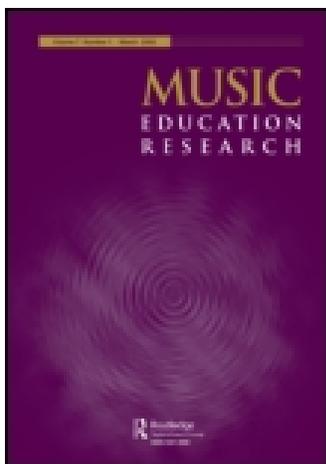


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Boys' music? School context and middle-school boys' musical choices

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This article focusses primarily on the findings relating to the musical participation of boys in one Melbourne school. As part of a project that investigated boys' attitudes and participation at fifty-one schools, several contextual features were identified that set 'Balton Boys' High School' apart from other participating schools, allowing this school to achieve a breadth of male musical involvement, thus challenging long-observed, frequently documented gender stereotypes. This research contributes to an understanding of factors which encourage boys to participate broadly, promoting insight into 'permissions' granted to boys in the context of specific school cultures. It highlights the propensity for some school contexts to reinforce and perpetuate stereotypical gendered behaviour, and for others to interrupt and challenge stereotypes, effectively promoting a breadth of musical participation amongst middle-school boys.

Keywords: middle-school boys; musical participation; stereotypes; school context

Introduction

'That's always been that way in schools' (Andrew, aged 14). This summation by a student in the present study encapsulates perceptions of deeply entrenched, and thus normalised, gendered musical roles for boys and girls. Within the context of the interview, Andrew's observations of strongly delineated male and female behaviours are accompanied by an acceptance of the status quo, an unquestioning compliance with his school's musical culture. Wills (2005) notes that very little progress has been made in changing gendered attitudes to music, or in diminishing stereotypical attitudes. McGregor and Mills (2006) contend that music is perceived to revolve around the affective domain, and is therefore synonymous with 'feminine' attributes. This perception serves to construct music as a 'girls' subject'. Participants in Harrison's (2007) study are the targets of pejorative terms such as 'sissy, faggot and poofter' (p. 269). Sweet (2010) concurs, the choir boys in her study describing ubiquitous 'gay' taunts. Further, Harrison (2002) argues that boys' dismissal of some areas of music participation relates primarily to the notion of 'devaluing femininity and the related behaviours of male gender role rigidity, avoidance of femininity, and homophobic bullying' (p. 2). Koza (1993) suggests that deep historical roots render such stereotypes highly resistant to eradication. Within the school setting, Green (2002) observes that girls are more active and successful than boys, participating in a broader range of activities.

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North, Hargreaves, and O'Neill (2000) found adolescent boys to be more concerned than girls with the image constructed by instrumental choices, a 'cool' image being crucial. Purposefully constructing and maintaining their sense of masculinity, many boys adhere to narrowly defined parameters of musical behaviour, rejecting choices which challenge these rigid confines, labelling them feminine or homosexual. These boundaries are actively policed by boys, ensuring the perpetuation of gender-congruent behaviours. Those boys exhibiting incongruent, 'deviant' behaviours may be targets for bullying and exclusion (Harrison and O'Neill 2002, 148). Alarming, Hall (2005) identifies negative attitudes towards singing in boys in their first year of school, with many boys already viewing singing as a feminine activity, and therefore inappropriate for boys.

There is much research focussing on the 'missing males' (Koza 1993) in school music, concluding that boys' participation currently maintains consistently narrow parameters, and that attempts to broaden this participation have not achieved significant outcomes. Whilst this is a valid summation in general terms, it is perhaps an oversimplification. The findings of the present study indicate a somewhat more positive stance, showing that *some* boys do participate beyond the stereotype in *some* school contexts. Thus, the focus of this paper is on the contextual features identified in schools which present a challenge to generalised observations of middle-school¹ boys' musical involvement. Conversely, features which appear to contribute to the maintenance of boys' narrow, stereotypical participation are also highlighted.

Thus, the research questions were posited:

- (a) How do boys in contrasting learning environments view participation in their schools' musical activities?
- (b) Are some school contexts more conducive than others in promoting a breadth of musical participation by boys?
- (c) If so, what are the specific factors that serve to challenge the gendered choices of many boys, and promote greater latitude in musical involvement?

This paper therefore highlights several contextual features, which in combination appear to provide middle-school boys at Balton Boys' High School (henceforth referred to as Balton) with a cultural context conducive to boys participating broadly in their school's musical offerings. Balton appears to successfully challenge the gendered stereotypes so rife in many schools, as identified in the literature, and substantiated in the current study. The predominant focus will pertain to Balton, but where points of contrast with other schools add to the discussion, these will be presented.

