

Choral possible selves: The interaction of Australian males' past, present and future identities in shaping decisions about participation in choir

Sarah J. Powell

Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South NSW 2750, Australia

Sarah.Powell@westernsydney.edu.au

This paper reports on the findings related to the possible selves of males who participate in choir. It focuses on the perceptions of participants' past, present and future identities and the way these interact to influence decisions about choir. The paper is derived from a larger study, set in Australia, which investigated the perceptions of success, notions of masculinity and the impact of possible selves on male choral participation. Four choirs of different age groups were involved: junior school, secondary school, university and community. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, surveys and observational video analysis. Findings demonstrated that the strength of possible selves was influenced by past experience and present self-perception, which impacted future projections of self and subsequent decisions about choir. The research points to the importance of providing positive and fulfilling experiences of choir in school because of its positive impact on individual well being and the active pursuit of desired goals.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider how possible selves influence decisions regarding choral participation from the perspective of males belonging to four Australian choirs. The discussion is derived from a larger study, which explored perceptions of success, notions of masculinity, and the role of possible selves, and the way in which these themes interrelated and affected male choices about choir. This paper is framed by one of the study's research questions, which asks, *What is the role of possible selves in relation to male participation in choir?* In order to explore this question, literature that defines aspects of possible selves is summarized and the influence of socio-cultural context is considered, which is essential when analyzing the phenomenon of males singing in choirs within the context of an Australian ideology of masculinity.

Defining possible selves

Possible selves are the formulations of future identities, sometimes described as the ideal self (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Freer, 2009, 2010; Sica, 2009; Cross & Markus, 1994). They may represent desired, expected, or feared outcomes (or selves) or a combination of these. Markus and Nurius (1986) first conceptualised possible selves as future-oriented and with

three distinct yet connected strands: that which a person desires or hopes to become; that which they expect to become; and that which they fear or wish to avoid. Likewise, Carroll, Shepperd and Arkin (2009) describe possible selves as 'mental representations of one's aspirations and fears' (p. 550). The inherent temporality of possible selves means that the past, present and future all play an integral role in the formulation of self, which is 'a personalised and subjective cluster of different dimensions: current self, relational self, past, future and possible selves, unconscious self, and so on' (Sica, 2009, p. 222). Whilst possible selves are separate to the present or current self, they are intrinsically connected. They are products of the past, formed by positive or negative experiences, and they are representations of the future, both desired and feared. Cross and Markus (1994) suggest that possible selves bridge the gap between present self and future self and are a way of organising belief and action to achieve a desired result. Strahan and Wilson (2006) argue that the future or ideal self directly influences the current self and that this 'hypothetical self' (p. 3) prompts the individual to assess their present self and adjust their behaviour to reach a goal. Individuals with a well-developed self-concept are more able to visualise achieving their goals and are able to devise strategies to pursue that future self. Conversely, those without a detailed image of self are less likely to recognise their ability and subsequently lack the capacity to structure a path to attainment (Cross & Markus, 1994; Oyserman *et al.*, 2004). According to Cross and Markus (1994) this is particularly apparent when external forms of motivation or assistance are not available, making a person more 'vulnerable to the adverse effects of negative feedback about the self in that domain' (p. 424). Individuals with a variety of possibilities are also more inclined to follow positive paths to possible future selves, rather than focusing on avoiding negative possibilities (Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Oyserman *et al.*, 2004; Stevenson & Clegg, 2011).

The significance of context

The images of projected selves may be individually conceived, but they remain constructed within a set of contextual parameters and most often in reference to others (Erikson, 2007; Oyserman & James, 2011). Socio-cultural context limits a person to the norms of the cultural context in which they exist or of which they have had experience, however small or vicarious (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012). The theory of possible selves highlights the significance of social context in the conceptualization and striving for future selves. Sica (2009) suggests a reciprocal relationship whereby self and context simultaneously define and are defined by each other. The social construction of possible selves is supported by several researchers (Cross & Markus, 1994; Erikson, 2007; Freer, 2009, 2010; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & James, 2011; Sica, 2009). Welch (2007) argues from the perspective of music education saying that socio-cultural factors have the power to influence and 'shape musical behaviour' (p. 25).

