# Gender and boys' singing in early childhood

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*This article derives from a research project investigating the singing behaviour of a group of Australian boys in their first year of school. The project showed that the genesis of the 'missing male' trend in singing at school may be occurring in early childhood. The impact of hegemonic masculinity in early childhood is explored here by examining the intersection between this group of boys' perceptions of masculinity and their singing behaviours. Peer modelling was found to be an effective motivational 'tool' for improving singing behaviour and illustrates the importance of finding strategies to support boys' success in singing long before adolescence.*

## Introduction

The education of boys is currently of great interest to Western societies, particularly Australia, which has seen burgeoning discussion and research on this subject over the past ten years or so. This body of literature indicates that girls continue to outperform boys in most areas of schooling and that the gender gap in educational achievement is widening.[1] Jordan (1995) argues that one of the greatest challenges in education for both boys and girls is the way in which masculinity is constructed and enforced in Western society. The present article has been inspired by studies suggesting that boys are participating in a narrower range of subjects and activities at school than girls (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003; Harrison & O'Neill, 2000) and that pressure to behave in masculine ways pervades boys' school lives (Connell, 2000; Plummer, 1999). This raises concerns about the future of singing as an acceptable male behaviour.

## Hegemonic masculinity

Western society promotes masculinity and femininity as opposite polarities within which it is expected that males and females will conform to one or the other (Davies, 1989). While men continue to be the main 'stakeholders' in most areas of adult life, boys are not without pressures to pursue activities perceived as historically male. Traditional notions of masculinity have been defined as the antithesis of femininity, and because of this boys (and girls) are often compelled to adopt behaviours regarded as suitable for their sex (Connell, 1989, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999).

Connell (2000) contends that masculinity has been defined differently at different periods of history, in different cultures and sub-cultures, and within individuals. Therefore, masculinity consists of many behavioural patterns, and because of this we need to refer to plural masculinities. He claims that masculinities are ordered hierarchically where

the hegemonic – meaning the most dominant form of masculinity – subjugates other forms (Connell, 2000).

In the construction of hegemonic masculinity all contesting forms of masculinity, including ambiguous behaviours, are labelled and expelled as feminine and/or homosexual. Hegemonic masculinity is upheld through the avoidance and denigration of all that is perceived as feminine and is 'policed' by boys in school through homophobia and heterosexism. By participating in behaviours incongruent with hegemonic masculinity some boys risk bullying and exclusion (Connell, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999; Plummer, 2003). Harrison's (2001) interviews with Australian males about their experiences at school provide examples of this conflict, reflected in this subject's comments:

> In primary school, I didn't remember getting any crap for doing music, but I think it had a profound effect on how I related to the other boys as all of them were playing football while I was playing the violin. It created a real divide between me and the other guys that I think still remains with me now in terms of how I relate to other guys. I didn't really receive much crap from the other kids during high school because the pattern of isolation or the divide that had been formed in primary school continued. (Harrison, 2001: 34)

### Boys and singing

The study of music in Western society is commonly regarded by both sexes as a female activity, as is demonstrated by the greater numbers of girls participating in music at secondary school (Colley, Comber & Hargreaves, 1994; Crowther & Durkin, 1982). Numerous studies discuss the absence of boys' participation in singing at school and the negative attitudes toward singing commonly held by adolescent boys (Adler, 2002; Dibben, 2002; Gates, 1989; Green, 1997; Harrison, 2003; Koza, 1993; Wright, 2001).

It is argued that singing neither constructs nor defends masculinity, and that because of this, hegemonic masculinity considers singing feminine and something to be avoided:

> Many boys make a decision not to sing between elementary and secondary school, in response to psychological and sociological messages that singing is not an appropriate activity for males beyond a certain age. (Adler, 2001: 2)

Nevertheless, male participation in singing is not always in contest with hegemony, and depending on the cultural, historical or musical context, male singing can often be a revered masculine behaviour. Examples of this can be found in the male domination of the contemporary music industry and boys' acceptance of singing within certain styles, such as rock, rap and jazz (Green, 1997; Hanley, 1998). For centuries, boys have been considered fortunate to receive an education in the cathedral choir tradition of England, and many cultures around the world fiercely protect the tribal songs meant only for male performers and/or audiences, as in the indigenous cultures of Australia. Additionally, research into the personality traits of musicians outlines a profile of extroversion and 'psychological androgyny' that allows students to bypass socio-cultural expectations and develop resilience against the personal threat involved in disregarding gender norms (Bruce & Kemp, 1993; Kemp, 1982, 1985). It may be possible to apply understandings gained from

examples such as these, where male singing supports a cultural or gender hegemony, to other contexts where males avoid singing.