Methodology

The study utilised an essentially qualitative approach, with the opinions and attitudes of students and teachers deemed to be of central importance. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), studying informants in their natural environment is the essence of qualitative inquiry: 'The province of qualitative research... is the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture' (p. 12). An ethnographic stance seemed well suited to this study, given its intention to explore the opinions and attitudes of students and teachers. Such a

stance requires contextual understandings of what participants say and do in ‘natural’ environments, in this case, the school, and is closely aligned with a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological perspective has as its focus an understanding of a concept or phenomenon. It aims to describe ‘the meaning of the lived experiences’ and to ‘explore the structure of consciousness in human experiences’ (Cresswell 1998, 51). The phenomenological approach of Conway (2000) is particularly relevant to the present study, as her methodology investigates ‘a connection between gender and musical choice, in which there is a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world’ (p. 3). To particularise, the present study deals with the concept or phenomenon of gendered musical experiences as lived and described by middle-school boys in an array of educational settings. Punch (1998) links the investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context with the relevance of case study methodology. Thus, case study methodology was selected for this inquiry as it offers appropriate tools for investigating the stated issues, and incorporated observation, questionnaires and interviews. Providing the focal point of the study, focus groups were conducted with twelve boys at each of the four case study schools.

Consistent with a phenomenological approach, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as *the* analytical tool for reducing and understanding the extensive amount of data generated in the study (Eatough and Smith 2006). The adaptation of IPA to multiple areas of social enquiry over the last decade is noted by Smith (2004). Further, Crawford (2007) observes the current, broadening application of IPA for research into music education. This methodology comprises identifying themes in the data, and making connections between themes by utilising tables and key words – some themes may emerge as predominant, with others subsumed within primary categories. The resultant thematic material is translated into a narrative account.

After gaining ethical approval for the study, questionnaires were sent to Melbourne schools in all three education sectors – government, independent and Catholic. Fifty-one questionnaires were returned (a return rate of 38%). The subsequent selection of four case study schools reflected choices based on the degree of contrast volunteering schools offered in terms of geographic location, socio-economic status (SES) and school sector. To protect each school’s privacy, pseudonyms have been used.

Balton Boys’ High School: school description

As this paper focusses on Balton Boys’ High School, this section provides a description of the school, in order to situate the school within its particular demography. Balton is a selective government school in central-east Melbourne. Enrolments commence at Year 9, and competition to gain a place at the school is fierce, with 1300 boys sitting the entrance examination each year, competing for 336 places. Sixty per cent of the school population is of Asian background, as indicated by statistics provided by the school, and derives primarily from China, Vietnam and Malaysia. Boys are predominately from middle-class families, according to detailed demographic information provided by the school’s registrar. As a consequence of its highly selective intake, the school predictably enjoys an excellent reputation in terms of its academic achievements, exemplified by its outstanding Victorian Certificate of Education results. In keeping

with the goal of academic excellence, and clearly articulated on the school's website, the institution claims to cultivate 'the finest thinkers and leaders in Australia'. Indeed, a perusal of the school's alumni would suggest that many past students have realised noteworthy achievements and recognition. The school is reputed to have a very successful music programme. Of particular interest is the ongoing success of its massed singing programme. Choral competitions constitute an auspicious occasion on the school's calendar, and as articulated by the Principal in the school's promotional material: 'the soul of [Balton] is expressed through song'. The position of music at Balton is clearly articulated on the website:

Music is firmly entrenched in the ethos and traditions of [Balton Boys'] High School. All students are involved in music in some way through the school's music curriculum. This is best seen at major events such as Speech Night and the House Choral competition, when the whole school reflects its unity and strength with the massed singing of over 1300 boys. The goal is to prepare students to participate actively in musical pursuits both within the School and the wider community, as performers and audience members.

Findings and discussion

Several contextual features were identified at Balton, which were found to be conducive to boys engaging in a broad range of musical activities. As a precursor to this discussion, selected quotes from interviews are presented here, to create a backdrop for the ensuing discussion. These excerpts from interviews conducted at several schools in the study capture several critical representations of the boys' participation in music, indicative of aspects of each school's musical culture. Although positive school features identified at Balton are the focus of this paper, it is perhaps advantageous to provide the reader with a sense of contrast between Balton and some other schools participating in this research. The following quotes from focus groups are chosen for their capacity to encapsulate the attitudes of each group of boys, and indeed seem to represent the prevailing cultures of the participating schools.

