Defending the Defended Subject: managing the researcher as advocate role in working with young people

Martin Ashley

Abstract

The overall context for this work is that of the increased attention that has been focussed on school singing through the government’s £40m National Singing Programme. A significant issue of inclusion arises through boys’ self-policed exclusion from singing. This paper draws on the author’s work with young subjects who have a vested interest in identity protection as young male singers positioned within discourses such as “real boys don’t sing” or “singing is for gays”. These boys face the choice, through this work context, of on the one hand being peer educators and role models for encouraging other boys to sing or, on the other hand, maintaining the secret, underground identity that has served them well as a self-protection strategy. The paper explores the ethical, methodological and epistemological dilemmas raised when the uniqueness of a project pushes the boundaries of conventional research governance.

Introduction

The young male voice has been particularly valued in Western choral singing for over 1500 years. This is partly because there exists a tradition that has grown up around the belief that the unchanged or “treble” voice of the younger boy uniquely resembles the “sound of angels” (Mould, 2007). It is also because adult male voices are required to perform the lower (i.e. tenor and bass) parts of choral music and there is an understandable fear that if an interest in choral singing is not captured during boyhood, there will be a shortage of adult males to undertake such roles. A comprehensive review by Clift et al (2008) appears to demonstrate good grounds for such a fear, with adult female participation in singing outnumbering male participation by a factor of 3:1. There is consequently significant interest in boys’ participation in singing amongst musicians, and choir directors in particular who occupy the front line with regard to male recruitment. A £40m government funded National Singing Programme, launched in 2008 and due to end in 2011 has focussed further attention on the issue through its proclaimed target of making 100% of primary schools “singing schools”. A comprehensive base line evaluation of this project by Welch et al (2009) has confirmed what has been acknowledged for many years – that boys present particular problems and challenges that make it unlikely that a 100% participation rate will ever be achieved.

The classic work of Green (1997) is often cited in support of the idea that boys find singing “sissy”. Such connotation has a long history as a review by Koza (1992) appears to confirm. Speculation on the reasons for boys’ reluctance to sing thus has a similarly long history. The belief that boys “don’t want to sound like girls” is often given as a reason (Phillips, 2003) and is regularly heard at a time of increasing awareness of homophobic bullying (Douglas et al, 1999), a proliferation of studies of masculinity and boyhood (Ellis, 2008) and the ongoing “moral panic” (Cohen, 1987) of boys’ alleged underachievement (Zyngier, 2009) This is an issue that the author has continued to address in some depth since the publication of an
ethnographic study of choirboys in 2002 (Ashley, 2002). Two substantial grants from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council have allowed this work to be developed and extended, first to cover larger, more diverse samples and a significantly wider range of singing genres, and second to develop proposals and resources for increasing young male participation in choral singing.

In drawing on the earlier research to create practical solutions of potential use to teachers and musicians, the question of role models has arisen. Contrary to a popular “common sense” (Mills et al, 2007) belief that fathers and adult males in roles such as music teachers and choir conductors are needed to encourage boys’ participation, the authors’ work suggests that it is boys themselves who must role model the activity for other boys. This finding is supported by the body of literature that is critical of the popular belief that teachers are role models (Carrington et al, 2005; Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Hutchings et al, 2008). The use of boys as role models for other boys has created particular practical and ethical challenges which are the subject of this paper.

“Real boys” or real boys as role models?

Skelton et al (2009) rightly remind us of the folly of homogenising “all boys” or “all girls”. Such admonition is of course justified, but there is also a danger that it has become merely ritualistic. Acknowledgement of what by now should be plain obscures the more radical possibility that the word “boy” is actually inherently a generalisation that describes every young male and no young male. In my own work, I treat “boy” as a social construction as do the majority of masculinity theorists. More than this, however, I would argue that no description or categorisation is wholly sufficient unless it is unique to any individual. Thus “real boys” are a theoretical construct based on the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Real boys are individuals who need to be understood and it is doubtful that there exists a real boy who is truly a “real boy” in every sense of the theoretical idea, any more than there is a real boy who fits perfectly any other hypothetical construction such as “lad” or “underachiever”.

