

**EVERYBODY'S SOMEBODY IN MY CLASS:  
FREEDOM TO TRY, SUPPORT TO SUCCEED FOR ADOLESCENT  
MUSICIANS**

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An ethnographic case study of Deb Borton, choir teacher at Kinawa Middle School in Okemos, Michigan, explored, investigated, and described the teaching and characteristics of an exemplary middle school choir teacher who builds and nurtures a musical learning community in her classroom. The development of musicianship, creation of a safe learning environment, and empowerment of students remained central lenses throughout the study.

The presentation began with discussion of primary ideas elicited from the study of Deb Borton: (1) Exceptional musical skills develop in a safe classroom environment that provides opportunities for middle school choir students to be themselves without inhibition, in a culture of acceptance; (2) Democratic outcomes may be achieved in a middle school choir class through teacher-led teaching practices; (3) Middle school choir teachers are in a position to make meaningful impressions on their students, especially with regard to the treatment and awareness of others; (4) A sense of humor is an important characteristic of an effective middle school choir teacher; (5) Extraordinary choir teachers are valuable resources for musical and professional development.

The session continued with Deb Borton, who amplified the discussion of adolescent musical development and supportive, structured environments for middle school musicians, as highlighted by my research on her teaching practices. In addition, Deb offered pedagogical examples of how her work fosters personal growth in her students through a musical framework.

During this research, Deb shared stories about teachers who strongly influenced her methods of teaching, and I found myself strongly influenced by Deb with regard to my own teaching philosophy and practice. Deb demonstrates that it is possible to achieve musical, democratic, intellectual, emotional, and community goals through an autocratic, yet student-focused, classroom. Students become strong, thoughtful, and independent musicians as a result of Deb's work to educate each student about being the best person that he or she could be, both inside and outside of the Kinawa choir classroom.