of studies show that elementary-aged students display symptoms of music performance anxiety, commonly referred to as MPA (Kalensak-Rodzaj, 2020; Miles, 2020; Patson & Osborne, 2015). Music performance anxiety presents itself in classrooms, leading up to concerts, and during concerts. Music performance anxiety is "The experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance, which is manifested through combinations of affective, cognitive, somatic, and behavioral symptoms" (Guyon et al., 2020, p. 2).

Post-covid, we see many markers of performance anxiety in our students, particularly upper elementary students. In our classes, students are refusing or showing signs of anxiety when singing or playing instruments alone, in small groups, or even with a large group. The performance anxiety we see happens in class and during events like concerts. These signs of performance anxiety manifest by students eloping when asked to sing or play in front of classmates or changes in body language and attitude and singing. Students also verbally express their anxiety in the classroom setting and leading up to concerts. Furthermore, parents regularly call or email us to express concern for their student's anxiety surrounding music.

To give our students the tools they need to reduce or control performance anxiety, we found the strongest connection between music and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies. Though there are five social-emotional learning domains, we are focusing on the connection between music and the self-management and self-awareness domains (CASEL, 2023). These domains lend themselves to fit most naturally into the music curriculum. "The general music practice of using music, theatrical, and dance/movement activities as performance or classroom

presentations use goal-setting processes that support the development of self-management skills” (Varner, 2020, pg. 77). Because of this strong correlation between music and SEL, our interventions included practices to help students maintain a growth-mindset, set personal and collective goals, and self-regulate their emotions.

It is essential students learn techniques to manage their performance anxiety at the classroom level before they should be expected to manage their performance anxiety surrounding public performances. The self-management domain of SEL is defined as “the ability to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and achieve goals and aspirations” (CASEL, 2023). If students can learn to manage their emotions and thoughts daily in the music classroom setting, they will be able to transfer these skills to a public performance setting more naturally.

The literature lacks findings on managing classroom performance anxiety among peers. Therefore, the focus of this research study was to answer the question, “In what ways can music students relieve their performance anxiety around their peers while singing and playing instruments in music class?” We were interested in the ultimate goal of students transferring these skills to a performance setting with an audience. For the purpose of this study, we were interested in their grade-level music concert.

This action research project took place in three different 4th-grade public elementary music classrooms in Minnesota. The first classroom was a kindergarten through fifth-grade school in central Minnesota and would be considered a suburban school. There were 125 fourth-grade students split into five sections of classes, and students had music for 45 minutes once every five days. The second school was a kindergarten through fifth-grade school in the twin cities metropolitan area. There were 76 students divided into three sections. Students here

had music once every three days for 50 minutes. The third school was a kindergarten through sixth-grade school in northern Minnesota. There were 75 students separated into three sections. Students had music once every three days, varying instruction time from 25-50 minutes.

Theoretical Framework

Our research on managing performance anxiety is led by social-emotional learning (SEL) framework. This theoretical framework is preferred because of the overlap between SEL and music education, particularly elementary music education. By implementing SEL strategies, we are not rewriting the curriculum or reinventing the wheel. SEL must be implemented intentionally. By adding elements of goal setting, collaboration, and student input, a music lesson becomes a lesson of music and SEL (Marcetti, 2021).

Social-emotional learning is defined as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals (CASEL, 2023).” SEL has five domains: Self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2023). Our theoretical framework specifically focuses on the first two domains of self-awareness and self-management.

Self-awareness is crucial in identifying the triggers and responses to performance anxiety. Performance anxiety can be caused by the environment, past experiences, ability level, and lack of support or self-confidence (Papageorgi et al., 2007; Susic, 2018). Part of self-awareness is identifying one’s emotions. If student musicians can identify the cause of their emotions surrounding performance anxiety, this is their first step in management. Growth mindset is another element of self-awareness that will be used in our research. Growth mindset is the belief

in oneself that effort and practice should continue, and one should learn from their mistakes along the way (Davis, 2017). Growth mindset is important in our theoretical framework to encourage a change of mindset, being that not every performance has to be perfect in order for it to be successful.

Self-management is the next logical step after students have started to identify their emotions and maintain self-awareness. The self-management domain focuses on managing one's emotions, identifying and using stress management strategies, setting personal and collective goals, and maintaining personal and collective agency (CASEL, 2023). Personal and collective goals are integral to this domain, particularly in the music classroom setting. Music is unique in that, most of the time, collective collaboration and effort are needed to succeed. While students may have individual goals, their small individual goals all work together to achieve a collective and common goal (Marcetti, 2021). The idea of working together for a common goal where all are contributing and valued is one way in which students might feel less alone in their fears surrounding music performance.

The theoretical framework surrounding this study is simple in nature and, as the reader will discover in the literature review, it has not been studied alongside performance anxiety in any depth. We hope to use this framework to build a stronger connection between the two.

Review of Literature

The essential question guiding this literature review is, "In what ways can music students relieve their performance anxiety around their peers while singing and playing instruments in music class?" While various ages and genders alike have shown anxiety surrounding singing and playing instruments in small and large performances, the literature will show that these qualities

can affect how music performance anxiety manifests in students. This literature review will highlight research that shows evidence of musical performance anxiety in students and the factors that can affect the level of that anxiety. Finally, the literature will explore procedures teachers can use to decrease anxiety levels in students.

Anxiety in School, Music, and Performances

Causes of Music Performance Anxiety

Many people experience anxiety in their everyday lives. Most people will experience performance anxiety, nervousness, and shyness around strangers. This anxiety becomes problematic when it affects a person's ability to function normally (Susic, 2018). Ryan (2005) explains that elementary and middle school age students show signs of musical performance anxiety and that this type of anxiety can start early in childhood. Cohen and Bodner (2019) also explicitly state that music performance anxiety can affect musicians at any point in their musical careers, including early childhood.

In a study aiming to identify the significant causes of anxiety among elementary-aged children, Inam et al. (2017) found that anxiety was most often not caused by bad childhood experiences, as might have been expected. They found that anxiety was part of natural human instincts and was most often more prevalent at school than in other settings. Susic (2018) found that one of the primary causes of performance anxiety, especially in children, is a natural fight-or-flight response as well as fear. These natural instincts appear when people do not have the experience or education to help them overcome these instincts.

Though Inam et al. (2017) found that bad childhood experiences did not necessarily cause music performance anxiety, they found that parental support and encouragement were contributing factors. Papageorgi et al. (2007) point out that many contributing factors can cause

music performance anxiety in people of any age. Findings indicate that efficacy and the performer's environment are the leading causes of music performance anxiety (Papageorgi et al., 2007). Along with efficacy, a lack of education can trigger music performance anxiety in children (Susic, 2018). Children who have not had time to experience many years of lessons and studying lack the knowledge that comes with time and experience.