For reasons such as this, I prioritise narrative and life history based methods within a humanistic phenomenological framework that has grown out of ethnographic roots (Wolcott, 2000; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Kendler, 2005). Paradoxically, this has the effect of focussing attention, not upon the multiplicity of possible masculinities, but upon the simple and observable biological facts of male sex and juvenile status. Only these qualities are universal and the task becomes effectively that of confronting the process of pre-judgement that will inevitably be applied by the viewer on the basis of existing social constructions held. The notion that “boys don’t sing” has regrettably become yet another popular stereotype constructed by the media that stands in the way of understanding what real boys do.

Images of what boys are supposed to be like of course abound. Most of these arise through the construction of boyness as performative and oppositional (Kehily, 2002). A boy is, according to this way of seeing things, everything that a girl is not. If lots of girls sing, we are already on dangerous territory that has little directly to do with vocal quality. In addressing the issue of how each rising generation comes to re-enact this process, the question of choosing boys to role model for other boys what is to all intents and purposes gender atypical behaviour assumes critical importance. With this importance comes the pressure to present an image of boyness that will serve, pragmatically, as a baseline. The boys who are to model the gender atypical behaviour must start with attributes that occur
sufficiently frequently in a general population to present something that is recognisably “boy”. There are inevitable tensions between individual real lives, theorised lives and stereotyped lives. Hegemonic masculinity is, itself, of course a theoretical construction. If there is contention it is around the degree to which it is an ideal to be attained or a flaw to be avoided.

Thus if he is to represent “boyness”, a potential role model must at the very least enjoy sport and demonstrate the possession of physical capital in strength and skill. He must probably also engage in rough and tumble play or rough housing. He must have a sense of humour or enjoy “having a laugh”. Such attributes have long been part of a patriarchal dividend for boys because “boys will be boys”. Authors such as Jackson (2006) or Reay (2007) describe the benign tolerance that is afforded to boys but denied to girls. More contentiously, the potential role model might be disinclined to engage studiously with school work. Without necessarily failing his exams, he must at least sometimes challenge teachers and exhibit an inclination to disregard much of “feminine” academic work. He must not be too well behaved. Tidiness and conscientiousness around the home are not expected of “real” boys who must be in a state of partial rebellion against feminine rule, which, apparently, includes “feminised” schooling.

This, it must be emphasised again, is not a prescription of how boys ought to be, or even necessarily a summary of how they are often described. It is rather to be thought of as a stock of theoretical cultural capital against which other attributes might judiciously be traded in the creation of a real image that boys will not dismiss as “sissy” or, more likely, “gay”. The matter is complicated by the attributes of cultural capital that are to be traded because by its very nature, the “sound of angels” requires deference to adult taste. To defer to adult taste is to be a “good boy”, which is dangerously close to being a “sissy”. There is here a considerable difference between core subjects and music. Boys can defer to adult prescriptions in the core subjects because these are needed for later economic success in life. Whilst it may be “uncool” or “nerdish” to enjoy mathematics for its intrinsic fascination, it can be studied because “you need it”.

As is made clear in the second report of the National Music Manifesto, music is not like this. It is perceived by the majority of young people as belonging to them. This idea of music as a youth consumer commodity rather than the induction into connoisseurship that might be recognised by Eisner is promoted by the National Music Manifesto:

> By the age of 11, many young people are making their own decisions about the music they want to hear and play and where and how they want to do it. Music providers within and beyond school have to listen to what young people want and act on providing it for them.

(Music manifesto, 2006: 48)

Music and fashion are now used by most young people to create identities in the here and now and there is seldom as much tolerance for learning justified on the grounds that it might be the subject of aesthetic appreciation in later years. “Real” boyhood is thus defined by performative and relational dimensions of generation as well as gender (Ashley, 2008; 2009). To perform “boy” means not to perform “adult”. This does not mean to be childish. In the context of music, it means to eschew those things that are the cultural markers of the generation and social class that does not own hip hop, grunge or rap. The “real boy” must eschew the passive, the demure, the gentile and in music, the “slow” or the “beautiful”. Passivity may be seen as a cultural marker of gender, but it is equally or more so a marker of
generation. The cultural debit balance of a boy’s performing music that pleases adults for its angelic qualities places heavy demands on the credit side of football, roughhousing and humour.

