

Article

Development of Early Choral Expertise: Insights from Middle School Elite Choristers

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Abstract

General models of talent development have highlighted the importance of a community of practice to nurture talent potential, with recent studies refining factors that contribute to the developmental journey. In music, an early model described three phases of talent development, while current research has focused on transitions between these. Choral music research has investigated conductors' expertise and choristers' experiences, highlighting positive social impacts for children in addition to the development of choral skills. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate talent development of 11 elite middle school choristers utilising interviews. Thematic analyses identified four themes and 10 sub-themes, demonstrating that choristers followed a developmental pathway similar to choral conductors, acquiring vocal competence and mastery, nurturing a sense of belonging to a choral community, participating in meaningful experiences, and becoming advanced choristers through intensive training. Chorister talent development was also linked to personality development, with transformation in choral identity leading to growth in personal confidence. This study extends research into choral talent development by documenting the voices of middle school children participating in an advanced choir, showing that high levels of performance can be achieved through expert choral coaching and without sacrificing the enjoyment of singing.

Keywords: talent development; choral expertise; middle school choristers; choral singing; choral community; intensive training



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1. Introduction

The terms “giftedness” and “talent” tend to be conflated to describe a combined phenomenon. [Gagné \(2017\)](#) has provided more conceptual clarity, proposing to “adopt the term gifted to convey a potential anchored in biological and genetic foundations, and the term talent to represent outstanding systematically developed competencies” (p. 152). While typically a single instrument is used to identify giftedness in primary-age students, a recent systematic literature review of existing protocols proposed a “multidimensional approach [that] helps reduce false negatives and supports the identification of underrepresented and twice-exceptional students” ([Delgado-Valencia et al., 2025](#), p. 1).

Early models of expertise development have been criticised for being one-dimensional, with psychologists viewing expertise as an accomplishment that only few “talented” individuals can attain ([Collins, 2013](#)). While [Feist \(2013\)](#) claimed that a natural talent is a necessary element for the development of expertise, [Collins \(2013\)](#) argued that a “level of expertise grows with embedding in the society of domain experts; the key is the transmis-

sion of domain-specific tacit knowledge” (p. 253). To acquire this specialist knowledge, an individual needs to be immersed in the community of those who already possess it.

A recent study by [Preckel et al. \(2020\)](#) has proposed a general talent development framework applicable across many high-achievement domains. This psychological framework described how abilities are developed into competencies, and competencies into expertise. The process is initially “to engage young people in a topic or domain (‘falling in love’), then helping the individual to develop the needed skills, knowledge, and values (‘teaching for technique’), and finally helping talented individuals develop their own unique niches, styles, methods, or areas of application (‘mentoring for personalized niche’)” (p. 694). The environmental factors that contribute to the development of talent included access to many learning opportunities and advanced content, intense learning experiences, strategies for independent learning, high levels of motivation, and fulfilment of personal needs such as friendships and acceptance. The framework also identified a link between ability development and personality development. Similarly, [Gagné \(2017\)](#) highlighted many factors that influence high achievement: “differences in level of intrinsic motivation, in family support, in personality traits like anxiety, in peer influences, in study time”, with high achievers being “more motivated, socially adept, or psychologically stable than average peers” (p. 160).

1.1. Developing Musical Expertise

An early model of musical talent development by [Subotnik and Jarvin \(2005\)](#) foreshadowed [Preckel et al. \(2020\)](#) work, also proposing three phases: ability, competence and expertise. Mediating variables for each phase included musical and personal elements such as innate musicality, teachability, intrinsic motivation, resilience, persistence, the quality of teaching, and opportunities for learning and development. [Zhukov and Rowley \(2022\)](#) utilised this model in examination of professional lives of 28 Australian classical pianists and focused on factors facilitating transitions from one developmental phase to the next. The study demonstrated that early music education was critical in developing the potential for future career success. The participants recollected wide-ranging opportunities for musical learning during primary and secondary education which in turn opened new possibilities during higher education and professional careers.

