

Their Stories Our Stories: Choir *in* schools as a means of fostering identity and community formation

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ABSTRACT

This project sought to research how young people (secondary students) can effectively express their social and cultural identity through the creation of choirs and small music ensembles to perform their songs. A key research question was to explore how the cultural symbolism of identity is expressed through music. Inherent in this question is an examination of how forming a choir or music ensemble can foster the formation of a sense of community between participants. In this respect community and identity are inextricably linked and interwoven through the processes of collectively making and performing music. This encompasses both vocal and bodily training – the latter derived from the physical theatre training methods of Jacques Lecoq. The research encouraged participants to reflect on their age and social trajectory of experiences and through writing lyrics and music, articulate key moments of identity formation. In turn the students explored the experiential means to communicate their stories to each other and their respective communities through movement and song. This multi-origin approach was intended to examine how young people focus on issues important to their generation in the context of their school communities. In this regard, the research discovered that their concerns were expressed musically in both comic and dramatic forms and closely tied to social issues and concerns.

KEYWORDS

Identity; community; Jacques Lecoq; choir; song writing ; ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

The research takes place within the context of how young people express their everyday experiences and concerns via musical and dramatic competence. In this respect, personal and communal or collective identity are mutually informative with the potential to be mutually reinforcing. Erickson a foundational scholar in establishing ‘identity’ studies argues that:

A sense of identity means being at one with oneself as one grows and develops and ... an affinity with a community’s sense of being at one with its history and future. (1974: 27)

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Identity is fluid between self and community but importantly developed by processes that enable self development and growth. Choral educators seek to focus their efforts on student's growth and learning by facilitating the understanding, realisation and delivery of song. In a choral context this is always in a group setting where the student must equally sing and listen to find their place within a choir. In order to enable such student development regular rehearsal fosters cohesion, discipline and a sense of ensemble or togetherness between participants. Elizabeth Parker has highlighted the need for the investigation of social belonging as 'embedded within [secondary school] group singing environments'(2010 :339). Parker draws on Hylton's definition of social belonging as the capacity to interact with each other, which is integral to creating a sense of community (Parker 2010: 340). We argue that it is in this aspiration to form a musically integrated body of students that choral and drama educators find a common bond. Drawing on our respective backgrounds as theatre director (Russell Fewster) and conductor (Christie Anderson) this article posits how drama and choral theory and practice benefit from pedagogical synchronicities when applied to musical education. In this instance the teachings of the Jacques Lecoq school are foregrounded and reflect Fewster's training there. Lecoq's school in Paris has been one of the most influential in physical theatre training. This approach aligns with a choral pedagogy that similarly emphasises bodily training methods such as Feldenkrais and Laban. (See Paparo 2016; Grady and Gilliam 2020).

Choir and chorus are indelibly linked in that Ancient Greek choruses sang and commented on the drama that unfolded in front of them. Chorus finds its contemporary equivalent in drama in the notion of an actor's ensemble. A drama perspective would refer to 'connectedness' or '*complicité*' between individuals, that helps form an effective acting ensemble. *Complicité* might be translated from the French, to the capacity for participants, to actively engage with each other. In turn this is premised on *Le Jeu* (play) and *disponibilité* (receptiveness). The latter referring to participants attaining a physical and vocal state of openness. These concepts are derived from experiential training and emanate from Jacques Lecoq (Murray 2010). In Lecoq's teaching the chorus is united by movement and form – the individuals combine through embodied gestures to create commentary on contemporary events. Moreover, the chorus represents the concerns of the audience and take on a near sacred purpose in its delivery of text and the messages to those in power (Lecoq 2019: 135-145). Form and content are bound together as the power of text and physical action are amplified by the performative strength of the chorus. The value of the text or song cannot be separated from the physical and vocal delivery of the chorus or choir – they are complimentary. It therefore follows that the training of the individual members of a chorus/choir is instrumental to their effectiveness. Taking this a step further the artistic development of the individual and group mirrors the identity formation of the individual and the group. Maggie Cobb has recently contended 'the creative process of songwriting serves as an embodied vehicle through which to assign meaning to lived emotional experience and the self. The study of which has been "neglected"' (Cobb 2016: 61). We emphasize that the interactive potential of an ensemble is linked to the lived, embodied and ultimately shared emotional experience of participants engaged in song composition and performance and which contribute to a sense of both individual and collective identity. Stephen Paparo in a recent study of the impact of Feldenkrais training on choral singing found that:

Somatic exploration as a part of instruction allowed for the development of singing that was more fully integrated and functionally efficient. (2016: 497)

Embodiment encompasses the integration of body and mind in full engagement with the task at hand; in this instance the generation and performance of song. In turn, embodiment contributes

to self and group identity formation. We explore how the level of physical and mental professionalism, focus, discipline and concentration achieved, contributed to the artistic development, cohesion and sense of self and community attained by the school choirs and music ensembles.