Boucher and Ryan (2011) conducted a study on three and four-year-old children taking group music lessons that culminated in two performances. The results of this study showed that children exhibit many of the same signs of music performance anxiety as adults and that this can be seen in the first performances of children. The idea that music performance anxiety can be present in young children was also explored by Miles (2020). She studied music performance anxiety in choir students between the ages of 10 and 12. Miles found this type of anxiety, especially in preparation for a concert, was highly evident and affected the students.

It could be expected that music performance anxiety would decrease as music students grow older and gain knowledge, time, and experience with their instrument. Patston and Osborne (2015) found the opposite to be true. In a study on the relationship between music performance anxiety and perfectionism, they found that experience on an instrument increased the desire for perfection in performance and, therefore, raised levels of music performance anxiety. Miles (2020) supports this claim by collecting data that shows that students' performance anxiety increases because of the desire to be perfect in front of friends and family.

Outside of the area of music, the type of anxiety most commonly compared to musical performance anxiety is testing anxiety. Boucher and Ryan (2011) recognize these similarities while also pointing out the differences, mainly the social context of performing for an audience. They noted an increase in anxious behaviors between music lessons and performances. Miles

(2020) also pointed out that having an audience can impact performance anxiety, primarily when children perform to a known audience, such as friends, family, and other students.

In a case study, Sieger (2017) noted that music performance anxiety could have detrimental consequences for students continuing their music education. Many students lose their willingness and love to create music because of fear and anxiety. This anxiety can cause burnout and stress that will cause students to end their music studies (Cohen & Bodner, 2019).

Effects of Age and Gender on Performance Anxiety

Many children experience anxiety when performing in front of others, including their peers. However, do demographic factors, like age or gender, affect anxiety in students, or are different ages and genders affected by anxiety equally? This literature review section will explore the possible answers to that question.

Age

Anxiety is part of many students' everyday lives. However, is there an age where this anxiety starts? According to multiple studies, there is. Syede and Andrews (2021) stated that anxiety symptoms emerge between early and late childhood. Ryan (2005) agrees with this stance stating that children as young as third-grade experience a raised anxiety level before a school concert. What happens in third grade for students that would cause this rise in anxiety? The answer is puberty. Many students start puberty at age eight or nine (NHS, 2022). Susic (2018) states that the further children are into puberty, the more likely they are to experience performance anxiety. Adolescence is an incredibly challenging time when it comes to performance anxiety. This struggle can continue for some professionals throughout their lives (Papageorigi et al., 2007). Besides puberty, the appearance of perfectionist tendencies begins

making themselves known at those ages. According to Patston (2015), performance anxiety and perfectionism show a strong and positive correlation for 10 to 17-year-olds.

Some studies have observed different tendencies for age, however. In a study by Sieger (2017), different music teachers were interviewed about their children and performance anxiety. Brent, a middle and high school orchestra teacher, felt that his older students could more easily identify what was making them anxious and develop ways to combat that anxiety. He also found that his younger students were more prone to self-deprecating talk (Sieger, 2017). Andrew, a middle school band and orchestra teacher, had a different experience. He found that his younger students experienced less anxiety because they had not had the pressures put on them yet that come along with high school music- auditions, all-state, multiple performances, and more challenging music (Sieger, 2017).

Gender

There seems to be a difference of opinion regarding gender affecting anxiety. The above section mentions that perfectionism and performance anxiety strongly correlate (Patston, 2015). That correlation also applies to anxiety in the different genders. Patston (2015) also states that girls have a steeper and more intense developmental trajectory than boys regarding the relationship between MPA and perfectionism. From this, one might then infer that girls are more likely to be perfectionists and experience anxiety because of it.

Ryan (2005) had a different finding. He found that gender differences were seen starting in fifth grade. These differences were not seen in third or fourth-graders. However, rather than girls having higher anxiety-like Patston found, Ryan (2005) discovered that fifth-grade boys had higher anxiety levels than fifth-grade girls when taking an anxiety inventory test on an average day. He also reported that both genders reported increased anxiety levels on concert day.

Ginsburg (1998) concluded something else in his findings. In a study on clinically anxious students, he found that there was no significant gender difference found when it came to social anxiety. In this study, parents of girls with high social anxiety rated their children low in social skills, assertiveness, and social behaviors. This was untrue for boys whose social anxiety was unrelated to social skills. Another exciting discovery was that in girls, levels of social anxiety were linked to a negative outlook on self-worth. This was not seen in the boys (Ginsburg, 1998). So, even though Ginsburg found no difference in social anxiety between the genders, he did find that anxiety was viewed differently by both parents and the students themselves, depending on the student's gender.

Routines Teachers Have Found Successful in Reducing Performance Anxiety

Relationship-Building and a Safe Space

Creating a safe space to create music is essential (Hendricks et al., 2014). With anxiety in the music class and performance setting being a common problem, teachers are already using various tactics to help students manage their anxiety. In interviewing three teachers of school instrumental programs, Sieger (2017) found common ground in handling performance anxiety, including using humor, teaching students perspective, building relationships, and breathing activities in regular classes. For more mature players, an emphasis is placed on playing technique to control anxiety during performance situations. Raschdorf et al. (2021) concur but add that relationship building can be between teacher and student or student to student and encourages the use of song games in an elementary setting to empower students to sing and create together, while the teacher shows the students how to work in a respectful and responsible community.

Some techniques are discouraged in the literature. Teachers may use competition to motivate music students, but for some students, competition in the music room creates fear and

anxiety and can lead to performance anxiety. Instead, teachers should consider using ability-appropriate and challenging situations while focusing on the current challenge rather than student competition (Hendricks et al., 2014). Performance feedback from teachers and peers has also been cited as critical concerning student anxiety. Positive post-performance feedback from teachers or peers will more likely increase confidence and future performance success. Critical evaluation of mistakes and performances in music education can begin earlier than in other areas like athletics and academics (Patson & Osborne, 2015). This negative feedback can result in negative beliefs about oneself and the onset of performance anxiety (Papageorigi et al., 2007).

A single study in the literature shows results contrary to the successes of the techniques described (Susic, 2018). A study conducted 232 fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders in two separate schools. One school has a traditional and rigid approach to music education, and the other uses Functional Music Pedagogy (FMP), an approach that implements more improvisation and less grading. The study found that the results were not statistically significant when comparing performance anxiety to these teaching approaches (Susic, 2018). These results suggest that performance anxiety is not necessarily caused or eased by teaching interventions in all school scenarios.