It is commonly accepted that adolescence is a crucial time in the lives of boys and girls, when beliefs and attitudes are formed, subject preferences are determined, and pressure to conform to the peer group is considerable. However, children can develop an understanding of 'boy' and 'girl', and that they belong to one or other of those groups, from the age of two (Jordan, 1995). Between the ages of five and seven children learn the constancy of their gender, and it is this realisation of permanence that makes them 'motivated to master [*sic*] the behaviours and attitudes typical of their gender' (Ebbeck, 1998: 29). Is it possible that boys might reject singing in the construction of their gendered identity prior to adolescence?

Green (1993) elucidated the pervasive perception among secondary students and teachers that girls not only like singing more than boys, but are also better at it. While research demonstrates that singing accuracy does improve with age for both sexes, 'the proportion of boy to girl out-of-tune singers is 2 or 3:1 for any given Western age group' (Welch, Sergeant & White, 1997: 154). It could be presumed that boys form negative attitudes toward singing because of their apparent lesser ability in this area. However, studies have not found a correlation between attitude toward singing and stage of singing voice development (Mizener, 1993; Phillips & Aitchison, 1998).

Boys' apparent singing 'disability' is also contentious, as Welch (1997) found that boys' and girls' vocal pitch matching ability were relatively the same at the beginning of schooling. While girls' ability to sing song material accurately remained constant, by the age of seven boys showed a decline in ability despite demonstrating a marginally better ability to match pitch, as opposed to the singing of songs. The lack of any significant differences in pitch-matching ability between boys and girls at the beginning of school suggests that the decline in boys' song-singing ability is 'more likely to be cultural in origin than biological' (Welch, 1997: 711). Is there any evidence that the decline in boys' singing has its origins in the avoidance of femininity before the age of seven? Although a considerable body of research exists concerning gender and music education, it appears that none, besides the work of Welch *et al*. (1997), focuses in any depth on early childhood gender differences in singing.

### Peer modelling

Research has found that children's perceptions of the gender appropriateness of certain instruments are significantly influenced by the sex of the performing role model (Bruce & Kemp, 1993; Harrison & O'Neill, 2000; O'Neill & Boulton, 1996). Bruce and Kemp (1993: 217) found that boys were more strongly influenced by the sex of the role model than girls and suggest that 'providing positive role models may help children to see the false reality of their perceptions of instruments, and raise their awareness of discrepancies between real experiences and stereotyped images'. Harrison and O'Neill (2000) argue that gender-stereotyped preferences for instruments may be more strongly challenged by providing peer role models as opposed to adult ones.

It is suggested that a peer model, someone with a comparative equivalence of ability and social standing, will be more effective in influencing motivation than a teacher, as 'peer modelling is likely to be associated with stronger identification between intended

imitator and model than modelling on professional adults – the teacher is super competent and too distant a mastery model' (Topping & Ehly, 1998: 6). The provision of effective role models has been found to be a valuable strategy in motivating boys to sing in secondary school (Harrison, 2001). However, there appears to be a lack of research to date in peer education in relation to young boys' singing. Could peer modelling positively influence boys' perceptions of singing and in turn change their singing behaviour?

### Description of the research project

This project aimed to understand better the singing behaviour of young boys and to explore ways of improving boys' participation in singing. Prior to the study I had observed that my male students at lower primary levels participated significantly less in singing than my females from an all-girls' school. The boys were also achieving lower levels of success initially than the girls in my music classes. An investigation of the social and attitudinal factors influencing a group of boys in their first year of school was designed with the following research questions:

1. What attitudes does this group of boys have about singing in their first year of school?
2. Do their attitudes demonstrate gender-stereotyped beliefs about singing?
3. Could the use of peer modelling be an effective way to improve this group's participation in singing?