Balton Boys' High School:

-When I came to this school it was sort of a culture shock in a way. At the old school you had to be sort of macho in a way, but here you can do what you like. Sixty to eighty people learning the piano – really good. Guys playing the piano. I thought, this is really good. Because at my old school it was like all the boys played guitars and drums and all the girls played piano, flute, and things like that.

- *Do any of you play the flute?*

- Yeah, flute's pretty big here [matter of fact].

Delacroix Catholic Boys' College:

- Well, some just say, like, "That's a girl's instrument".

- *Do you think that sort of attitude exists here in any way at all?*

- No [with a bemused, quizzical expression]. How can it? It's all boys here, so no.

- *Do any of you play the flute?*

- I did flute last year. I was really good at it!

Greenhills High School (an outer eastern government, co-educational school):

- *Are any of you in the choir?*
- No, it's just girls.
- I didn't think we had a choir here.
- Yeah, Robert's in the choir [met with sniggering by the other boys].
- *Do any of you play the flute?*
- It's a girls' instrument [grimacing].

Wenbourne College (an elite private, co-educational school):

- *So you seem to be saying that there is girls' music and there is boys' music.*
- That's always been that way in schools [with a degree of impatience].
- *Do any of you play the flute?*
- It's just not macho [some laughter/sniggering].

The most striking comparison to be noted in these interchanges is the somewhat polarised responses of the boys in co-educational settings, compared with those of their single-sex counterparts. In the broader context of the entirety of the interviews, these extracts provide a summary of each group's perceived understandings of what is acceptable musical behaviour for middle-school boys.

Contextual features identified

Several themes emerged as contributors to the breadth of participation by Balton students. These themes commence with broader contextualising issues, progressing to more specific themes. The interconnectedness of nominated themes is recognised, and thus there may be an overlap of ideas between some sections/themes. Themes to be presented include the recognition of music as a component of a broad, rounded education; the importance of teachers actively promoting music; the impact of a teacher-centred versus student-centred approach to teaching music; the adoption of certain pedagogies combined with teacher characteristics; the influence of class; the influence of ethnicity; and the impact of the single-sex environment.

Valuing music as part of a commitment to a broadly conceived educational paradigm

Fundamental to Balton's success, indeed underpinning the ethos of all schools achieving success in relation to boys' participation is the valuing of music and the subsequent status attributed to music. This is reflected in multiple ways, as will be discussed throughout this paper. Many issues identified are dependent upon this vital feature. At Balton, music is described as the school's 'soul', and as 'central to our lives'. The valuing of music as an integral part of boys' education is supported by appropriate resources in the form of compulsory and timetabled massed singing, and by promoting the performance of instrumental music 'at every given opportunity' (quotes taken from the school's website). The claim pertaining to the importance of music, far from pure rhetoric, is backed in a substantial, tangible manner, resulting in the establishment of musical traditions which have become Balton's 'signature'.

Underlying the school's philosophy of education is a commitment to a broad, liberal education in which learning is viewed as:

akin to an initiation process, an initiation into the worthwhile activities of life. This [is] very much a non-instrumental view of what should go on in schools. Education [is] not a means to an end, be this economic advancement, social reconstruction or social engineering, self-aggrandisement, mental health, or self-fulfilment. True education [is] intrinsically worthwhile; as an end in itself. Its aim [is] the development of the rational mind, a capacity to make sense of ourselves and our world which would be liberating and enriching. (Black 2004, 3)

In the school's prospectus, this philosophy is referred to as a 'total education' by the Principal. Within this landscape, music is deemed to have a place amongst 'the worthwhile activities of life'. A liberal education promotes the value of learning for learning's sake, whilst contemporary ideology espouses the more utilitarian necessity for authenticity, usefulness and relevance to students' lives (Black 2004). Cocks and Watt (2004) refer to 'utility value', meaning that a subject's worth is determined by its perceived usefulness, particularly for future employment. Sullivan et al. (2009) also highlight this link between relevance and usefulness for life in general, and for future vocations in particular, pairing this with motivational levels of junior secondary students. Balton clearly subscribes to the former ideology, thereby representing a significant departure from contemporary educational paradigms. Black's 'non-instrumental view' of a liberal education is the view adopted and promoted by Balton. Inherent within this philosophy and stemming from the notion that music is to be enjoyed by all students, not just the talented few, is the resultant inclusiveness of the school's programme. This was demonstrated in Balton's massed singing programme, and a further sense of inclusion was enhanced by means of the House Choral² competitions. All boys are required to participate in these activities. The place of music at Balton is articulated by one student: 'They make a big deal of it, like the music programme is really important here. It's like, who we are'.

