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The Enrollment of Adolescent Male Singers in Public School Choral Ensembles

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Abstract

Persuasive social constructs of masculinity negatively impact the enrollment of adolescent male singers in public-school choral music programs. Research focused on the awareness of the systemic gender stereotypes threatens to invalidate boys' participation in the arts and strategies and approaches to support the middle level choral music experience for young male singers. A critical analysis of relevant scholarly research pertaining to this topic included single-sex ensembles, vocal models and their influence on possible future selves, use of improvisation and the development of self-efficacy and musical identity, and promotion of inclusive masculinities through voice classification methods and repertoire choices.

The Enrollment of Adolescent Male Singers in Choral Music Ensembles

For decades, secondary level choral music educators have acknowledged the recruitment and retention of adolescent males in the junior high public-school choir as one of their most challenging responsibilities (Freer, 2007; Lucas, 2012; Mizener, 1983; White & White, 2001). According to middle level choral music expert Dr. Patrick Freer (2007), it is an exercise in futility to present 7th & 8th grade male singers with a traditional choral music experience and expect an enthusiastic response. Furthermore, he maintains middle level directors who are not willing or do not understand how to adapt their teaching strategies in response to the changing needs of these singers unwittingly structure programs discourage participation (Freer, 2007).

Although most middle level choral music experts recognize the typically disruptive nature of the adolescent male voice change as an authentic deterrent from singing in school choirs, they also agree boys who understand what to expect during the physical voice change before it begins, perceive the transition as a more positive experience (Benyon & Heywood, 2010; Demorest, 2000; Denison & Denison, 2019; Lucas, 2012; Mizener, 1993; Sweet, 2016; Thurman, 2012). Reliable classification systems for the determination and description of specific developmental stages of the male voice change during puberty are used to regularly inform singers of their individual progress through the voice change process. Additionally, choral music pedagogues continually support music educators through updated contributions to an evolving body of scholarly research regarding successful coaching strategies, rehearsal approaches and singable repertoire choices to include in their middle level choral music practices. The problem is interest among male choristers began to decline in the 1930s (Whorton, 2016) and this lack of enthusiasm remains a relevant concern in the present day.

The purpose of this literature review is to investigate the persuasive social constructs of masculinity impact the enrollment of adolescent male singers in middle level choral ensembles. The research question addressed in this literature review is, aware of the systemic gender stereotypes threaten to invalidate boys' participation in the arts, what strategies and approaches are most effective in supporting a motivating middle level choral music experience for young male singers? Emerging themes in response to this question include an urgency to broaden the definition of masculinity, an emphasis on fostering the development of possible selves while encouraging high levels of self-efficacy among young vocal musicians, and the essential commitment to understand and implement current best practices for developing the male singing voice within a single-sex ensemble context.

A journal article was considered a meaningful addition to this literature review when chosen from Northwestern College's DeWitt Library of peer-reviewed research. The review of literature included topics information relating to: Gender stereotypes, masculinity, social constructs, voice change and classification, gender choirs, vocal models, peer supports, mentors, voice building exercises and repertoire, recruitment, retention, elementary, junior and senior high school, motivation, confidence, possible selves construct, self-efficacy, and musical identity. Most sources and studies were published within the last 10 years.

Historical Perspective for Review of Literature

Within the cathedral walls of early Christendom, the ethereal, straight-tone voices of English boy choirs were highly regarded as an essential component of its meaningful worship traditions and rituals (Beynon & Heywood, 2010). Membership in these prestigious choirs was exclusive, as only unchanged male adolescent singers were capable of producing this distinct quality of sound. With the onset of puberty and the voice change process these treble voices

“broke”, resulting in immediate dismissal from the cathedral choirs. Unfortunately, boys were then cautioned against singing while their voices were changing and consequently, most never resumed singing as adults (Beynon & Heywood, 2010).

