

A study of teachers' perceptions of the National Children's Choir.

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

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Abstract

In 1985, Seán Creamer, a music inspector with the Department of Education and Science, established a choral programme in the Republic of Ireland: the National Children's Choir [NCC]. The intention behind the NCC is to provide primary school children with the opportunity to enhance their music education, develop a love for choral singing, and to perform in concert. Since its inception, over 160,000 children have participated in the programme. It remains largely unstudied, however, and as such, its full effects and benefits are not fully understood. This study examines teachers' perceptions of the NCC. Using qualitative methodology, the research data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Six teachers of various backgrounds were selected from three different schools to share their experiences of the NCC. The research was undertaken due the researcher's particular passion for choral singing and belief in the importance of music education.

This research explores the benefits and challenges of the NCC for children, how it impacts development of musical and personal skills, and how it contributes to their sense of confidence. In line with literature on the benefits of choral singing, the findings of this research reveal that participation in the programme improves children's musical skills and leads to improved confidence and self-esteem levels. The research also examines the teachers' own experiences of the programme, including the effectiveness of the resources provided, the importance of school support, and how teachers' confidence levels in teaching music influence their experiences. The data reveal an overwhelmingly positive general opinion regarding the NCC and its value in the music education of primary school children. Recommendations for further research which emerged from the data include if low confidence levels in teachers exclude them from the NCC - and if so, if further continuous professional development is required - and if the demographic, culture, and location of a school impacts its experience of the NCC.

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List of Abbreviations

ANA: Additional Needs Assistant

CBOI: Cross Border Youth Orchestra of Ireland

CPD: Continuous Professional Development

DES: Department of Education and Skills

Fig. : Figure

INTO: Irish National Teachers' Organisation

MD: Musical Director

NCC: National Children's Choir

NCH: National Concert Hall

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

ROI: Republic of Ireland

U.K: United Kingdom

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Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses the National Children's Choir [NCC], which is at the heart of this research. It also offers an overview of the position of music in Irish primary schools, and outlines the aims and purpose of the dissertation.

1.1 Research Aims

The purpose of this dissertation is to answer the question, what are teachers' perceptions of the NCC? Six teachers from three schools were interviewed about the benefits and challenges of the NCC for the children. The research also seeks to gather insights regarding the teachers' experiences of the programme, and to assess the value of the NCC in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [ROI].

1.2. Background of The National Children's Choir

Established in 1985, the NCC is considered as "one of the most renowned music programmes for primary schools" (Irish National Teachers' Organisation [INTO], 2009, p. 52). The key aims of the NCC are to foster a love for choral singing and to enhance children's musical education (National Children's Choir [NCC], 2017). Such ideals echo comments made by choral practitioner, Doreen Rao, who says "singing in choirs has always provided the kind of enjoyment associated with working together, improving, and realizing the highest standards" (Rao, 1993, p. 45).

The NCC takes place biennially in the ROI for primary school students from fourth to sixth class. Teachers establish choirs within their school consisting of students from these classes, and learn repertoire set by the NCC with the aim of eventually coming together with local schools to rehearse and perform as an amassed choir. These amassed rehearsals, or

‘cluster rehearsals’, occur three times a year, and are led by a specialist music teacher or one of the NCC’s three musical directors [MD] - each of whom is both a choral expert and a primary school practitioner (Doyle, 2019). The repertoire ranges from popular to classical music, the standard of which is intended to challenge the children. (Thundering harmonies, 1999). As of 2019, 160,000 children have participated (Doyle, 2019).

NCC founder, Seán Creamer, stated that a key philosophy of the NCC is that “absolutely every child gets to sing in a public concert, whether they can sing well or not” (“Thundering harmonies, 1999). As such, under the direction of a NCC MD, each child performs in a regional concert as part of the programme. Teachers also choose a small cohort to represent their schools at the finale performance in the National Concert Hall [NCH] (NCC, 2017). Each of these concerts is a large production in which the amassed choir performs with orchestra.