'Buying' and 'selling' music: teacher advocacy

Inextricably linked with the status of music within a broad educational paradigm, the issue of teacher advocacy is identified as an element that distinguishes Balton from the other schools involved in this study. Teachers at Balton were observed effectively and overtly providing a rationale for students as to why music is an important subject area. In reviewing the transcripts of interviews, it seems apparent that this significant aspect underpinned many of the comments made by the boys, which indeed contributed to an overall positivity in the students' attitudes to music. During interviews, boys raised several issues relating to the value of music, overall demonstrating an acceptance of their teachers' ideologies. For example, 'We are told it is part of a fully rounded education, and it broadens our knowledge'. Another added: 'Music is an important part of the community, so understanding it helps us understand the world we live in as well'. There was also a general consensus that music is used as a tool to promote a sense of unity and involvement.

Only James, aged 14, after proffering: 'They say it will make us better people', added the caveat: 'I'm not sure how that works'. Otherwise, there appeared to be a general acceptance of music as part of a 'fully rounded education'. There was a sense of teachers 'selling' music, and of students 'buying' the strongly promoted 'product'. This strategy seems to be an effective means of developing within students a valuing of a subject area that is frequently marginalised. On a regular basis, the benefits of

musical involvement were expounded to students. Teachers made links with music and significant, enriching learning experiences, effectively validating the existence of music in the curriculum, promoting both intrinsic and extrinsic values.

As opposed to viewing music as a ‘frill’ subject, merely light entertainment to provide relief from the more serious subjects, Balton students appear to regard music as occupying a significant position in their school lives, and in life generally. Teachers assisted students to comprehend that music comprises part of the whole, and indeed is one of life’s myriad facets that in their sum represent a satisfying, rich and meaningful existence. This feature was also evident at Delacroix, where boys were observed constructing understandings of music as socially and individually relevant, having the capacity and power to reflect current concerns and universal human experiences and emotions. There was no evidence of this type of teaching in the other two case study schools, and interviews confirmed this observation. Providing the strongest contrast with Balton students, the boys at Greenhills viewed music as an isolated learning area, quite detached from any real meaning, indeed, as ‘useless’ and ‘a waste of time’. Thus, students’ motivation to engage with music was severely diminished. Students’ perceptions of the value of music are regarded as impacting significantly on motivation levels, and this was seen to be inextricably linked with teachers’ approaches as evidenced in the classroom. Teachers at Balton were explicitly assisting students to understand ‘the big picture’, promoting discussion about the function of music in society and of its value on an individual basis, identifying the place of music as a part of the rich tapestry of life.

These data suggest that such an approach is infrequently adopted in the music classroom, but is paramount to the success of Balton, achieving the desired outcome of making music relevant to the lives of students. As Ames (1992) advises, learning is more likely to be effective when students attribute meaning to that being studied. This seems a crucial approach for all subjects, but is especially important for non-core subjects such as music, where the scope for undervaluing is significant, indeed inherent within its status as a non-core area.

‘Eat your vegetables – they’re good for you’: a teacher-centred versus student-centred approach

Contemporary educational thought extols the advantages of child-centred tuition, as such an approach renders learning relevant and authentic, in that it relates to the students’ lived worlds outside the school arena (Marsh 2010). The issue of child-centred education versus teacher-centred education is discussed by Hawkes (2001). He purports that most students, given their varying levels of maturity and limited life experience, are not in a position to determine appropriate educational outcomes and experiences. The author maintains that it is the role of the educator, ostensibly replete with expertise and maturity, to determine the worth of various modes and content of learning. Wills (2005) concurs, whilst cautioning against coercive strategies, suggesting that boys require a high level of direction to ‘establish a self-esteem and resilience that will eventually allow them to be self-directed and highly motivated to learn and succeed’ (p. 11). An experienced educator, Wills extends his contention, stating that tightly articulated clear goals are necessary for boys to realise their potential. A considerable degree of self-determination in the name of perceived relevance, preference and familiarity, is, according to Wills, detrimental to boys’

motivation and life achievement. Balton's philosophy of music education is clearly echoed in these sentiments, aligning with Swanwick's (1988) 'traditional values' approach to music education, which sees students as 'inheritors of a set of cultural values and practices, needing to master relevant skills and information in order to take part in musical affairs' (p. 10).