The project involved two groups of five-year-old boys ($n = 38$) in their first year of junior school at a private, Kinder-Year 12, single-sex school in a high socioeconomic area of inner-city Melbourne, Australia. The participants were my current music students with whom I had taught specialist Kodály-based music lessons twice a week for one term (10 weeks). Various co-curricular and extra-curricular musical activities are available at most year levels and the children are encouraged to develop broad interests, particularly at junior school levels. Within the 'musical culture' of the school, opportunities exist for students to sing in various choirs from Years 4 to 12, in chapel services, annual musical plays and within the junior classroom programme, which involves Kodály methodologies from Kinder-Year 6. While a culture of tolerance at the school enables boys to participate in singing, hegemonic masculinity is 'enforced' through the importance placed on sporting achievements and performance in traditional academic subjects.

The project was naturalistic in the sense that the study occurred in the context of the students' regular music lessons and I participated as teacher–researcher. In Stage 1 the students were involved in activities that aimed to explore their attitudes toward singing and being male. In Stage 2 two older male students (17 years of age with changed voice; 9 years of age with unchanged voice) were included as a focus of the lessons with the aim of investigating the effects of peer modelling on the students' participation in singing.

An interpretivist methodological framework serves to illuminate the phenomena of this particular group whereby 'the story of the self who has the stake, asks the questions, and does the interpreting; and the stories of others who help us find or create meanings' (Goodall, 2003: 60). The recursive nature of the project meant that 'sub-questions' emerged throughout the course of the study in a cycle of observation → reflection → interpretation → question → formulation action over two school terms (19 weeks). Although sympathetic to

action research, this approach cannot be defined clearly as such because its broad purpose was to stimulate the interpretive process rather than merely affect curriculum reform or behaviour change.

Although some quantitative data were collected, the study relied primarily on qualitative methods, namely observation (including video recording), informal interviewing and journal entries (researcher). The function of the numerical data is to elucidate the thoughts of the participants rather than to statistically validate the study. Data triangulation – that is, the use of a variety of data sources – ensured 'rich' data and 'integrity' in the analysis. The initial data were integrated in the journal-writing process as I 'fleshed out' notes taken during the sessions in my entries, reflected on my observations and interpreted the events of the day. These journal entries then became part of the data in the study's formal analysis, which incorporates numerical data gathered from planned activities, transcriptions and recounts of video-recorded episodes in exploration of the research questions.

The depth of ethnographic inquiry can be limited when the researcher is also acting as participant because of the logistical difficulty of making full observations and detailed note-taking of events as they occur. Also, the difficulty in working within the strict time limits of a school timetable can affect the scope of interaction that might not otherwise be an issue when observing behaviour over a longer period. This puts increased emphasis on the researcher's recall of events, which invariably results in a greater level of interpretive modification (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). To overcome this I completed my journal entries as soon after the lessons as possible and used video recording to make more detailed observations later on.

Observational methods designed to be as unobtrusive as possible were considered most appropriate for participants of this age. In order to 'uncover' the boys' attitudes and beliefs about singing it was necessary for them to respond and behave spontaneously without invoking an 'acquiescence response' (the desire to please and respond with the correct answer) (Brooker, 2001). To achieve this I included activities that appeared to the boys to be part of their regular music lessons and I asked open-ended questions. The teacher–researcher advantages of close relationships and an 'insider' understanding of the participants arguably outweigh the disadvantages mentioned.

The results will be presented in the order in which the study occurred, and representative examples of the students' responses are included. Because the analyses incorporate elements of the journal they are presented in a narrative style. My students are referred to as 'the boys' and the older peer models as 'the models'.