Musical prodigiousness was analysed using the Integrative Model of Talent Development by [Gagné and McPherson \(2016\)](#) who identified ten most significant causal predictors. These were ranked in order of influence, with general intelligence and time invested in practice being the highest; willpower/perseverance and autonomy/self-determination next; followed by energy investment and passion; and then long-term auditory and motor memory, manual dexterity, and mimicry (p. 97). This approach was further refined in a recent model of musical potential and giftedness that highlighted physical and mental natural abilities as a starting point that together with environmental and intrapersonal catalysts contribute to the developmental journey (activities, process, progress) and result in the development of musical talent ([McPherson et al., 2022](#)). The authors proposed four stages of musical giftedness: “aptitude, competence, expertise, and transformational achievement” (p. 46).

1.2. Developing Choral Expertise

In the area of choral singing, recent research into the development of choral conducting expertise has identified four themes based on [Wenger’s \(1998\)](#) theory of situated learning: “competence—learning as mastery; community—learning as belonging; meaning—learning as experience; identity—learning as becoming” ([Jansson & Balsnes, 2021](#), p. 350). Competence (learning as mastery) focused on the conductor entry point into choral singing, formal

musical education and evolving practice where choral skills were refined through application. Community (learning as belonging) considered musical and personal interactions between the members of ensemble and the influence of peer groups. Meaning (learning as experience) examined the purpose of choral engagement, choral singing achievements, and shared participation through giving and receiving reciprocally. Identity (learning as becoming) described conductor transformation as their choral identity grew with the intensity of training needed for this progression. While this framework explains the development of choral conducting expertise, it can also be utilised in examining chorister talent development.

Children's and young people's perspectives on choral singing have been reported in a range of contexts utilising surveys and interviews. In the UK, a child survey evaluating the Sing Up programme (aimed at increasing singing participation in primary schools) showed that children's positive self-concept and sense of social inclusion grew in step with their singing development (Welch et al., 2014). In Australia, a children's survey evaluating the introduction of singing activities into primary classrooms by generalist teachers who were mentored by music specialists demonstrated a positive impact on children's singing skills and attitudes to music regardless of sex, ethnicity and socio-economic standing of the school (Barrett et al., 2020). These studies show that children recognise positive impacts of singing on their singing and social skills development.

In adolescent chorister development, research utilising interviews in three USA choirs identified a principal concept of team (Parker, 2014). The main categories highlighted by choristers included being acknowledged and accomplished, feelings of pride and desire to give back. A UK study of high school choristers employed questionnaires and interviews to compare girls' perceptions of singing with that of boys' (Orton & Pitts, 2019). Boys tended to view their ability to sing as static and did not fully understand the changes happening to their voices. On the other hand, girls acknowledged the interaction between effort, ability and confidence in their singing achievements. An Australian survey of 6–17-year-old choristers reported a persuasive connection between participation in advanced choirs and positive perceptions of self-esteem, self-efficacy, identity and social impact (Zhukov et al., 2021). Interviews with 11–24-year-old choristers taking part in an intensive Australian choral summer school revealed five themes that explained the value and meaning of choral participation: “(1) love of performance; (2) unity of purpose; (3) challenge and professionalism; (4) relationships and community; and (5) individual growth and wellbeing” (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022, p. 1). Young people's perspectives from these studies demonstrate that choral singing during adolescence leads to positive identity development in addition to growth in choral singing skills and musicianship.

1.3. Listening to Young Children's Voices

In the last two decades the field of music education research has expanded to include children's and young people's perspectives on music learning in a variety of settings. For example, Barrett and Bond (2015) reported student opinions regarding a music programme delivered in four disadvantaged schools in Australia, with students highlighting the development of music skills and positive impact on academic performance, social skills, personal confidence and well-being. In the UK, Kokotsaki (2017) focused on student transition from primary to high school and the reasons for dropout in music participation. Interviewed students emphasised the desire to be consulted regarding the content and nature of music learning in the secondary education setting. This study highlighted the need for music educators to involve students in co-design of music curriculum. A recent systematic literature review of learner's voice in music education—while limited by its choice of keywords—showed that students prefer to learn music through active participation, be involved in decision-making, and be exposed to a variety of instruments and musical styles (Després &

Dubé, 2020). Students did not like being lectured, tested and taught in a top-down approach embedded in the master-apprentice model of instrumental and vocal music teaching.