In the vernacular language of boyhood, there arises a dichotomy between the “weird” boy who defers to adult taste in the “sound of angels” and the hegemonic prescription of boyish masculinity – the so-called “normal” boy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal Boy</th>
<th>Weird Boy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play sport</td>
<td>Balls screwed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight other boys</td>
<td>Sing in a high voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forget homework</td>
<td>Go to church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get muddy</td>
<td>Get hugged by 50 grannies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave bedroom in a mess</td>
<td>Like posh music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoy teachers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The greatest challenge is perceived when it is understood that real boys, that is to say actual boys whose identity has been captured and documented through narrative, phenomenology and ethnography seldom if ever match perfectly the specification of the “real boy” of hegemonic masculinity.

The defended subject

The term “defended subjects” is principally associated with Hollway & Jefferson (2000). Defended subjects invest in particular positions in discourses to protect vulnerable aspects of self, an essentially psycho-social phenomenon also noted by Phoenix et al (2003) and Gadd (2004). Sagan (2007) describes the need that is sometimes felt, perhaps unconsciously, by subjects in ethnographic work to keep levels of anxiety down. The fact that a boy sings is potentially a vulnerable aspect of self, or certainly becomes so when it is realised that such behaviour transgresses significant boundaries set by hegemonic masculinity. Frosh et al (2003) see this in psychoanalytic terms and are clear that inviting boys to express dissent from hegemonic constructions of masculinity may turn them into defended subjects.

Boys I have interviewed have often talked openly and in some depth about such matters as being positioned as “gay” simply because they enjoy singing. More than that, they have sometimes articulated an understanding of multiple identity, describing their own identities as shifting and context specific,

I’m a different person at school, I play football and I don’t talk about singing.

In choir surrounded by people who are doing the same thing, it is different in school, it’s seen as strange.

I much prefer to sing in head voice in choir, but I did a Queen number at school in tummy voice. I wouldn’t use head voice at school.

Collins (2006) too has noted that boys are careful to differentiate between situations where they know other boys will understand their singing and situations where they know they will
be ridiculed. It has been clear in my own work that most boys would simply prefer it if their non singing peers simply did not know of their other life as a singer. For example:

My friends, some people from my old school know, but not the whole class. … I don’t think I’m teased, it’s just something I’d not like to tell everyone.

The work was conducted carefully according to the BERA ethical guidelines which commence with the principle of voluntary informed consent. In order to ensure that full consideration was given to UN Convention on Rights of the Child, Article 12, requiring that children be facilitated to give fully informed consent (BERA, 2004: 6), a version of the guidelines was prepared in language accessible to ten to fifteen year old boys. This, in theory, guaranteed a number of important rights including anonymity, the right to withdraw and protection from detriment through participation. The accessible version was shared with each boy and his responsible adult. It was known from previous work that anonymity would be difficult to achieve where an individual was unique and the fact that boys with work in the public domain in the form of commercial CD recordings were amongst the subjects presented an unusual challenge in this respect.

Additionally, the particular clause on detriment read as follows:

- Detriment through participation

  We will do our best to make sure that nothing bad can happen to you or anyone else because you took part, for example, somebody finding out something about you and using it against you.

If boys were to be role models, there arose the possibility that I might be asking some of them transgress their own stated boundaries, to cross from one life world to another in uncharted territory thereby increasing the risk of exposure to teasing, bullying or ridicule. It was found necessary in practice to strive for an ethical balance between the undoubtedly cathartic dimension of boys’ story-telling and the pastoral responsibility of the researcher to consider the potential impact of reporting on boys’ disclosures given in a trusting environment. Thus a dichotomy arose also between the two potential roles of the researcher, as critical analyst and as advocate:

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<tr>
<th>Critical analyst</th>
<th>Advocate</th>
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<td>Outsider</td>
<td>Insider</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Empathetic</td>
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<tr>
<td>impartial</td>
<td>partial</td>
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<td>Detached</td>
<td>Defensive</td>
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<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysing</td>
<td>Counsellor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoriser</td>
<td>Friend</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Explainer</td>
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This dilemma is exacerbated by the current drive to measure research by its impact and its relevance. Two key aims of the project as stated in the case for support were:

- To support the objectives for singing of the National Music Manifesto through making available relevant research to those users most able to develop it
To provide testable solutions to the long and widely recognized phenomenon of “missing males” in singing