Balton's instrumental music and class music programme is described as 'orchestrally based', and does not include rock bands. This represents a significant departure from the position assumed by most surveyed schools, in which rock was deemed the preferred genre, with several respondents indicating a rock focus in both classroom and instrumental participation. Balton's decision aligns with a judgement made by the school's teachers in regard to what constitutes 'good' music – 'The uneducated like it loud and fast, but most enjoy good music in several styles' (questionnaire response). This comment is accompanied by an unequivocal 'No rock'. Incorporated within the school's programme, are opportunities for participation in the symphony orchestra, concert bands or jazz ensembles, string, clarinet and flute groups. The mere listing of such groups speaks articulately of what is deemed 'good' music. During class music lessons, teachers were observed promoting the value of 'real', 'good' and 'valuable' music, adjectives associated with Western classical music. Balton's firmly held stance regarding the value of classical music above other genres is confirmed by a perusal of the school's curriculum document, which essentially comprises a history of Western classical music. It is described by Mr M as 'very conservative'. It was therefore not surprising that all lessons viewed during the observational phase of the study focussed on classical music. This focus on Western classical music was a point of criticism for some students, who bemoaned the lack of more contemporary music. It is noted that the boys indicated a preference for some contemporary music *as well as*, not *instead of*, classical music. But some boys defended the school's stance, and were appreciative of a classically based programme:

I've got all that [contemporary music] at home. You learn about it at home, it's on the radio and everywhere. I'm not used to listening to like classical stuff – like I usually don't listen to it, so it's good that we are doing it.

This decision also relates to the teachers' perception of the role and duty of the school to provide a breadth of educational experiences. Effectively providing a rationale for its selection of musical experiences, it is stated that boys are offered 'the opportunity to experience music-making and music appreciation through the school that they would not normally indulge in by means of their home environment' (interview with participating teacher). Thus, the philosophy adopted relates to a perceived responsibility to extend the thinking and experience of students to encompass parameters outside their group or individual preferences and understandings. The selection of repertoire for performance is made by staff, 'and students on certain occasions', allowing some, albeit limited, student input. Further clarifying the school's focus, selection of repertoire need not 'conform to a populist platform'. Balton's musical vision for its students could be described as almost uncompromisingly teacher-directed.

Offering electives at the compulsory level

Aligning with a student-centred approach is the practice of offering electives within the music programme at the compulsory level. Several schools indicated via questionnaire that middle-school students are offered a series of electives from which they must choose one. Clearly the rationale for electives at this level is to ensure that all students are able to pursue their interests, and sustain enthusiasm and participation in music. It is significant that in all cases in which teachers described their middle-school elective programmes, classes were referred to as ‘girls’ groups’ and ‘boys’ groups’.

The reality of student ‘choice’ in such contexts may be questioned. In all cases, teachers reported that participation was divided by gender, with girls and boys demonstrating markedly different preferences, resulting in separate activities for each gender. It could be suggested then that an elective system at this level may produce a counterproductive and negative effect in that it has the potential to perpetuate gendered behaviour within schools. When the electives are offered over consecutive years, student participation may become particularised, with some choices perceived as appropriate for either girls or boys. This is referred to by Abbiss (2009) as ‘the paradox of choice’ (p. 343). The student who may wish to exercise a particular choice may effectively be denied that choice as a result of previous male/female participation becoming an ingrained feature of the school culture. In support of this notion, McGregor and Mills (2006) suggest that such strategies may effectively restrict both genders, narrowing the possibilities by perpetuating and affirming gendered roles. It could be argued that a more constructive approach, in the sense of alleviating gendered behaviours, may require students to participate in compulsory units spanning several types of activities, so that students experience the ‘others’ domain, which may offer a challenge to what appears to be firmly entrenched behaviours in many schools. As revealed in interviews at Balton, many students, particularly in relation to singing, asserted that if their involvement had been optional they would not have participated, but due to the compulsory nature of the programme, the boys experienced a growing enjoyment of singing. Significantly, one interviewee conjectured, ‘If you haven’t experienced it, how do you know whether or not you will like it?’

It would seem that this compulsory stance is crucial to the success of Balton’s singing programme. Lingard et al. (2002) contend that a successful strategy in countering ‘gendered patterns of subject choice’ lies in the implementation of programmes that force boys to choose across a range of subject areas (p. 123). The benefits of establishing compulsory music programmes appear to yield significant dividends: such strategies serve to normalise certain choices, and may alter gendered perceptions, thereby expanding the possibilities for boys. This comment lends support to the effectiveness of the position assumed by the school that teachers, overall, will determine the musical knowledge and experience of its pupils. It would appear that such pedagogical decisions have yielded positive outcomes at Balton. The opportunity to experience an activity that would otherwise have been rejected and considered inappropriate has resulted in very favourable attitudes, certainly contributing to a negation of stereotypical preconceptions. Thus, it is observed that an important contextual feature of the school is its observable leaning towards teacher-centred education.