The review of literature highlights the need for research into musical talent development in the area of choral singing. Previous research has investigated the impact of choral singing on primary school and adolescent students, with no explicit focus on middle school choristers. In particular, it is important to listen to children's and young people's perspectives as a way of identifying effective teaching and learning approaches and recognising important social and personal factors in chorister identity development. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do middle school choristers develop competence in choral singing?
2. What is the role of the choral community in this journey?
3. How do middle school choristers achieve high-level results?
4. How is chorister identity shaped through choral participation?

2. Methodology

This investigation is part of a larger study of the pedagogies of early expertise undertaken through case-studies of choral learning and pedagogy in three choral communities in Australia (2) and the UK (1). In all settings data were generated via observation and interview with choral conductors and children. For this report, focusing on children's perspectives, data were generated via semi-structured interviews with children enrolled in one prestigious Australian-based choral programme (Yin, 2018).

2.1. Research Site

Gondwana is a highly respected Australian choral programme for school-age singers. During its 30-year history, it has created several choirs to suit the needs of different ages and abilities. Children from its general choral programme who display exceptional potential can audition into Junior Performing Choir (JPC) which is an extension ensemble for 9–14-year-old singers that rehearses twice weekly. This choir was chosen for research to focus on choral talent development of middle school students.

2.2. Participants

The choir publicised the research and eleven parents and their children volunteered to be interviewed, their age ranging from 10 to 14 years old (average age 11.5 years). Seven females and four males attended school in year 5–8 (middle school). As seen from Table 1, in addition to singing in JPC, these children played multiple instruments and achieved success in practical music examinations.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	School Year	Sex	Instruments Played, Exam Level or Years of Learning
Emma	10	5	F	Piano, Grade 1; Harp, 1 year
Eva	10	6	F	Piano, Grade 4; Clarinet, Grade 3
James	10	5	M	Violin, Grade 7; Piano, Grade 3
George	10	5	M	Cello, Grade 8; Percussion, Grade 2; Piano, 4 years
Mia	11	6	F	Piano, Grade 5; Violin, Grade 5
Henry	11	6	M	Violin, 7 years
Martin	12	7	M	Piano, Grade 4; Saxophone, 1 year
Camilla	13	7	F	Piano, Grade 2; Violin, 2 years; Harp, 1.5 years; Bass Guitar, 1 year
Anna	13	7	F	Flute, Grade 4; Piano and Guitar, beginner
Lily	13	8	F	Flute, Grade 6; French Horn, beginner
Chloe	14	8	F	Singing, 4 years; Clarinet, 3 years; Guitar, 1 year

Note. Exam grade indicates level of accomplishment in playing an instrument.

2.3. Data Collection

After obtaining ethical clearance from an Australian university and written consent from children and their parents, children were interviewed twice, six months apart. To make children comfortable, both interviews were conducted by the same researcher in public spaces with a parent in sight but unable to hear the conversation. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a professional company, and transcripts member-checked prior to analyses.

The first interview focused on participants' history of choral participation and memorable choral events; details of the current choir experience, music learning strategies, and choral community; choral skills development and the conductors' role in this; and anticipated enduring impacts. The second interview probed a comparison to other choral learning experiences; musical and personal learnings from choral participation; individual approaches to learning/rehearsing/performing and skill transfer to other areas; contribution to life, achievements and influence on future directions.

2.4. Thematic Analysis

The first author undertook initial coding of interviews informed by the four themes identified in [Jansson and Balsnes \(2021\)](#) framework of choral expertise development: those of competence, community, meaning and identity. Data were analysed following procedures described by [Braun and Clarke \(2022\)](#). Iterative discussion between the two researchers helped to refine emerging categories, with participant quotes providing evidence of trustworthiness of findings.