Within socially constructed meaning is the socio-cultural construction of gender and it is essential to consider the 'socio-historical contexts within which individuals develop' (Anthis, Dunkel & Anderson, 2004, p. 151). Elmore and Oyserman (2012) argue that 'gender is a core identity' (p. 177) established early in life, where children interpret their world in terms of what is and is not acceptable to their gender's discourse, describing this learned response as 'gender congruent action' (p. 177). Males learn to conform to

that which has been socially assigned to the male gender and their ensuing congruent behaviour perpetuates these gender regimes and stereotypes (Connell, 2008) and gendered expectations (Knox, 2006).

Freer (2009) extends the discussion of possible selves to the male choral singer, arguing that a boy's self-esteem is indelibly linked to their perceived competence. He says 'boys ascribe self-esteem to skill and ability' (p. 342) and that motivation for an activity will follow if the conception of possible selves is strong.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss masculinity in any depth, understanding notions of masculinity is integral when considering the role of socio-cultural context as it influences male choices regarding choir. The perspective of Australian males in choir is discussed in more detail by Powell (2015), and Harrison (2012) suggests that,

Men who do participate in certain art-forms can be perceived as living outside the expected models of Australian masculinity and risk ridicule, bullying, and social rejection (p. 68).

Other research by Harrison (2001; 2007; 2010) strongly indicates the existence of a gender continuum in relation to musical instruments. He found that brass instruments and drums were on the masculine end of the continuum and singing, along with flute, was on the feminine end of the scale. Similar themes, also surrounding boys and music in Australia, were discovered by Collins (2009) who reports comments such as 'music is not a "manly" thing to do' (p. 35) and 'music is a girl's subject' (p. 37).

A major part behind the purpose of Choir 4 relates directly to this ideology of the 'Aussie bloke'. They both embody the ideology and challenge it with ironic, beautiful and high quality musical performances.

Methodology

The findings presented here form part of a research project, undertaken for the completion of a doctoral degree (PhD). The research investigated perceptions of success (Powell, 2013), masculinity (Powell, 2015) and possible selves in relation to males participating in choirs. The methodological approach combined aspects of phenomenology, case study and narrative inquiry in order to investigate the phenomenon of males singing in choirs, in an Australian context, by referring to four specific examples. Narrative inquiry provided the opportunity for boys and men to speak about their experience and offer insight into the phenomenon. Freer and Tan (2014) advocate the use of narrative inquiry saying it allows the researcher to '[hear] the opinions of boys themselves' (p. 176). All three approaches consider socially constructed meaning, individual experience and the importance of participant voice, relying on surveys, observations and interviews as the primary means for gathering data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Cresswell, 2007; Stake, 2000; Van Manen, 1997).

There were four choirs involved in the study, which were selected on the basis of their availability and willingness to participate, a level of recognized success, and location. Each choir came from Sydney or greater western Sydney areas and represented a different age group and context (see Figure 1 below). This was not a longitudinal study in that it