## Results and analyses

### Stage 1

The stage of the boys' singing development was assessed in order to contextualise the participants' ideas. This was done by using an adaptation of Rutkowski's (1997, 2000) Singing Voice Development Measure (SVDM).[2] It was considered useful to observe possible changes in the boys' singing in case patterns emerged that suggested a correlation between the stage of singing voice development and attitude. I speculated whether it might simply
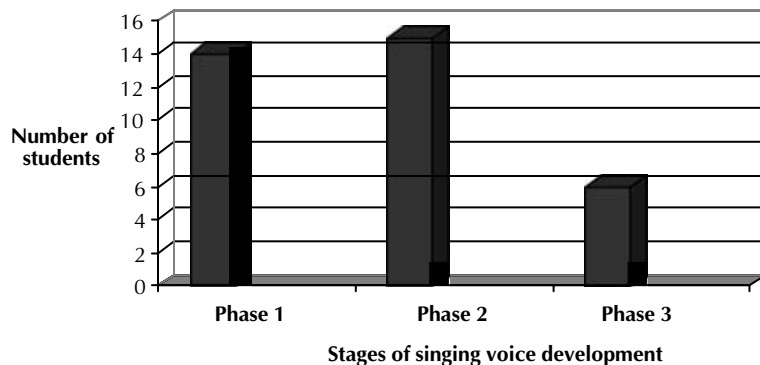
Fig. 1   Singing voice development measure (A)

be that the boys with the least developed singing voices were those who held negative attitudes and participated the least.

For the purposes of this research, the nine stages in Rutkowski's (1997) SVDM: Version 3 rating scale were ordered into three major 'phases', defined broadly as beginning singer (Phase 1), developing singer (Phase 2) and competent singer (Phase 3):

Phase 1          Pre-singer → Inconsistent Limited Range Singer: singing voice not yet fully discovered.

Phase 2          Limited Range Singer → Inconsistent Initial Range Singer: singing voice discovered and learning to control with greater consistency.

Phase 3          Initial Range Singer → Singer: using singing voice consistently and learning to use or using extended range.

The results showed (Fig. 1) that the majority had discovered their singing voice and were still in the early stages of learning how to control it consistently within a limited range, while a significant proportion of the group had not yet discovered or were still in the earliest stages of discovering their singing voice. A small minority of the group were able to use their singing voice consistently and sing beyond a limited range. Only one boy was at the final stage and could be classified as a 'singer'.

I then began to unpack the boys' attitudes and beliefs about singing. I read a picture story book, *Gala Koala of La Scala* (Sawyer, 1998), the tale of a devious koala who convinces the town of her singing virtuosity when the truth is she cannot sing at all. The following dialogue occurred between a student and myself (my own comments are italicised):

> *Do you think Gala Koala can really sing so high she can break chandeliers?*
> Of course she can, she's a girl!
> *Can only girls sing high?*
> Yep. [Many students agree with nodding of heads and 'mm']
> *Can't boys sing high?*
> No. [Class teacher enters room]
> [Class teacher comments in passing] They can if they sing in the St Paul's Cathedral Choir!
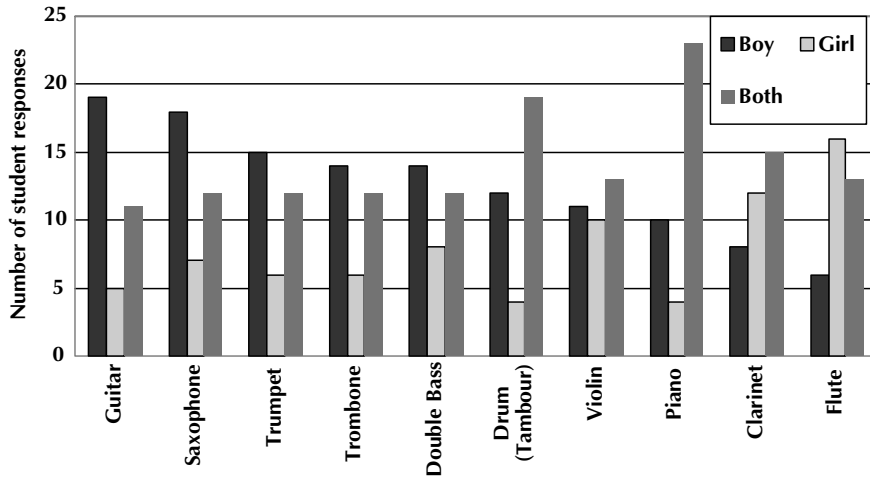
Fig. 2 Gender-stereotyped perceptions of instruments

I questioned the boys' perceptions of 'high': is 'high' a culturally defined term? In other words, are the boys' perceptions of 'high' gendered? I wanted to investigate whether behind the belief that boys can't sing high was in fact the attitude that boys *shouldn't* sing high. I investigated this question further by exploring the boys' beliefs about acceptable musical behaviours for males with regard to the playing of instruments. I expected to uncover gender-stereotyped ideas, but I was interested to find out the pervasiveness and rigidity of their beliefs about the gender appropriateness of different musical behaviours.