3. Results

The interview data was analysed according to the four themes of [Jansson and Balsnes \(2021\)](#) framework of choral expertise development and identified 10 sub-themes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Results.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotes
Competence: Learning as Mastery	Entry Point into Choral Singing	My first memory of singing would probably be when I went to school and was in the school choir at the age of 5 or 6. My sister was singing before me and she sung so beautifully that I thought to myself, "Wow, I want to someday be able to sing like that," so I started singing. (Emma) When I was about seven my sister did her audition for the Sydney Children's Choir and we both started singing a lot. (George) First memory of singing in a choir would definitely be when I was six, when I heard of the Sydney Children's Choir and I decided to join. (Henry) When I was about five, I got my first singing teacher and she was really nice, and I completed Grade 1 when I was about five. That was probably my first musical experience of performing, so that's pretty cool. (Camilla) My best friend's Mum decided to start a class choir, just in my little class, and I did that for about a year. (Chloe)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotes
Competence: Learning as Mastery	Formal Choral Music Education	Sight-singing classes helped me the most, because before that I didn't really know treble clef that well and that's really helped me develop my skills for that. (George) I've learnt a lot of theory, so much more than I ever would have learnt anywhere else. And blending and technique. (Chloe) In my singing lessons I work on new songs improving my vocal range. How I sing, techniques for breathing, just how to approach singing altogether. That's been really, really helpful. (Camilla) If we first get a new piece then we'll sight-sing it through first and then we'll analyse the phrasing. And if it's an old piece we'll analyse the word stress and other things like that. (Anna)
	Evolving Musical Practice	Last year I was alto, because we were split into three parts: Soprano 1, Soprano 2 and Alto. And this year I'm Alto 2 singing in four parts (Martin). My choir pushing me forward to do more challenging things, and I got to love singing even more than I had when I started. (Emma) We got to learn different types of music. Like we did a yodelling song and we did songs in other languages. (Mia) In this choir, we do quiet time before performance. Ten minutes before the performance, you'll sit and shut our eyes and just think about everything. It's nice to have time where you can just think about what you're about to do. (Anna)
Community: Learning as Belonging	The Ensemble Community	The first rehearsal was really nice, because everyone was really nice and welcoming, seeing as I joined at a different time. And being able to make great music with great people and having a good time in rehearsals. (Lily) It's such a lovely choir. The conductors are so supportive of our choir. The people are nice. The people are understandable, because I'm a bit like them. (James) I think it is more like a tribe or a family than a music attendance. (Henry) Honestly, I can't imagine myself without my singing or my choir. My choir just makes me feel like I'm part of something and that I'm helping some people by singing and making them feel so nice inside. So, it's made a very big impact on my life. (Emma) If I wasn't singing, I don't think I would be as happy as I am now. Singing with this choir has given me so many new friends, so many opportunities. So many ways to just be happy in general. The highlight of my week is coming to choir, I love choir. (Camilla)
	Peer Group	I've learnt there are people in the world like me who love singing and really appreciate the joy of music. (James) They are some of my closest friends because it's really nice to have friends that love doing the same thing as you. (Anna) The friends that you get in choir are the friends that you keep for almost forever. (Henry) I have lots of really nice friends at choir, they're probably better than my friends at school, because we're all interested in the same things. When we have break time, we sit down, we eat, we talk. On tours we have so much fun. (Camilla) Not long ago I had a sleepover with my choir friends and then we went to the park and swam in the pools. (Mia)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotes
Meaning: Learning as Experience	Purpose	When you get to the kind of professional level like in JPC, you have to commit to the two days a week of rehearsals. Singing is really important to me, so I always find the time to do it. (Eva) In this choir it is not focused on just singing a song but it is focused on giving you experience. They give you incredibly good vocals, great accompaniments, great conductors, great compositions, amazing works of art that you get to see. They are sharing something with us that is incredibly hard to find. (Henry) When conductors are singing it really shows me how a professional singer would sing, and what I need to aim towards. (Martin) You need to know that it's a team rather than just one person. Everyone knows that it's a choir, so everyone needs to blend. Blending is really important. (Chloe) In this choir we work on music skills like being able to read music and sight-singing as well as understanding the theory and what sort of ideas the composers had and what we need to portray when we're performing the songs. (Lily)
	Achievement	I wasn't very good at sight-singing and I've got better and better at that. And now I'm in the top sight-singing group. (Martin) I have learnt [music] theory, I have learnt how to do sight-singing really well. I have learnt how to compose and it has given me inspiration to do all sorts of other things. (Henry) I learnt to sing in tune, I learnt like how to blend our voices together, not just sing as one soloist but to sing as a choir. (Mia) I used to look like a balloon when I was breathing, but now I can breathe in the right spots, in the right pitches, which is a very important skill, especially in performance. (James)
	Reciprocity	I think being in the choir I have developed a sense of maturity because conductors constantly rely on you to do the work. The responsibility is a real switch for everything and we have to follow with this responsibility. (Henry) I like how we can learn all the music together instead of just trying to practise by yourself, and conductors help you learn and find new methods of practising and learning. (George) [Conductors] don't mind if they ask you to sing something and you get it wrong. They ask you to try again until you get it right, and then they congratulate you and just encourage you to do better. (Eva) Kindness and helping people who don't really know the music that well and helping them to learn the music, and also to be a confident person. (Emma) [Conductor] fine-tunes the bits in a kind way that's not critical and makes people confident of their abilities. (James)