Productive pedagogies/teacher characteristics

Linked with the issue of advocacy is the manner in which teachers function in the classroom. Swanwick (2008) reflects on the complex processes of teaching and learning, suggesting that ‘care for music as a vital, living form of human discourse’ is integral to the teacher’s capacity to engage students. In other words, central to effective teaching is the demonstration of a passion and conviction for music, and a capacity to communicate to students a belief in the value of music. Several observed teachers, particularly Mr T at Balton, appeared to embody this principle, collaborating within the whole school context to ‘facilitate students’ immersion in this environment of the symbolic world and promote the growth of their musical autonomy’ (Swanwick 2008, 12).

Providing a strong contrast with Balton, teacher passion for music was least evident at Greenhills, where a sense of ‘going through the ropes, again’ was communicated to the onlooker, and was evident in student responses both in class and during interviews. This sense of indifference was disturbing, particularly given the students’, both girls’ and boys’, habitual responses to their teachers’ lessons. Over the several observed lessons, students were seen engaging in the same distracting behaviours, clearly designed to alleviate boredom. This teacher’s consistent approach involved the presentation of information: few questions were asked of students, and these constituted predominantly closed questions. A group of six boys appeared to be the focus of this teacher’s lessons, with most other boys, and all girls, receiving almost no attention. A sense of inclusiveness and cohesiveness was absent from this teacher’s lessons.

It is noted that perceived shortcomings – such as Balton’s Mr T’s almost detached approach, in which no boys were addressed by name, but rather, collective communications such as ‘gentlemen’ were constantly utilised – appeared to be somewhat compensated for by the teacher’s obvious interest and passion for his work. Also, contributing to a sense of significance was the inclusion of many higher-order questions which stimulated much discussion. There was a definite sense of seriousness and purpose accompanying Mr T’s lessons, which were certainly demanding of students to engage intellectually and affectively. During interviews, the boys articulated a respect (but not necessarily a liking) for Mr T, and an appreciation that he ‘really knows his stuff’, and is able to demonstrate an enviable level of musicianship. These attributes, combined with the setting of very firm disciplinary boundaries, which boys at no time during observations attempted to cross, appeared to result in a very productive classroom climate, in terms of boys’ engagement, an observation confirmed by students when interviewed. Mr T’s unwavering and consistently applied expectations were reinforced by his very practised, authoritative body language that incorporated a consistent class-wide gaze. In that sense, no boy evaded the attention of his teacher, who was quick to identify and refocus inattentive students with a question, keeping all ‘on their toes’, and generating an inclusive atmosphere in his classes. The need to institute clear boundaries and behavioural guidelines is highlighted, and subsequent rewards realised (Hawkes 2001; Lillico 2002).

Schenk (1989) highlights the importance of music educators aiming for a balanced pedagogy, one that considers student enjoyment, but also teaches ‘proper fundamentals’, or music skills, requiring sustained effort, which enable the student to

experience the satisfaction of achievement based on progressive proficiency (p. 32). The author contends that one approach without the other is demotivating for students and teacher alike. Similarly, Gee (2004) highlights the need for an appropriate level of challenge in lessons – the optimal level will stretch students' thinking, but will not discourage them with unrealistic expectations. It seems that Balton generally achieves this balance extremely well, and all involved reap the rewards. Providing significant contrast, the choral approach at Delacroix, with its emphasis on enjoyment, at the expense of skills development, or sufficient challenge, is not seen to be an appealing option by the boys interviewed, and membership of the choir has dropped significantly from the beginning of the year.

Balton teachers appeared to successfully create an inclusive classroom environment in which risk-taking was encouraged, and in which music was presented as relevant and meaningful, enjoyable, but suitably challenging, and rewarding, delivered via a wide variety of activities. It was this multiplicity of musical experiences that was especially appreciated by the boys. Impressive was Delacroix's Ms W's capacity for eliciting some of the most thoughtful and reflective discussion witnessed over the weeks spent observing at the four sites. Her endeavours to pose higher-order questions encouraging a range of responses, and her insistence that boys justify and reflect on their opinions, respectfully acknowledging and challenging those of others, undoubtedly facilitated metacognitive processes, together with the cultivation of emotional intelligence (McInerney and McInerney 1998; Finney 2006). Thus, several classroom features were identified at both Balton and Delacroix which contributed to 'a positive classroom climate' (Marsh 2010, 180).