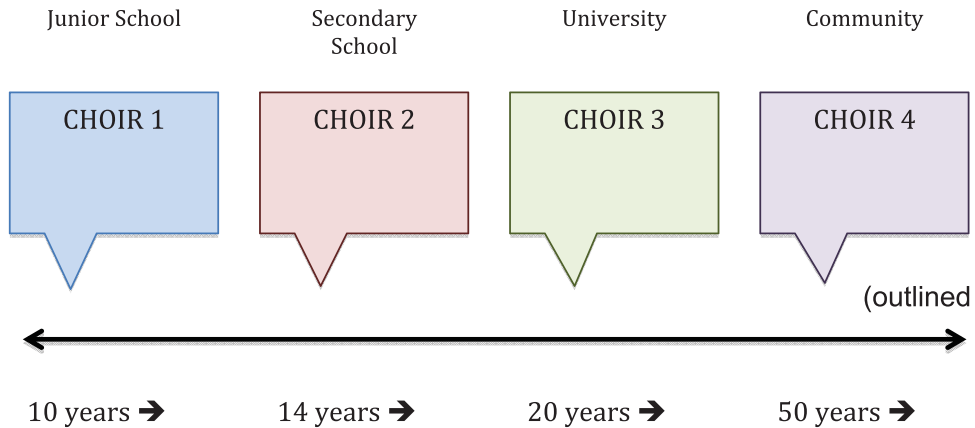


Figure 1. (Colour online) Participant choirs on the age continuum

did not follow participants over a long period of time. Rather it provided a ‘snapshot’ of distinct stages along an age continuum. Choir 1 was a Junior School choir at an independent school with approximately 50 boys aged 10–12 years, performing repertoire that ranged from Bach to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional songs, with piano accompaniment to a capella. Choir 2 was a mixed group from an independent Secondary School of about seven boys and eight girls aged 14–17 years whose repertoire was dominated by spiritual songs. Choir 3 was a university group consisting of ten males aged 20–24 years, who had auditioned to study the Bachelor of Music. This group was formed for a specific course unit, related to working as an ensemble and not necessarily related to their instrument major. Whilst the group did not sing as a choir outside this context they did spend an entire semester working together on a weekly basis preparing their chosen performance piece, ‘Lux Aurumque’ by Eric Whitacre. The preparation and the performance of this piece constituted their assessment. Choir 4 was a semi-professional group of 30–40 men with the majority of its members aged over 50 years. They performed music written and/or arranged by their conductor, across a range of musical styles but most of which involved humour and irony surrounding the notion of being a man. Choir 4 regularly performed at community events, toured nationally and internationally and continues to produce CD albums.

A range of methods was used to collect data in order to capture a variety of perspectives (outlined below in [Table 1](#)). The perceptions and experiences of choir members were gathered from the Choir Members Survey (CMS) and individual interviews. Focus groups were employed as a strategy to facilitate open conversation with the school-aged children of Choir 1 and 2 only. Audience responses were collected via a written, three-question Audience Members Survey (AMS), administered at each choir’s performance. These have not been included for discussion here because they did not specifically address the possible selves theme; however, the way in which audiences perceived success and masculinity vindicated the premise that socio-cultural context significantly affects the development of identity and available choices.

Table 1. Summary of data collected

Data Source	Choir 1	Choir 2	Choir 3	Choir 4
Number in choir (approx.)	50	15	12	30
Choir Members Survey (CMS)	40	8	8	13
Audience Members Survey (AMS)	136	120	17	91
Individual interview	5	4	3	3
Focus group	2	1	0	0
Video recording	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

One rehearsal and one performance of the choirs were recorded for the purpose of observation and video analysis. The use of video sought to capture action, gesture and facial expression, recognizing the importance of the unspoken as well as the spoken (Paterson, Bottorff & Hewat, 2003). It also meant that the researcher's perspective was intentionally situated in the research.

Questions from the CMS directly related to possible selves asked participants about their past and current involvement in choir. This included questions such as *Why is choir important to you?* and *Have you belonged to other choirs in the past?* Participants were also asked to comment on their projected choral participation, demonstrated by questions such as *Is choir something you wish to continue doing into the future?* and *What would stop you belonging to choir?*

This paper focuses on data obtained through interviews, focus groups and the Choir Members Survey (CMS). The conductors were an important part of this research and so several references are made to their responses. These support the findings associated with choir members. Data from conductor interviews highlight the significance of past selves and the influence of family and school experience. All four conductors (three male) reported positive experiences of music and singing throughout their lives from a young age. In addition four professional conductors from the United Kingdom and one from Australia were interviewed and all five described a similar pattern of experience of singing, music and choir as that discussed by the boys and men in this study's choirs.

Findings and Discussion

As stated, this paper is framed by the research question, *What is the role of possible selves in relation to male participation in choir?* Participant responses demonstrate that possible selves play a significant role in influencing male participation in choir. The interaction of past, present and future selves impact decision-making, self-perception and aspirations for the future. A summary of the findings is presented below in Table 2. The summary indicates that participants' past selves were defined by family background, experience of music during school and prior choral experience. Present or current selves were described in terms of participants' self-perception and self-confidence, whilst future selves were evident in discussions about the purpose of choir and preparation for personal goals and events.