Table 2. Cont.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Participant Quotes
Identity: Learning as Becoming	Transformation	I'm hoping to sing in choirs for a long time after now, and maybe do some solos, and be an opera singer part-time. (Emma) I just want to keep singing. I want to stay in the choir. I think it's going to make me more musical and know more and understand more music. (Mia) I want to sing my whole life, that's why I look after voice, I don't want it to be hurt. I want to be a musical person in the future. (Camilla) I personally think it helps me tackle fear on an emotional level and it helps me with a lot of things in my mind because I get quite nervous sometimes occasionally. And then, when I sing, singing is the thing that makes me feel calm. (Henry) This choir also is about leadership too. Sometimes people are appointed leaders of the section, and I find that very good to improve your social skills. (James)
	Intensity	We sing it through it first, and conductors give us points, and we find it very helpful to always write it down on the music so they don't have to keep repeating themselves, and most of the time we at least do a few bars, and then they would go over what we need to focus on. (Lily) Usually what happens is we practise the songs, but then when there's something wrong then our conductor goes through that page or line or a specific part of the piece and we get people to have their opinions about how to perfect it, how it could be better. (James) I want to be able to blend with other choristers and trying to remember every note that the conductor gives you. I find it very helpful to have a pencil and write down absolutely everything they say. (Anna) The conductors sometimes like to make jokes, not hurting anyone's feelings but helping us to get better, so giving us things to work on rather than telling off. (George) I love rehearsals, they are really fun and helpful. Doing fun mirror exercises and choir games. They are always really fun and you learn as well. (Eva)

4. Discussion

4.1. Competence: Learning as Mastery

The participants described starting to sing at an early age, with many inspired to sing by older siblings. They sang in school choirs first, before auditioning for Gondwana choirs. The findings demonstrate that the participants engaged with informal choral singing around the age of 5–7 years. An early start in learning to play a musical instrument was similarly reported by professional classical pianists (Zhukov & Rowley, 2022). Preckel et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of engaging young people in the domain early to help them fall in love with the particular field. Similarly, Gagné (2017) flagged early introduction as an essential element of talent development. Research into sight-singing showed that the age of starting to sing is the best predictor of sight-singing performance, independent of years of experience or education (Pomerleau-Turcotte et al., 2021). These studies confirm the importance of early entry into choral participation and training.

The choristers identified development of their sight-reading skills and acquisition of music theory knowledge as part of their choral training. Improving their vocal range and technique were also foci in their learning. Analytical approaches to evaluating the musical and text challenges were some of the pedagogical strategies employed in the JPC. The findings reported here correspond to similar outcomes from an intensive summer choral school, where students reported improvement in general music skills such as sight-

reading and music theory, and singing skills including expanded vocal range, blending, and specific vocal techniques such as breathing (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022). Score analysis plays an important role in preparation for a vocal performance, with cues highlighting relevant musical features serving to facilitate long-term recall (Ginsborg & Chaffin, 2011). Focus on text clarity is an important element of choral rehearsals: a large international survey of professional and amateur musicians regarding factors affecting the intelligibility of sung text showed that articulation, diction and enunciation was the most frequently cited category (Fine & Ginsborg, 2014). These studies document various elements of formal choral education that contribute to the development of choral competence and mastery.