Inherent in these aims, however, is a further conflict between faithfulness in reporting the lives of boys and explaining to the potential users of the research why boys do not wish, generally, to engage with their product. It is the notion of knowledge transfer itself that is problematic. Within knowledge transfer lays the insidious concept of “what works”. Users of research, to whom knowledge is transferred, are less likely to be interested in a complex analysis of why things don’t work than a simple prescription of what to do to make them work. In conventional research, the researcher is generally a critical analyst. In a knowledge transfer project that proposes solutions that must themselves be tested and evaluated, the researcher has to become a diplomat. I am now going to describe one case study that illustrates this most central of dilemmas, encapsulated by the questions:

- How can a researcher inhabit the dual identities of advocate and critic?
- How can a boy continue to inhabit dual identities prescribed and proscribed by the discourse of hegemonic masculinity when he becomes the subject of research?
- What are the issues common to researcher and researched in the dilemmas of dual identity?

Methodology

At the outset of the research it was hypothesised that the audience for boys’ singing was seldom the peer group. Not only were there good grounds for proposing that such a condition be formally verified or refuted, there was also an inherent logic in that it could be argued that boys were unlikely to participate in singing themselves if they did not hear or appreciate other boys singing. Behind all of this, of course, lay the bigger question of why the audience for boys’ singing was seldom the peer group. This hypothesis led to the adoption of a mixed methods approach consisting of detailed case studies of boys who did sing and a larger scale survey of young people in schools who would potentially constitute the “peer audience” for the young singers.

“Peer audiences” were accessed through sampling of primary and secondary schools designed to gather data from Wales and a diversity of regions of England. Schools were selected to include a range of different types in which boys might be expected to sing as well as schools chosen on the grounds that music was not a particular feature of the curriculum. As far as possible considerations such as the need to achieve a spread of urban and rural location and differing ethnic and social class demographics were taken into account, although the nature and impact of the music department with regard to boys’ singing was the primary variable. This process resulted in contact with some 500 young people across the spread of secondary schools below. The primary schools visited were located in the catchment areas of the secondary schools marked with an asterisk. Nine KS2 classes were visited in total, mainly in the South West.

The main research instrument employed was a multimedia presentation based on either on the work of the young performers studied, or other similar performers. Audio samples of performances, short video sequences and visual examples of the way the singers had been imaged were included in a montage assembled with video production software. The multimedia presentation was employed in a two stage process based on two visits in person...
over a two month period of the six month’s full time funding of the project, continuing for a
further twelve months during the analysis and writing up phases. In each of the primary
schools, the Y5 and 6 classes (ranging from one to three in number according to the size of
the school) were visited. In the secondary schools, teachers were asked to identify a Y7, Y8
and Y9 class that would be timetabled for music during the days of the visit. Y10 or 11
GCSE sets were also visited in four of the schools.

| Town performing arts comprehensive, NW |
| City music specialist comprehensive, SE |
| Inner city-comprehensive, SW * |
| Rural performing arts comprehensive, SW * |
| Town comprehensive, Wales * |
| Town comprehensive, Isle of Man |
| City performing arts comprehensive, SW * |
| Choir school (independent), SE |
| Choir School (independent), SE |
| Choir School, (independent) SW |
| Choir & Music school (independent) NW |
| Boys’ grammar school (maths and science), SE |
| South London comprehensive |
| Rural business studies comprehensive, NW |
| Inner city comprehensive, SE |
| Co-educational HMC Public School, SE |
| Sport comprehensive, Midlands |

Focus groups of six male pupils, six female pupils and three male/three female pupils who
had seen the presentations were also arranged. Although it was planned to visit every school
twice, time constraints and timetabling difficulties resulted in second visits being made to
only four of the schools, focus groups at the other schools being fitted in during lunch breaks.
Pupils were questioned both about their own tastes and about the tastes of adults, for example
presented as people they might buy a CD for as a Christmas present. Data were recorded on
response forms issued with each lesson which captured quantitative elements analysed by
means of the SPSS package and qualitative comments written by the pupils for subsequent
coding through analytic software.