Social-Emotional Learning Techniques

"Music education and social-emotional learning share complementary objectives, such as helping develop self-awareness and social awareness, promoting responsible decision-making skills, fostering self-management skills, and encouraging positive relationship skills" (Raschdorf et al., 2021, p. 43)." Music is a unique academic subject in that it requires a high level of community and teamwork in order to be successful. Before students can attain goals such as participating in a performing group or creating a piece of music with classmates, they must first

meet the prerequisites of taking turns, showing mutual respect, supporting each other in mistakes, and perceiving everyone's ideas as worthwhile (Jacobi, 2012).

Data in the literature shows that implementing social-emotional learning can relieve anxiety in students. In a study of 222 musicians ages 9 to 12, Kalenska-Rodzaj (2020) found that 45% of the participants fit the profile of suffering from musical performance anxiety (MPA). The researcher suggests developing students' emotional awareness and regulation skills by recognizing their emotions before a performance, differentiating between them, and teaching strategies to develop confidence and cope with emotions (Kalenska-Rodzaj, 2020). When performing a study using a control group and an experimental group to test the effectiveness of social-emotional learning strategies to relieve social and test anxiety, Boyes and McLeod (2021) found that students in the experimental group's exam scores increased while anxiety decreased. Students described eased anxiety regarding social situations and perceived judgment of teachers, peers, or parents and cited breathing techniques as the primary coping mechanism.

Conclusion

Many factors contribute to anxiety, including the non-encouragement of parents and the performing environment. Music performance anxiety in young students often causes burnout, leading to students discontinuing their musical education. The literature shows that anxiety and music performance anxiety is present in students of all ages but point to an increase starting at the end of second grade, or around eight years old. The literature is clear that aspects of social-emotional learning and building relationships among students and teachers are essential to creating a safe classroom and performance space to cope with performance anxiety.

The gaps in the literature were very evident. There is a lack of research regarding anxiety, specifically in the music classroom during an average school day. Most research about anxiety in

music focuses on performances with an outside audience. Furthermore, the research focuses on students in extracurricular music activities, such as piano lessons or choirs. However, very little research surrounds the students who comprise a general music class in a middle school. Finally, there is a lack of literature that focuses on elementary-aged students. The literature focuses on performing ensembles, particularly concert bands, in middle and high school music students. More research is needed in this area of elementary music education.

Methodology

This study aimed to implement interventions to help lessen performance anxiety in students in the music classroom and in a concert setting. This action research project took place in three different 4th-grade public elementary music classrooms in Minnesota. The first classroom was in a kindergarten through fifth-grade school in central Minnesota and at a suburban school. There were 125 fourth-grade students split into five sections of classes, and students had music for 45 minutes once every five days. The second school was a kindergarten through fifth-grade school in the twin cities metropolitan area. There were 76 students divided into three sections. Students here had music once every three days for 50 minutes. The third school was a kindergarten through sixth-grade school in northern Minnesota. There were 75 students separated into three sections. Students had music once every three days, varying instruction time from 25-50 minutes.

Three interventions were implemented during this study. Students completed a pre and post-survey (see Appendix A) using Google Forms to measure their feelings about participating in music class, performing in front of other students, and performing alongside other students.

The data collected from the pre-survey helped us to determine the appropriate interventions to implement and in what order to do so.

The first intervention focused on both class and individual mantras. This intervention took place over the course of two music class rotations. The first lesson introduced the mantras, and the second reviewed the mantras and how they related to the day's activities. In this intervention, students received the definition, appropriate usage, benefits, and examples of mantras. Each school and class used the same mantras: “My best is enough” and “I don’t need to sound perfect. I only need to sound better than last time.” Students were also instructed to create their own mantras. When students became frustrated with not being perfect at playing an instrument or singing, the class mantra was used to refocus students. Negative self-talk was a prevalent issue in the three classrooms. The goal of the mantra was to lessen those negative thought processes and focus instead on a positive outlook. Rather than quitting when something was hard, the mantra encouraged students to push through the struggle.

The second intervention focused on goal setting. This intervention also took place over the course of two music class rotations. Students learned about what a goal is and why having a goal is essential for success. All three schools and corresponding classes had the same goal: “We will sing every music class leading up to our concert.” The survey results that students were given before interventions showed that students felt incredibly anxious about singing in front of classmates and an audience. During Covid-19, singing and playing wind instruments was heavily regulated and, in some states or districts, discouraged due to the possibility of spreading germs (Stockman et al., 2021; Fink et al., 2022). Also, students did not get to sing as a group during distance learning. Because of these factors and the general unease about singing felt by many, this study put an extra emphasis on singing. During the second week of the goal-setting

intervention, students were encouraged to make their musical goals. Students did not have to make their goal focused on singing, but it was something that should be achievable before the concert. The idea of goal-making was to build students' confidence and encourage motivation.

Breathing was the focus of the third intervention. This intervention occurred during the final two music rotations leading up to the concert. In this intervention, students were taught what mindful breathing was and how it can reduce anxiety. Students practiced different breathing exercises to calm their minds and bodies when feeling anxious or out of control. The objective of mindful breathing is to focus only on one's breathing, encouraging students to live in the moment and push the anxiety away. Students practiced using these breathing techniques when thinking about performing in front of an audience or on a stage.

After the music concert, in the following music class attended, students completed a post-survey using Google Forms. The questions were identical to the pre-survey to accurately compare student responses before and after the interventions. The survey was seven questions in length. Questions included two different five-point Likert scales regarding anxiety or enjoyment surrounding music, three true or false questions regarding confidence, and two short answer questions to gain information about what makes students anxious in class and what students enjoy in class. The survey was not anonymous, as students provided their email so that we could remove the surveys of students who returned the parental opt-out form. There was no time limit given for this survey, and students were encouraged to be completely honest in their responses, and their responses would have no impact on their grades.

Throughout our study, four data collection tools were implemented in total. As previously explained, students completed a pre and post-survey (see Appendix A), students completed a weekly attitude scale (see Appendix B), teachers took daily field notes (see Appendix C), and

teachers completed a daily teacher attitude survey (see Appendix D). The pre and post-surveys were only completed at the beginning and conclusion of the study. However, all other data collection tools were implemented daily throughout the study.

Each time students had music throughout the study, they completed a weekly attitude scale (see Appendix B) at the end of class. Students completed the attitude scale using paper and pencil. Completing this attitude scale started with the first intervention when students learned about mantras and ended after students had implemented breathing techniques. Students completed this attitude scale five or six times, depending on the rotation of their class. The attitude survey was six questions in length, and all were on a five-point Likert scale using visuals of a frowning face up to a smiling face. Students were instructed to fill in the face that most matched their feelings and attitude in class that day. Questions included students' attitudes towards singing and playing instruments alone, in groups, and in games, and students' feelings before, during, and after music class. These attitude scales were completed within the final five minutes of class, and students were encouraged to be honest with their responses. They were reminded to think about their feelings that particular day. The surveys were not anonymous, as students provided their names so that we could remove the answers of the students who returned the parental opt-out form.

