
'It's cool because we like to sing:' Junior High School Boys' Experience of Choral Music as an Elective

Mary A. Kennedy

Abstract

This study examines the participation of junior high school boys in choral music. Informants were eleven males, three females, and the teacher of a twenty-seven member grade 8/9 class at a suburban school. Data collection techniques included interview, observation, participant observation, and the examination of material culture. Data analysis involved the preparation of field notes and interview transcripts, document analysis, and study of the field note/interview text. Triangulation was achieved through the cross-referencing of informant statements and researcher observations. Four major themes emerged: motivation to join and remain in the choir; acquisition of musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes; repertoire preferences; and perception of the choral experience. Factors motivating boys' membership in choir were love of singing, teacher influence, and peer influence. Boy choristers were musically skilled, knowledgeable and articulate. They had clear though varied repertoire preferences. Perceived benefits from choir membership are discussed according to musical, non-musical, social, and teacher aspects.

Philip sits in the front row of the choir, hugging his 'Linus-blanket' jacket around his knees. He watches the dance rehearsal intently and then comes alive when directed, along with his classmates, to sing and perform the actions for the rock music medley. On another occasion, Robert, Bruce, and Ron, the inseparable trio, stand close together in the second row as they sing their part, totally absorbed in the music. Their faces betray a concentration not often seen in junior high school music classrooms. A third example finds eighth grader Matt sporting an oversized blazer, his 'costume' for the up-coming concert, as he 'grooves' to the music. Three ninth grade boys look on with smiling faces. It's an instance of fraternal friendship between students of different ages.

The reader will identify the foregoing examples as emanating from a music classroom—a junior high school choral classroom to be exact. Although the class is fairly equally-divided between girls and boys, it is the boys who provide the focus for this study. Such an investigation is timely, as recruiting and retaining males in choral ensembles is becoming an increasing challenge for teachers (Adler, 1999; Gates, 1989; Koza, 1993; Mizener, 1993; Phillips, 1995). I am particularly interested in junior high males' participation in choir. Boys remaining in the choral program during the often traumatic time of the voice change (Adler, 1999; Killian, 1997) must certainly have had meaningful 'musicking' (Small, 1998) experiences.

Providing a framework for the investigation are the works of Hylton (1981), Gates (1991), Finnegan (1989), Rutkowski (1981), and Cooksey and Welch (1998). Hylton's (1981) study of participants of senior high choral ensembles identified six dimensions of meaning: achievement, spiritualistic, musical-artistic, communicative, psychological, and integrative. After conducting a pre-pilot and a pilot study to identify the six dimensions listed above, Hylton administered the main study to 673 high school choral students in 14 ensembles. Students were asked to rate randomly-ordered statements representing the six dimensions on a Likert-type scale. Statistical analyses confirmed the validity of all six dimensions. It will be informative to discover whether or not these dimensions of meaning resonate with junior high school boys today.

Gates' (1991) analysis of music participation suggests six types of music participants: professionals, apprentices, amateurs, hobbyists, recreationists, and dabblers. Gates places them

in types "by the content of the cost-benefit relationships" (p. 14). Professionals and apprentices tend to remain active participants as long as it is "economically feasible" (p. 14). Amateurs and hobbyists are motivated more by psychological than by economic benefits and recreationists and dabblers are propelled by curiosity and the entertainment factor. Although Gates formulated his theory based on data from participants within a wide age span, his categories might well find some correlation with junior high male singers.

Finnegan's (1989) study of amateur music-making in Milton Keynes examined not only the varied musical organizations active in the British town in the early 1980's but also the reasons people participated in such musical groups. Personal satisfaction, social contact, and the sheer joy of musical enactment were among the responses offered by her informants. As a percentage of Finnegan's informants were teenagers, it is altogether likely that the American teens in the present study will derive similar meanings from their choral ensemble membership.