The influence of class

Class emerges as a significant factor in the data, and is vital to understand a school's culture and ethos. It is argued that demographic features play a significant role in the construction and perpetuation of values pertaining to educational achievement and participation. The notion of 'cultural capital', developed by Bourdieu (1974), is used to describe the benefits enjoyed by middle-class children in terms of their inculcation in a home environment that promotes and values educationally enhancing experiences. It has already been noted that Balton students derive predominately from middle-class families, according to demographic information provided by the school. Embedded within the notion of 'cultural capital' is the high value placed on academic achievement. This resonates with the observed advocacy for music at Balton, instrumental in the provision of a broad liberal education, with an emphasis on academic achievement. The selective nature of the school demands that students are 'generally self-motivated' (teacher's description) and are 'high achievers' (website description). In this regard, Balton has a somewhat unique learning environment. A significant aspect of the resultant culture aligns with the opportunity for 'like to gravitate to like', certainly reflecting homogeneity, at least in intellectual terms. Some boys give expression to this sentiment, an example of which is located on the school's website:

This school gives me the opportunity to learn in an environment with a higher intellectual level and to compete with students who are on the same intellectual plane as me. (Tom, Year 12)

Gaining a place at a highly sought-after school must surely have implications for all aspects of student behaviour. This highly selective school ostensibly holds significant power over the behaviour and performance of its students, an aspect not realised by other mainstream schools. Perhaps this factor contributes to a more positive level of compliance with school rules and expectations than many other schools are able to command, its selectivity constituting a significant advantage in terms of the teachability of its students.

The relationship between class and music preference and participation has been alluded to by several authors (Small 1998; Russell 1999; Dibbens 2004). The present study appears to support this link. Many participating schools described as having low SES referred to programmes based predominantly on rock and pop music, with some listing boys' preferences for 'heavy metal', 'thrash', and 'punk' musical styles, genres sociologically linked with working-class ideals (Russell 1999). Similarly, the existence of string programmes and orchestras appears to be the domain of the higher-SES schools, particularly the elite independent schools. Balton's programme aligns closely with the values implicit in the latter group of schools, with a rejection of rock music altogether, and a Year 9 programme that is based entirely on Western classical music. So if musical valuing is related to class, school demographics constituting middle-class clientele could be considered as having considerable advantage over schools of low SES in their capacity to teach a range of musical offerings, and in the concomitant identification of students with a breadth of music genres.

It is acknowledged that impacting directly, and indirectly, on the capacity of each school to adopt a musical stance comparable with Balton are issues pertaining to class, and to the allocation of funding to various school programmes within the hierarchy of each school's needs. A broad association between class and music is suggested, and is supported by other studies (Bennetts 1999; Ashley 2002).

The influence of ethnicity

As indicated previously, 60% of students at Balton are of Asian background. Making this demographic significant is the potential implications it has on the dynamics of the school, particularly in regard to academic achievement. The solid work ethic frequently observed and commented upon in relation to students with migrant backgrounds undeniably has a considerable impact on this school's recognised culture of achievement and general valuing of education. Mayer (1991) suggests that the valuing of education exists as a key component of Asian culture. Leung (2006) supports the link between migrant experience and academic achievement, documenting interviews with both parents and students, some of whom attend Balton Boys' High School. Potentially influencing the positioning and functioning of music at Balton and relating to the substantial Asian population is the 'cultural perception that the classical arts bring more prestige and fame to an individual' (Zhang 2004, 1).

It is well documented that many Asian communities regard the attainment of Western musical skills and knowledge to be a measure of social status. Tamagawa (2001) notes the association of Western music with middle-class aspirations: the adoption of Western music, together with 'western things promised a better life and guaranteed them membership in the middle class' (p. 110). In the context of Balton,

according to a participating teacher, this pursuit of status symbols via musical activity manifests itself in the instrumental selection by many Asian students of piano and strings. Accordingly, students of Asian background comprise 80% of Balton's string players. This link was somewhat replicated at several other schools participating in the current study, at which similar demographics were identified, in terms of ethnicity levels and instrument selection. It may thus be argued that schools such as Balton, with large Asian populations, may indeed enjoy an enhanced level of male involvement and positive attitudes to stereotypically eschewed musical choices, by virtue of the cultural backgrounds from which many of its students derive. As this research has demonstrated statistically, a potential edge, in regard to the alleviation of frequently observed gender stereotypes, is a by-product of this school's student makeup, with large numbers of boys playing piano and strings. It would therefore appear that many Balton students are making musical choices that challenge broadly accepted ideals of masculine and feminine musical behaviours in the Australian context, but these valuing derive from cultural mores which differ considerably from Western perceptions of masculinity and femininity (McCrary 1993; Ho 2001, 2003).