Throughout the study, the three teachers took daily field notes (see Appendix C). Field notes were taken beginning the same week as the attitude survey when students were introduced to mantras and continued through the concert rehearsals and performances. How students behave and react to their surroundings at their concerts was an essential aspect of this study. The field notes included notes on students' verbal comments, overall participation, and behaviors and were broken down by each activity in class. Verbal comments were primarily focused on comments

surrounding negative self-talk or expressions of fear and anxiety, or comments of self-confidence and excitement. Overall participation focused on what activities students were excited and actively participating in versus refusal to participate or minimal participation. Behaviors focused on any behaviors that either positively or negatively impacted student learning.

Throughout the study, the three teachers took a daily teacher self-assessment (see Appendix D) using Google Forms. The self-assessment was taken from the beginning of the first intervention through the completion of the concert. This self-assessment was completed at the end of the school day as a reflection of how the day went and how our own attitudes may have affected the feelings and attitudes of our students. The self-assessment included our names and the date for data sorting purposes. Questions included a five-point Likert scale to rate our mindset coming to work, our anxiety level, and our ability to maintain a calm classroom. It also included a checklist of our personal feelings going into our fourth-grade class that day and a short response section to explain any pertinent information about our fourth-grade class from the day that may have affected our teaching.

Analysis of Data

This study aimed to determine if specific social-emotional learning interventions would reduce the amount of performance anxiety students felt when performing in their classroom and on stage. This study took place over an approximately six-week long period in the three separate fourth-grade classrooms. Data were collected from the beginning of concert preparations through the class that happened after each school's concert was completed. In total, data were collected from 276 4th-grade students across all three schools. It should be noted that when a student was absent, they were not asked to make up any of the interventions or data collection materials.

Therefore, the number of students completing the surveys and attitude scales varies slightly each week.

The methods of data collection were both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data was collected through a pre and post-intervention survey (Appendix A) and student attitude scales (Appendix B). Quantitative data was collected through daily field notes (Appendix C) a daily teacher self-reflection survey (Appendix D). For the purposes of this study, the data analysis was done with an all-encompassing lens, looking at the data of the 276 students as a whole, without separation of the specific school being revealed in the analysis.

The week before beginning interventions, a pre-intervention survey (Appendix A) was given to students. 257 students completed the pre-intervention survey. Questions included two likert scale questions, where students were asked to rate their anxiety in performing both in music class and in front of an audience. Students were also asked true or false prompts referring to their anxiety level in class and in concert. We found these questions to be the driving force behind determining our interventions. When given the prompt, "I feel confident singing in front of my classmates," 72.8% of students responded with "false," while only 27.2% of students responded with "true". When given the prompt, "I feel confident playing an instrument in front of my classmates," 56.8% of students responded with "true" and 42.8% responded with "false." Though the answers are more in favor of confidence in playing instruments, this answer still shows a substantial amount of students lacking confidence in the classroom. Finally, when given the prompt "I enjoy performing for an audience," 57.2% of students responded with "false," and 42.8% responded with "true." These responses together show a lack of confidence in students both in the classroom and in concert.

In addition, two open-ended questions asked students what they enjoyed about music and what made them anxious about music. When asked, “What do you enjoy in music class?” common responses included: playing music games; playing instruments such as drums, recorders, and boomwhackers; and class choice reward days. When asked the question “When do you feel anxious in music class?” the answers varied more among the students. More common responses included: When playing the recorder, singing, singing alone, when it is loud, when we have a concert, and never.

Based on the pre-survey results, we decided to base our interventions around building student confidence in singing, playing instruments, particularly the recorder, and easing anxiety leading up to a concert with a full audience.

Findings

The largest amount of student data came from a quantitative attitude scale (Appendix B) that students took at the end of each lesson during the six rotations of data collection. These surveys included questions that aimed to capture the feelings and anxiety levels of students throughout the study regarding singing and playing instruments alone and with others, as well as how they felt before, during and after music class. Of the six questions presented on the scale, two of the questions had a clear change over the course of the study, while four of the questions answers remained stagnant.

Figure 1

Total number of student responses to the prompt “Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom” over six rotations of data collection.

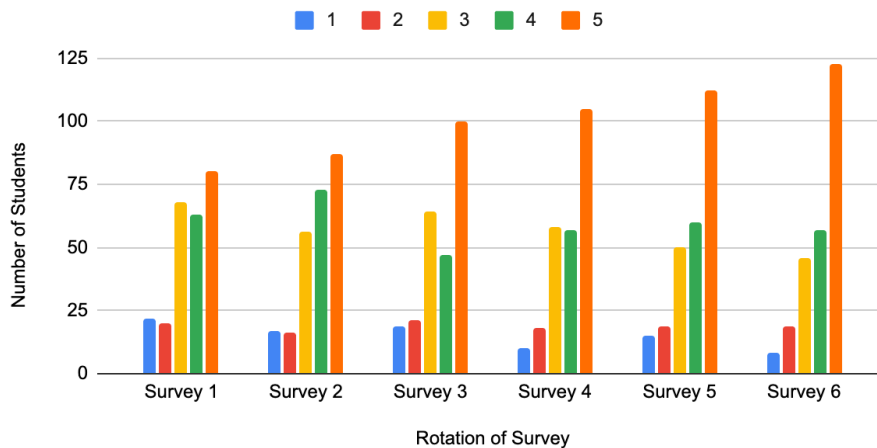


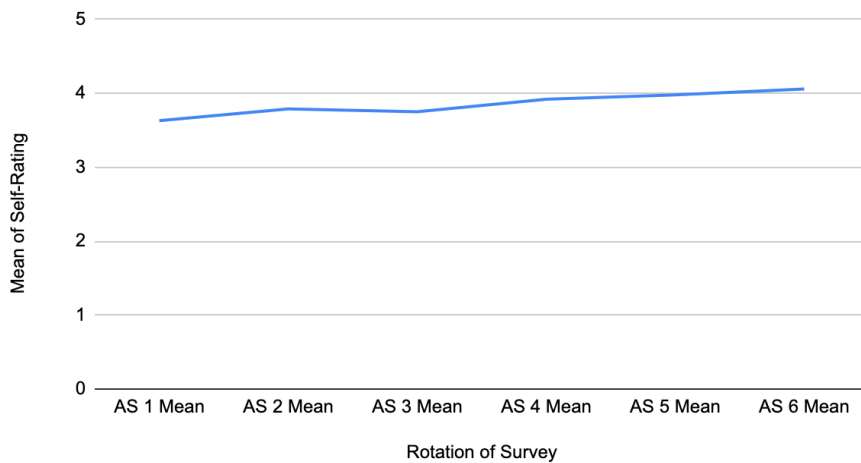
Figure one shows the changes in the student response over each week when rating themselves on a likert scale of one to five in response to the prompt, “Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom.” It should be noted that the total number of respondents in each week of data collection varies slightly due to student absences. Student response totals were 253 students in week one, 249 in week two, 251 in week three, 248 in week four, 256 in week five, and 253 in week six.