METHODOLOGY: PRACTICE AS RESEARCH (PaR)

The authors' approach is centred around the 'doing', in this instance the rehearsal of composition and performance of songs in a secondary education environment. This practice leads the research — what is commonly known as Practice as Research (PaR). There is much debate over the use and definition of different terms describing this type of research, such as practice-led research and practice-based research. Given the constraints of this article we adopt the PaR format but acknowledge there are alternatives. Much like the experiential pedagogy that the authors practice professionally this project focused on the lived experience of the participants in accomplishing the assigned tasks. However, inherent in such a goal driven activity is an examination of process, i.e. how were the bodies and voices of the participants trained? It is the investigation of the responsiveness of the instructor/researchers and students to such learning, that is the focus of this research. This reflects the application of 'material thinking' to PaR, which proposes a 'particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice' (Bolt 2007: 29, 30). Materials in this respect refer to the corporeal and vocal qualities of the students, the lyrics and melodies that made up their compositions and group rehearsal processes.

The participating schools included a public secondary school and a private secondary college in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia, both with a specialist music focus. The schools were selected in conjunction with the funding body, Multicultural Education and Languages Committee (MELC). MELC funded the project with a view to promoting multi-cultural diversity via music creation. The cohorts were chosen by the schools and with localised objectives. There were two classes of Year 9 boys and Year 9 girls from the public school. The Head of Music at this school sought discipline development within choral music, while from the private college a mixed year 11 music class was chosen with the objective to extend the skill base of the cohort. These were quite different intentions and with respect to the maturity of the classes gave distinct behavioral challenges, though we adopted the same broad approaches to both schools. The 'journey' as such was planned over the first three school terms of 2019. We met and worked with each of the school groups on alternative weeks for 60-90'. This lead into the planned one-off showcase performance in September 2019 (at the private school), which featured the songs from the public school students followed by those from the private school.

Several factors are at play when outside educators such as the researchers in this article are embedded within existing school communities that have been hitherto created by place and age — locality in place and time. Important steps that need to be taken by such outside pedagogues include the capacity to earn the trust and respect with the student communities in question and to find 'common ground' in the exploration and realization of music making. 'Common ground' has been identified by numerous scholars in music pedagogy across different countries as primary to inclusive practice. For example, Pamela Burnard et al state that:

The challenge seems to lie in the teacher's capacity for recognizing how to strategically (rather than merely tactically) approach music-making experience as a way to build common ground between cultures and community values. (2008: 121; see also Hartwig and Riek 2015: 39)

This is a dance between the researcher's musical vocabulary and intentions and the student's capacities and interests. The latter informs how personal and therefore social and cultural identity is expressed through music making. Culture is interpreted in a wide sense pertaining to young people's home lives, school lives and the popular culture they interact with. In this respect, school musical communities might be referred to as sub-cultures of their own with distinctive qualities reflected by students' experiences, concerns and aspirations. Researchers are always interlopers in such groups, entering and then withdrawing from these sub-cultures through regular but finite rehearsal contact. As such, this research activity might be viewed as fieldwork and the researchers as explorers of culture, post-ethnographers of sort. That is to say, having the capacity to not only observe but as practitioners themselves the capacity to also shape the performative aspects of the culture(s) they interact with.

In analysing this project, the authors employ participant observation to reflect upon the rehearsal processes. This ethnographic method of stepping inside and outside of practice is intended to give insight into rehearsal processes and acknowledges the dual role of the researcher/practitioner. Over thirty years ago James Clifford and other cultural anthropologists raised the problematic nature of the singular 'textual authority' that the documenter adopts in the writing process (1988). More recently George Musgrave amongst others have noted the privileging of the 'ethnographer's voice' over participants and this remains an ongoing challenge for documentation and the writing up of field studies (2019: 8). A hallmark of 20th Century and indeed contemporary ethnography is the search for 'polyphonic' writing, i.e., allowing several voices to contribute to the writing up of the study, in order to avoid a researcher-centric narrative. In this respect, the researchers draw on polyphonic sources such as:

- Excerpts from the interim and final reports for the funding provider, student-penned song lyrics, student comments from the showcase performance and images from rehearsal and performance that are included in this narrative.
- Edited summaries of student, audience teacher and questionnaires attached as appendices.
- A link to a documentary (See reference list).

However, as we, the authors ultimately chose what was included from these materials, the quest for a polyphonic write-up is, as always, provisional. Ethnographers have argued that 'fieldwork is situated between autobiography and anthropology'. The self and others work together to produce knowledge. The inclusion of the 'I' or 'we' of the self(ves) in this narrative is a means intended to acknowledge the presence of the authors in the process as we co-produced knowledge with the students rather than as an invisible authority (Okley & Calloway 1992: 117 & 23-24) . Similarly, the voices of the authors are included as a reflexive 'we' to subvert the idea of a hidden authority in the narrative (Okley & Calloway 1992: 24). Where our account differs from such classical ethnographic narratives is that as practitioners we actively intervened into the sub-cultures of student musical communities through our approaches to the artistic development and delivery of song.