The NCC also promotes the continuous professional development [CPD] of the teachers (Doyle, 2019). It provides training in the form of a summer course and refresher courses, in which teachers learn the repertoire and are instructed on musical interpretation. The MDs serve as models of good practice for the teachers who observe their work - a method of CPD widely appreciated by teachers (Doyle, 2019). The programme is a useful resource for teachers in this regard, as - despite their being expected to deliver the entire school curriculum - training in music is generally minimal (The Arts Council, 2008). The NCC’s training of teachers recognises that children learn best from teachers who are “not limited in their ability to grasp important new musical ideas” (Ferreira, 1993, p. 25).

Since the NCC’s inception, other music education programmes have emerged, including the Cross Border Orchestra of Ireland [CBOI] Peace Proms, a choral programme akin to the NCC which is open to primary school choirs of all levels. It is similar to the NCC

in that it sets repertoire, and individual choirs will eventually combine to perform as a single group in large-scale concert. The programme does not provide such extensive CPD, however; only a workshop with the Peace Proms conductor (Doyle, 2019). The NCC can be considered a flagship of sorts in this regard. Despite the development of these programmes, however, the profile of choral singing in Irish primary schools is still somewhat low on an international level (The Arts Council, 2008).

1.3. Importance and Relevance of this Research

Many aims within the music curriculum are achievable through choral singing (Doyle, 2019). Group music-making offers children “the joy of shared experiences which demand collaboration”, and which “contributes to the child’s developing creativity and self-esteem” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1999, p. 5). As such, the NCC is designed in part to satisfy requirements laid out by the music curriculum (NCC, 2017).

An emphasis on song-singing in the curriculum prevails today (NCCA, 1999), continuing a tradition established by the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland in 1840 (Stakelum, 2008a). Singing plays a key role in music education (Rao, 1993). Furthermore, song-singing is celebrated as a means by which *all* children can experience and enjoy music performance:

This strand dwells on the importance of using the voice, the first and most accessible instrument for the child, both for the sheer enjoyment of performance and as a means through which musical skills may be expanded ... a vital aspect of the child’s early musical development (NCCA, 1999, p. 6).

Given that the NCC incorporates the music curriculum (NCC, 2017), and that many teachers lack confidence with singing (Doyle, 2019), schools may consider it a valuable

resource with which to achieve their objectives in teaching music. The need for such a programme is pertinent as, despite the Department of Education [DES] viewing arts, including music, as “integral” to the curriculum, the INTO admits that achieving excellence in arts education at times goes “unrealised” due to inadequate funding, resources, and teacher training (INTO, 2009, p.30). In light of such systemic weaknesses, one might question the support of music education in the ROI compared with countries such as Hungary, where students sing in school every day and vocal instruction is compulsory for the first eight years (INTO, 2009). Conversely, only three hours per week is dedicated to arts education in Irish primary schools (NCCA, 2016).

These hours are particularly vulnerable since 2012, when the DES demanded that further time be spent on literacy and mathematics (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011). The INTO and NCCA report that this resulted in teachers sacrificing certain areas in an attempt to prioritise the teaching of these core subjects (NCCA, 2016). Research shows that arts are generally low priority for many teachers, and will often be the first subjects to be ignored (Russell-Bowie, 2009; Hennessy, 2000).

Considering the precarious position of curriculum music just outlined, this research seeks to investigate the value of the NCC programme. Though the NCC is long-established, little research has been done on it (with the exception of forthcoming research by Richard Coady). This research aims to rectify this by revealing teachers’ perceptions of the NCC, including benefits for the children and teachers’ own experiences.

1.4. Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. Chapter one has outlined the focus of this research and introduced the NCC. The second chapter reviews the relevant literature, specifically that which explores the effects of music education, the power of choral singing,

and the underlying issue of teacher confidence levels. Chapter three discusses the methodology used to gather data and outlines the backgrounds of the participants involved. The fourth chapter discusses and analyses the findings of the research under the main themes which emerge from the data. Finally, chapter five summarises these findings, concluding with suggestions based on data and literature, and makes several recommendations for future study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews literature pertinent to the study regarding teachers' perceptions of the NCC. It discusses literature pertaining to the cross-curricular and intrinsic benefits of music education, and which assesses children's development and enjoyment levels. As the focus of this study is on a choral singing programme, literature relating to singing and the benefits of choral singing is also examined, as well choral programmes similar to the NCC. Finally, because the research is based on teachers' perceptions, it addresses the role of the teacher in facilitating music education, and related issues of teacher confidence levels.