Even with this slight variation, it was evident from figure one that the highest response rate of a five, meaning a student feels excellent in regards to the prompt, steadily increased over the course of six weeks. The rating of a three or a four varied slightly throughout the six weeks, but decreased by week six. The rating of the two remained very similar throughout the study, and a rating of one changed each week, but ultimately ending in week six with only eight students giving themselves a rating of one. One theme that emerges from this chart is that the highest confidence level of a five only increased throughout the study, but one of the lowest confidence levels of the two remained very stagnant. This raises the question of whether or not students who

felt the lowest amount of confidence entering this six week period had any changes in their confidence levels. It could be that the interventions only affected the confidence level of students who were already rating themselves as a three or a four to begin with, which could account for the decrease in mid-level ratings, and increase in highest level ratings by week six.

Figure 2

Mean of student response to the prompt “Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom” over six rotations of data collection.



Since the weekly number of responses varied, we also analyzed the mean of the response number each week. Figure two shows the changes in the student response mean over each week when rating themselves on a likert scale of one to five in response to the prompt, “Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom.” The mean response was a 3.63 in week one. Weeks two and three showed a slight increase followed by a slight drop, with a mean of 3.79 and 3.75, respectively. Weeks four and five showed a steady increase of the mean response, with an average of 3.92 in week four, and 3.98 in week five. In the final week of concert preparation and attitude scales, the mean response was a 4.06, again showing an increase.

In order to determine whether the increase in mean from 3.63 in week one to 4.06 in week two is statistically significant, a paired t-test was conducted. The results showed a t-value

of 4.3271, with the degrees of freedom being 252. Using this information, a p-value was calculated. The p-value of the data collected is $p=0.000022$, which means the results of answers for the prompt “singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom” from week one to week six are statistically significant.

Figure 3

Total number of student responses to the prompt “Singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom” over six rotations of data collection.

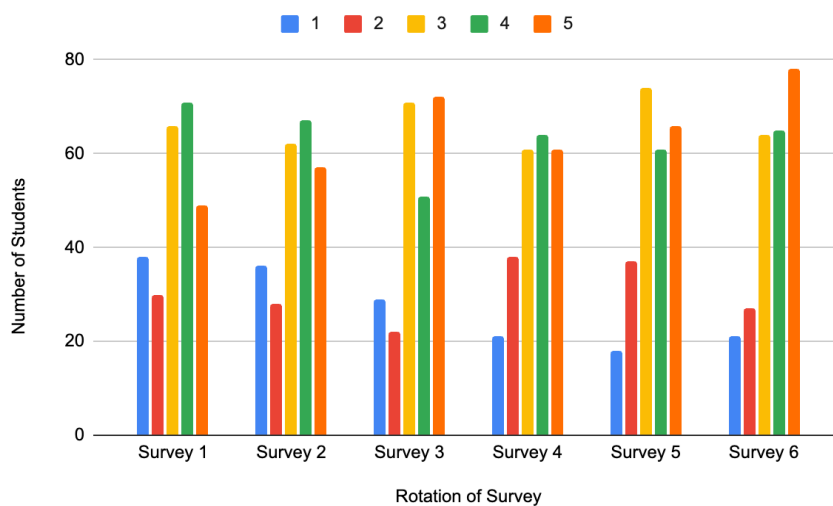
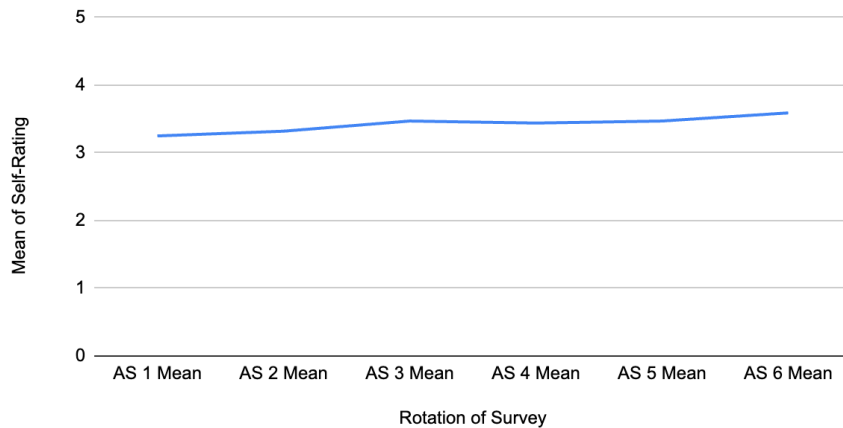


Figure three shows the changes in the student response over each week when rating themselves on a likert scale of one to five in response to the prompt, “Singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom.” As noted with figure one, the total number of student respondents varied slightly each week. One theme that emerged from figure three is the increase in a rating of five over the course of the study, and steady decrease of a rating of one, except for the slight increase in week six. The ratings of two, three, and four are not consistently increasing or decreasing, and there are no obvious patterns showing why these numbers fluctuated. The slight increase in the rating of a one in the final week may be attributed to this being the final week of concert preparation when students are combining with other classes, switching to risers and a stage, and in front of other teachers.

Figure 4

Mean of student response to the prompt “Singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom” over six rotations of data collection.



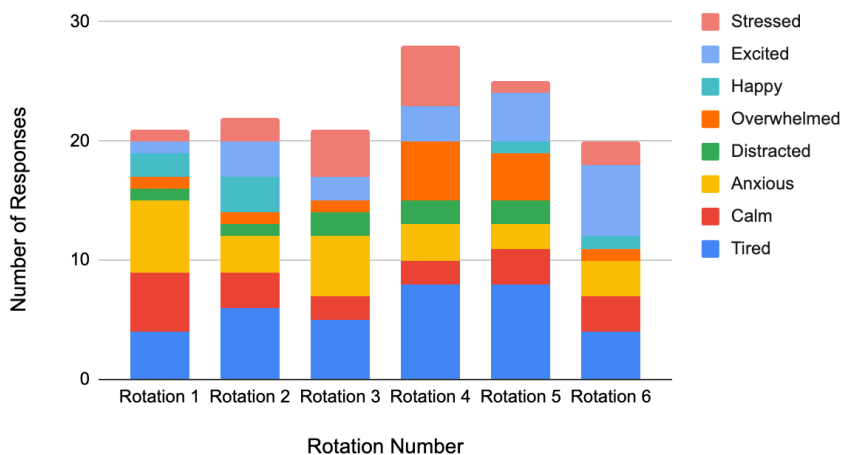
Again, we must analyze the mean of the response number each week. Figure four shows the changes in the student response mean over each week when rating themselves on a likert scale of one to five in response to the prompt, “Singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom.” The mean response was 3.25 in week one, and increased slightly to 3.32 in week two. Week three showed another slight increase with a mean of 3.47. A slight decrease occurred in week four with 3.44, but increased again in week five with a mean of 3.47. The final week or the survey showed a mean of 3.59, again showing an increase in mean.