Rutkowski (1981) claims that the "declining interest of junior high boys in chorus and in singing is largely attributed to the fact that they feel insecure about their voices and do not experience success because they are asked to sing parts inappropriate to their vocal ranges" (p. 15). Cooksey and Welch (1998) agree. They write: "Adolescent male voices cannot experience success in singing activities if their changing vocal limitations are not taken into account" (p. 109). Adcock (1987) and Collins (1987) express similar views. They recommend that teachers choose literature which employs the functional ranges of changing singers. It will be interesting to discover whether or not this is the case in the choral classes at Cedar Hill Junior High.

Purpose

It is the purpose of this study to examine the participation of junior high school boys in choral music. Their acquisition of musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes, their perception of the 'choral experience,' their preferred repertoire, and their motivation to join the choir and to remain are the issues explored. Guiding questions for the study help focus the issues and facilitate the investigation. According to Creswell (1998), such questions

are open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional; restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms; start with words such as "what" or "how" rather than "why"; and are few in number (five to seven). (p. 99)

Therefore, the investigation began with the following questions:

- 1) What are the motivating factors that encourage boys to join junior high choral ensembles?
- 2) What musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes do they acquire while belonging to these groups?
- 3) What are their perceptions of the 'choral experience' – what do they like and what benefits do they reap?
- 4) What factors cause them to remain in choir year after year?
- 5) Is range-appropriate repertoire a factor in their enjoyment and participation in choir?

Method

The grade 8/9 vocal ensemble of Cedar Hill Junior High forms the backdrop for the study. Cedar Hill is a school of approximately 850 grade 7-9 students situated in a suburban area of a large metropolitan American city. The choral teacher works full-time at the school with three choral groups and two grade 7 'exploratory' classes, as well as preparing her singers for festivals and concerts.

This teacher has been at the school for three years, during which time the choral program has grown significantly. The 'exploratory' classes provide each seventh grader with a term of general music, while the choral classes stress the development of comprehensive musicianship through singing. A wide variety of repertoire is included in the choral program. During the time of this research, the students were preparing for a local festival and the annual 'pops' concert. For the festival, they were learning a renaissance madrigal, a contemporary art-song, and a folk-pop arrangement. For the 'pops' concert, they were working on a rock music medley which incorporated costumes and dancing. The 27-member vocal ensemble is the most advanced choral group in the school, and it has, within its male membership of 12, a mix of unchanged, changing, and changed voices. It is for these two reasons that this group was selected for the study.

Structured and semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) were conducted singly and in groups of three with 11 of the 12 male choristers. Eight were eighth graders and three were in grade nine. Questions focused on reasons for joining the choir, skills, knowledge, and attitudes acquired through membership, favorite activities and repertoire, perceived difficulties or challenges, and benefits accrued from belonging to the ensemble. In addition to interviewing the boys, one group interview with three of the girls was utilised to triangulate (Denzin, 1978) with the boys' responses. Three complete classes were also observed, and informal conversations with the teacher and students occurred at either end of each official class time. These conversations helped to fill in informational and contextual gaps in the data and to enrich observational field notes.

Following the model of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), jottings were kept in a small note-book during or immediately after each of the seven field visits. These jottings were then developed into descriptive field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Complete interview transcripts were prepared and added to the field notes. Further data consisted of a written questionnaire completed by the teacher, copies of current repertoire selections, and tapes of the choir's festival performances. The examination of this material culture (Hodder, 1994) aided in the validation of informants' responses and researcher observations.

Analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the field note/interview text, making marginal notes, sorting, and coding. In accordance with procedures suggested by Burgess (1984), a box system was developed which facilitated the organization of data into categories (see Figure 1). Huberman and Miles (1994) term this the "coding scheme or thesaurus" (p. 431). From these categories, four major themes emerged which are explored later in this paper.

Figure 1
Box system for coding

Category Codes		Category Codes	
C	cooperation	M	mentor
D	discipline	NI	not involved
G	group	NLIK	don't like
I	involved	P	psychological
J	join	R	range
L	learn	REFL	reflexive comment
LIK	like	S	social
		ST	stay

Interpretation

The five guiding questions evolved into four major themes: motivation to join the choir and to remain; acquisition of musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes; repertoire considerations;

and perception of the choral experience—both preferences and benefits. Each theme will be sub-divided into categories and explored drawing examples from the data. Following exploration of each theme, interpretive comments are provided.