Table 2. Summary of possible selves findings

		CHOIR 1 <i>Junior School</i>	CHOIR 2 <i>Secondary School</i>	CHOIR 3 <i>University</i>	CHOIR 4 <i>Community</i>
PAST	Family influence	Parents & grandparents sing or in band (H)	Parents sing or in band (M) Normal part of life (M)	Mum sings (L) Dad does not (L)	Musical parents (M) Normal part of life (L)
	Positive experience of school music	Instrumental tuition, music teacher, other music activities (H)	Sing in class and junior school, play instrument (M)	Instrumental tuition, good junior school, teach own students (H)	Negative singing experience (L) Normal part of school (M)
	Experience of choir	Enjoyment (H)	Enjoyment (H) Junior school choir (M)	Enjoyed at school (H) Involved in other choirs & musical companies (M)	Enjoyed at school (M) Involved in other choirs (H) No school choir (L)
PRESENT	Self-perception	Level of ability (L)	Based on opinion of others (M)	Values ability & sound (L)	Level of ability (L)
	Self-confidence	Resilience (L)	Fear of criticism (M)	Based on ability & identity (H)	Leading (L)
FUTURE	Purpose	Vocal improvement (L)	Vocal training (M)	Musical improvement (M)	Musically, socially & personally fulfilling experience (H)
	Preparation	Concerts, competitions, school events (H)	Solo performance career (H)	Course completion, career (H)	Tours, CD recordings, performances (H)

Key: Rate of response – (H) High (M) Moderate (L) Low

The Past

Family influence

The boys in Choir 1 talked extensively about their involvement in music, with many saying they came from 'quite a musical background' (Choir 1, Focus Group 2). One 10-year-old said, 'It's sort of in my blood because my whole family, like my grandparents had eight kids and every one of them likes to sing. So I guess that sort of makes me want to sing' (Choir 1, Focus Group 2). The boys in Choir 2 and the young men in Choir 3 reported a similar experience. One Choir 2 adolescent commented on singing with his family, saying, 'Me, my brother, my dad – that is what we do – that's a big part of me' (Choir 2, Focus Group). Conductor 3 said his 'Mum was a singer' (Choir 3, Conductor 3) and a member of Choir 4 reflected, 'I feel privileged to have had, particularly in early childhood, what I got from my mother' (Choir 4, Interview 1). Responses to *Why is the choir important to you?* (CMS, Question 10) demonstrated the influence of family. One boy wrote, 'My family loves big choirs so I wanted to try one and I LOVED IT' (Choir 1, CMS, Question 10).

Positive experience of school music

For many participants, positive past musical experience provided the foundations for their future musical pursuits. Boys from Choir 1 had instrumental lessons at school and reported being in the choir at their 'old school' (Choir 1, Interview 1). They also mentioned school events such as going to the 'Opera House [to] sing with other schools' (Choir 1, Interview 2). A 17-year-old from Choir 2 said, 'the foundations of how to sing were laid when I was in primary school' and because of the school culture 'it was normal for everyone to join the band and the choir' (Choir 2, Interview 1). The interaction witnessed between Conductor 2 and some of the older Choir 2 boys is another example of choir being a positive musical experience. The rapport that had been developed between the boys and the conductor was clearly evident and was characterised by the use of humour. It highlighted choir as a safe, relational and important space for these boys, where they had fun, respected each other and enjoyed a strong sense of belonging.

Choir 3 was able to reflect on school experience and many members described being in choirs and having instrumental tuition throughout school. These young men were actively pursuing a career in music and attributed this, at least in part, to their early and positive exposure to music at school and home.

Survey responses showed that Choir 4 members had participated in primary school choirs, university choirs, and later in community choirs. Most men in this group described a similar pattern: as young boys they sang in choir at school and some at church; they were involved at university and then they stopped, coming back to choir much later in life. One man wrote, 'Stopped singing in my early 20s as other typical activities were more important, e.g. Football, tennis and beer' (Choir 4, CMS, Question 3). Like many others, one man described singing as normal school practice, saying, 'the school I went to was a boys' school and it was just a natural thing that there was singing' (Choir 4, Interview 2). In contrast another participant did not have a choir at his school, however, his recollection of childhood singing supports the power of the family environment:

I do remember very clearly doing a lot of singing as an infant, you know, in bed; going to sleep; the top of my voice; very high; very in tune, I'm told. (Choir 4, Interview 1)

There were varying degrees of family involvement but it was presented as a positive fact and one that also provided participants with extra opportunities to be involved in musical activities and it provided an environment where music and singing was a normal part of everyday life. These findings are strongly supported by the work of Barrett (2012) who argues that the musical support received from family is vital for the musical development of children.