Centuries later and an ocean away, secondary level choral music educators acknowledge the recruitment and retention of adolescent males in the junior high public-school choir as one of their most challenging responsibilities (Freer, 2007; Lucas, 2012; Mizener, 1983; White & White, 2001). Researchers estimate a disproportionate 70:30 ratio favoring female over male participation in United States public-school choral music programs (Elpus, 2015; Palkki, 2015) citing “Gender roles are not challenged when girls choose to sing, so they participate in greater numbers” (Zemek, 2010, p.16).

Gender Constructs and Musical Identity

“Sex refers to the biological distinctions separating males and females, whereas gender is a set of socially constructed ideas regarding what behaviors and physical attributes can be considered ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’” (Palkki, 2015, p.6). As a Western society, we have assigned and continue to promote antiquated social constructs of gender roles according to sex (Palkki, 2015). In the United States, masculinity and femininity occupy two separate spaces and are framed as opposite from one another (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). From birth to age 2, children are exposed to and begin to understand widely accepted ideologies such as pink is for girls, blue is for boys or only girls play with dolls, boys play with trucks. Between the ages of five and seven they realize and acknowledge the expectation to conform to the conventional gender binary stereotypes defined for their sex (Ebbeck, 1998; Hall, 2015; Palkki, 2015; Talbot, 2010). Boys are especially discouraged from engaging in any behaviors conflicting with their assigned

stereotype (Rosen & Nofziger, 2018). The following study illustrates the early awareness boys have of singing as a feminine construct.

Having noticed her lower elementary male students appeared far less interested in participating in singing than her lower elementary female students, Dr. Clare Hall (2005) conducted an action research investigation about factors may be influencing this behavior. Especially curious about the boys' attitudes and beliefs as singers, Hall first read a book aloud about a singing koala who believed she sang very well, although she really did not. Responses from the boys to Hall's questions about the story indicated a strong belief only girls can sing high (Hall, 2005). Hall wondered what exactly the boys meant. Did their unanimous agreement reveal a belief boys simply *couldn't* sing high or a gendered stereotype they *shouldn't*? She asked the boys to categorize single pictures of orchestral instruments into one of three categories: played by girls, played by boys, or played by both. Not unlike previously conducted studies perceptions aligned with traditional gender stereotypes, where smaller, quieter, higher sounding instruments were labeled feminine and bigger, louder, lower sounding instruments were labeled masculine. Finally, the boys were asked to assign a variety of occupational labels to gender-neutral stick figures and 25 of the 34 boys labelled the singing figure as female. A follow-up conversation revealed singing wasn't an activity most boys thought would be an appropriate choice to participate in as adult males. The results of this study in which five-year-old boys expressed an awareness of certain instrumental and singing choices and activities as feminine in nature clearly demonstrated the negative effect of gendered social constructs in regard to the early development of male musical identity (Hall, 2015) and affirmed the notion "when a perception becomes part of the human and societal psyche... perception is cemented even before formal schooling" (Beynon & Heywood, 2010).

Findings from a two-year research study conducted by Francis Farrell (2016) found the narratives of 6th grade boys more or less free of stereotyped masculine constructs. Most of the boys agreed it was okay to do things girls like and vice versa, indicating a sense of inclusive masculinity. However, when pressed further and given the choice to sing or play sports, every boy chose sports (Farrell, 2016). Comfortable in discussions regarding emotional expression and acknowledgement as boys they experience many different feelings, Farrell noted “the most striking rupture of the boy code” was “evident in their discussion of caring for each other...suggest[ing] the dominant normative masculine discourse is fragile and therefore open to resignification” (Farrell, 2016, p.286). In contrast, at the secondary level Farrell recorded narrative evidence of gender binary stereotyping absent of softer masculinities as well the inclusion of toxic ideologies such as acceptance of anger as a boy’s dominant emotion, the belief crying is only for girls, and boys do not talk about their feelings with other boys (Farrell, 2016). Somewhat unexpectedly, this same group of boys did eventually begin sharing their experiences with one another, confirming the fragility of the social constructs of masculinity and the potential for revision noted earlier in the study.