2.2. The Benefits of Music Education

The wealth of benefits related to learning music has long been documented. Many scholars acknowledge the cognitive and academic advantages of learning music, and its particular cross-curricular and intrinsic values to the learner. The music curriculum encapsulates these values in its aims to promote children's musical enjoyment while also striving to develop "the whole spectrum of the child's intelligence" (NCCA, 1999, p. 5).

2.2.1. Cross-curricular benefits.

Emphasis is frequently put on the value of music's transferable skills (Doyle, 2019; Welch, 2012; Hallam, 2010; Pitts, 2000). Active engagement with and exposure to music have been shown to have a direct impact on intellectual development, with the cross-curricular benefits to areas such as mathematical skills, and language and literacy development having received particular attention (Hallam, 2010).

2.2.1.1. Mathematical skills.

Correlations are widely accepted between the benefits of music-making and advanced mathematical skills (An & Tillman, 2015; Hallam, 2010; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Pitts, 2000). Susan Hallam notes the results of multiple studies (Haley, 2001; Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanga, 1999) in which the correlation between music education and mathematical achievement was evident. One such study, conducted by Noel Geoghegan and Michael Mitchelmore in 1996, revealed that the children who participated in musical activities scored higher in mathematics assessments than the children who did not (Hallam, 2010).

A 2015 study conducted by Song A. An and Daniel A. Tillman strongly confirmed the correlation between music activity and mathematical achievement. Their study examined the effects of using music in the elementary school classroom as a direct means of teaching mathematics. Activities such as music composition were used to teach different mathematics topics to the participating children. The results of this study showed that the children's mathematical skills, such as analysing and interpreting, improved as a result of these lessons. The conclusion of the research strongly suggested that "teachers should take advantage of the opportunities that music offers as an authentic and engaging context to help students learn mathematics" (An & Tillman, 2015, p. 56).

2.2.1.2. Language and literacy development.

Literature also highlights the connections between music education and improvement in reading ability (Hallam, 2010; Piro & Ortiz, 2009; Douglas & Willatts, 1994). There is evidence that music activity, especially rhythmic training, helps children with dyslexia to learn how to read (Overy, 2003). Achievement in phonological awareness in early and emergent readers, too, is enhanced by musical activity (Schlaug, Norton, Overy & Winner, 2005; Anvari, Trainor, Woodside, & Levy, 2002). Hallam's research finds that those with musical training are better able to encode linguistic patterns, which is "critical to developing phonological awareness which in turn contributes to learning to read successfully" (Hallam,

2010, p. 272). She explains that melodic contours and intonation can be processed and understood in the same way as language, and it has been found that listening skills developed through exposure to music can be applied directly to language comprehension (Hallam, 2010). As such, engagement with music can be predictive of reading skill (Anvari et al., 2002).

A Swiss research project undertaken in 1993 proved that increasing the amount of time dedicated to teaching music in the classroom had no detrimental effect on language and reading skills, despite less time being spent directly on these latter areas. In addition, findings from this research showed that increased time dedicated to music resulted in children who were more well-adjusted and had positive attitudes to learning generally (Spsychiger, Patry, Lauper, Zimmerman, & Weber, 1993; Zulauf, 1993). This researcher concurs with Deirdre Russell-Bowie's findings that the positive effects of music education on such fundamental and important curricular areas suggest reason enough for policy makers to promote music in the school timetable (Russell-Bowie, 2009).

2.2.2. Music's intrinsic value.

It is not only these direct connections between music, numeracy, and literacy, that lead to better academic success. Scholars indicate that personal skills developed through music education, such as self-discipline and perseverance, are also influential in educational achievement (Kokotsakai & Hallam, 2007; NCCA, 1999).