Motivation to join the choir and to remain in it

Factors motivating boys' membership in choir were three-fold: love of singing, influence of the teacher, and the company of friends. Some expressed a life-long interest in singing. One boy offered: "I've been in some form of choir since like 2nd grade. . . I've been in church choirs and like the YMCA kinda choir one year . . . (counts) [altogether] eight years," while another indicated that "I've always liked singing along to the radio and stuff—just never thought about getting in choir". This expressed love of singing was corroborated by evidence from the teacher's questionnaire. When asked what motivated boys to join the choir, she wrote, "Most just enjoy singing and come in on their own". Others traced the beginning of their choral association to elementary school. As one boy commented, "I've been in choirs since I was in 5th grade at Whitworth Elementary. 6th grade I was singing at St. Paul's and [after that] I came to Cedar Hill and went in beginning choir here".

A second motivational factor was the influence of the teacher. Both she and her students alluded to recruiting strategies: Darryl talked about being in her seventh grade exploratory class and "she kept pushing me and Terry . . . and she's like . . . 'Gotta be in choir next year, gotta be in choir next year' . . . so I went first and Terry followed". Bob refers to the teacher's practice of taking her choirs on elementary feeder school tours. "I was over at Clearlake seeing all those people performing and stuff and it looked pretty cool." The teacher herself mentioned that she receives many recruits from these elementary concerts and also that she listens while walking through the halls. "I have gotten a few basses that way," she noted. Her teaching style was another means of recruiting singers. Bob was a student at Clearlake. He liked this teacher, although he was not a member of the choir. Having been impressed with the junior high school 'tour' concert, he was a willing choir candidate when he arrived at Cedar Hill School. The importance of the teacher as a motivating factor with adolescents has been noted elsewhere (Gerber, 1989; Hughes, 1987).

The third motivational factor was the influence of friends. Aki, a tall, soft-spoken eighth grader, explained it this way:

Before school started, I was like, filling out the schedules, and like, we had elective, and everybody wanted to know like, what elective everybody wanted, and like everybody wanted to be with their friends, so, like half the kids, they were signed up for choir, so I was like . . . "all right, sign up for choir".

Bob agreed.

Um, I had a friend that switched into choir and I guess everybody's switching over there, so I said "might as well join it" and then I ended up liking it so I stayed another year and got into vocal ensemble and now here I am.

Friends proved to be also a significant force in allowing junior high males to overcome powerful hurdles such as the belief that "singing is for females only" (Adcock, 1987, p. 9). Aki cited friends as being responsible for his joining choir. He explained why he avoided it so long.

That's why I never done it before like, man, it's like 'girl stuff' like, only after I did it, it was like, you could see it wasn't, like the only way you would know is if you actually get in there and join, but it was different from what everybody said.

Once boys have joined the choir, what tempts them to stay? Ron and Milan cited the reason they joined—the love of singing. "I've liked it from the beginning," says Ron matter-of-factly. Milan echoes his response. "I like to sing so—you just go to choir to sing." Robert talked about continuing choir in high school. Bruce agreed and listed possible future benefits: "Well, if we continue it, later on in high school it'll be possible for some of us to get scholarships and stuff. We could expand into bigger choirs—state and national ones. [Also] they're giving us credits to graduate." Parental advice was important to Aki.

At first, like, beginning of the year, I was like . . . "this is all right". But then, it was like, a couple of months, I was like "I don't want to do this any more" . . . but, my mom, she told me to stick with it for the rest of the year, and then like, after that, I just wanted to be in it. I can't really explain . . . but it was just something I wanted to be in.

The evidence from these informants supports three of Hylton's (1981) six dimensions of musical meaning. Expressed motivational factors relate to his musical-artistic, integrative, and achievement categories. The love of singing correlates with Hylton's musical-artistic statements such as "to enjoy being part of many voices blending together" and "to learn to sing songs well" (Hylton, 1981, p. 298). The comments referring to friends relate well with integrative statements like "to make and enjoy good friends" and "to be with a great group of people" (Ibid., p. 299). The future benefits mentioned by Bruce resonate with Hylton's achievement descriptors. Particularly significant are the power of friends to assist males in overcoming stereotypical hurdles to join junior high choirs, the continuing influence of parents in the lives of adolescents, and the prominent role of the choral teacher in the recruiting of male choristers.