Selection of performers for interview was purposive and informed by the important work on
boys’ changing voices of John Cooksey. Cooksey (1993) has developed a highly influential
categorisation system that describes the characteristics of boys’ voices during six stages of
puberty. His work has largely refuted the misconception that boys’ voices simply “break”
and shown instead that there are distinct vocal qualities associated with a protracted period of
change. Only those performers whose voices were within the first three of Cooksey’s stages
were selected as it is these voices, possessed by boys between the approximate ages of ten
and fourteen, that are highly prized by adults as (potentially) the voices of angels. Boys were
targeted for interview in order to achieve a cross-sectional representation of every genre that
has exploited a pre-stage 4 male voice.

Each of the performers had recorded at least one CD album in addition to other performances
in concert, on stage or in film. Most of them, in consequence had varying degrees of
experience of being interviewed by the media. It was explained to them at the outset that the
research interviews, whilst in some ways initially similar to media interviews, were for
academic work that would analyse their answers more deeply and, through the process of
iteration, draw them into the analysis and theorisation. This approach was informed by grounded theory with its emphasis upon continuous interplay between analysis and data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and by the desire to be naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It reflected also the role of the young people as potentially co-participants in the process of reflection and meaning making, rather than as passive subjects of research (Alderson, 2003; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000; Ratcliff, 2000; O’Kane, 2000; Fine & Sandstrom, 1998). The approach is one that might indeed be traced back to John Dewey – democratic co-construction of knowledge, characterised by risk, and with nothing certain or absolute in mind.

- Three winners of the BBC chorister of the year competition
- A “natural” child voice allegedly “unspoiled” by training
- Tutoring by the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain
- Tutoring by a leading European Boys Choir
- Tutoring by a professional pop producer
- An opera performer trained by traditional Bel Canto methods
- A music theatre performer
- An Eisteddfod competitor
- An indie punk singer mentored by a rock band

Analysis was through transcription and the coding of emergent themes, supported by second order questioning and the cross referencing of interviews which were conducted as far as possible as professional discussions. Though they worked largely in isolation on their own albums, the boys showed some interest in the work of their professional rival peers when invited to look at these during interview. In the coding, age and sex of the audience were universal themes, the perceptions being (a) that the audience was mostly elderly and female and (b) that the ideal target audience was girls their own age. On this topic, the boys found common cause and appeared in some case to be relieved to hear of fellow sufferers who also “got the grannies”. However, another frequent theme was musical integrity and most of the performers were contemptuous of “bubble gum” or “candyfloss” pop in which a boy of their own age was deliberately imaged to appeal to “unsophisticated” teeny girls.

These perceptions correlated strongly with the results of the school surveys which revealed almost identical perceptions from the peer audience viewpoint. The most common reason given by peer audiences for not listening to the work of the boy performers, mentioned in over 90% or replies, was that the music was for old people and grannies (the word “granny” or similar words such as “nan” were used frequently and consistently). The second most frequently given reason, mentioned in 21% of cases was that the music was not created by the young singers themselves. School audiences appeared to place quite a high premium on originality and song writing. A word which was used by both performers and audiences with some frequency was “cute”. It appeared that a boy could be considered “cute” by a girl who might want to go out with him, but not by an aging mother who “might want to trade in her teenage son” and certainly not by another boy. The question was put directly to the boys of a cathedral choir. Fourteen were alarmed at being thought cute by boys, though not by girls. All but two felt strongly that boys should not be imaged as cute if other boys might see this.

‘Not boys, good if it is a girl. If it was a boy I would be quite terrified.’

It would appear that audiences and performers generally held the same views on the most significant matters and this raises one final ethical dilemma. The young singers accept the status quo of the hypothesis. Boys their own age are simply not going to listen to them.
Their singing is not something to share. It sets them apart and they are complicit in this process. It is not singing per se that is the problem, however. It is not even the fact that their voices are high. It is that they sing to please adults and the adult world has not engaged with the world of “normal” boys. This is explored now through one of the detailed cases studies which was conducted relatively late on in the research after all the principal themes had emerged.