The participants reflected on their musical growth as choral singers, adjusting to changes in their voice, being challenged by more complex and varied repertoire, singing in different languages, and preparing for a performance. JPC choristers are exposed to modern choral repertoire representative of a contemporary Australian multi-cultural society. Innovative and diverse programming plays an important role in a philosophy of a choir (Bartolome, 2018). Selecting repertoire in diverse musical styles nurtures choristers' musical growth (Parker, 2014). Singing challenging, complex and varied repertoire reported here aligns with exposure to more advanced and more varied repertoire cited by the participants of an intensive choral summer school who also stated that high calibre, memorable performances fostered their love of music, singing and performance (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022). Access to advanced learning content has been highlighted as an important element in talent development (Gagné, 2017; Preckel et al., 2020).

Little is known regarding the experience of music performance anxiety in choral settings. A study of adult choristers from semi-professional choirs in the USA reported frequent occurrence of performance anxiety and highlighted the role of the conductor as a primary factor impacting this (Ryan & Andrews, 2009). It is heartening to hear that JPC conductors have implemented practical strategies to reduce the impact of performance anxiety on young choristers through a quiet pre-performance time.

The findings reported here illustrate how young choristers' musical practice is evolving through exposure to more complex and challenging repertoire and positive performance experiences and provide a contrast to reported typical student experience on instrumental learning (Zhukov, 2012).

4.2. Community: Learning as Belonging

All of the participants described the choir community as welcoming, positive and supportive. They liked singing with like-minded children and belonging to a special "tribe". Choir participation had a positive impact on their lives and made them happy.

Choral participation tends to nurture a sense of belonging to a unique group. For example, Bartolome (2018) described a "brotherly bond" between choristers who "stick like family" (p. 277). Women's choirs have been described as "warm and welcoming", the atmosphere of a single-sex group facilitating experience of "becoming a group" (Parker, 2014, p. 448). Choristers attending an intensive choral summer school also emphasised a "sense of community where everyone was welcomed and supported" (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022, p. 9). Welch et al. (2014) stated that "children with more developed singing ability tended to have a more positive sense of self and of being socially integrated" (p. 9). Choral research supports the findings from JPC choristers regarding the positive impacts of belonging to a supportive choral community.

The choristers discussed forming special friendships within the choir peer group, even though the children came to choir rehearsals from many distant suburbs and were not living in the same geographical area. The unity of purpose—love of choral singing—created strong interpersonal bonds that often endured for years. The non-school, audition-based nature

of this choir might have strengthened peer bonds compared to school music programmes. Special choral friendships are often cited in research. For example, choristers attending an intensive choral summer school highlighted the importance of “being with like-minded choir nerds” and “building long-term friendships” (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022, p. 9). Similarly, Ferrer et al. (2018) reported a significant link between friendship and spontaneity from the surveys of 80 children’s and young people’s choirs in Catalonia, Spain. In the USA, female choristers commented that the development of new friendships and sustaining old friendships led to opening themselves up vocally and personally (Parker, 2014). These studies corroborate the vital role of choral peers and long-term friendships formed through choral participation reported here.

4.3. *Meaning: Learning as Experience*

The participants recognised they were singing in an advanced choir that aimed to produce choral performances at a professional level. They were able to articulate various elements contributing to the high-level results such as blending to create a unique choral sound, developing advanced musicianship skills, and sophisticated interpretation. However, the participants may have a positive bias because they were chosen for an elite programme (which may not reflect the experiences of most children that learn music). Choral research has demonstrated that choristers are “challenged to perform at the highest level possible both individually and as a group” (Parker, 2014, p. 448). Challenge and professionalism were identified as one of the five major themes from the interviews with choristers attending an intensive summer choral school (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022). This included aiming at the highest level of choral singing and focus on interpretation. Gagné (2017) highlighted challenging excellence goals as necessary for talent development. Research and the findings here demonstrate that the purpose of advanced choral participation is to generate performances comparable to a professional level even at a young age. This requires a joint effort from the organisation (conductors, accompanists, inspiring repertoire) and from the choristers (developing music skills, blending).