Acquisition of musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes

When polled for the most important learning goals she had for her students, the choral teacher responded, "I want my students to grow as musicians, both in written musical terms and note reading, and in their sensitivity for music. I want them to express themselves emotionally". On another occasion, she expressed that her focus for her students was one of "acting professionally". These goals were reiterated time and again by the informants, and it could be suggested that one of the prime reasons for the success of the Cedar Hill choral program is the effective communication of program goals to students.

With regard to musical skills, sight reading and vocal production emerged as being prominent. Students were delighted with their ability to make sense of the notes as evidenced by Matt's comment below.

She actually gives us music to take home and look at and I just started looking at the music. When I got home . . . I'd just sit there and . . . read it through and remember how the song would go and then I'd know that that note right there means that I sing you know and you get louder . . . and I just started readin' and readin' music.

I observed Matt taking the music home after class to study. In response to my queries about how the students learned to sight-read, Darryl explained:

She had these books in the beginning of the year and she said they had helped these other people [so that] they could sight-read anything and so she thought it would be a help for us and she started giving us those books and we read out of them.

Vocal production was a second major area of learning for the students. They mentioned breathing "you breathe from your stomach instead of from your shoulders", posture "like hands to sides, stand straight, feet about shoulder width apart and one slightly in front of the other", tone quality "raise the soft palette", vowel shape "[for] tall vowels, keep your mouth vertically and not horizontally open", intonation "I was like a droner, but now I can hit [the notes] right", and register shift "I can control my range and sing from low to high". I was impressed with their ability to not only 'spit-back' teacher-taught concepts, but also to explain them. They *knew* what the concepts meant. Reflecting on my own experience teaching adolescents (Titon, 1997), I am aware of their selective memories. The fact that these choristers had grasped the essential points of voice production is a credit to both their teacher and themselves.

The teacher referred to the development of her students as musicians "in written terms". I took this to mean musical knowledge. As has already been mentioned, the vocal ensemble male choristers were able to list the skills they had learned and to explain their meaning. They were also well versed in the language of music. As John put it, "Now I know what most of anything in music will mean". Bruce demonstrated his knowledge of musical terminology as he described the piece, *Weep, O Mine Eyes*. "Um, the crescendos and decrescendos make it more interesting to sing and stuff." This musical growth was fostered by using musical terminology in class. It was

evident after listening to the tape of the choir's festival performance that students had grasped the musical concepts of crescendo and decrescendo. Although there were some intonation problems in their rendition of *Weep, O Mine Eyes*, the rise and fall of the musical lines were clear, and dynamics were used to advantage.

Students also learned choral techniques and etiquette. Aki expressed it as follows: "[We learn] how to watch her and like be good. When she's directing, like keep your eyes on her so you like can follow her". Robert mentioned different standing formations.

Researcher: And what about the time when [the adjudicator] moved you beside somebody not in your own part? Was that hard?

Robert: Well, we'd done it before in practice.

Revealing and impressive was Donny's self-taught strategy for holding his own part.

Like for me, I'm right by the sopranos and they're all singing up high and I'm trying to sing with the other guys . . . I just kinda turn around and listen with my other ear and match what they're [the boys] singing instead of trying to go all high like the sopranos (laughs).

The ease with which these students related their musical learnings and the obvious pride they took in them resonates with Gates' (1991) hobbyist category of music participant. Students "were serious about developing their music related skills and knowledge" (p. 14).

With respect to musical attitudes, teacher and student responses highlighted the importance of professionalism, presentation, and musical sensitivity. "I want them to act professionally" remarked the teacher in her comments. This attitude has been successfully internalized by the students. During a festival adjudication clinic, several university choral conducting students noted how impressed they were with the department and conduct of the Cedar Hill choir members, "particularly as they are junior high!". Students, too, expressed their value of professional attitudes.