During teaching on common orchestral instruments, of which the majority of the boys demonstrated some prior knowledge, I conducted a pictorial survey where the boys cut out pictures of orchestral instruments and pasted them into one of three columns: 'played by girls', 'played by boys' or 'played by boys and girls'. The use of pictorial surveying was considered most appropriate for children of this age since their thoughts would be evident in the choices they made. This medium was familiar to the boys, the skills required to complete the task were appropriate, they did not feel self-conscious about their responses and they enjoyed the task. These factors might have been problematic if other research strategies that focus on linguistic competencies had been employed. Nonetheless, the utterances and discussions between the boys and the comments generated by the task about their choices proved to be a valuable source of data for this investigation, as presented below. This supports the belief that the verbal responses of very young children can be reliable and useful 'when the children are in a familiar environment, with familiar adults' (Brooker, 2001: 164).

The results indicate that many boys' perceptions about the gender appropriateness of certain instruments are generally in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes (Harrison & O'Neill, 2000; Harrison, 2001; O'Neill & Boulton, 1996). The guitar, saxophone, trumpet, trombone and double bass were perceived to be most masculine and the flute and clarinet most feminine (see Fig. 2). Surprisingly, their perceptions of

the violin and piano were as counter-stereotypically masculine or appropriate for both sexes. This led me to question whether they had displayed less stereotyped perceptions of these instruments because these were the two instruments with which this group had the most experience?[3] One might expect the playing of the violin to be perceived as more unanimously male in this circumstance. Yet the results suggest that messages external to the school environment that stereotype the playing of the violin as feminine are strong enough to contest counter-stereotypic influences of the school culture.

As the boys went about their worksheets I interviewed them informally, facilitating task-based conversation by asking questions about their work. The kinds of reasons the boys gave about their choices displayed various patterns. The boys justified the gender appropriateness of particular instruments by making reference to:

1. The operational or physical demands of an instrument:
   *Why do boys play the saxophone?*
   Some boys have bigger mouths than girls.
   *What does that help them do?*
   Blow better.

2. Direct personal experiences with an instrument:

   *Girls play the cello, do they?*
   Yeh, my mum really likes the cello.

3. The sound quality of an instrument:

   *Why do boys play the drums?*
   Because they are noisy.
   *Do girls like noisy things?*
   No.
   *What do they like?*
   Sweet sounds.

4. The style or genre associated with an instrument:

   *Why do boys play guitar?*
   Because they're rock stars.
   *Are girls rock stars?*
   No, girls are only pop stars.

Overall, the boys' comments demonstrate widespread gender-stereotyped attitudes, and a reliance on these traditional notions to help them formulate beliefs. Hegemonic masculinity is evident in the boys' engagement with a masculine/feminine dualism and in the belief that males are supposed to play certain instruments, those that are big, loud or low.

I set out to explore further the boys' attitudes to singing. Would similar, if not more, stereotyped attitudes about singing be evident? Again a pictorial survey was conducted where the boys were asked to ascribe a male or female name to a gender-neutral stick figure. Each stick figure was engaged in an occupation: teacher, tennis player, builder, bus

driver, computer operator, singer. The aim of this was to find out their beliefs about the appropriateness of singing for males. Again I talked with the boys about their ideas as they worked.

