

Loaded Words: The Ongoing Evolution of “Support”

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As frequently referenced in voice studios, “support” (or “breath support”) is a fundamental element of some teachers’ pedagogy. Others eschew the term, believing it to be ambiguous at best and harmful at worst. This article examines how support has been addressed in select pedagogical books and articles over the last fifty years. It presents various definitions for the term, examines potential problems with how it is often used in the voice studio, and considers alternate phrases that may be less “loaded.” It will also highlight some areas of general consensus in the ongoing evolution of the word support.

IN 2018, THE INDEPENDENT TEACHER COLUMN featured an article titled “Loaded Words: Finding the Right Place for ‘Placement.’”¹ The article first acknowledges that the term “placement” is revered by some as a cornerstone of their teaching and singing and despised by others as too subjective to be of use. It then examines how singers and pedagogues have discussed, defined, and experienced placement over the years. Lastly, it offers a process for the studio designed to help students and teachers discover their individual sensations and explore how they may be used as reference points in developing their vocal technique.

Voice pedagogy is fraught with similarly “loaded” words, thus inviting reentry into the semantic minefield. This time the subject is “support” or “breath support.” Like placement, support is a term that has been frequently uttered in voice studios and, indeed, is fundamental to some pedagogies. Others, however, eschew the term, believing it to be ambiguous at best and harmful at worst.

This article will examine how support has been addressed in selected pedagogical books and articles written over the last fifty or more years. It will present various definitions for the term, examine potential problems with how it is often used in the voice studio, and consider alternate phrases that may be less “loaded.” It will also highlight some areas of general consensus in the ongoing evolution of the word support.

A WORD UNDEFINED

Voice pedagogues have long decried the lack of a universal definition for “support.” Former NATS president Jean Westerman Gregg addressed the issue head-on in the *Journal of Singing* more than thirty years ago. In an article titled “On Support,” she asked the big question: “What do we voice teachers mean by the word ‘support?’”² She noted how confusion surrounding the

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term had been discussed at least as far back as 1967 by otolaryngologist and author Friedrich Brodnitz, who stated, “The term ‘support’ suggests that the voice is a kind of physical object which has to be lifted from below by a supporting force.”³

It seems not much consensus toward a definition has been reached in the intervening decades. The co-authors of the 2020 edition of *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*—Melissa Malde, MaryJean Allen, and Kurt-Alexander Zeller—echo Gregg’s question, asking, “Singers like to talk about support, but how many have a really good working definition of it? What does ‘more support’ actually mean?”⁴ In the 2023 publication *Musical Theater Voice Pedagogy*, co-authors Christopher Arneson and Kirsten S. Brown, assert, “The word ‘support’ is ubiquitous in voice studios, and yet it means something completely different to many voice teachers.”⁵

In the 2024 edition of *The Vocal Athlete*, speech-language pathologists Wendy D. LeBorgne and Marci Rosenberg note that support is seen as a crucial aspect of singing, even though there is no agreed-upon definition and the ways in which it is incorporated in studio training are far from standardized. “Historical and contemporary pedagogues tend to advocate that breath and breath support are key elements for optimal voice production in singers regardless of genre,” they state. “However, the training modalities and implementation of training breath and breath management are highly variable from teacher to teacher.”⁶

Author and pedagogue Elizabeth Ann Benson made a similar observation in her 2020 book *Training Contemporary Commercial Singers*. In her interviews with twenty-six “exemplary” CCM voice pedagogues (identified as such through an anonymous survey), she gave the following prompt: “Please describe your approach to teaching support.” Some of the pedagogues viewed “breathing” and “support” as inextricably intertwined, while others believed they should be addressed separately during voice training. Still others avoided the term support entirely. As Benson summarily noted, “‘Support’ can mean many different things in singing.”⁷