Hegemonic Masculinity

A comprehensive exploration of the intricacies shaping and reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity are far beyond the scope of this literature review. However, hegemonic masculinity is most relevant to the discouragement of adolescent boys’ participation in choral music. Data analysis of victim narratives of bullying confirm many experiences were interpreted pursuant to hegemonic masculinity norms (Rosen & Nofziger, 2018). Hegemony is defined as “shorthand to describe the relatively dominant position of a particular set of ideas and their associated tendency to become commonsensical and intuitive, thereby inhibiting the

dissemination or even the articulation of alternative ideas” (Britannica, 2020). This rigid view of masculinity is considered superior to all forms of femininity and alternative masculinities (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). Investigating a potential connection between the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and bullying of adolescent males in schools, researchers for the Youth Voice Project collected qualitative data from 275 adolescent males between the ages of eleven and nineteen, enrolled in 31 different schools, across 12 states in the U.S. The online survey included 33 multiple-choice questions and 12 open-ended questions (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). Analysis of participant responses revealed the value of heteronormativity when viewing masculinity through the harsh lens of hegemony, meaning “boys who do not ‘do’ their gender in socially prescribed ways are often targets of bullying...[and] boys’ participation in bullying is often a direct result of them trying to affirm their heterosexuality and ‘manliness’” (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019, p.299). Adolescent males who choose behaviors or activities incompatible with this limited definition of masculinity, displaying feminine qualities perceived as failures of masculinity such as choral music singing, are often considered homosexual and endure homophobic slurs (Beynon & Heywood, 2010; Freer, 2015; McBride, 2016; Palkki, 2015; Powell, 2015; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018). Challenging traditional gender norms by enrolling in choir at the secondary level, where the highest probability of harassment and isolation in response to perceived gender nonconformity already occurs, is a risk most adolescent males will understandably avoid (Powell, 2015; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018; Smith, Schacter, Enders, & Juvonen, 2018).

Vocal Role Models

Acknowledging the cultural prevalence of the hegemonic attitude, where “men” are narrowly defined as “muscular, tall, dominant, and heterosexual” (Rosen & Nofziger, 2018) many choral music educators tout the ensemble recruitment catchphrase “real men sing”

(McBride, 2016). Unintentionally reinforcing a limited view of masculinity through stereotypes, this slogan suggests music teachers must somehow sell singing in choir as something “manly” men do (Demorest, 2000; McBride, 2016; Powell, 2015). Demorest (2000) offers a less stereotypical, more inclusive definition of “masculine”, suggesting it simply means “pertaining to things men do” (Demorest, 2000, p.38). He explains using this definition “may appeal directly to boys’ gender identity in a much more natural way - by providing them with opportunities to interact with other boys and men who are active in singing. This allows them to see a variety of male role models, some of whom may be like them, some different, but all showing an interest in singing” (Demorest, 2000, p.38). Although male public singing is typical of many cultures throughout the world, Western societies do not generally celebrate this activity with equal enthusiasm; oftentimes leaving few role models for young male choristers to identify with (Demorest, 2000; Williams, 2012).

The data Dr. Clare Hall (2005) collected from her class of kindergarten boys during the first half of her research investigation confirmed early socialized constructions of singing as a “feminine” activity had already begun to negatively shape her students’ musical identity. Most of the boys articulated an unlikelihood of choosing to sing as older students or adults (Hall, 2005). Curious about whether a connection with same-sex vocal models might positively impact their perceptions of themselves as singers, Hall (2005) invited two enthusiastic secondary level male choristers to join their music classes on three separate occasions. Although the boys and peer models had never interacted with one another before, the older students effectively engaged the boys in lively conversations to learn more about their interests, then sang with and performed for them (Hall, 2005). This peer modeling strategy helped broaden the boys’ narrow definition of

masculinity and allowed them to imagine their future possible selves as singers (Beynon & Heywood, 2010; Dilworth, 2012; Freer, 2015; Powell, 2015; Williams, 2012; Zemek, 2010).