The respondents highlighted their achievements resulting from choral participation. These included development of sight-singing skills, knowledge of music theory, and growth in vocal skills such as ability to sing in tune, blend, and breathing techniques. Previous research has shown that choristers “accelerated their musical learning and felt more self-efficacious in sight-reading and singing in harmony with others” (Parker, 2014, p. 448). Singing in tune tended to improve when conductors used gesture and movement during rehearsals (Liao & Davidson, 2016). Enhanced breath control was reported as one of the key learnings from an intensive summer choral school (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022). Choral research supports the findings from JPC choristers noting that choral participation leads to singers’ achievements in the development of sight-reading skills, ability to sing in tune and better breathing technique.

The choristers acknowledged reciprocity in their choral learning, with conductors providing expert guidance and children expected to respond with maturity and responsible action. This was achieved through kind, helpful feedback that built chorister confidence. Preckel et al. (2020) suggest that talent development depends on “ease and speed of learning and responsiveness to learning new content and skills” (p. 701). Chorister comments above demonstrate their understanding of the importance of responding quickly to conductor’s suggestions, but also their awareness that choral learning tends to flourish in a positive rehearsal atmosphere. Positive feedback has been shown to be an effective teaching strategy in instrumental music tuition (Zhukov, 2012). Greater personal confidence and confidence in singing were reported as outcomes of participation in a summer choral school contributing to individual growth and well-being of choristers (Barrett & Zhukov,

2022). These studies support the evidence from JPC choristers regarding the importance of reciprocity in choral learning where conductors and children work together in a harmonious atmosphere to achieve outstanding singing results and at the same time building singers' musical and personal confidence.

4.4. Identity: Learning as Becoming

Participation in this renowned choir instilled the love of choral singing, with all children professing the desire to continue long-term singing in choirs. Some indicated their aspirations for a musical career, others commented on mood regulation, leadership roles and development of social skills. The participant quotes illustrate transformations in chorister identity, as the children come to view themselves as choral singers and recognise the impact of choral participation on them. The intention for ongoing engagement with choral singing indicated by the participants corresponds to similar outcomes from an intensive summer choral school reported by Barrett and Zhukov (2022). Other research into extra-curricular music programmes had also shown their positive impact on lasting participation in music-making activities (Creech et al., 2020). The role of music-making in mood regulation and “learning the skills of self-management and care” has been cited in research (Barrett & Bond, 2015, p. 47). Parker (2014) reported identity transformation as an outcome of choral participation, with choristers describing how “their passion for singing and their motivation to improve were spurred on by other members of the ensemble: they also took on additional leadership opportunities, auditioned for solos, and mentored younger students” (p. 451). Similar impact of participation in a high-quality choral ensemble on the development of musical identity was described in Zhukov et al. (2021). The reflections of the JPC participants reported here describe the transformation of their identity from enjoying singing to becoming dedicated choristers and are echoed by research into choral and extra-curricular music participation. The awareness of the impact of choral singing on emotional control, the development of social skills and opportunities for leadership demonstrate the maturation process of these young singers and have also been cited in research.