BUILDING THE SKILL BASE WITH THE ENSEMBLES

A Lecoq-based experiential approach to ensemble training was instrumental in developing the *complicité* between students in each of the three cohorts. Some students in the year 9 classes were resistant to this (in the same way as some were resistant to singing) – both drama and singing being new to them and the discipline involved was challenging at times. The first technique introduced to the students, drew on Jacques Lecoq's notion of the tree. Lecoq notes that 'It is important for an actor to work at the tree. He [she] must be able to achieve a body that is in balance, positively balanced in the ground' (2019: 44). This involves the students planting their feet into the ground, like a tree grounding its roots, so there is a push downward. The body then stretches upwards creating an oppositional force. The head rests on top of an extended spine, with the knees slightly flexed. This is a starting point for achieving *disponibilité*, a physical openness which also correlates with a starting position for ease of vocal projection. For the conductor this physical presence in turn created a platform for vocal presence, as she worked through various vocal warm-up exercises such as vowels, listening across the ensemble and intonation techniques through scales.



Figures 1 and 2: Russell Fewster demonstrates the Tree exercise to Year 9 Secondary School Students

The second technique was a 'push/pull' exercise with bamboo sticks. A stick is held lightly by the forefinger between two students. One pushes, the other is pushed. One pulls away and the other is also pulled away, and so on. The technique is marked by movement followed by stillness, that inform each other. Lecoq refers to the push/pull dynamic as inherent in how the body reacts to the world (Murray 2003: 134). And similarly, this extends to how the performer then vocally reacts to what forces are pushing/pulling the body. *Disponibilité* is therefore extended to encompass the dramatic currents in a text.

The third technique was *Pointe Fixe* or fixed-point which 'situates the displacement of a movement' and correspondingly 'the movement is evidence of the fixed point' (Lecoq 2006: 81). Fixed point gives clarity to movement and highlights the beginning, dramatic high point(s) and end points. It was important for students to learn these principles to achieve dramatic presence and focus and they would be continually referred to and create an ongoing physical grammar for rehearsal and performance. For example, the students were constantly reminded of the tree pose when they came onto the rehearsal floor and ultimately the performance stage. Anderson noted in an interim report that this in turn produced the following outcomes:

- Improvement in posture, spatial relationship and balance between each other and within themselves.
- An understanding of the concept of stillness, of creating space through periphery and therefore engaging more openly in physical activities.
- An increased awareness of pace and clarity in speaking and singing when performing.
- Development in a collaborative approach to learning more about themselves and each other, working together in groups that are not always friendship groups.
- A consequential increase in trust with us and the project, contributing to relationship building.



Figure 3. 'Balancing bamboo sticks seemed quirky at first, but after developing a degree of professionalism, they broadened the possibilities of performance'. (Student evaluation 2019)

Dear Kindly Mister Teacher Year 9 Boys

(Based on *Officer Krupke*
Westside Story)

Dear kindly Mister Teacher
I ran into a pole
I stabbed me with a pencil
It made a massive hole
I really want to study
It's just my body hurts.
O.M.G. I'm sorry I'm a jerk!

So Mister Teacher we're very upset
We never had the love ev'ry child
oughta get.
We're not neglectful, we're
misunderstood
Deep down inside us there is good -
there is good!

There is good! There is good!
There is untapped good
Like inside the worst of us is good!

My cat just ate my homework
My grandpa lost his spleen
Forgot my iPad password
My parrot broke my screen

My brother broke my finger
I took too much morphine
O.M.G. I've turned into a meme!

Dear kindly Mister Teacher
You gotta understand

My homework's on the beach, sir
It's buried in the sand
Our mothers work at cleaning
Our fathers work at night
O.M.G. sir, that's our sorry plight.

So Mister Teacher we're very upset
We never had the love ev'ry child
oughta get.
We're not neglectful, we're
misunderstood
I need an extension - 'til JUNE!

'I feel more confident I'm not afraid of
the stage anymore'

'I enjoyed learning new techniques'

(Saksam, Taran Documentary 2019)

PUBLIC SCHOOL TERM 1

In parallel with the physical approach our intent in the first term was to create a relationship with the students in all three classes we worked with. In groups of four to six students, we encouraged them to explore a variety of areas:

- Their personal cultural history and ethnicities – where they and their families are from, including compiling languages.
- Memories – personal, or from family/others.
- Food (favourites – cultural norms for the students).
- Celebrations.
- Environment.

From here we investigated what made the relationships with their family and friends, function. We noticed that there were interesting differences between what the girls and boys in year 9 considered when they talked about memories. The boys fell into darkly humorous anecdotes ('I embedded a pencil in my thigh when I fell', 'I fell into the open oven door', etc.) whereas the girls' memories were about what they shared with their families and friends.

The year 9s were not necessarily singers, so finding a connection through singing was not initially a core part of the music making. However, they were excellent musicians, and further on into the project, they found their voice through writing what they wanted people to hear. In turn the conductor decided with the school's Head of Music that applying the students' lyrics to existing songs would be an achievable outcome.