Possible Selves

Research conducted by Patrick Freer (2015) provided qualitative data indicating connections between the development of musical identity and the possible selves construct valuable for middle level pedagogical practices. It is compelling to note of the 77 participants whose responses were collected for analysis (including perspectives from boys who currently sing in choir, boys who had once sung but had since withdrawn, and boys who had never sung), none of the boys who had withdrawn from singing in choir could remember having a vocal role model (Freer, 2015). In contrast, 86% of the boys currently singing could identify a specific male role model, either a close family member or peer 4-5 years older than themselves who exemplified confidence and strength as a male singer (Demorest, Kelley, Pfordresher, 2017; Freer, 2015). One student shared “students need role models who understand their ideas about music, this is very important. Younger boys need older boy singers to look up to” (Freer, 2015, p.97). This is a crucial component to have in place before and during the physical transition from elementary to middle or junior high school (Demorest, Kelley, & Pfordresher, 2017). Most boys will find themselves in an active stage of the voice change process at this point, making it a natural time to avoid those frustrations through withdrawal from singing and choosing of alternate activities (Beynon & Heywood, 2010; Sweet, 2016; Williams, 2012). The disheartening reality is most boys who disengage from singing during the voice change rarely return to the choral music setting (Freer, 2012). Prior to the voice change it is advantageous to physically bring the boys to their future secondary level rehearsal space and performance venue where they can more easily envision their future possible selves as choral music singers. Meaning they are

more likely to continue singing during and following the transition (Dilworth, 2012; Freer, 2009; Freer, 2012; Hall, 2015).

Single-Sex Ensembles

A sense of brotherhood and camaraderie is very important among adolescent male singers (Beynon & Heywood, 2010; Dilworth, 2012; Freer, 2012; Williams, 2012) and can be thoughtfully nurtured within single-sex ensemble structures (Denison & Denison, 2019; Dilworth, 2012; Williams, 2012; Zemek, 2010). Exclusive membership empowers and promotes the freedom to engage in the vocal risk taking inherent to the exploration of new singing voices without fear of embarrassment or the imposition of socially constructed stereotypes of masculinity (Denison & Denison, 2019; Dilworth, 2012; Williams, 2012). Chris Maunu (2019) articulates this vulnerability with clarity: “We create sound from inside our bodies...the sounds we make are closely connected with who we are as human beings...We put our voices out into the world without any assurance of acceptance or appreciation” (Maunu, 2019, p.64). Fundamentally, the voice change is simply a growth spurt of the larynx (Sweet, 2016) but the uncertainty of the occasionally peculiar sounds accompany learning to control this rapidly evolving mechanism and its surrounding musculature are apt to be less concerning in the company of same-sex peers.

Vocal Improvisation & Musical Self-Efficacy

In a similar manner, powerful narratives collected during a series of interviews conducted by Patrick Freer (2015) revealed an additional level of comfort could include the elimination of the performance element of participation in choir during the voice change (Freer, 2015). Remarks included sentiments such as “Just because boys want to learn to sing doesn’t mean they want to sing onstage in a choir” (Freer, 2015, p.100) or “I think voice is a hard thing to master...I

just want to learn how to sing the melody line well. Or, to create harmonies myself” (Freer, 2015, p.100) and finally:

I like my voice. It’s kind of wild. So, I need to learn how to use it. I want to be a confident singer before I have to sing in front of an audience. Don’t put me on stage if I’m not ready (p.102).

Teaching strategies accommodate the trial and error of pitch exploration while simultaneously improving boys’ sense of musical self-efficacy include the creative development and use of vocal activities encourage boys to access their full range without the pressure of matching specific pitches (Denison & Denison, 2019; Dilworth, 2012; Freer, 2015). A mixed-methods, action research study conducted by teacher-researcher David Hirschorn (2019) investigated the impact a vocal improvisation curriculum might have on the self-efficacy of 35 incoming sixth-grade singers enrolled in a performance-based school ensemble (Hirschorn, 2019). The collection and analysis of the study’s quantitative and qualitative data indicated at the conclusion of this 16-week vocal improv program participants experienced a collective increase in their musical self-efficacy. The researcher noted creative musical expression is often neglected in lieu of the preparation required of traditional repertoire for performance (Hirschorn, 2019). However, the positive construction of musical identity relies on perceived self-efficacy and “plays a key role in mastery, motivation, and long-term engagement” (Hirschorn, 2019, p.53). Many singers expressed an appreciation for the freedom improvisation allowed in the creative expression of emotion and pitch choices. Those struggling with the vulnerability inherent in the art form recognized peer modeling and honest feedback as powerful motivation to persevere and experience success. This vocal improv strategy for developing and nurturing male singers’ positive perceptions of musical self-efficacy is especially important prior to and during the voice