Single-sex environment

One of the most significant findings of this study was the extreme difference in attitudes to musical participation between the boys at the single-sex schools and the boys at the co-educational schools. In discussions relating to gendered stereotypes, as formerly described, the contrasting responses were stark. The boys at both Greenhills and Wenbourne displayed some unexpectedly extreme responses, laughing and grimacing at the mention of boys playing the flute and violin, demonstrating a strong disdain for these instruments which were 'not macho enough'. By contrast, however, the same questions, when asked of both Balton and Delacroix boys, elicited responses devoid of gendered perceptions. Indeed, one Delacroix student happily exclaimed: 'I did flute last year. I was really good at it', and another commented: 'I'd rather stay and listen to music than play sport'.

The boys articulated the absence or presence of girls as an important factor that influences their participation. When asked whether or not pressure to conform to the stereotypes described during interviews was apparent at Balton, one student stated unequivocally: 'It doesn't apply here. Not at all. Seeing it's all guys it can't'. This statement was made in an almost bemused manner, the student appearing to ponder why he would be asked about something so clearly evident to him. Additionally, teacher questionnaire results captured in the present study appear to indicate a broader participation of boys at single-sex schools. After interviewing groups of boys at three independent boys' schools, Collins (2004) also concluded that: 'Many of the established stereotypes of boys who were involved in musical activities did not exist, or were far less influential than I had anticipated' (p. 32). As her study focussed on boys' schools, Collins is not able to compare the attitudes of boys in single-sex schools with those of boys in co-educational settings, which the present study is well placed to do. The data suggest that single-sex schools may have a significant advantage over their co-educational counterparts in terms of encouraging boys to sing, and to play 'feminine' instruments. Indeed, some students were forthright in articulating their enjoyment of such pursuits.

In her reflection on the subject choices of boys and girls in single-sex and co-educational schools, Leonard (2006) concludes:

Co-education in fact increases differentiation between the sexes. To consolidate their gender identity, the sexes demarcate themselves from each other: in each other's presence, they defend their designated but also hard-won gender identities. (p. 194)

The Balton boys are clearly in a unique position, given their experience in two secondary schools. With enrolments beginning at Year 9, all boys have spent Years 7 and 8 in other institutions. They are consequently able to make comparisons between their former and current schooling experiences, in contrast with the vast majority of students who begin and finish their secondary education in the same school. It would appear from the boys' comments that their all-boys environment does have an impact on their perception of appropriate musical participation. Some boys indicated clear delineations between male and female roles by drawing comparisons between observations made at their former schools with those experienced at Balton. Whilst the contribution of several cultural factors is acknowledged, it seems apparent that the absence of girls from their educational setting is perceived as 'permission' for involvement in a range of activities.

Conclusions

Initially posing the question as to whether or not some school contexts are more conducive than others in encouraging a breadth of participation by middle-school boys, these data suggest an affirmative response. This research concludes that there are indeed school contexts which actively work against established gendered stereotypes, successfully affording boys the prospect of self-realisation based on an authentic breadth of possibility. It has been suggested that boys' musical participation differs markedly between contexts, and is dependent on a complex interplay of multifarious factors. Each school's philosophy of education and music education is seen to impact on the classroom experiences of the middle-school boy. Each school's vision and the place of music within that vision underscore the value placed on music and the ensuing status attributed to music in the everyday life of the school. Significant status is instrumental in feeding the capacity of teachers to promote their subject as having intrinsic and extrinsic values for all students, and is reflected in the commitment to music evidenced in resource and time allocations. Such decisions carry implicit and explicit messages to students and in turn affect the level of inclusion and ownership experienced by students, and the persistence with which boys' participation is sought.

If musical involvement is deemed to be a valuable human endeavour, and part of a holistic and balanced education, then the importance of striving for a school culture that permits broad male involvement must be pursued. The implications for broadening boys' conceptions of gender-congruent behaviours have enormous significance beyond the present area of musical involvement, potentially lessening the possibility that gender should control journeys and destinations, and promoting a full and purposeful engagement in society.

Notes

1. Within the context of this study, 'middle-school' spans years 8–9 (13 to 15 years of age). Most interviewees were 14 years of age. As Balton is a selective school, with entry based on academic merit, several boys had been accelerated through their schooling, and thus were the same chronological age as their Year 8 counterparts in the other case study schools. Importantly, music is compulsory at the middle-school level, creating very different class dynamics compared with music as an elective in subsequent years.
2. In most Australian schools students are placed in 'houses'. These vertical groupings form the organisational units for activities such as sports days, competitions and other school events. Opportunities for student leadership, peer mentoring and pastoral care are promoted within these groupings.

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