The majority of boys (25 out of 34) labelled the singing figure female. All other figures apart from the singer and the teacher were unanimously labelled male. Surprisingly, the boys did not articulate gender-stereotyped attitudes as strongly as their labelling may predict, nor as they had done with regard to instruments. In fact, when talking to the boys there was apparent neutrality concerning the gender appropriateness of singing. Could it be that they were more confused? It seems likely that they may have been less able to justify singing being 'for girls' because singing was the one musical behaviour all the students had most experience of. How could they argue that boys don't sing when they do it at least twice a week in our music classes? It is also possible that, knowing of my particular interest in their ideas about singing and the fact that I am a female teacher, the boys felt a situational pressure which motivated them to respond 'correctly'. Some boys did express the struggle with the gender 'correctness' of singing, which I sensed was at the heart of many other responses:

> Singing is something girls do most times.
> *Don't boys?*
> No.
> *What do boys do?*
> They do homework and computers.
>
> *Why do girls like singing?*
> Because boys don't like it.
> *Why?*
> Because I don't like it.
> *Why?*
> Because some people might laugh at you.

Despite the boys' general ambivalence about the gender appropriateness of singing in relation to themselves, it is clear they do not perceive singing to be an acceptable adult male activity or something they might do when they grow up.

I then set out to explore what significance same-sex role modelling could have on the boys' participation in singing by involving older boys in our classes.

### Stage 2

I invited two older students (one in Year 3 and one in Year 10) to be involved in our music sessions. Both are very active music students, singing being one area of their study, and both have participated in music activities outside of school as much as inside. They both have highly educated parents who have been active in providing an excellent music education for their sons and encouraging their participation in a broad range of activities including the arts. The models were carefully selected based on the following criteria:

1. strong participation in singing within and outside the school
2. advanced vocal skills (trained choristers)

3. love of performing for others
4. known by the researcher.

Each peer model attended three music sessions with one class for approximately 10–20 minutes each class. These sessions were semi-structured to allow the peer models a certain level of independence to 'control' their time with the boys, with the aim of facilitating an authentic interaction between the participants rather than the peer models being preoccupied with instructions. During the sessions the peer models sang for the boys, played a singing game, taught them an action song and talked with the boys about themselves. These sessions were unobtrusively video recorded to enable detailed analyses of the events later on.

Despite the boys and the peer models not having had any prior relations and only a relatively short contact time they developed an astonishingly close bond. The boys displayed an unprecedented and instant 'love' for the peer model, demonstrated by their high levels of attentiveness, desire for physical proximity, curiosity, and positive comments – one boy approached the peer model at the end of their first encounter and said, 'I love you'. Overall they displayed a strong desire to get to know the model, to compare him to themselves and to imitate him. The strength of this personal identification manifested in a kind of competition to be 'friends' with the peer. The boys competed to sit close to him, to sing just like him, and tried to make him take notice of them. Contact with an older male student fascinated the boys most; the fact that the models were accomplished musicians and singers was incidental.

A key feature of the peer models' approach to the sessions was the effective use of humour and invitational language. Both models instinctively appealed to the boys' sense of humour – one sang 'Brown Bread', the other sang a pirate song in character. They'd pull funny faces and joke with the boys. They also engaged the boys by saying things like, 'Would you like to hear a funny song?', 'Hands up if you want to hear another verse', 'Do you know this song? If you do, try to sing, but if you don't, try to listen.' This invitational appeal to their interests and abilities, combined with the boys' desire to please the model, was highly motivational. Presumably the songs and activities used in these sessions would have achieved a good level of vocal participation without the inclusion of the peer model; however, I attribute the high levels of keenness to participate to the involvement of the peer models. This led to almost all students vocalising most of the time, including boys who would seldom participate in our usual music classes.

During one session the peer model sang 'Peace on the Earth' to contrast his other comic song. He performed it very slowly, with legato phrasing, well-rounded 'choral' vowels and slight vibrato. A number of boys responded with uncontrollable laughter and many others, although they did not laugh, appeared bemused; some said they did not understand what it was about. At the time I wondered whether those who laughed had thought it was a funny song or that it was funny to hear a boy singing so beautifully. Had this song challenged their ideas about gender-appropriate repertoire? I asked them about their reaction.