Literature shows that children's participation in music education and activities increases their self-esteem (Welch, 2012; Hallam, 2010; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Kokotsakai & Hallam, 2007; Dolloff, 1997). As a result of increased levels of self-esteem, Hallam noted that children were more intrinsically motivated, and showed a greater sense of self-efficacy, self-discipline, and persistence (Hallam, 2010; McPherson & Zimmerman, 2002). Gary

McPherson and Barry Zimmerman explained the effects of this, saying, “when musicians' self-motivational beliefs are enhanced, they are more likely to feel inclined to continue their cyclical self-regulatory efforts in order to attain their goals” (McPherson & Zimmerman, 2002, p. 342). Children who possess such qualities are more likely to experience greater success in school compared with children who have lower levels of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation (Bandura, 2008; McPherson & Zimmerman, 2002; Perry & VandeKamp, 2000).

Beyond this, there is also the argument of music for *music's sake*, and several scholars paint music in a light which looks beyond the benefits it provides in terms of academic achievement. Stressed in Stephanie Pitts's writing is the *holistic* nature of music and its power in allowing self-expression, emotional discovery, and personal understanding. She concurs with and emphasises Brocklehurst's views, written thirty years before her own: “most obvious are the opportunities music can provide as a means of self-expression, for awakening and developing the imagination and for emotional and spiritual development” (Pitts, 2000, p. 39). It is important, therefore, to recognise that music's value surpasses the strictly academic (Kokotsakai & Hallam, 2007; Pitts, 2000; Elliot, 1995; Swanwick, 1988)

Educational psychologists, Piaget and Vygotsky, view active, explorative learning, such as that found in the national music curriculum (NCCA, 1999) as key to a child's development regarding emotional regulation, self-worth, and social skills (Timmons, Pelletier, & Corter, 2016; Semmar & Al-Tahni, 2015; Wood & Bennett, 1998). Music education through this lens emphasises the holistic value of *process* in participating, as opposed to the end *product*. An Australian study by de Vries highlighted the value of music process for the children, saying “for our children it's not about ‘performing’, it's about doing and enjoying music every day” (de Vries, 2015, p. 216).

Hallam details the intrinsic positive effects of music-making on creativity, emotional development, health, and well-being (Hallam, 2010). Russell-Bowie's research presented similar findings, and affirmed that "the creativity and problem solving skills children develop ... are vital to creating a well-rounded child able to perform confidently in the twenty-first century" (Russell-Bowie, 2009, p.24). Hallam acknowledges there might be some bias in the research, as many of her research participants are teachers who personally value music (Hallam, 2010). Nonetheless, the literature generally suggests that the benefits of music are vast.

2.3. The Power of Singing and Choral Singing

The power of singing - and choral singing in particular - is an area of ongoing interest for researchers (Doyle, 2019). Literature deems singing to be an enjoyable activity which is beneficial for emotional well-being, develops social skills, and contributes to overall physical health.

2.3.1. Emotional and health benefits of choral singing.

Literature attributes many emotional benefits for the individual to singing in choral settings, including emotional well-being, self-esteem, a sense of purpose, concentration, and increased feelings of confidence (Doyle, 2019; Welch, 2012; The Arts Council, 2008; Kokotsakai & Hallam, 2007; Dolloff, 1997). Indeed, several writers comment on the inherently social-emotional benefits of choral singing, and how they lead to increased feelings of inclusion, belonging, and camaraderie, as well as creating a positive group identity (Hallam, 2010; Welch, Saunders, Himonides & Papageorgi, 2009; Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007;). In research undertaken by Dimitra Kokotsakai and Susan Hallam in 2007, students described feelings of pride, achievement, and excitement associated with performing music in a group, and cited the development of social skills, teamwork, and mutual encouragement as contributing to

their overall enjoyment of the music-making process (Kokotsakai & Hallam, 2007). These comments are supported by Hallam, who reports that endorphins released whilst singing in a group lead to a sense of joy and happiness, with singers feeling a “high” (Hallam, 2010, p. 281). The American Academy of Teachers of Singing confidently declared in 1998 that singing “makes for happiness, and endows life with an added zest” (Adams, 1999, p. 14). In essence, singing is acknowledged to be a cathartic activity which serves as a vessel for self-expression and personal enjoyment (Doyle, 2019; Hallam, 2010; Welch et al.; 2009; Adams, 1999).