Figure 4: The joy of the 'hat' game : *Le Jeu* applied to the Year 9 Boys 'Homework' song.

Not Perfect Year 9 Girls

(Based on *Not Perfect* by Tim Minchin)

This is my locker,
and it's full of junk.
It's pretty small and quite mistreated
It's full of books and forgotten work
no matter if I clean it up
it always smells really, really bad.

And here's the really weird thing
despite how long it takes to find
this box of space is the gateway to my
mind.

This is my locker and it's fine,
cramming stuff in here takes up heaps
of my time.
It's not perfect, but it's mine.
For my school days...

This is my mind
and it's full of stuff
It's made of memes and lots of music
I spend way too much cash on food
My bank account is dead - boo hoo,
And now my hunger bars are getting
low
The weirdest thing about it is
I don't remember useful things,
but I can remember the menu from
KFC

This is my mind - it's full of food,
chips and burgers, Empanadas,
cheesecake and pie.
It's not perfect - but it's mine.
It's not perfect...

This is my country
and I live in it,
it's pretty big, but there aren't many
people.
And these people come from
everywhere
but sometimes we don't want to
share

PUBLIC SCHOOL TERM 2

Term 2 was a mixture of singing and creating. We began with both groups having a song chosen which they could then make their own. For the boys it was the frenetic and hilarious *Officer Krupke* from *Westside Story* by Leonard Bernstein, which in turn highlighted the boys own dark humour and the trouble they've gotten into at school and home. The song is written in a skillful and slapstick way, and it married well with the boy's theme for their own texts which were 'real excuses for not doing homework'.

The highlights of this process were:

- Working together to create texts to layer into the original melodies.
- The delight in the issues that make sense to them, and the agreement over the idea of 'unpacking' our lives.
- It was enlightening to see and hear their views on what is going on in the world around them, and where they saw themselves 'fitting' into society.

Though the boy's writing were comic, underneath was the sense that they not only wanted to be listened to but also believed as these were genuine reasons for not completing their homework.

For the Year 9 girls it was Tim Minchin's *Not Perfect* – thoughtful, wry and funny, with a suitable vocal range and opportunity for harmonies and vocal experimentation. In the YouTube clip of Minchin singing this live, he talks about life being like a Babushka Doll, and in a similar vein the theme for the girls was 'unpacking your life'. They chose to use the following verses as context:

- My Locker – the 'locker' in your mind and the physical 'locker' at school – filled with junk and where 'sometimes things get lost'.
- My City – the environment of school and place: the good and the bad.
- My Country – the impact of refugees and Australia's non-welcoming stance to people in need.

Not Perfect

We're 'sposed to be the lucky land
but we don't lend a helping hand
to the families and the children who
need a home.

This is our country – not just mine
it's where we spend the vast majority
of our time

It's our country – not just mine.
It's not perfect...

This is our earth
and we live on it.
The icecaps are melting,
there's a hole in the ozone.
Look we tried to put this subtly,
but are wonder'ing why you cannot see
that Sco-Mo and his party are fossil
fools.

And here's the really weird thing,
you've left it up to us kids.
So now we need to fix up your
mistakes.
This was your earth now it's mine
And you guys can't say that you even
tried.
This was your earth, now it's mine.
Far from perfect.
Now it's mine.

'I believe our identity was somewhat
rebellious. The song began with
cheeky references to memes and of
the like, however when talking about
our country and earth, our words
were delivered with greater intensity
and direction towards those in
power.'

(Anonymous Student Evaluation 2019)

- My Earth – how we populate it, how there's no place else to go; 'we don't have a choice, we can't live on Mars'.
- My Country II – about 'Sco-Mo',¹ politics and the nature of climate change; a powerful verse on how adults 'haven't even tried to fix it'.

The female students managed to mix the quotidian with quite worldly commentary on politics, refugees and climate change. Both genders expressed a need to be heard but on very different subject matters.

PUBLIC SCHOOL TERM 3

In rehearsal and performance, a challenge arose with what blocking to give to the Year 9 boys in the musical interludes of their 'Homework' song. The combination of time pressure and the occasional lack of focus within this group made this an interesting question. Fewster noted prior to one of the classes that a student had grabbed another's hat and thrown it around their peers with the student chasing their hat. This 'game' is a good indication of the play and lightness that underlines *Le Jeu*. Fewster advised the students to play this game during the breaks in the song. Phillipe Gaulier (from the Lecoq school) teaches that the 'pleasure of the game should always be beneath the text', supporting it.² This approach ensured that there was a lively interaction between the students, with the added proviso of each iteration being slightly different (See Figure 4).

For the Year 9 girls their performance was highlighted by stillness. The tree pose helped sustain their intensely delivered message on climate change to Australian political leaders. Lecoq proposes that the:

Finest choruses are those made up of women, for they possess a deep sense of cohesion of solidarity. They stand guard over essential values (2000: 132)

¹ 'Sco-Mo' is an abbreviation for Scott Morrison Prime Minister of Australia from 2019.