The Present

Self-confidence and self-perception

The extent to which individuals may feel confident to follow a desired path is an expression of identity, particularly as it relates to possible selves. Self-confidence and self-perception play an integral role in making choices, and although influenced by past experience, current perceptions of ability have the power to determine an individual's direction. As Choir 1 boys suggested, some boys may choose to avoid choir because they think they 'have a bad voice' (Choir 1, Interview 1), or they are 'not up to standard' (Choir 1, Interview 2) or 'maybe they don't think they're good enough' (Choir 1, Interview 3). The importance of self-perception and self-confidence was clearly communicated by this 15-year-old:

I've got confidence. I really like my voice. I think I'm pretty happy with the tone, and my range is all right. I play and sing at a restaurant, so I'm confident, I'm good at it, that's pretty successful. (Choir 2, Focus Group)

Conductor 2 recognised the importance of developing self-confidence and healthy self-perception in the boys, which was highlighted by his encouragement of the boys.

Conductor 3 acknowledged the importance of knowing which path to follow, but he also believed it was important to know what you did not want to do. It is important to note that Choir 3 was formed for a unit of study in a degree program and in this context the group chose the leader. Conductor 3 was selected because the other students 'were not confident in their ability to do it' (Choir 3, Conductor 3) but his self-perception meant Conductor 3 felt confident to rely on his musical experience to fulfil the role. His comments highlight the significance of self-confidence and self-perception. For example he believed that 'if you were a bad singer in your mind, I would imagine that would be quite a daunting thing, to put yourself out there' (Choir 3, Conductor 3).

For Conductor 4 it was important to provide a fulfilling present experience of choir and like Conductor 2 he saw this as impacting the personal futures of those involved. He said, 'I'm looking for a nice movement within myself and nice movement from those guys in their journey towards whoever they are becoming' (Choir 4, Conductor 4).

Whilst the quality of the present experience was integral to participation, it was also strongly linked to preparation for the future.

The Future

Purpose and preparation

Participants across the four choirs communicated a focus on career and upcoming performances or competitions, where choir served a specific purpose and potential future. According to a Choir 1 boy the purpose of choir was to 'improve your voice a bit' (Choir 1, Interview 2). Another said, 'For me, choir is important because I want to be an artist when I'm older, so being in a choir now can teach me how to sing' (Choir 1, Focus Group 2). A Choir 2 boy belonged to the choir because he could not afford singing lessons. Choir was a preparatory step, the purpose of which was to 'help develop my voice [and] get me better prepared for the future' (Choir 2, Interview 2). CMS responses revealed similar ideas:

It is a place where I can improve my singing skills. (Choir 2, CMS, Question 9)

I want to learn how to become a better singer. (Choir 1, CMS, Question 10)

To sing at a professional level. Honing of music skills. (Choir 4, CMS, Question 10)

Several boys in Choir 1 wanted to become reputable sportsmen, and even though the realisation of this was distant, it remained real and attainable. In contrast and possibly because they were older, the boys in Choir 2 described goals that seemed more likely to be achieved. This is applicable to the men in Choir 3, who were actively engaged in securing their future through tertiary education. They demonstrated a strong group persona during their rehearsal, taking on a demeanour that was focused, professional and serious. Their decisions showed them actively pursuing their goals:

So that's actually a bit of an aim for me; to get choirs started again in primary school.

Music is a really important part of life, I think, and with that missing, you're missing out on a lot. (Choir 3, Interview 2)

Another member of Choir 3 stated the importance of resilience, which is relevant to striving for an identity and the pursuit of a desired future self. This young man said that his attitude towards himself had been instrumental in changing the way other people perceived and treated him. This reflects a theory of possible selves in its notion of avoiding an unwanted or feared self. After being harassed about his sexuality he described challenging the insults by embracing them:

As soon as I did that in Year 11, people didn't insult me; people actually liked me.