If voice teachers do not agree on what support is and how it should be taught, it is no surprise that singers often discuss and implement support in equally varied ways—even at the highest professional ranks. In the 2015 book *Master Singers: Advice from the Stage*,

soprano Nicole Cabell says, “I try to keep a good balance between support and relaxation,” while mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato says, “I tend not to use the word *support*. I prefer to talk about *freedom* of breath.” Soprano Christine Goerke notes additional language barriers, stating, “I have a hard time talking about breath without talking about support, because the two are so connected to the muscles around the abdomen (which is the word I prefer to *diaphragm*).”⁸ Obviously, the lack of a universal definition is not a unique issue in voice training. As pedagogue Scott McCoy notes in a *Journal of Singing* article titled “On Breathing and Support,” “As with registration, we tend to get bogged down with semantics.”⁹

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH “MORE SUPPORT”

Despite the many confusions around the term, there is general agreement in the pedagogical literature that the vocal direction calling for “more support” has been overused in the voice studio and can lead to specific problems. Author and pedagogue Richard Miller once recounted his experience observing a voice lesson in which a student displayed excessive nasality. After several failed attempts to address the issue via directives related to placement, the teacher concluded, “What you need is more support. Come on now! Give it more support!” Miller mused after the lesson, “Without specific information as to the physiological and acoustical causes of nasality, can [the teacher] expect to know how to eliminate nasality in singing? Will ‘you need more support’ continue to be his panacea for all vocal faults regardless of their origin?”¹⁰

Miller later expanded on the idea, somewhat harshly noting that “more support” appears as “a catchall nostrum that automatically surfaces when the teacher’s ingenuity fails.”¹¹ As he explained, “Unless the singer, either student or professional, understands the delicate physical balances appropriate to the shifting demands of breath management, to call for ‘more support’ only complicates the task of balancing subglottic pressure, airflow rate, and vocal-fold approximation . . . requesting ‘more support’ may only exacerbate problems of dynamic muscle equilibrium.”¹²

Other pedagogues have reached similar conclusions. In the 2019 publication *The Breathing Book for Singers*, soprano and Body Mapping instructor Barbara Draina

writes that “overwork” is the typical response from students when they are told to support, but do not have a clear understanding of what their teachers mean by the word. “Whether the resulting physical tension is felt in the throat, abdomen, legs or elsewhere, it negatively affects breathing and vocal sound,” she says.¹³ Gregg likewise warned that the muscular rigidity induced by calls for more support could lead to hyperfunctional voice disorders—a claim that speech-language pathologist Leda Searce provides with additional detail and nuance.¹⁴ As Searce writes in her 2016 book *Manual of Singing Voice Rehabilitation*:

Breath support gets blamed for a world of sins in singing. Of course optimizing breath support is essential for successful singing, but if the problem lies elsewhere and the singer is instructed to ‘support more,’ excessive abdominal tension may result. For example, the problem may be inappropriate laryngeal height, inadequate resonance, or unfavorable interaction of source-filter. Any of these may contribute to an undesirable sound, and none will be corrected by trying to ‘support more’ . . . overemphasis on breath support without effectively recruiting the vocal tract can exacerbate traumatic injuries by creating excessive subglottic pressure and increasing mechanical stress on the vocal folds.¹⁵

Benson agrees that support is “over-blamed” for technical problems, noting that the “more support is always better” approach may be particularly problematic when singing music outside of Western classical genres. “With the short phrase lengths of CCM material, the frequent use of speech range, and the ubiquitous presence of audio technology amplification, support needs are often minimal,” she says. “Belting is a low-breath flow and high-breath pressure activity due to the greater closed quotient. By definition, the sustained belt (chest-dominant) ‘money notes’ do not use as much air as the head-dominant ‘money notes’ in legit musical theatre or operatic pop (‘popera’).”¹⁶

Malde, Allen, and Zeller note that calls for more support lead many singers to control their airflow, becoming physically “locked” in the process. They offer alternative language designed to better identify the true source of any inefficiencies. “Instead of asking yourself if you need *more support*, you can ask if you need to allow the breath to flow more quickly or if you need to regulate that release so that the breath flows more slowly,” they

write. “You can ask if your phonation and resonance are responsive and efficient.”¹⁷

SEMANTIC SUBSTITUTIONS

As Benson discovered, many voice teachers avoid the potential nightmare of terminology by simply avoiding the word support. Over the last several decades, pedagogues have offered a number of alternate terms and phrases.