² Fewster was an assistant to Phillipe Gaulier for the Adelaide International Fringe Workshop in 1995.

Weatherman Year 11 Students

Headlines read out,
Everything's going just great,
everyone's got a smile and shout,
Don't get me wrong, I believe you,
But the weatherman don't lie

I have to be heard,
And I don't have to think because
you'll give me the words.
My lips say one thing and my words
something other,
Is it miscommunication or malice,
Maybe the world has gone into
madness,
At least I won't be their apparatus
But the weatherman don't lie

Tell me your beautiful lies,
Tell me exactly what I want to hear,
What's wrong or right – it's not like
we're wise,
You can be screaming to the world
with all your fears,
But if they're not there did it really
ever happen, all of them – Profiteers

I have to be heard, (repeat refrain)

Florida school shooting leaves parents
petrified,
Service station robbery leaves two in
critical condition.
Jacob Smith set to become new prime
minister
despite massive protests.
Read all about it world's on the brink.

No the Weatherman don't lie (repeat)

I have to be heard, (repeat refrain)

At least I won't be their apparatus
(Repeat twice)

'Our song ... deals with media ... which
has a lot of power [and] shows that no
matter what you do there is one you
can trust: the Weatherman'.

(Sam, *Showcase Performance* 2019)

The girls, with their lyrics, stood guardian over the planet with a clear message that they would need to 'fix' what the adults had destroyed.

PRIVATE COLLEGE TERM 1

We spent an even mix between physical activities and exploration in setting the students up for creating a work of their own. We studied many texts that we asked them to work out the colour, space, pace and movement of the words for. This included the colour of text, the nature of the language and whether it was dense or sparse. In turn Anderson asked the students 'how do we represent that musically?' And to consider:

- Rhythm and vocal underlay
- Repetition of key ideas
- Instrumentation
- Mood
- Tempo
- Timbre

Anderson also asked, 'what words would you use to describe the type of melody you want it to sound like?'

E.g. 'Sweet, sombre, cold, dispassionate'? This paved the way for the concept of *Postcards – Secrets and Lies*. Anderson handed out a post card to each student and they had to randomly return it with a secret. They were then handed out to others for them to create a piece of music relevant to the text.

PRIVATE COLLEGE TERMS 2 AND 3

The students' musical responses to their postcards over two sessions gave us an invaluable insight into how they approached music and composition. Some made live recordings, some used music processing software such as Garage Band, some played live. From that sense of achievement, the conversation/discussion progressed to the things that they were aware of in the world such as the Christ Church shootings, the Youth Rally for Climate Change, Archbishop George Pell's conviction and the Mozambique floods; they were all discussed and the students were asked to come up with ideas that they felt they could connect to through text and music. The four groups of five to six students all contributed to the ideas, but came up with four broad topics, one group aligning with each:

Tomorrow's another day closer

Can you hear the rolling thunder
spread across the plains?
Can you feel the anticipation
of the flooding rains?

Weatherman said its coming today
but he said that last week
So we'll look to the sky
and hope that he's right this time.

Keep your chin up and your spirits
high,
We gotta wait for the rain from the
sky
I know its hard but just remember
Tomorrow is another day closer

It's been a while, but keep holding on
If we stick together, we'll wait out the
storm
I know its hard but just remember
Tomorrow's another day closer

'It's about the drought we are in the
moment and the farmers waiting for
the rain. Lewis and I are boarders.
Lewis is from Mt Galleon, Yorke
Peninsula and I'm from Keith in the
South-East'.

(Megan, *Showcase Performance*
2019)

- Water (environment)
- Mental Health
- Ethics and Morals (this also links to politics – 'why do politicians do things that they know are wrong?')
- Politics and Government (social media; fake news)

They agreed that environment (urban and natural), community and communication were the key factors in all four topics and there were further crossovers. They then had further sessions to create musical compositions around the topics. Importantly, the researchers worked with the students in rehearsal and in performance to first introduce the themes of the songs that would follow, through key words they spoke and moved to as group, thereby demonstrating a commonality of purpose and concern – a hallmark of chorus as discussed previously. They followed this with their individual songs. The additional comments the students made when introducing their songs gave further understanding of their intentions and are included here with their lyrics. They deal with socio-political concerns that the students felt were important and needed to be articulated. In some instances, these were calls for solidarity in the face of daily challenges. For example, Megan (a country boarder) commented that her song, *Tommorrow's Another Day*, reflected that:

Weather events and natural disasters are a huge part of my life on the land. Performing about it was an attempt to get others to be hopeful and stick together like my family is doing (Appendix 1: Student Evaluation 2019).

A similar desire for hope is embodied in Rachel's call for courage in dealing with mental health issues (*Help*) and an optimism in Angelique's song of acceptance of differences between people (*Back Then*). While Sam's song, *Weatherman* rings of a nihilism with a total loss of faith in media. Cobb notes :

Songwriting can be understood as a form of writing as inquiry an evocative and creative way of "revealing" and assigning meaning to identity and experience in the unfolding moment, particularly as it relates to lived, embodied emotional experiences. (2016: 70-71)

The expression of identity encompassed the student's first-hand experience of the world, in particular their world view as they filtered what was around them through their daily existence .