Choral presentation was another frequent topic among informants. "[She told us] how if your face isn't excited the audience will know that you really didn't do good." "Eyebrows up" was mentioned by the festival adjudicator and it struck a chord with the choristers. Several of the boys put their hands on their eyebrows pushing them up when I mentioned expressive faces in a sectional rehearsal a week later. The three female informants were more vocal about musical sensitivity than the males. Boys were more concerned with self-satisfaction. They remarked: "Performing for an audience makes you feel good", and "After a concert, if the people that was there tell you that they like it, you know, it's cool". Girls were better able to articulate musical issues. As Karin explained:

I've learned the dramatics of a song—your facial expressions—I mean that totally changes the way people think of your choir. In *Weep*, we had to have this serious face. You have to have this look on your face that means you KNOW what the song's about. *Hey* we have to look like we're having fun, and *River* we have to look like we're totally into it.

The vocal ensemble students demonstrated both acquisition of musical learning and awareness of what learnings they had acquired. Their attention to professionalism and presentational behaviors in performance relates to Gates' (1991) apprentice and amateur music participant categories. They strove to achieve a high standard in their 'musicking' not unlike professionals in the field. It was clear from triangulation of informant responses and observation field notes, that these same qualities were stressed by the teacher in rehearsal. What is surprising and gratifying is the fact that the students are responding so positively to the high standards set for them. This fact rings true to my own years of high school teaching. Students rise to meet a teacher's expectations. Expect the best and one will often receive it.

Repertoire Considerations

One of the guiding questions of the study was whether or not range-appropriate repertoire played a part in adolescent males' enjoyment and participation in choral ensembles. Rutkowski (1981), Adcock (1987), Collins (1987), and Cooksey and Welch (1998) clearly demonstrate that, in the context of requiring boys to sing and in attempting to ensure maximum enjoyment and vocally healthy participation, range-appropriate repertoire is essential.

It is one of the most significant findings of this study that range-appropriate repertoire does not appear to be a contributing factor for enjoyment among the male choristers of the Cedar Hill vocal ensemble, although there was general agreement among informants that high notes were difficult. Several confided: "Can't hit them, those high notes—I try, but, I don't know", "I struggle, trying to keep it high". What was illuminating is that the boys have developed both vocal and group strategies for handling notes out of their ranges. Bob discovered that taking a "deep breath usually helps me to get high". The higher voices, unchanged and changing, have the opposite problem with notes that are too low. In answer to my question "What do you do when it goes out of your range?", John replied, "Just maybe go up another octave from the note that supposed to go down all the way". Darryl, a changing voice singer, explained a group strategy that the boys had devised. "*Hey for the Dancing* goes pretty high. A lot of our guys [basses], when we start hitting the high notes, they look at me". The higher voices filled in the notes that the basses found difficult. This trading-off procedure was mentioned by the basses also. Not once did the informants mention experiencing frustration with the range of the repertoire they were asked to sing. Nor did this appear to be an issue during rehearsals. Rather, the boys accepted their range limitations as part of their stage of vocal development, and coped as best they could, devising their own practical solutions. Possibly, the value the boys placed on the social aspects of choir membership assisted them in compensating for their range deficiencies. Perhaps it was the attraction of the music.

What did emerge as an important repertoire consideration was the matter of style. Informants wanted material that was appealing to their various tastes. Philip liked fast and slow songs "that you can DO stuff with and not just sing". Philip demonstrated his preference in a choral class where students were preparing a rock music medley that combined choreography with singing. His otherwise limp body, often slumped in his chair, came alive when he started to do the dancing. Darryl preferred challenging repertoire. "*Weep, O Mine Eyes* has been our toughest [song], but we worked hard on it and we got it up to perfection." Bruce related how familiarity with a piece can breed appreciation.

In the beginning, nobody really liked *Weep* because it was kinda difficult for people . . . but now that everybody knows it, um, they have their parts down, they like it a whole lot better, and if everybody sings the right notes and we can all sing together, we can make it a fun song.