> When _____ sang 'Peace on the Earth' some people thought it was sad and some people laughed. Why did you laugh?
> He sounded like a girl. [Many nodded their heads in agreement]

*How did he sound like a girl?*
[One boy stood up spontaneously and demonstrated a quasi-operatic gesture and very high, 'squeaky' nonsense singing – the class laughed]
[Another boy interjected] Girls kiss boys! [The class laughed more]

To my surprise, this song became the most popular request in the following sessions, and despite the same few boys laughing, their request contradicts other results that suggest boys respond best to humorous, repetitive, lively songs. Might they have enjoyed the conflict that this song represented to them, that boys shouldn't sing like that, therefore the strangeness made it interesting? It could be speculated that a boy singing beautifully posed less of a 'threat' to their masculinity than a performance by a girl, which shows the potential of peer modelling to challenge perceptions and offers a direction for future investigations.


### 'Post-assessment'

Following the conclusion of the peer modelling sessions the boys were surveyed about whether they thought they might like to join the Junior School Choir in Year 4. The results showed that 20 out of 35 boys thought they might like to join the choir.

Another SVDM was conducted and the results showed that 20 out of 36 boys made progress in the development of their singing voice by progressing to the next developmental phase or by making progress within a phase (Fig. 3). SVDM (B) found that the majority had discovered their singing voice and were in the early stages of learning how to control it consistently within a limited range; many had learnt to sing beyond a limited range consistently. The numbers in the earliest stages of development showed the greatest improvement, with only a few still discovering their singing voice.

There was no apparent correlation between the boys who were still in the early stages of singing voice development and those who did not want to participate in the choir. Many boys still in the early stages of discovering their singing voice said they would like to sing in the choir, and many who said they would not were more developed singers.
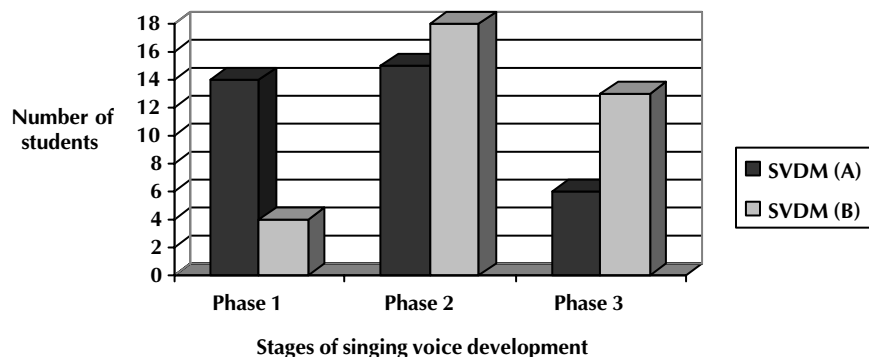


Fig. 3   Singing Voice Development Measure (A) and (B)

### Findings of the study

The purpose of the study was to understand better the singing behaviour of young boys and to explore ways to improve boys' participation in singing. By its investigation of the attitudes of a small group, the study demonstrates that a child's participation or non-participation in singing is not necessarily an indication of their stage of vocal development. The findings support the research into adolescent attitudes that indicates that children with negative attitudes toward singing are not necessarily those with the least developed singing voices (Phillips & Aitchison, 1998) and that other factors, such as gender and socioculture, may well be influencing their singing behaviour. However, a full understanding of boys' singing would include research into other factors, such as the family and physiology, in acknowledgement of the multi-factorial nature of musical behaviour development (Welch, 1999, 2001).

The guiding research questions can be answered as follows:

1.  What attitudes does this group of boys have about singing in their first year of school?
2.  Do their attitudes demonstrate gender-stereotyped beliefs about singing?

This group of boys displayed a range of attitudes toward singing. Their comments indicate that many understand male gender in opposition to female and how boys may rely on gender stereotypes to form a male musical identity. Gender stereotypes were evident in their beliefs that boys are supposed to do certain things – homework, computers, sports, play big, loud, low instruments – and in their attitudes about the inappropriateness of singing as an adult male behaviour, certain styles of singing, and males singing high.

The articulation of these kinds of attitudes – the kind we might expect from adolescent boys – is somewhat surprising in the context of an all-male school where many examples of boys' participation in singing are evident. These attitudes demonstrate a rejection of feminine constructs and imply that this group of boys were already influenced and to a certain extent bound by hegemonic masculinity upon entering their first year of school. Although the literature emphasises the decline in adolescent boys' singing, the results of this study suggest that boys may also adopt sociocultural messages that say singing is for girls much earlier in childhood.