The benefits of singing also extend to physical well-being (Doyle, 2019; Welch, 2012; Hallam, 2010; Adams, 1999). Much literature attests to the physical health benefits of singing, including contributions to respiratory and cardiac function, the immune system, fine and gross motor control in the vocal system, the relaxation of physical tension, and neurological function (Welch, 2012; Hallam, 2010). Graham Welch found from his study that the act of singing is conducive to “longevity, stress reduction, and general health maintenance” (Welch, 2012, p. 1).

2.3.2. Choral singing programmes.

Choral singing can be a powerful example of the holistic musical experience, as outlined earlier by Pitts and other scholars. This is also evidenced in the following choral projects which examine the value of choral singing for children, their teachers, and communities.

The *North York Choral Development Project*, founded by Doreen Rao was a project in which provided seminar-based choral training to teachers to support their choral work in schools. The project culminated in these teachers combining their school choirs to form a board-wide choir for a final performance. Throughout the process, teachers who were interviewed remarked on a noticeable growth in the quality of vocal production in the

children, the level of the children's musical interactions, musical vocabulary, confidence, and performance (Dolloff, 1997). Notable, too, is the feeling of empowerment reported by teachers who partook in the project, one of whom said "I have achieved some things that I would never have attempted on my own ... I feel a growing confidence in my abilities for choir directing" (Dolloff, 1997, p. 94). Rao summarised the aims of her choral projects as "to achieve self-growth and enjoyment by teaching musicianship that will serve the whole person after schooling is over" (Rao, 1993, p. 45), which Lori-Anne Dolloff suggests contributes to "intensive, long-term commitment to professional development context of a singing community" (Dolloff, 2013, p. 93).

In England, *Sing Up* was established in 2007 "with the intention of ensuring that singing becomes part of early years and primary education for all children in England by 2012" (Welch et al, 2009, p. 13). The programme was committed to producing high-quality singing and enjoyment in school children, and intended to have one teacher per school committed to the project. The results from a two-year study conducted by Welch *et al.*, report children feeling a positive sense of self and a sense of social inclusion from taking part in the programme, particularly amongst younger children and female students. The report also noted that the children's musical and singing ability generally improved with age, but, somewhat paradoxically, this did not always correlate to enjoyment, as older students tended to enjoy singing less than their younger counterparts. Boys were reported to have an overall lower enjoyment of singing compared with girls (Welch et al., 2009).

Research on choral singing programmes in Ireland – such as the NCC and the Peace Proms introduced in chapter one - has yet to be completed. Recent research undertaken by Creative Ireland, an "all-of-government culture and wellbeing programme" (Government of Ireland, 2020) acknowledges the potential of these programmes as "a model of interest in development of both performance outlets and CPD structures" (Doyle, 2019, p. 17).

However, literature is scarce in terms of teachers' and children's perceptions of these programmes.

2.4. Role of the Teacher

The literature is clear that the teacher's role in music education is important. A teacher's knowledge of and enthusiasm for the subject is central to the teaching of music (Russell-Bowie, 2009; Stakelum, 2008a). This has implications for national policy on music education as, if there is a lack of enthusiasm for music education on the part of the teachers, this affects "its place in the curriculum and its role in the education of young people" (Pitts, 2000, p. 34).

Music educationalist, Zoltan Kodály, stated that "a bad teacher may kill off the love of music for thirty years from thirty classes of pupils" (Bónis, 1964, p. 120). Kodály's philosophy makes clear just how vital the role of the educator is in their students' music education. Kodály stresses that failing to facilitate quality music education affects not only the children's musical experiences in school, but may contribute to a generation of people who do not relate to or engage with music culture on the whole. Similarly, Mary Stakelum stated in 2008 that a child's musical world is built "on a foundation of the teacher's values and dispositions towards music" (Stakelum, 2008b, p. 101). If we accept these comments, we must acknowledge the importance of equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate effective teaching and learning of music.