In order to determine whether the increase in mean from 3.25 in week one to 3.59 in week six was statistically significant, a paired t-test was conducted. The results showed a t-value of $t=11.8087$, with the degrees of freedom being 251. Using this information, a p-value was calculated. The p-value of the data collected is $p=0$, which means the results of the ratings for the prompt, “singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom” from week one to week six are statistically significant.

The daily teacher self-assessment (Appendix D) also offered quantitative data. This self-assessment was taken at the end of each day by the three researchers during the course of data collection. Questions included five point likert scale ratings of the teacher's ability to maintain a calm classroom and their own anxiety. It also included open response questions regarding any schedule changes or particular events that day that may contribute to the answers. The most informative data comes from a check-box style question that reads, "Going into the class for which you are collecting data, which words describe how you felt?" The respondent was able to check as many or as few boxes as needed to describe their feelings. Figure five shows a culmination of the results over the data collection period.

Figure 5

Total daily responses per music rotation of the three researchers when taking the daily teacher self-assessment



Over the course of the study, the researchers noted being tired and anxious most consistently. The consistent answer of being tired may be attributed to the time of day in which the survey was completed, being at the end of the school day. Though the question does specify to mark feelings experienced during the fourth grade class that day, there may be some bias in

the answer or tiredness. The consistent answer of being anxious is to be expected due to the nature of leading a group of students in concert preparation.

The open ended response questions echoed the results of the check-box question. When answering the question, “What else should be noted today regarding your personal feelings and how this may have affected your teaching?” the researchers described many scenarios they felt may have affected their teaching, or the student response to their teaching. Answers included personal life problems affecting their ability to remain calm or focused on students, feelings or anxiety due to student behaviors, feelings of frustration due to school wide events of schedule changes, and feelings of happiness or calmness with particular classes or content. It should be noted that many of the feelings of anxiety and frustration were noted during rotations four and five, while the feelings of happiness were noted in weeks one and six.

The data of the teacher self-assessment survey was most useful when compared to the data of the student attitude scales, as well as the daily field notes, outlined in Table six. Weeks one and two did not show an overwhelming significance of any particular answers in the teacher self-assessment, except being anxious in week one. Based on the open-ended answers the researchers provided in that rotation of self-assessments, the anxiety was due to presenting the new intervention of mantras. However, when looking at rotation two on figure five, the response of anxiety has gone down, and is replaced with feelings of happiness and excitement. This correlates with the field notes for rotations one and two. Table six noted that by rotation two, students were using mantras to remind themselves they do not need to sound perfect, and were supportive of one another in singing and instrument playing.

The results of the teacher self-assessment and field notes were also triangulated by the data collected from the student attitude scales. Looking back at figures one and two, showing the

data in response to the prompt “Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom,” the mean of the attitude scales increases from a 3.63 to 3.79 from weeks one to two, and the individual responses show a decrease in ratings of one, two, and three, but an increase in ratings of four and five. Overall, the use of mantras as an intervention showed a positive impact on both student and teacher anxiety in concert preparation.

Table 6

Summary of daily field notes of three researchers

Rotation	Intervention	Common Themes-Positive Behaviors	Common Themes-Negative Behaviors
1	Mantras	-Engaged with mantras and comparing them to personal interests and experiences -Help one another on instruments -Participate in singing when they enjoy the song -Overall excited about recorder and various instruments	-Some give up when not immediately successful on recorder -A few laugh or mask their mistakes with disruptive humor -A few comment on others mistakes causing them to shut down -Some refuse to sing or will only lip sync
2		-Many still engaged with mantras -Motivated when reminded of the mantra “I don’t need to sound perfect, I only need to sound better than last time” -More willing to sing and sound confident on their concert songs -Excited and supportive of one another when they are successful on recorder	-A few students reluctant to recite mantras and voice complaints -A few students are heavily masking their discomfort of singing with disruptive humor -Some will only lip sync
3	Goal Setting	-A few express excitement over the class goal of “We will sing every music class leading up to the concert.” -Almost the whole class is willing to sing and are sounding and appearing more confident -Comments of excitement about the upcoming concert	-Many express anxiousness over the class goal of “We will sing every music class leading up to the concert.” -A few have very strong reactions to lack of success on recorder, such as elopement or emotional outburst -A few students continue to heavily mask discomfort with disruptive humor (less than the last two weeks)
4		-Mantras are more ingrained and students remind one another -Songs are becoming more comfortable and more willingness to sing standing in close proximity to peers	-Recorder progress plateaued for many students during this rotation -Lots of negative self-talk surrounding recorder
5	Breathing	-Students have been introduced to breathing exercises before -Many expressed feelings of breathing exercises being effective in the past -Students have a more positive attitude towards recorder and instruments than last class	-Many students were reluctant to try the breathing exercises. Expressed annoyance that they’ve done them before
6		-Students were visibly using breathing exercises to calm their nerves during rehearsals that were close to the concert -Class went from chaotic and loud to calm and attentive after practicing breathing exercises	-Loud breathing and sighing -Not doing the breathing exercises

Figure five showed the largest jump in emotions noted in rotation four, with the researchers marking being tired, overwhelmed and stressed as their highest emotions during this rotation. Table six notes that the intervention during week four was the second rotation of goal setting, there were no significant observations that working on goal setting was effective in reducing student anxiety. It was also observed that during this week, mantras were still being used and helpful in student willingness to sing, an overwhelming amount of students plateaued on their success of practicing recorder, and therefore used negative self-talk to cope with their feelings. This observational data shows that the intervention of goal setting did not have an overall positive impact on students in helping them to reduce their anxiety.

Weeks five and six also show a possible correlation between the student attitude scales, teacher self-assessment, and field notes. There was a steady increase in mean response to the prompts “Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom” and “Singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom.” The means increase from a 3.75 in week four up to a 3.96 in week six, and a 3.44 up to a 3.59 in week six, respectively. Furthermore, the teacher self-assessment showed a decrease in the answers of tired, anxious, and overwhelmed in weeks four and five, to an increase in the answer of excited in week six. Finally, the field notes triangulate this with observations of students using breathing exercises to self-regulate during the final rehearsals before the concert in rotation six. It can be concluded that the breathing exercises had an overall positive impact on students in helping them to reduce their anxiety. However, it cannot be ignored that this was the final intervention before the concert performance, and students were already excited and feeling more confidence in their concert music from their weeks of practice. While the breathing

exercises had a positive impact, they should not be labeled as the sole reason for student success in weeks five and six of the study.