They were like, 'Oh, my god, who is this kid, he's awesome! He's come out of his shell. He's funny, he's really witty...' All because I took [something] that was deemed an insult – that I should persecute myself for – and removed the fact that it was an insult. (Choir 3, Interview 1)

For the men of Choir 4 the future involved establishing and cultivating friendships with 'good blokes' and the choir provided them with the opportunity 'to be 'artistic' and [let their] 'creative' juices flourish' (Choir 4, CMS, Question 10). One man said that if this group ceased to exist he would look elsewhere because,

I really enjoy the experience of singing, so I'd be looking for the community choir setting, I guess, because I find it so rewarding. (Choir 4, Interview 2)

A major component related to future for this group was practising the group's on-stage persona. This was a tangible thing that the group planned and practised, and it was reflected in the facial expressions, hand gestures, 'dance' moves, and hat costumes involved in their songs. All of this confirmed a strong group identity and the men could project this image into the future, planning for it and practising it. Strahan and Wilson (2006) describe the temporal nature of possible selves reflected here by a number of the participants. They argue that if the subjective attachment to a possible future is strong then that outcome remains close to an individual regardless of how distant the eventuation of that reality may be.

Concluding comments

According to Erikson (2007) experiencing the future in the present is an essential part of the realisation of potential futures, both desired and unwanted. This understanding is supported by Creech *et al.* (2013) and Oyserman *et al.* (2004) who add that such experience contributes to the construction of well-developed or detailed possible selves, which in turn develop stronger motivation for the pursuance of future-orientated ambitions. Additionally, temporal relationships between past, present and future selves are discussed by Strahan and Wilson (2006), who propose that a distant goal can remain an imminent reality if the motivation to achieve this end is strong. The four choirs in this research all demonstrated different stages of possible selves development. They showed that future participation in choir was a reality because the past and present experience of choir was positive, supported by family and remained psychologically close (Strahan & Wilson, 2006).

Although discussion about the future inherently involves speculation, a theory of possible selves suggests that an individual can only use past and present realities to inform their potential futures. The participants projected a future based on their experience of choir in the past and present, which had developed their personal, musical, social and life skills.

Findings from this research strongly suggest that the past, the present and the future were intrinsically connected and that a positive experience of choir, both past and present, had a significant influence on future participation. It was also apparent that to varying degrees, largely dependent on age, participants had experienced the future in the present. For example, enjoying success in present performances provided a taste of potential performance career. When this factor is coupled with constructive musical background, provided by family and school, it reveals the way in which positive and detailed possible selves are developed. It also strongly advocates that the role of possible selves is substantial in directing the decisions of boys and men regarding participation in a choir. Having strong and positive possible selves – past, present and future – enables males to choose choir participation if they want to. A developed sense of identity, with all its possibilities, provides them with the strength to challenge and defy stereotypes and restrictive ideologies, prevalent in some Australian socio-cultural contexts, and subsequently experience the musical and social stimulation unique to a choir.

The challenge, therefore, goes out to music educators and choral directors alike, to continue to strive to provide students with an enjoyable and meaningful experience of

music and choir, recognising that music and singing is an integral part of every person, not just as individuals but as they exist within a family culture and a social context. Music plays an extensive and essential role in the identities and futures of young people as they follow their aspirations for the future.

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APPENDICES:

1. Choir Members' Survey questions

1. Do you like to sing?
2. Have you always liked to sing?
3. Where do you sing?
4. Are there situations or places in which you feel more comfortable singing?
5. What sort of music do you like to sing?
6. Do you have any say in what music the choir sings?
7. Have you experienced any difficulties singing in the choir? For example, physical, social, or parental.
8. What do your friends think of you being part of the choir?

9. Why is belonging to the choir important to you?
10. Would you describe your choir as a success? Why?
11. Why do you think boys might find it hard or avoid belonging to a choir?
12. Is singing in a choir something you would like to do in the future?

2. Choir Members' Interview and Focus Group Schedule

1. What are the things you enjoy most about singing in the choir?
2. Are there things about belonging to the choir that you do not enjoy?
3. How would you describe success in the choir setting?
4. Do you consider this choir successful?
5. Do you consider yourself a successful singer?
6. Have you experienced difficulties related to being a boy in a choir?
7. Why do you think more boys do not belong to choirs?
8. Is singing in a choir something you would like to continue doing in the future?
9. What would stop you from belonging to the choir?
10. Why is being part of the choir important to you?

Sarah J. Powell has a background in music education with several years' experience as a classroom music teacher (Preschool – Year 12). She studied at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, completed a Master of Education and Master of Teaching Honours through the University of Western Sydney; and has recently graduated with her doctorate. Her PhD research investigated perceptions of success, notions of masculinity, and identity as it relates to boys and men participating in choirs. She currently works in the Centre for Educational Research and teaches within the School of Education Master of Teaching (Secondary) and Master of Education programs.