2.4.1. Teachers' confidence.

Despite research showing that the role of the teacher is hugely significant in music education, music is an area in which teachers generally feel underqualified and lack in confidence (Russell-Bowie, 2009; Stakelum, 2008a; Pitts, 2000). It can be deduced from the literature that a lack of time and resources contributes to inadequate teaching (INTO, 2009; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Stakelum, 2008a; Hennessy, 2000). Teachers in Irish primary schools, for

example, are expected to deliver a music curriculum which enriches the well-being of their students, and fosters their musical intelligence and technical abilities in areas such as composition and notation (NCCA, 1999). It may be argued that dedicating potentially only one hour per week to music in school – as discussed in the Introduction – heaps impossible demands on the teachers responsible for facilitating the curriculum (NCCA, 2016; DES, 2011; Russell-Bowie, 2009).

Perhaps more prevalent in terms of teacher confidence, however, is the perception and notion that musical ability is fixed, and that a teacher requires a higher level of musical skills in order to teach the subject effectively (Elliot, 2012; Stakelum, 2008a; Stakelum, 2008b). This is intertwined with a teacher's personal experiences of music. It is fair to assume that teachers who are musically trained are "particularly well equipped and confident to pass on their knowledge and skills" (Swanwick, 1988, p. 12). Conversely, however, this assumption allows for a potentially damaging practice among teachers whereby their lack of personal experience with music leads to a reluctance to improve their skills in this area (Stakelum, 2008a). Thus, the teaching and learning of music can be "misguided, unethical, or mal-practiced" (Elliot, 2012, p. 3).

Russell-Bowie's 2009 study of pre-service teachers in Ireland, Australia, the U.S.A., Namibia, and South Africa indicated that issues of low confidence and limited support in music education are felt universally. Despite 88% of the Irish participants indicating their feelings that music education *should* be a priority, only 43% of them followed through and actively made music a priority in their classrooms, primarily due to a lack of confidence in their abilities (Russell-Bowie, 2009). A similar study, carried out by Sarah Hennessy in England in 2000, cited a "cycle of low expectation" (Hennessy, 2000, p. 184) amongst pre-service teachers and more experienced teachers alike, in which teachers who understood themselves to be unmusical believed that they simply lacked the expertise to teach music

effectively. The study highlighted that teachers felt it was their prior experiences, teacher-training course, and school-based experiences that informed their lack of confidence (Hennessy, 2000).

Research shows that most teachers desire further training to improve their own music skills in order to teach effectively in the classroom. When teachers are more involved in music making, confident with their own music skills, and supported by the school community in terms of time and resources, they are more likely to teach music successfully (INTO, 2009; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Stakelum, 2008a;).

2.5. Conclusion

It is clear from the literature children who receive quality musical education benefit enormously. As an activity, music improves students' cross-curricular activities as well as their overall sense of well-being (Russell-Bowie, 2009; Kokotsakai & Hallam, 2007; Pitts, 2000; Dolloff, 1997; Swanwick, 1988). More specifically, choral programmes similar to the NCC allow children to thrive musically and personally (Welch et al., 2009; Dolloff, 1997). The literature also addresses that children's access to such quality music education can be put at risk due to low confidence levels amongst teachers in teaching music (INTO, 2009; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Stakelum, 2008a. Stakelum, 2008b).

The information which emerged in this chapter is pertinent to this study as it addresses the experiences of both children and teachers in music and choral education, which forms the basis of this research regarding teachers' perceptions of the NCC. In the next chapter, the methodology used to obtain this data will be discussed.

Chapter Three: Methodology Chapter

3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to gain in-depth knowledge of teachers' perceptions of the NCC, particularly the benefits and challenges of the programme for children and for teachers. While aspects of such a question may have been easily answered by a survey (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), I felt that a qualitative research approach would reap the best results. As Creswell reports, "qualitative inquiry represents a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration, without apology or comparisons to quantitative research" (Creswell, 2007, p. 11).

This chapter sets out the research method chosen, and the research design and sample strategies used. Some limitations are also discussed, and ethical issues considered. This chapter concludes with comments on the researcher's positionality, and information regarding the data analysis strategies used.