Help

Help
can anybody help me?
I am lost In the dark, I need a light to see
Help
does anybody know me?
I drove you away and now I pay the fee

Gotta be brave and take down the walls
Gotta stand up and stop wandering empty halls
Can't be afraid of this weakness
I'm gunna get better no more nights sleepless

I need some help so here I am asking
Cause I'm done with all this pain that I'm masking
I'm hurting inside, I'm all alone,
shivering in the darkness on a bed made of stone
didn't mean to come across with such a loud yelp
I guess I'm just asking for some help

Help
I know it will be OK
Sometimes you've got to scream to keep the
nightmares at bay
Help
the tears are the words the heart can't express
So let them come at let yourself confess

Gotta be brave and take down the walls
Gotta stand up and stop wandering empty halls
Can't be afraid of this weakness
I'm gunna get better no more nights sleepless

I need some help so here I am asking
Cause I'm done with all this pain that I'm masking
I'm hurting inside, I'm all alone,
shivering in the darkness on a bed made of stone
didn't mean to come across with such a loud yelp
I guess I'm just asking for some help

'It's about the process of asking for help ... which
takes courage when your battling mental
problems'.

(Rachel Showcase Performance 2019)

EVALUATION

Student Evaluation: (Online survey) 80% of the 20 students who completed the survey felt that being involved in this project had increased their awareness of the importance of music/song in education. Some of the students were challenged by the length of the project and others acknowledged their classes' lack of focus and discipline at times. However other students reflected that the physical exercises 'enhanced our performance as we felt more confident'. Another student commented that:

When singing our songs, I felt more connected than ever before with my peers in delivering our strong messages to the audience. (Appendix 1 2019)

Complicité within student groups was enhanced by the expression of a shared message – we 'wrote our song about things that matter to us' and which was supported by the physical training which in their own words 'allowed us to express our thoughts through our actions'. As a consequence, they felt that their identities were expressed through performing as a group their songs about social issues such as climate change, fake news and mental health. (Appendix 1 2019)

Audience Evaluation: (Hard copy questionnaires) The audience noted that seeing the performance increased their awareness regarding the importance of music/song in education by 90%. One audience member commented that the students:

Showed us they are concerned about global issues and want to do something about it. They also expect us to act. (Appendix 2 2019)

While others remarked that the highlight was the students 'writing their own songs and performing them' and 'the lyrics of the

Back Then

Back then, back then,
you could say what ever you wanted
back then, back then,
you could never be offended
and back then
you would have to hide your face if
you looked different

But things change,
people change
morals grow
and we accept.
But things change,
people change
morals grow
and we accept,
we learn to accept

right now, right now,
we can be our selves.
right now, right now
people have changed
and right now,
we see people for who they are,
and not what they look like

But things change,
people change
morals grow
and we accept.
But things change,
people change
morals grow
and we accept,
we learn to accept

‘This is about how morals and how
society has grown through the years
to become more accepting of people’.

(Angelique Showcase Performance
2019)

‘I felt that we got to learnt more
about ourselves and our community
and feed that back to people’.

(Helena Showcase Performance 2019)

songs [meant] I had tears in my eyes’ (Appendix 2 2019). In general, they commended the collaborative effort of the students, the professionalism of the performances, the value in communicating concerns about global issues through original lyrics and melodies. One would anticipate that a school community would be supportive however the audience also included practitioners, who completed the questionnaires anonymously.

Staff Evaluation: (Online survey) The two staff that filled out the survey (one from each of the two schools) both agreed that the level of professionalism, focus, discipline and concentration provided by the delivery of the project contributed to the cohesion attained by the ensembles. One staff member commented that there was a ‘direct correlation’ while another commented ‘as they were getting regular feedback, they were able to maintain a vision’ which was evident in their culminating performance. They also noted that students ‘gained a sense of belonging through having a role and contributing to what would become a public performance’ (Appendix 3 2019).

The private school observed that the students developed as an ensemble while the public school felt ‘less so as they were already in their classes’. The latter also remarked that the time involved meant other areas in the music curriculum suffered. However, both staff members agreed that students’ identities were articulated via song writing particularly ‘expressed through life’s experiences’ and how they ‘felt personally about issues and how they were being managed in the world’. There was a 70% correlation between being involved with the project and an increase in awareness of the importance of music/song in education (Appendix 3 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Melissa Grady and Tianna Gilliam have recently discussed the importance of movement to choral vocal delivery noting in particular, a 'strong singer preference of movement over stillness' (2020: 300). This has merit, no doubt, as music does indeed provoke movement, however the importance of dynamic stillness should not be overlooked in choir training. The Lecoq 'tree' method provides an internal movement — feet pushing down, trunk drawing up — that creates an internal tension and gives dramatic and vocal presence. Such internalized movement creates an embodied and kinesthetic quality that impacts on both young performers and audience. The students, audience and staff commented on the 'confidence', 'engagement' and 'strengthening' of the performance achieved through 'the training in stage presence' (See evaluations). At the same time the benefit of movement was evident in the contrast provided by the boys' choir whose robust play and physical and vocal embodiment of reasons for not doing their homework, gave a frenetic activity that juxtaposed with the girls' choir made the latter even more poignant. In both instances the connection to each other and to the audience was an indication of the complicity sought by the researchers in rehearsal. The sense of student ownership and therefore commitment correlated with the fact that the students were singing their 'own songs' (See Appendix 1). This was arguably the common ground found between the students and researchers, with agreement reached that the songs would reflect the students 'unpacking their lives'. Their stories were piggybacked onto existing melodies and reflected their early stage of musical development. In turn this highlights the recognition of both staff and researchers of what was musically possible with this year 9 cohort.