**Cute and Commercial**

“Grant” (pseudonym) was a winner of the prestigious BBC Chorister of the Year award and a member of a treble boy band of some repute and with two well marketed CDs to its credit. I had been keen to include this particular group in the research because of the suggestion that their CDs had made the boy treble voice “cool”. In particular, I was struck by the marketing announcement that appeared on the band’s official website:

So what are <n band>? They are cute. They are commercial … They might sing like angels but they have discarded their traditional uniform of cassocks and surplices for Gap chinos, designer suits and trendy haircuts.

The word “cute” was interesting because it was quite clear from the work I had done to date that cute was emphatically not a word to use in promoting boys’ singing amongst boys. “Commercial” was an interesting word to employ. Presumably being commercial was some kind of a virtue. Of course, it would be an aspiration for the record company but beyond such a mundane consideration there was presumably something of sufficient merit to create demand. It was not that these boys had forsaken the “sound of angels” for, according to the marketing hype, they still “sing like angels”. Gap chinos, designer suits and trendy haircuts were what, apparently, made the sound of angels “cool”.

I met Grant in his home, one or other of his parents being present throughout the interview. We began with exploring a set of cartoon figures that I had used in all the school based research.

The figures are designed to show the stages of physical growth that correspond to stages of vocal maturity and most boys of Grant’s age (13) when asked to choose the figure that represents their current physical status of growth tend to choose the centre one. Grant did too, but when asked whether his actual choice would be his ideal choice he chose the figure to the right. I am asked him whether he was content with being a boy or whether he wished to leave childhood behind and was anxious to grow up. Contrary to the moral panic of “toxic
childhood” (Palmer & Leaman, 2006) he affirmed several times that he was content with being a boy. His idealisation of the figure to the right was due to its apparent possession of physical capital, not its status of more nearly approaching adulthood:

It’s great being a kid, but I’d like to be taller, bigger, stronger, muscly with a jutting out chin.

I hear a boy talking here! This is about sport isn’t it?

Yes! (face lights up). I like lots of sport (he reels off a long list which seems to include everything except tennis, which is singled out as not particularly liked). I don’t feel pressured, I love being a kid, rolling around in the mud, free to do what you like, playing in the paddling pool and getting all your clothes soaked. Getting in trouble with the teachers is the best part! (said with a broadening grin). Messing about and annoying the ones who can’t shout properly…

In this extract, three stereotypes of “normal” boyhood are confirmed in one go: plays sport; gets muddy; annoys teachers.

I presented Grant with a tabulation of the words used to describe his band on the marketing site and asked him to indicate on a scale of 1 – 10 how happy he was with each of the words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CUTE</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMMERCIAL</td>
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<td>ANGELIC</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>TALENTED</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHEEKY</td>
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<td>PURE</td>
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It is clear here that he shares the doubts about calling a boy “cute”. It is not an appropriate word for Grant any more than it is for his fellow performers or the “peer audiences” in schools. “Angel” is similarly uncertain, though less objectionable than cute.

Well, you’ve only given yourself a 9 for talent! Suitably modest! No one gives a 10!

It’s nothing to boast about. It’s good to know you have it, but you don’t go round shoving it in people’s faces.

So what about cute?

I can deal with it. I wouldn’t call myself cute, but, well, older people say when I sing, ‘Oh, you’re so cute’ (imitative voice) but it doesn’t bother me that much. I’m angelic sometimes, but most of the time probably not.

So you’d say it’s an occupational hazard?

Yes.

Cheeky, however, meets with his approval. It is part of what “normal” boys are supposed to be like - slightly rebellious, liable to leave their bedroom in a mess or cheek teachers. “Boys will be boys”.

The interesting finding is that to be “commercial”, unlike “cute” is perceived as virtuous.

What about commercial? Why is it quite good to be commercial?
Well, I’m with UMG. They make money if people buy the CD. That’s fair and it’s good for them.

The full significance of this young male orientation to commerce was not appreciated at the time of this case study. A later case study, in which another boy was the victim of intellectual property theft, has opened up significant further discussion that is dealt with elsewhere (Ashley, forthcoming.)

Next, it is Grant’s turn to validate what all his performer peers have said independently in their own interviews. The audience is elderly and female.

Who listens to you? Who is the audience for your singing?

Anybody! Anybody who wants to listen to it.

Who most?

Well, people who don’t go to church but who still want to listen to Christmas carols. Anybody who wants to listen to music of a certain genre.

Being?