These stated preferences provide good news for choral educators. They encourage teachers to continue to select quality literature for their choral classes, secure in the knowledge that students will respond to challenging repertoire if given sufficient time for learning.

Perceptions of the 'Choral Experience:' Preferences and Benefits

When asked what they liked about the choir, informants gave varied responses. These replies have been organized into four categories referred to as teacher aspects, musical aspects, non-musical aspects, and social aspects. Both musical and non-musical aspects relate to the academic side of school life whereas social aspects relate to the opposite or non-academic side.

Teacher aspects

Informants expressed a liking for their teacher. Philip's comment was short and to the point: "She's nice". Darryl agreed: "We have a great teacher". Matt commented on organizational ability: "She makes it fun like with all the field trips that we get to do". But students also referred

to the teaching style of their teacher. Explaining how he was so sure of the correct posture for singing, Darryl said, "She POUNDS it into our heads!". Classroom observation of the choral teacher corroborated the evidence given by informants. She teaches with a firm hand, expecting a high code of student behavior at all times. However, she balances firmness with a light, humorous touch that has won over the hearts of her students. Once again, these comments support Gerber's (1989) contention that the teacher can be the prime motivating force for adolescents. He believes that students in this age group often make a connection with the teacher first and then the discipline stating: "In effect, 'the medium is the message' in today's classroom: students often are unable to distinguish between the teacher and the content" (p. 38).

Musical aspects

Informants mentioned singing, good music choices, and performing as reasons for their enjoyment of choir. Matt's comments summed it up.

I like singing and you just sort of sing and the music is good—well most of the time the music is awesome. I hear something and I know that I have to sing and it's like just telling me to sing. It starts playing in my head and it comes out my mouth!

Matt's comments were typical of the informants with whom I talked. Singing was for them a highly pleasurable activity, and one which they eagerly awaited each day.

Non-musical aspects

Non-musical aspects of enjoyment concerned the fact that music was a non-academic course. There's "not much written work", observed Robert. Philip was concerned with grades. He liked the fact that he gets A's.

Social aspects

By far the majority of comments concerned social aspects of the choir class. Informants placed high value on friendships, the group experience, and field trips. Friendships could be same sex or opposite sex. Darryl spoke of opportunities to "meet new people from other choirs and stuff . . . girls . . .!". Bob referred to "all the friendly people that happen to be in choir . . . Last year I came in and I didn't know nobody, but as soon as I continued on with it, I met a lot of people and it was pretty cool". Cross-grade mentoring friendships were a significant part of the social dynamics of the vocal ensemble. Both boys and girls mentioned the importance of having students from different grades in the choir. Developing associations with people one wouldn't normally meet was one stated benefit. Support was another. Fraternal mentoring friendships were easily visible in the classroom. The relaxed repartee I observed between Robert and Matt over the oversized blazer 'costume' was evidence of one such friendship.

The value of the group experience for informants was made clear through repeated comments. "We work as a team", "everyone gets along", "we'll always stay together" were statements that reflected the strong attachment that choristers felt for their class as a whole. John stated that "I can't [think of one person who's been an enemy or who has been conflicting very long and not made up". Informants' comments on teamwork were validated in classroom observations. Students did sub-divide into smaller units to be sure, but tension between group members was not observed. Field trips was a third reason for students' enjoyment of the Cedar Hill vocal ensemble. Both musical and non-musical outings were organised for the students. Philip talked of ice-skating and water-slides. Darryl mentioned the musical trips—to a local university, to the district festival, to another metropolitan center, to a mountain tourist resort, and to near-by elementary schools. Informants stressed their enjoyment of festival adjudication sessions where pointers for improvement were given. Another highlight of contest trips was performing for large, varied audiences. One of the female informants, a brown-haired, bubbly

girl named Sheila, gave an interesting perspective. "Most people would say, 'yeah, I like missing school because of all the trips.' Personally, I don't care for missing school, but if I have to do it because it's for something that I like to do, then I will."