The choristers described the intensity of rehearsals, with conductors providing specific feedback, children taking notes, choristers being asked to give their opinions, and the coaching being delivered in a light-hearted manner that inspired children to practise and become better singers. Preckel et al. (2020) highlighted an escalation in learning intensity as musicians near competency level: “the beginning of the competence level could be defined as the point in time when a substantial increase in the time dedicated to musical learning is discernible” and “where an individual masters increasingly complex musical materials and broadens his or her musical repertoire and expressive scenarios to a considerable degree” (p. 709). Similarly, Gagné (2017) highlighted the importance of customised/accelerated pacing for talent development. In instrumental music teaching, effective teaching strategies included specific feedback and frequent questioning of learners (Zhukov, 2012). Conductors' use of humour was highlighted by choristers attending an intensive summer choral school (Barrett & Zhukov, 2022). These studies suggest that while learning intensity is an important factor in talent development, it can be delivered in a positive way with conductors giving specific feedback, using humour and questioning techniques to engage singers in identifying problems, and finding solutions instead of a top-down coaching approach. Such a balanced approach of having fun while engaging in “serious” singing produces outstanding results.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Jansson and Balsnes' (2021) framework for the development of choral conductor expertise was utilised here in the analysis of middle school chorister perspectives on the development of early choral expertise. The findings demonstrate that young choristers follow a similar pathway to choral conductors, developing vocal competence and mastery, nurturing a sense of belonging to a choral community of practice, participating in meaningful experiences, and being transformed into advanced choristers through intensive training. This developmental journey also aligns with the four-stage model of musical potential and giftedness: starting with aptitude for choral singing, gaining competence through singing in various choirs, acquiring expertise through participation in an advanced choir, and achieving transformative outcomes (McPherson et al., 2022).

The process of gaining competence starts with an early entry into choral singing, followed by formal choral music education that focuses on the development of sight-reading skills, understanding of music theory, vocal techniques and expanding the vocal range. This in turn impacts the singers evolving choral practice and allows them to sing more complex and challenging repertoire and gain performance experience.

Young choristers recognised their membership of a unique choral community of practice that was supportive and welcoming, and the positive flow-on effects on their lives from choral participation. Long-term friendships with choral peers enhanced their sense of belonging and happiness.

The choristers understood that their choir aimed to produce performances at the highest possible level. This accelerated their learning and motivated them to achieve superior levels in sight-reading, knowledge of music theory, vocal skills and technique, well beyond what could be expected from singers of similar age. These 11 choristers demonstrated maturity beyond their years by acknowledging their responsibility to follow through on the conductors' advice and suggestions contributing to a perception of reciprocity between conductors and singers. We acknowledge that the sample in this study is small and elite, and the findings may not directly apply to all schools or non-selective choral settings. Nevertheless, this study emphasises the importance of a positive and harmonious rehearsal atmosphere and meaningful experiences in expanding children's singing, engagement and learning.

Participation in an advanced choir has led to transformation in children's identity from enjoyment of singing to becoming committed choristers. This was delivered through intensive training that escalated their growth as choral singers. Choral pedagogies that have contributed to that included specific and detailed conductors' feedback, use of questioning and humour. These positive teaching strategies are in contrast to the typical master-apprentice approaches that still persist in instrumental and vocal music teaching and learning.

The findings reported here also resonate with the new model of talent development proposed by Preckel et al. (2020). We note that our participants fell in love with choral singing at an early age and then developed relevant choral skills, knowledge and values through formal choral music education and evolving practice. At the age of 10–14 the choristers were perhaps a little too young to be thinking about specialising in niche music areas. Many of the environmental factors identified by Preckel et al. (2020) were also reported here, such as access to advanced content, intensive learning experiences, high levels of motivation as evidenced by achievement and reciprocity, fulfilment of personal needs through friendships with choral peers, and acceptance by the choral community. Chorister responses also showed that their talent development was linked to personality development, with transformation in their choral identity leading to their maturation and growth in personal confidence.

This study extends the music education research focus on listening to children's voices. While earlier studies have focused on singing in primary school settings and impacts of choral participation on positive identity development of adolescents, this study brings a new viewpoint by documenting the voices of middle school children participating in an advanced choir.

Children's perspectives offer new learnings for choral conductors and educators. For example, the desire for challenging and varied repertoire, harmonious rehearsal atmosphere where children's opinions are sought and respected, specific and positive feedback, and the use of humour are all elements that could be implemented in choral rehearsals. The insights from these middle school elite choristers show that it is possible to aim for and achieve the highest levels of performance by providing expert choral coaching from a young age while letting children enjoy singing.

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