With the Year 11 students exercises such as the use of sticks, gave recognition of performance possibilities through again, the contrast between movement and stillness. The discipline and professionalism associated with such control was best illustrated by the group's spoken delivery of key words from their songs, at the beginning of the private school's performances. Drawing on Lecoq's premise that the chorus always decides who speaks on their behalf the students were instructed to move back as a line, revealing a chosen student who would then speak; the chorus would echo that person's words and would then move forward and then retreat again revealing a different student who would speak. This mass movement gave force and energy to the delivery. The key words, were questions to the audience that included : 'Trust?', 'Wrong?' and 'Right?', 'Conversation?', 'Rain?' and culminated in 'What are you going to do about it?!' (See documentary 5.16'). The common ground here was the performance training that facilitated the student's messages they wished to convey, reflecting the argument that empowerment functions in two ways enabling the students to express their opinions views and concerns while training their bodies and voices to make the delivery more powerful.

In this respect, the evaluations overall, reveal a strong sense of ownership by the students in the project in being able to write their 'own song(s) about things that matter to them'. This encompassed both their 'personal beliefs' and 'political stance' and ranged from the everyday to profound global concerns. In this regard, the research question: encouraging group identity via song was realized by the students as variously 'rebellious', 'cheeky', confrontational, questioning and appealing and was addressed to those in authority. The choirs and ensembles' collective voice(s) were in turn recognised by the audience who were 'moved' by the 'values' expressed on issues such as refugees and climate change and the need for action to take place. In this way expressing identity and developing community were mutually reinforcing as the choirs/ensembles gained their identity and cohesion through a shared purpose. The students, audience and school staff appreciated the professional excellence achieved. Students found the project demanding in terms of duration which caused a lack of focus and commitment at times. Staff also found the

project meant other areas in their curriculum weren't covered as a result. These point to the challenges facing outside educators when working on a long-term project in schools. However, notwithstanding these drawbacks, the project was able to provide a professional platform for year 9 and year 11 students to develop expressions of identity and community formation via physical and vocal training, song writing and performance.

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Appendix 1: Student Evaluation, Their Stories Our Stories (edited summary)

How was your identity or who you are expressed through music you developed and performed?

'My personal beliefs and political stance certainly came through in our song'; 'We wrote our own song about things that matter to us';

'Weather events and natural disasters are a huge part of my life on the land. It's always in the back of your mind, bushfires, storms, droughts, winds etc. We try to be hopeful and wait it out, and we try to tell others to do the same, but it's really hard. Performing about it was an attempt to get others to be hopeful and stick together, like what my family is doing'.

Was your own particular background reflected in the songs you wrote?

'I believe our song did really represent me and my life unpacked'; 'No, our performance reflected a social issue rather than ourselves;

'Yes, our song was based on a very agricultural and rural related problem which is where I am from.'

How did writing lyrics and songs express key moments from your life or personal concerns?

'My current concerns about our country and climate crisis were included in our lyrics'; 'It was a cool way to using music as a way to start a conversation on this issue (climate change)';

'While talking about media and misconception, it helped me express injustice that I felt that many people were facing: especially the younger generation';

Did forming an ensemble foster the formation of a sense of belonging or community between the ensemble members. If so how?

'Yes because when singing our songs, I felt more connected than ever before with my peers in delivering our strong messages to the audience'; 'It did. Forming a casual band allowed me to connect with people I honestly would not have done so on my own volition';

'I felt that over the course of MELC, I grew close to the group that I worked with as the learning process, sharing in food for thought and fellowship'.

Do you think that your ensemble achieved its own identity? If so how would you describe this?

'We developed our own identity, all connecting together through the themes of our song';

'I believe our identity was somewhat rebellious. The song began with cheeky references to memes and of the like, however when talking about our country and earth, our words were delivered with greater intensity and direction towards those in power';

'I believe my all ensemble formed an identity of experimentation. Many of us were playing instruments we were unfamiliar with, or trying new things related to the composition'.

Did learning about posture and movement contribute to the music?

'I think it enhanced our performance as we felt more confident'; 'Yes, it's very important to quality of sound as well as quality of performance'; 'This allowed us to express our thoughts through our actions'.