Throughout the 1967 edition of *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic*, pedagogue William Vennard often referred to “breath control,” though he admitted, “The expression *breath management* is preferred by many to *breath control* because it does not contradict the ideas of freedom.”¹⁸ In *The Structure of Singing*, published in 1986, Richard Miller included a chapter titled “The Supported Singing Voice: Breath Management in Singing,” where he recommended the phrase “pacing of the breath” instead of “more support.”¹⁹ Author Clifton Ware offered similar terminology in his 1998 text *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy*, with a section of his chapter on respiration titled “Breath Coordination and Management.”²⁰ In her enduring 1994 text *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* (recently posthumously reissued), pedagogue Barbara Doscher suggested substituting the term “breath energy” for breath support. Ultimately, however, she concluded, “Any practical methodology which uses the concept of freedom combined with balanced control is desirable, regardless of what terminology is used.”²¹

Authors of voice pedagogy texts published in the 2020s also tend to avoid the term “breath support,” though they have not yet reached a consensus on a replacement. Kari Ragan refers to “breath management” and “respiration coordination” in *A Systematic Approach to Voice* (2020).²² Julia Davids and Stephen LaTour have a chapter titled “Breath Control” in the second edition of *Vocal Technique* (2021), where they state, “Improved breath control will benefit singers of all styles.”²³ In *Class Voice* (2023), Brenda Smith writes that the term “breath management” is preferable to both “breath support” and “breath control.”²⁴ Lastly, co-authors Cynthia Vaughn and Maribeth Dayme make a single reference to the term “breath management” in the fourth edition of *The Singing Book* (2024) while acknowledging many existing

approaches to how it can be executed—“some bordering on the strange and exotic.”²⁵ Instead of choosing any of the other terms above, their most frequent reference is simply to emphasize “efficiency” when breathing for singing. Embracing rather than avoiding the term, Arneson and Brown provide an entire chapter in their book titled “Support.” Wading into the terminology debate, they provide some caveats and clarifications:

Support is not a catch-all or a cure-all—only a teacher who understands precisely what they are asking their student to do can effectively employ the concept of support. A vague concept of support often serves to confuse and frustrate students, which is why some teachers avoid this terminology entirely and opt instead for phrases like ‘breath control’ or ‘breath management.’ Whatever terminology you choose to refer to this process, it is helpful to understand the physiological realities of exhalation and how they shape our singing . . . Whether you call it ‘support’ or ‘breath control’ or ‘breath management,’ the most important thing is that your students understand what you are talking about and what you are asking them to do.²⁶

NOTABLE DISTINCTIONS

Although Vennard used the term “breath control” most often, he offered some pertinent definitions in the thesaurus at the end of his book. He defined “supported” as “Having adequate breath pressure” and defined “breath control” as “Smooth maintenance of breath pressure over extended periods of time.” He also defined “breath management” as “Efficient use of respiration for singing or playing a wind instrument.”²⁷

In the revised and expanded edition of *The Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults* (1994), pedagogue James C. McKinney also identified a difference between “breath support” and “breath control.” He stated, “Breath support is a dynamic relationship between the breathing-in muscles and the breathing-out muscles, the purpose of which is to supply adequate breath pressure to the vocal folds for the sustaining of any desired pitch or dynamic level.”²⁸ On the other hand, “Breath control mainly is a function of the vocal cords themselves. It may be defined as a dynamic relationship between the breath and the vocal cords which determines how long you can sing on one breath.”²⁹