Classical. It depends on what the person’s personality is. People at school talk ‘Ooh I’ve bought your CD for my Grandma’ (in falsetto voice) but I’ve got it on my phone and they go ‘Ooh give us a listen Grant!’

There is an interesting insight here. The music is for “grannies”, but there is still some recognition amongst the boys at school that Grant has exceptional talent. The boy is affirmed, but not the music that adults have chosen for him to sing. This is consistent with other case studies which appear to demonstrate that if a boy has good enough social skills to present as “normal” to other boys through (in Grant’s case) sport, messing about and cheekiness, he will be accepted. Grant was “normal” in another important way too. It was robustly the case that the ten to fourteen year old boys sampled in the schools did not listen to singing by boys of their own age. Neither did Grant.

Do you listen to other singers your own age?

No (said with some emphasis and finality). I’ve never been to anywhere singing when there are people my age. I listen to lots of older people and to violin soloists.

Why?

I love the violin. Totally. I’m more of a violinist than a singer.

This was generally the position across the other case studies too. Boy singers do not of their own volition listen to other boy singers. It was only during their discussions with me that some showed some interest in the recordings of other boys. The voices of boys are really of interest only to adults. I next moved to the most sensitive part of the interview, asking Grant what he thought peers in a school who did not know him would think of his CD. This was sensitive because I knew an answer and Grant did not.

What, though, if I went into a school where they’d never met you and just played your CD? What do you think their reaction might be?
I honestly have no idea!

For all the marketing and imaging hype of “Gap chinos, designer suits and trendy haircuts”, there has clearly been no attempt by the record company to address the deeper and more challenging questions raised in this paper. I explained as tactfully as I could to Grant that, on the basis of my research in schools, most boys his own age would find it incredible or rather “sad” that a boy of thirteen would want to sing music chosen by adults that appealed to grannies, whilst children in primary schools would simply imagine that he was a girl – paradoxically often because of the belief that “boys can’t sing that well” (Ashley, 2005; Joyce, 2005). He seemed to accept this. We concluded the interview with an interesting family discussion about bullying, role models and the dawning idea of being an “ambassador for singing”, introduced by Grant’s father in response to engagement with the issue.

Discussion

With regard to the key findings of this enquiry, data saturation (Bowen, 2009) occurred remarkably early on. Indeed the central problematic, that boys’ singing is only of interest to adults, was identified in the very first interview. The subsequent eleven case studies simply validated and expanded on this issue. In retrospect, I would currently argue that my discussions with Grant and his colleagues have an ethical basis in the democratic principles of John Dewey. I have been neither Grant’s critic nor his advocate through what is reported above. He and I together have constructed knowledge and he and I together have advanced in uncertainty. According to Webster (2009) Dewey’s view is of education as enabling persons to live a way of life characterised in part by engaging with all aspects of their life more intelligently than they are otherwise inclined (p96). To that extent, all the boy singers who have taken part in case studies have been engaged in education in the best sense of the word. Few would have reflected, for example, on the use of “cute” as an exploitative marketing ploy without the more intelligent engagement offered by the interview. There may be a possible impact in years to come when some of these boys themselves perhaps become record producers – or even just invite new generations of boys to follow the path of “angel voices”.

Grant has been afforded conventional anonymity in this paper. For those so inclined, there is a website and there are CDs with pictures in the shops. If it is “bad” for a boy to sing “granny music” and be dressed cutely, then Grant’s peers have had access to all that they need to inflict harm since well before the research took place. Some of them will doubtless have seen this material but it is not this that ultimately matters. Grant is judged by his peers on his social skills as a real boy and my dilemma would have been significantly greater had the difference between “real boy” and real boy been too great in Grant’s case. It is hegemonic masculinity that is the subject of critique here. Why is the concept so valorised by university academics (Quinn et al, 2006)?

The greater difficulties begin when this information is channelled through the knowledge transfer route. For those who want to know simply “what works”, there is little of succour. It can be said with some certainty that if what is desired is more boys singing in schools, then boy band albums with “Gap chinos, designer suits and trendy haircuts” do not work. There is doubt, however, whether this is new knowledge of real value and there is doubt that this is really much on the agenda of the music industry. For them, angel voices and designer suits do work because they sell albums. To whom and for what reason is not the issue. For as long

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as there is a succession of boys like Grant with exceptional talent, the status quo will continue to “work”.