3.  Can the use of peer modelling be an effective way to improve this group's participation in singing?

The effectiveness of peer modelling in this study highlights its potential as a strategy to improve singing in the music classroom. The surprising instant bond that occurred during the study signifies the strength of the personal identification between the boys and the peer models. Because of this the peer modelling achieved increased levels of vocal participation while contributing to the boys' learning on many levels. In this case the boys were most interested in learning about becoming older and being friends with the peer (social level), but they were also learning about many other things, namely the joy and usefulness of singing (affective level) and how to sing well (cognitive level).

The results indicate that the boys' overall singing voice development and level of participation improved greatly over the course of the project. The process of conducting a SVDM before and after the peer modelling was informative for my teaching despite the lack

of any 'controls' on the singing development. Not only was the diversity of developmental stages in singing within the cohort at the beginning of the investigation surprising, but also the speed at which many boys made progress and the amount of progress made within a school year. This process of investigation gave an awareness of each student's exact stage of vocal development previously unknown and raised my consciousness of effective role modelling. This increased awareness and focus on singing during the period of study may explain the post-assessment improvement. It would be convenient to argue that the singing voice development was a direct outcome of the peer modelling, yet this cannot be measured. Although most likely the changes were primarily a 'natural' result of maturation, it could be speculated that the boys' singing voice development was accelerated because of their improved motivation.

The models' use of humour and invitation proved to be a successful approach, although the effectiveness of the modelling relied on the skill level of the models. The peer modelling sessions also showed that exposing boys to a range of experiences can have a surprising effect on their interests, therefore imposing adult generalisations about what appeals to boys should be avoided.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study show the part that gender can play in boys' construction of musical identities at a young age. It is contended that concerns about the 'missing male' trend in school singing need to consider the ways boys learn to be masculine in early childhood, given the evidence of alarming negative attitudes toward singing in boys in their first year of school. This study highlights the importance of demonstrating to boys before adolescence that there are many ways to be masculine. Further research is needed that addresses how negative attitudes toward singing develop in some boys before five years of age, and considers how to deconstruct male stereotypes in the music classroom.

This process of investigation enabled a rich and personal account of singing behaviours in a group of young boys. The limited scope precluded an investigation into other factors that may influence musical behaviour, such as ethnicity and the family, and a larger-scale ethnographic inquiry is needed to encompass a range of factors. Longitudinal case studies would also provide interesting insights into how boys' attitudes toward singing develop over time as they engage with different cultures and subcultures, such as the school and their peer group. Might boys' negative attitudes in the first year of school improve with age in certain conditions as they become acculturated by the values of the school or community, and how might teachers be able to facilitate these conditions?

The success of the same-sex older peer modelling has implications for all teachers of young boys in relation to motivating participation in 'feminine' behaviours. Teachers are encouraged to adopt this research process as a practical way of examining the impact of peer modelling with their own students. Further examination of peer education is needed to identify the most influential age difference between peers, longitudinal effects on attitude and strategies for teachers without access to highly skilled models.

In conclusion, this research contributes towards a greater understanding of how boys' gendered identities intersect with learning to sing and raises awareness about the challenge

of finding ways to improve participation in a wider range of musical behaviours early in childhood.

### Notes

1    A key Australian study is the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2003), *Boys: Getting it Right – Report on the Inquiry into the Education of Boys*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government, www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/eofb/report/fullrpt.pdf. The Australian government is currently engaged in a national project to improve the educational performance of boys known as the *Boys' Educational Lighthouse Schooling (BELS) Project*, www.boyslighthouse.edu.au/link_index.htm.

2    Rutkowski (1997) advocates the use of more than one assessor to qualify the results. However, because of the independent nature of this project the assessment was made without additional auditing. The results were considered reliable because of my teacher–student relationship and prior close work with the participants.

3    Many boys were having private violin or piano lessons inside and outside of school. The music curriculum included a string programme in Year 2 involving all boys learning an orchestral string instrument for one year, and because of this the boys had all been exposed to older peers and siblings playing the violin. In this way the learning of string instruments was expected to be part of 'normal life' for these boys.

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