Post-Intervention Survey Comparison

After the music concert was performed, in the next music class students attended, all students completed a post-intervention survey (Appendix A). This survey had the exact same questions as the pre-intervention survey they took approximately six weeks prior. The most drastic result differences were in the responses to the true and false questions. It should be noted that the pre-survey had 264 student responses, while the post-survey had 249 responses. This was purely due to student absences, as well as two fourth grade students leaving one of the districts in which this research was conducted.

Figure 7

Student responses to pre and post-intervention surveys to the statement “I feel confident singing in front of my classmates”

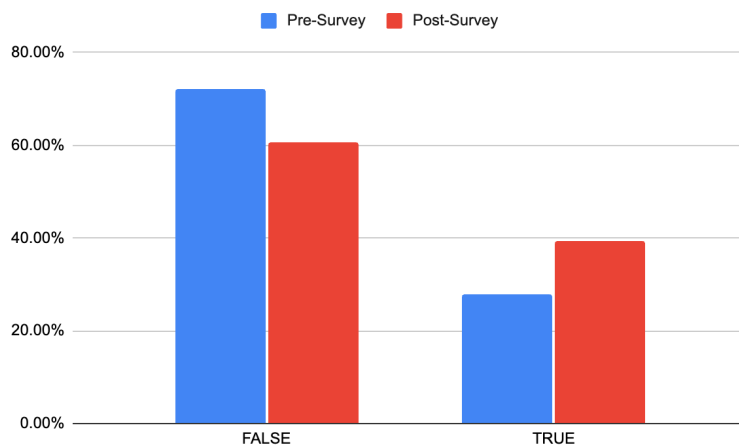
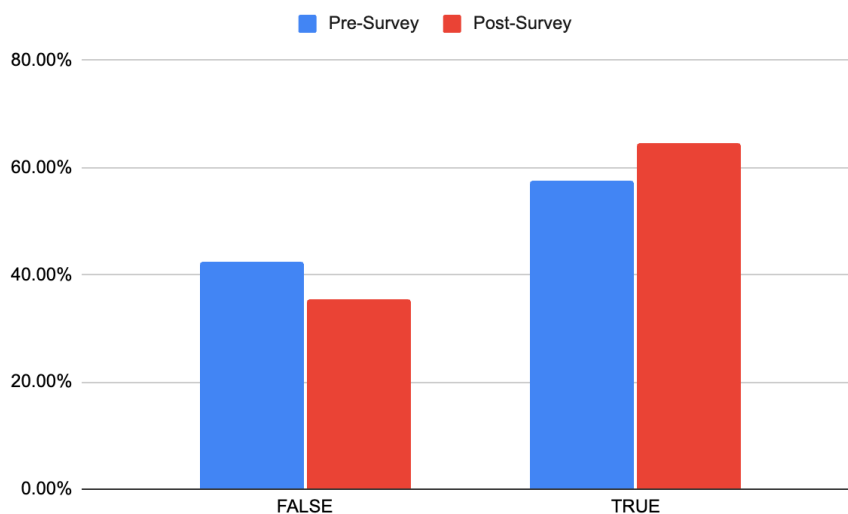


Figure seven displays the results of the student responses in the pre and post survey to the statement, “I feel confident singing in front of my classmates.” In the pre-survey results, 28% of students responded with “true” to this statement, while 72% responded “false.” Due to this response, this was the question that showed the largest lack of confidence in students, and the

main question we formulated our interventions around. In the post-survey, we did see a positive change, as 39.4% of students responded with “true,” and 60.6% responded with “false.” Though there still shows a lack of confidence while singing in a majority of our students, these results show progress in a way our students have not been shown in the past in relation to singing. It should be noted that this increase in confidence may be due to both the interventions and the consistent singing and positive praise from the audience at the concert.

Figure 8

Student responses to pre and post-intervention surveys to the statement “I feel confident playing an instrument in front of my classmates”



Though 57.6% of our students responded with confidence in a pre-survey to the statement, “I feel confident playing an instrument in front of my classmates,” we were still surprised by the 42.4% of students who responded “false” to this statement in the pre-survey. The intervention of implementing class mantras became very geared towards the instrument portion of our concert preparation, especially playing the recorder. Figure eight shows that the post-survey results had a slight increase in confident answers, as 64.7% of students responded

with “true” and 35.3% responded with “false.” Again, it should be noted this result may be due to both interventions, especially the use of mantras, and also audience praise after the completion of the music concert.

Figure 9

Student responses to pre and post-intervention surveys to the statement “I enjoy performing for an audience”

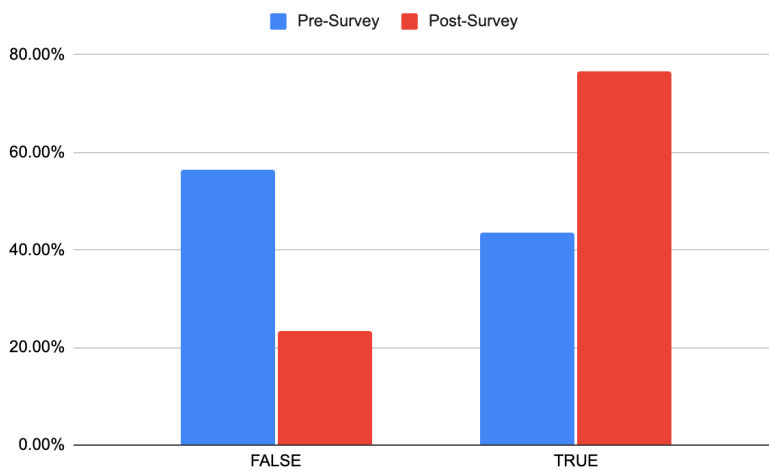


Figure nine shows the most dramatic positive change from our pre to post-survey with answers to the statement “I enjoy performing for an audience.” The pre-survey results showed that 43.6% of students responded “true,” and 56.4% responded “false.” There was a complete turnaround in student attitude in the post-survey, as 64.7% of students rescinded “true” while 35.3% responded, “false.” Once again, we are confident the interventions helped the students to prepare for the concert. Still, it cannot be denied that audience praise and recognition may have played a huge role in this dramatic shift in student responses. Regardless of the reason for this shift in student response, this data is a testament to what performance anxiety can do to a student’s confidence in the preparation stages of a concert when the pre-survey was completed compared to a student’s sense of relief and pride following a successful performance.