Education, in the democratic sense, however is not about maintaining the status quo but challenging it and there is much here to challenge. First, there is the value system of the TV talent show that disempowers “ordinary” boys through making entertainment out of the ritual humiliation of young people with less talent than Grant. “Ordinary” boys are thus one step further removed from the wellbeing that is said to accrue through the social activity of singing together (Clist et al, op. cit.) Grant himself sees the commercial gain from the exploitation of his talent as “fair and good” – an issue of particular pertinence given the current panic within the music industry over young people’s perception of music downloads as legitimately free. My educative dialogue with Grant might usefully continue here, as it has in fact done through a subsequent case study (Ashley, forthcoming).

Of at least equal importance is the failure to engage with real boys that is revealed. Although there is now a growing rhetoric of “youth voice”, endorsed in the new Children’s Plan (DCSF, 2009) there are huge issues to be faced in music, music education, the conceptualisation of boyhood and the management of the so-called “problem with boys”. There is one thing I would change straight away were I to repeat my interview with Grant. The line “I hear a boy talking here! This is about sport isn’t it?” I would replace simply with “This is about sport isn’t it?” The unfortunate slip reveals that I perhaps have a hidden agenda. I want to replace the “cute” and therefore “weird” Grant with the “real” and therefore “normal” Grant. This is advocacy. An image of a boy playing sport I imagine is more likely to make Grant a role model for boys’ singing than an image of a granny’s darling. This, for better or worse, is the part of the knowledge that is being transferred in the current project.

I think this does a disservice to my own work and I have the uncomfortable feeling that I have not here managed the conflict between advocacy and critique as well as I might. What needs further critique is the discourse of “normality” in boys. Grant comes across in the interview as “normal” through his expressed interest in physical capital and sport. I have also argued elsewhere that there is no significant difference in participation in sport between populations of boys who sing and populations of boys who do not (Mecke, 2009). This is justified by analysis of the data I have collected, but it leads to no real epistemic gain (Muller, 2000). What do we really know about boys that we did not know before? We have confronted prejudice and stereotype – that choirboys are too soft to play sport – but is this knowledge of boys or knowledge of the popular media and the stereotypes it creates? I would submit that it is more the latter and there is much yet to be done in the radical field of critiquing the word “boy” itself as a generalisation.

Ultimately, I do not think this reduces to anything as simple as transfer of knowledge about “what works”. Dealing with the contention that boys at the “angel voice” stage only sing because adults desire their voices does not lend itself to a one way transfer of knowledge. It is a fundamentally democratic problem and real progress can only be made when there is mutual willingness to engage with principles such as those of Dewey. At stake are democratic, mutually respectful relationships between young people and adults. It is not sufficient, as does the National Music Manifesto, to state that music providers have to listen to what young people want and provide it. That is not democratic and it certainly fails to qualify as educative in any sense that would be recognised by Dewey. The stakeholders who are concerned with missing males in singing need to talk to the missing males, not subject
them to the latest instant remedy, foolishly believed a certainty because it has been purchased as a commodity of knowledge transfer. When they do, they must not neglect to put their own point of view. “Real adults” are not just there to provide young people with what they think they want.

**Conclusion**

Arguably it has been possible for a researcher to inhabit the dual identity of advocate and critic through an approach based in democratic ideals such as those of John Dewey. These demand a renegotiation of power relationships, in this case those between an adult researcher and a thirteen year old boy. Both parties subscribe to uncertainty and the epistemic claims made are not absolute. It has been argued that it is possible for a boy to continue to inhabit dual identities prescribed and proscribed by hegenomonic masculinity because the concept of hegemonic masculinity itself is questioned. Boys do not have to choose between “normality” and “weirdness” and significantly greater attentiveness to the diversity of individual lives is called for, even though conceptions of masculinity are already beginning to recognise the multiplicity of possibilities. Both researcher and researched in this case study share a dilemma with regard to their own positioning in relation to the stakeholders of the “missing males” syndrome of choral singing. Are they advocates or critics of a status quo, the challenging of which might lead to considerable uncertainties about the future status of “angel voices”. Is it the singers or the songs that should be the ultimate concern?

**References**


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