The emphasis on social aspects as a source of student enjoyment of the vocal ensemble is not surprising. Both Finnegan (1989) and Hylton (1981) refer to social contact as being a contributing factor to music participants' gratification. Finnegan talks of the

element of sociability [that] runs through musical practice. People are moved not just by the love of music but also by the desire to be with their acquaintances, friends, teachers, peers, colleagues, relatives, and enjoy the whole side of engaging in musical pursuits along with other people and with their approbation. (p. 328)

Hylton's 'integrative' dimension contains statements reflecting a desire to participate in and interact with the group (p. 290). An alternative explanation to this social dimension of 'musicking' is found in Zillman and Gan's (1997) review of 'Musical taste in adolescence'. In this chapter, the authors present evidence to support adolescent groups being formed on the basis of a taste culture which is often the preferred music of the leader, and that once this peer group is formed, members can then define "themselves as members of a cultural elite (in their own perception) and attain the emotional gratifications of belonging" (p. 172). While members of the Cedar Hill vocal ensemble clearly expressed a sense of belonging, it is unclear as to whether they felt themselves to comprise a 'cultural elite'.

Considering the musical aspects, there is a similarity between the benefits accrued through membership in the vocal ensemble and the significance of musical encounters for participants in Finnegan's (1989) 'classical world'.

The rewards for those committed to the classical music world are hard to capture in precise words, but they certainly included a sense of beauty and fundamental value, of intense and profoundly felt artistic experience which could reach to the depths of one's nature. For participants in this world there was perhaps nothing to equal the experience of engaging in a beautiful and coordinated performance of some favored classical work, whether in practice or . . . in public concert . . . (p. 41)

The adolescents in the Cedar Hill vocal ensemble were not as poetic in their descriptions of the musical aspects of their choral experience as were Finnegan's informants, but they were none the less captivated and involved in their musical encounters.

To investigate the rewards or benefits that the boys received from membership in junior high choir, the question "What do you get out of it?" was posed. Responses reflected back to several of Hylton's (1981) dimensions already noted and touched on two more. Integrative, musical-artistic, and achievement were joined by psychological and communicative. Psychological benefits included the development of self-confidence and trust and the feelings of self-worth and self-satisfaction members experienced through participation in the choir. Communicative benefits involved choristers' experience of reaching out to their audience, sharing their talents. Many of these benefits were connected to the concert performances which involved the integrative, musical-artistic, and achievement dimensions. The following excerpt from the group interview with Ron, Milan, and Aki provides a holistic picture.

Researcher: What are some of the things you like best about choir?

Aki: The contests.

Milan: Yeah, the contest--it was pretty cool.

Ron: The concerts . . .

Researcher: What makes the concerts exciting and fun?

M: It's like, OK, after everybody's concentrated so hard, you finally get to show people what choir's about, and what we can do with it . . .

R: Show off our talent.

A: You see people clap before you, you know, they say you did a good job, it's like . . .

R: Makes you feel good.

A: Yeah, it's like, after a concert or whatever, if the people that was there, if they tell you that they like it, you know, it's cool.

M: You know that you did a good job.

Colloquial as their conversation might have been, these boys expressed the deep meanings that involvement with choir held for them. Their comments also affirmed the stated goals of their teacher which were to "grow as musicians, both in written musical terms and note reading, and in their sensitivity for music". She also wanted them "to express themselves emotionally". These findings should both warm the hearts of choral educators and encourage them to continue their task of training adolescent male singers.

Conclusion

It was the purpose of the study to examine the participation of junior high school boys in choral music. Four issues arising from the guiding questions were explored: motivation to join the choir and to remain; acquisition of musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes; repertoire considerations; and perception of the 'choral experience'—both preferences and benefits. It emerged from the data of this study that junior high boy choristers are musically skilled, knowledgeable, and articulate. They have varied reasons for belonging to the choir, but strong similarities exist among the group. Their repertoire preferences show clear patterns, and they are quite adept at developing strategies to overcome range limitations. With regard to perceptions of the 'choral experience', junior high boys have definite opinions not only on their preferred activities in choir but also on the benefits they receive through belonging. Boys' enjoyment of the choral program seemed to be unanimous and not dependent on their stage of vocal development. With respect to long-term membership in the choir, the boys are able to clearly articulate their reasons for remaining.