This distinction resonated with McCoy, which he reflects in *Your Voice: An Inside View* (2019). Citing McKinney’s definitions, he added, “Support, therefore, is a pulmonary function. Breath control, however, is a laryngeal function . . . We might say that breath support enables the production of beautiful sounds; breath control allows those sounds to last to the end of long phrases.”³⁰

Arneson and Brown make a similar distinction, delineating the difference between “breathing” and “support” as well as “breath pressure” and “breath flow.” As they state, “When we talk about ‘breathing’ we’re talking exclusively about the process of inhalation . . . support involves how we exhale for singing . . . Support is really about air pressure, and how we use our bodies to supply just the right amount.”³¹ Like McKinney and McCoy, they highlight the difference between the pulmonary and laryngeal elements and note how the conflation of the two can result in confusion. As they describe, “Breath pressure refers to the air pressure that builds up below the vocal folds, whereas breath flow refers to the air that passes through the folds.”³²

VARIABLE AND TASK SPECIFIC

In Gregg’s article, “On Support,” she identified how different physical tasks often employ different breathing patterns. She cited examples such as clavicular breathing when running to catch a bus, passive expiratory forces used during quiet breathing, and the downward pressures “necessary for lifting, parturition, evacuation, or micturition.”³³ It stands to reason that the variety of tasks executed when singing—especially when singing in multiple genres—may require a variety of strategies of support in order to complete the tasks most effectively and efficiently.

Benson (as discussed above) noted that some of the specifics of singing CCM call for different strategies of support than those used in Western classical singing. Arneson and Brown similarly encourage various approaches when singing musical theatre, echoing Benson’s reasons nearly verbatim. “With the short phrases in musical theater repertoire, the frequent use of the speech range, and the presence of amplification, support needs often are minimal,” they state. “Musical theater singers need a flexible and variable support

technique which serves all the styles, sounds, and types of expression required by the genre.”³⁴

McCoy also believes support should be variable and appropriate to the task at hand. “Brünnhilde requires a different kind of support than Despina,” he says. “‘One size fits all’ works no better in pedagogy than in fashion.”³⁵

Other contemporary pedagogues cited in this article agree. Benson believes that tactics to achieve a “supported sound” will vary significantly depending on the unique physical anatomy of the performer and style of music they are singing.”³⁶ LeBorgne and Rosenberg note results from research studies indicating that, even at the elite level, singers tend to have distinct individual respiratory patterns in performance.³⁷ Smith acknowledges that there is no single best practice for breath management and that it may be based on personal preference.³⁸ Arneson and Brown also believe that there are many ways to support the voice and that, when choosing which strategy to use, teachers should consider “the constraints of the style at hand and the experience and individualities of the student in front of you.”³⁹

Lest it be assumed that this is a recent revelation, both Doscher and Brodnitz advocated a flexible, individualized approach in 1994 and 1988, respectively. Doscher wrote, “Considering the variability of breathing practices, it is probably well-advised to admit that from an empirical point of view, and probably from a scientific one as well, there is no set formula for ideal breathing that will fit every singer.”⁴⁰ She then quoted Brodnitz, who wrote, “The singing teacher who tries to impose on all pupils *one* form of breathing will only risk the ruin of promising voices.” She concluded, “When a voice teacher has a good basic understanding of the physiology of the breathing apparatus, there is a realization that there are several ways to accomplish one’s goal.”⁴¹

CONCLUSION

It may be futile to hope that a universally accepted definition of support will ever emerge. Even if such a definition were decided upon, it would be foolish to assume that pedagogues would agree on how those words would translate to implementation in the voice studio. The lack of certainty when it comes to ideal terminology and definitions can be frustrating. After all, if we cannot even

define what support is, how can we teach our students to do it? In the implementation of support, however, the relative consensus is that there is not—nor should there be—consensus. Like so many other elements of vocal training, the glorious and unique peculiarities that each individual brings to the studio must be considered. In the end, working together to determine the most effective ways to manage, control, or energize breath so that our students can reach their singing goals may be the best way for us to offer them optimal support.

NOTES

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