change, as research suggests those with low efficacy are likely to consider challenging activities, such as singing through the voice change, something to avoid or withdraw from (Fisher, 2014).

Voice Classification

Providing opportunities for boys to collaborate with one another and their conductor-teacher apropos of decisions directly impacting their choral music experience will certainly influence positive attitudes toward singing. Voice classification and repertoire choice are two high-stakes occurrences where collaboration is advantageous. The science of the physical voice change can be explained and adolescent male singers are typically intrigued by and appreciate understanding the anatomy and physiology of vocal development and production (Denison & Denison, 2019). It is worth repeating researchers agree boys who understand what to expect during the change ,before it begins, perceive the transition as a more positive experience (Beynon & Heywood, 2010; Collins, 2012; Demorest, 2000; Denison & Denison, 2019; Lucas, 2012; Mizener, 1993; Sweet, 2016; Thurman, 2012) and are consequently more likely to continue singing. It is crucial conductor-teachers use consistent terminology when articulating the anatomical and physiological components of the process so singers can incorporate these new ideas into their own vocabulary (Dilworth, 2012). With this knowledge, boys are able to clearly communicate what is happening during and ask appropriate questions regarding their experience.

An essential strategy for verification of an adolescent male's most current stage of voice change is the frequent use of assessment (Dilworth, 2012; Sweet, 2016). There is an overwhelming fluidity regarding the developmental pacing of each individual voice's range and tessitura, requiring regular evaluation, revision, and assignment of what the most appropriate voice part classification is for each singer. For this reason, researchers recommend every student advocate for their developing voices by charting these changes when they occur as a visual

representation of their journey throughout the change (Collins, 2012; Sweet, 2016). With this awareness, boys can analyze repertoire and identify the voice part fits best. Teacher-researcher Bridget Sweet (2016) strongly advises against early, traditional labeling of changing voices however, citing the unrealistic and inappropriate nature of limiting a singers' perception of their vocal ability before maturation is complete (Sweet, 2016). Furthermore, the traditional SATB system of classification is another example of constructs of gender stereotypes where soprano, alto, and tenor, as higher voice parts, are regarded as feminine and bass, as the lowest, is considered masculine (Dilworth, 2012). This creates conflict when all voices are high before and during the initial stages of the voice change and others remain high afterward. In their research study featuring 275 middle school boys who had been victims of bullying shaped by hegemonic masculinity, narratives from participants included comments such as "'People make fun of my voice because it squeaks and they think I am homosexual'" (Rowen & Nofziger, 2019, p.308). A study cited by Denison & Denison (2019) found "singing in a high voice was considered particularly un-masculine, even when the physiology prevented any alternate sound" (Denison & Denison, 2019, p.33). Another accurate observation included this question: "Since high voices have been labeled as feminine, is it any wonder many American choirs lack tenors?" (Palkki, 2015, p.32). Gender-neutral recommendations for organizing voices include simply using numbers (Sweet, 2016) or the names of the developmental stages identified by John Cooksey (1992).