How did learning one style of song impact on you learning other styles?

'Our style was very mixed, I learnt more about collaboration and creativity rather than styles'; 'I could transfer information from one style to another';

'Finding a meaning to the song is vital to telling a story, and so it was very similar to other things that I have done before'.

How did the level of professionalism, focus, discipline and concentration contribute to the cohesion attained by your ensemble?

'Balancing bamboo sticks seemed quirky at first, but after developing a level of professionalism, it broadened the possibilities of performance';

'We were able to quickly work together on writing our song and then work on polishing it and making the video to play inbetween as a sort of bridge';

'At times discipline was a struggle for my ensemble, however when we concentrated and maintained a level of professionalism, we achieved great things'.

Has being involved in this project increased your awareness of the importance of music/song in education?

80% of the students surveyed responded positively to this question.

Appendix 2: Audience Evaluation, Their Stories Our Stories (edited summary from 15 audience members)

What was the most memorable aspect of the performance for you?

'Beautiful confident performances all round';

'Children writing their own songs and performing them'; 'the lyrics of the songs. I had tears in my eyes';

'I enjoyed the way the pupils all worked together'; That two schools can combine so well and showcase different styles and lyrics.'

Why was this most memorable?

'It was amazing. All students were fully engaged in the performance'; 'Appreciate the students creating it';

What did the performance mean to you?

'Very moving and made us more aware that we need to look after society for the next generation';

'Fantastic to see the students so competently expressing themselves';

How were the student identities expressed through music they developed and performed?

'Fears and hopes for themselves and the world'; Great to see original music and lyrics';

Showed us they are concerned about global issues and want to do something about it. They also expect us to act’;

'Values and feelings expressed in heart felt ways';

How did the level of professionalism, focus, discipline and concentration contribute to the cohesion attained by the students?

'Extremely high standard of performance'; 'Very professional'; 'Excellent, amazing'; 'Students from both schools were professional and respectful';

Do you think that the music performed fostered the formation of a sense of belonging or community between the students. If so how?

'Yes. Common beliefs and feelings expressed collaboratively';

'choir format – balance, band format – individualism';

'Yes as I think it shows they/we all have the same concerns and we need to work together to make changes';

Has seeing this performance increased your awareness about any thoughts/feelings regarding the importance of music/song in education?

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10

not at all very much

The audience measured their increased awareness of the importance of music in education from the concert as 9/10

Age	(25 – 81 years)	Average: 50 years
What's your gender?	Male: 2	Female: 13

Appendix 3: School Staff Evaluation, Their Stories Our Stories (edited summary of two staff surveyed – one from each school)

How was the identity of the students expressed through music they developed and performed?

Students were able to consider what is important to them and reflect on these issues.

They recalled life experiences - in particular, fondly reminiscing about injuries and mishaps.

How did writing lyrics and songs express key moments from their lives or personal concerns?

The students expressed their personal concerns by focusing on issues in Australia and globally, such as drought, anxiety, truth in media and society's changing stance on morals. This gave students a chance to express what they see as key elements within these topics, and how they feel about it personally, how they see these issues being managed in the world.

As above

Did forming an ensemble foster the formation of a sense of belonging or community between the ensemble members. If so how?

Students formed a stronger connection by working together on their pieces. Because they had to develop original music, there were many elements to consider and work through. Within the process, students had to define roles of who would perform what function in the group for the performance as well. This meant there was a strong mutual focus throughout the process, which involved a lot of discussion. Students gained a sense of belonging through having a role and contributing to what would become a public performance.

Not so much for Brighton because the ensembles were already in existence prior to the project.

Do you think that the ensembles achieved their own identity? If so how would you describe this?

As each group was working on a different topic, the groups and the music that developed with that were unique. Their choice of instrumentation and the different musical elements they explored to support their lyric also gave each group a unique flavour. Lastly, the fact that each of the students brought with them individual approaches and abilities strongly affected the identity of the group.

As above

Did learning about posture and movement contribute to the music performance?

This was a great aspect of the developmental stages of the learning.

Yes. The training in movement and stage presence definitely strengthened the performance.

How did learning one style of song impact on learning other styles?

Students were largely focused on their own song only. In viewing others, they could appreciate aspects of the style through the instrumentation, rhythmic feel and texture.

Due to the lengthy nature of this project, it impacted adversely on learning other music.

How did the level of professionalism, focus, discipline and concentration contribute to the cohesion attained by the ensembles?

There were key individuals in each group who drove the process, and guided their fellow students, whether that be in moving through the writing stages, or helping those less experienced to play in time or find the right notes. It really came down to a mix of personalities, and the relationships that the students developed over time, which allowed them to work well together. The students overall could appreciate the end goal, and understood how to manage their time to create a piece which gave all members a role, and felt inclusive. As they were getting regular feedback, they were able to maintain a vision and consider further aspects of their pieces.

There was a direct correlation.

Has being involved in this project increased your awareness of the importance of music/song in education?

Mean of 7 out of 10.