Evidence from the data supported five out of six dimensions of meaning as stated by Hylton (1981). Male choristers' comments illustrated the dimensions of musical-artistic, achievement, psychological, communicative, and integrative. Comments related to spiritualistic were missing, perhaps due to the age of the informants or perhaps due to the secular age in which we live.

Turning to Gates' (1991) music participation theory, the categories of apprentice amateur, and hobbyist were the most applicable to the males in the Cedar Hill vocal ensemble. While boys may have joined the choir initially as recreationists or dabblers, their experience in the choir moved them along the continuum to a place where they regarded choir as serious business and they placed a value on the acquisition of musical skills and knowledge. However, they also knew how to relax.

A surprising finding was the small degree of importance that the boys placed on range-appropriate repertoire. They handled the notes out of their ranges with apparent ease, devising inventive and practical coping strategies. Far more important to them was repertoire they liked. Choral teachers should be aware of student preferences, while continuing to note the inherent challenges in allowing developing adolescent voices to rehearse inappropriate (in the sense of vocally unhealthy) vocal behaviors which, although enjoyable at the time, could restrict competence in the longer term.

References

Adcock, E. (1987). The changing voice: The middle/junior high challenge. *Choral Journal*, 28(3), 9-11.

- Adler, A. (1999). A survey of teacher practices in working with male singers before and during the voice change. *Canadian Journal of Research in Music Education*, 40(4), 29-33.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Burgess, R. (1984). *In the field*. London, UK: George Allen and Unwin.
- Collins, D. (1987). The changing voice: A future challenge. *Choral Journal*, 28(3), 13-17.
- Cooksey, J. M., & Welch, G. F. (1998). Adolescence, singing development and National Curricula design. *British Journal of Music Education*, 15(1), 99-119.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic field notes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Finnegan, R. (1989). *The hidden musicians*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J. (1994). Interviewing. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (p. 361-376). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Gates, J. T. (1989). A historical comparison of public singing by American men and women. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 37(1), 32-47.
- Gates, J. T. (1991). Music participation: Theory, research, and policy. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 109, 1-35.
- Gerber, T. (1989). Reaching all students: The ultimate challenge. *Music Educators Journal*, 75(7), 37-39.
- Hodder, I. (1994). The interpretation of documents and material culture. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 393-402). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428-444). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hughes, W. (1978). The next challenge: High school general music. *Music Educators Journal*, 73(8), 33-36.
- Hylton, J. B. (1981). Dimensionality in high school students' perceptions of the meaning of choral singing experience. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 29(4), 287-303.
- Killian, J. N. (1997). Perceptions of the voice-change process: male adult versus adolescent musicians and non-musicians. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 45(4), 521-535.
- Koza, J. E. (1993). The 'missing males' and other gender issues in music education: Evidence from the *Music Supervisor's Journal*, 1914-1924. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 41(3), 212-232.
- Mizener, C. P. (1993). Attitudes of children toward singing and choir participation and assessed skill. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 41(3), 232-245.
- Phillips, K. (1995). Recruiting and retaining males. *Teaching Music*, 2(6), 28-29.
- Rutkowski, J. (1981). The junior high school male changing voice: Testing and grouping voices for successful singing. *Choral Journal*, 22(5), 11-15.
- Small, C. (1998). *Musicking*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Titon, J. T. (1997). Knowing fieldwork. In G. E. Barz & T. J. Cooley (Eds.), *Shadows in the field* (pp. 87-100). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zillman, D., & Gan, S. (1997). Musical taste in adolescence. In D. J. Hargreaves & A. C. North (Eds.), *The social psychology of music* (pp. 161-187). New York: Oxford University Press.

About the Author

Mary Kennedy received her B.Mus and M.Ed degrees from the University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and her Ph.D in Music Education from the University of Washington in Seattle. She is presently an Assistant Professor in Music at Mason Gross School of

the Arts, Rutgers University where she directs the Voorhees women's choir and teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in music education. Publications include articles in *British Journal of Music Education*, *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education*, *Choral Journal*, and *Canadian Music Educator*