Choral Music Curriculum

Finally, for most secondary level choirs, repertoire choices become the choral music education curriculum (Ramsey, 2016). Choosing music meeting the vocal ranges and tessitura of current ensemble membership (Collins, 2012; Williams, 2012) is an absolute. This can be a challenging assignment as literature written for male adolescent choral ensembles is relatively limited. The solution becomes the responsibility of the conductor-teacher who must custom-fit the music to their ensemble through transposition, part swapping, octave displacement, doubling of parts, or composition of a complementary part (Dilworth, 2012). Research also indicates successful literature choices for adolescent male voices includes more unison than multi-part writing, synchronous entrances, unison movement, and simple voice leading (Denison & Denison, 2019). Lastly, it is imperative to the idea of inclusive masculinity the text chosen for study does not reinforce hegemonic or heteronormative stereotypes (Denison & Denison, 2019; Freer, 2012; Palkki, 2015; Powell, 2015). There is more literature to choose from than work songs, sea chanteys, tools, and images of big, strong men with a limited spectrum of emotions (Freer, 2012; Palkki, 2015; Powell, 2015; Ramsey, 2016). On the other hand, “No self-respecting young man wants to sing about clouds and rainbows” (Palkki, 2015, p.32). If the repertoire is to reflect the lived experiences of the young men singing it (Palkki, 2015), a collaborative partnership between the singers and their conductor-teacher is fundamental when selections are made. One student reported his approval of “the songs we sing because we get to choose some of them with our teacher. It helps us feel like the music is much closer to us” (Freer, 2015, p.102).

Rehearsing standard repertoire for performance is a typical middle level choral music model. Previously noted in this literature review, however, middle level choral music expert Dr. Patrick Freer (2007) suggested it is an exercise in futility to present 7th & 8th grade male singers

with a traditional choral music experience and expect an enthusiastic response. Singers expressed their desire for a more comprehensive choral music experience would include opportunities for them to “learn by themselves, to use their minds, to think like musicians. Composing would be interesting” (Freer, 2015, p.102). A case study conducted by Evan Tobias (2015) documented the positive impact enrollment in a Songwriting and Technology Class (STC) had on secondary student musicians. This investigation featured the opportunity to enroll in a composition class as an alternative to participation in a performance ensemble. However, creating space for songwriting within the middle level choral music curriculum offers a relevant approach for encouraging skill development of musical independence and self-expression (Kratus, 2016; Tobias, 2015). Kraus (2016) adds:

Songwriting can also address a number of social and psychological needs for adolescents...Recent research suggests adolescents spend so much music time listening to songs because music helps them to relieve tension and stress, cope with personal difficulties, and develop their individual and social identities” (p.61).

Future Research

Current research confirms the male adolescent voice change is occurring earlier than previously documented. Whereas prior studies have traditionally indicated junior high as the age to provide education regarding the voice change, researchers have determined these voices are beginning the transformation as early as 5th grade (Fisher, 2014). Researchers have also indicated a student’s musical self-concept is almost exclusively rooted in their perception of their singing ability, noting most elementary music education programs are anchored in singing activities (Demorest, Kelley, Pfordresher, 2017). As the population of male singers who withdraw from choir between the transition from elementary to secondary school continues to trend downward

(Whorton, 2016), a gap in the research is whether this current reality could be curtailed if boys, whose voices are changing in elementary school, knew what to expect and how to manage the process before it begins, rather than wondering why they suddenly don't sing well, assume they're just "bad singers", and withdraw from choral music (Fisher, 2014).

Boys are especially discouraged from engaging in any behaviors conflicting with their assigned stereotype (Rosen & Nofziger, 2018), including participation in activities as singers. A second gap in the research is whether there are mitigating efforts our elementary schools could engage in as early as kindergarten to "interrogate the social construction of masculinities" (Farrell, 2016, p.284), such as the successful gender work programs Farrell (2016) conducted with 6th and 9th grade male adolescents.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this literature review was to explore the persuasive social constructs of masculinity impacting the enrollment of adolescent male singers in middle level choral ensembles. Aware of the systemic gender stereotypes threatening to invalidate boys' participation in this art form, practical, research-based strategies and approaches supporting a motivating middle level choral music experience have been included in an effort to equip music educators with the most current pedagogical practices related to the topic of inclusive masculinity in music, fostering the development of possible selves, encouraging musical self-efficacy, and developing camaraderie within single-sex ensemble structures.

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