Action Plan

This action research project aimed to find the most effective social-emotional learning interventions to use in the music classroom to reduce performance anxiety. The goal was to teach students methods to regulate their anxiety in the music classroom that could easily be transferred to a music performance setting, particularly their music concert. It was critical that the interventions selected were compatible with our music curriculum so they could easily be used in our classroom setting and complement our curriculum rather than take time away from it. The interventions of classroom mantras, goal setting, and breathing techniques were chosen as they are transferable to a real performance situation and are helpful in day-to-day music activities.

After giving the pre-survey to our students, it was clear that students lacked confidence in performing for both their classmates and an audience. Basing our interventions and goals around these pre-survey results proved to be beneficial based on our weekly results of the student attitude scales, showing growth in confidence most weeks. We also found a connection between the teacher attitude survey results, field note observations, and student attitude scales, as described in the data analysis. We are confident in our conclusion that teacher attitudes and emotions impact student attitudes and emotions and their reactions to our content.

We decided to do a two-rotation intervention focused on classroom mantras, a two-rotation intervention surrounding goal setting, and a two-rotation intervention on teaching and utilizing breathing techniques. These three interventions fit in very well with the self-management and self-awareness domains of social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2023), the two domains we established as our focus for this action research project, as they align best with our music curriculum. We felt the first intervention should be mantras to establish a positive mindset as an entire class, as well as a way for individual students to encourage themselves and

one another to move past their negative thoughts regarding performance. We followed this with a goal-setting intervention, in which we made a common goal: "We will sing every music class leading up to our music concert." We felt this was an easy goal to achieve, but still emphasized singing, which was deemed necessary based on the pre-survey results. The final intervention, which happened closest to the music concert performance, was simple breathing exercises used as a class, but mostly individual students to reset their minds and calm their nerves and anxiety during concert practices and the performance.

As described in the data analysis, we found the most positive impact on student responses to the attitude scales during the time of the mantras intervention and the breathing intervention. Our field notes build our confidence that mantras were truly an effective intervention to begin with, as, throughout the entire data collection period, students referred back to mantras to improve their mindset. This set the tone of the entire class being encouraging and accepting of one another's singing and playing abilities and offered a common way to encourage one another or oneself when frustration and anxiety took over. Mantras are the intervention we felt was most effective and had the largest impact on student mindset overall, and mantras will be continued at the conclusion of this action research project.

The least conclusive data comes from the time period of the goal-setting interventions. We saw slight increases and decreases in both individual and mean scores on the student attitude scales. The field notes also shed light on the fact that goal setting was not as impactful on students as mantras. While some students showed either excitement or anxiety surrounding the class goal, no observations showed students were using this goal as motivation to succeed. However, we cannot ignore the timing of this intervention and how this may have impacted the results. This intervention occurred approximately three to four weeks before the music concert

performance. The field notes, and teacher daily self-assessments show evidence that students and teachers alike were feeling heavy levels of anxiety during this time. Teachers were overwhelmed and had a very small window of tolerance, and students were becoming aware of the time crunch. We must wonder if this intervention had been completed at a date further out from the concert with more emphasis placed on meeting more specific goals, would the results have been different and had more of an impact on students?

Finally, the breathing techniques intervention was implemented within the final two to three weeks leading up to the music concert performance. The results of the attitude scales, teacher daily self-assessment, and field notes all show a dramatic increase in positive ratings and feelings during this final intervention. The student attitude scales show the highest positive responses of the entire data collection period, the teacher daily self-assessments show far more responses of happy and excited attitudes, and the field notes show students using breathing techniques to calm anxiety and nerves during concert rehearsals.

While we could attribute these positive changes to the breathing techniques or the interventions alone, we must look to our former experiences as musicians and music educators to analyze this data critically. As students begin learning their concert music, there are always mixed feelings of excitement and uneasiness. Students are still in the true learning stage of this music. As the concert approaches, some students will start having very tough days if the music is too hard for them, they do not like it, or they have extreme anxiety over performing. Finally, in the final days leading up to the concert, anxiety and nerves are always present, but so is excitement. This is true for both students and teachers. So, we know, based on the field notes, that the interventions of class mantras and breathing techniques were indeed a key aspect of

student success, but they should not be deemed the sole reason for the positive change in data over the course of this action research project.

Going forward, we would like to continue implementing all three social-emotional learning strategies used in this project. The data analysis was completed in close proximity to a music concert performance, which certainly impacted the success, or lack thereof, found with the interventions. If we were to replicate this project again in the future, we would change the timing of the interventions to a point in the school year that is a significant amount of time away from a concert. This would solidify the data and would give a more definitive answer as to whether or not these social-emotional learning interventions have a major positive impact on reducing student performance anxiety.

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Appendix A

Pre/Post Research Anxiety Assessment

Pre/Post Research Anxiety Assessment

jlmickels667@stkate.edu [Switch account](#)

* Required

Email *

Your email _____

I feel anxious when I sing or play an instrument in music class *

1 2 3 4 5

Never Always

I enjoy singing or playing an instrument in front of an audience *

1 2 3 4 5

Never Always

I feel confident singing in front of my classmates *

True

False

I feel confident playing an instrument in front of my classmates *

True

False

I enjoy performing for an audience *

True

False

When do you feel anxious in music class? *

Your answer _____

What do you enjoy most about music class? *

Your answer _____

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Appendix B

Attitude Scale

Name: _____ Classroom Teacher: _____ Date: _____

Attitude Scale

Color in the face that represents how you feel.

Singing or playing instruments with the whole class in the music classroom.	
Singing or playing instruments alone or in a small group in front of the class in the music classroom.	
Singing or playing instruments while playing a musical game in the music classroom (pass the pumpkin, bigfoot, etc.)	
Feeling before coming to music class.	
Feeling during music class.	
Feeling after having music class.	

Appendix C

Daily Field Notes

Daily Field Notes

VC-Verbal Comments; OP-Overall Participation; B-Behaviors; O-Other

Date:	Class:	Time:
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Activity 1:
VC:
OP:
B:
O:

Appendix D

Teacher Self-Assessment

Teacher Self-Assessment

This teacher-self assessment will be taken by the teacher at the end of the school day each day during the action-research data collection period.

 jlmickels667@stcate.edu (not shared) [Switch account](#) 

How was your attitude and mind-set coming to work this morning?

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Which teacher is taking this?


Jen Mickels

Erin Lawler

Erika Berger

What is today's date?

Date



Going into the class for which you are collecting data, which words describe how you felt?

Calm

Excited

Stressed

Anxious

Happy

Tired

Distracted

Overwhelmed

Other: _____

Rate yourself on your own anxiety level today.

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Rate yourself on your ability to maintain a calm classroom today.

Poor 1 2 3 4 5 Excellent

Did anything happen during the class for which you are collecting data that should be noted today? Include behaviors, unexpected disruptions, schedule changes, etc.

Your answer _____

What else should be noted today regarding your personal feelings and how this may have affected your teaching?

Your answer

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