3.2. Research Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

The qualitative research method chosen was a series of semi-structured interviews with a sample of teachers from schools which have participated in the NCC. The restricted nature of a *structured* interview (Denscombe, 2014) would not offer the same scope for in-depth research as that of semi-structured interviews given that they allow for elaboration, flexibility, and depth of insight (Denscombe, 2014; Silverman, 2013; Creswell, 2007). They support the research question while providing a deeper understanding of social phenomena than that which could be achieved in this instance through quantitative research (Silverman, 2013).

The methodology was informed by the literature. Much literature perpetuates the idea that music education, and specifically choral singing, is of emotional and intellectual benefit to children (Welch, 2012; Hallam 2010; Dolloff, 1997). I endeavoured to discover if this was considered true by the participants by enabling them to share their insights and to develop a detailed understanding of their views. (Creswell, 2007) A semi-structured interview approach was a means by which I, the interviewer, could remain flexible, and responsive to the participants (Cohen et al., 2007).

3.2.1. Interview questions.

The interviews were designed to give context to the participants' perceptions, including general support for music in their school community; their personal musical backgrounds; and their role in running the NCC in their school. The interviews consisted of clear, focused, open-ended questions. When necessary, these questions were supported with further examples to allow for greater understanding and insight (Cohen et al., 2007). Various aspects of the NCC were addressed, including expectations, challenges, motivations, rewards, and benefits (Gerwitz, Shapiro, Maguire, Mahony & Cribb, 2009). The questions were provided in advance of the interviews to allow the participants to reflect on their answers.

It was important to allow the interviewees to feel at ease, encouraging them to elaborate and develop their ideas freely (Bergmark, 2019; Cohen et al., 2007). Interviewees were encouraged to discuss the advantages *and* challenges of the programme. Though they were aware of the researcher's support for choral education, they were not obligated to appease the interviewer. To reduce interviewer counter-transference of my own biases, I was careful to minimise verbal and non-verbal judgement at the answers given. (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

3.3. Research Design and Sample Selection

The original design for this research was to undertake a case study with staff members in one school, including the principal, class teachers, and additional needs assistants [ANAs]. After consulting with the choir teacher in the school, however, I was advised that some of those selected would provide limited data due to their general lack of involvement with the NCC. For data to be truly reliable, it is “essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128). Creswell advises that researchers must be flexible to change regarding their sample (Creswell, 2007), and that, fundamentally, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants ... that will best help the researcher understand ... the research question” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 262). As a result, I adapted my sample to maximise reliability. I interviewed the principal, sixth class teacher, and fifth class teacher (who is also the choir teacher) in this school, and also extended the research to include three participants from two other local schools.

I was keen to keep the sample size relatively small. The effectiveness of such a research method allows for the opportunity to conduct in-depth, holistic research that may not have been possible using a wider sample (Denscombe, 2014), and is also likely to result in rich, comprehensive data (Sim, Saunders, Waterfield & Kingstone, 2018). Limiting the number of interviews also allows for efficient time management. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

Six participants were interviewed in total (See Fig. 1). The sample of participants was selected from three primary schools which have taken part in the NCC between eight and sixteen times. Each of the participants is a primary school teacher in some capacity. As well as the participants from the original school, the interviewees now included a recently retired principal, a fourth class teacher, and a deputy principal. Four of the participants were the

musical directors in their school who prepared the children for the NCC performances. The remaining two were involved to the extent that they observed rehearsals, chaperoned students, and facilitated some of the administration. As such, each of the teachers interviewed was in a position to provide information and opinions based on personal knowledge. It is important to note that there were varying levels of musical experience, interest, and expertise amongst the participants. While some considered themselves experienced in and passionate about choral singing, others considered their musical experience to be limited.

Fig. 1: Interview Participants

<u>Teacher</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Years of NCC Experience</u>
Mary	1	5 th class teacher and choir conductor	8
Sarah	1	School principal	6
Jack	1	6 th class teacher	2
Anne	2	Deputy principal and choir conductor	16
Lucy	3	4 th class teacher and choir conductor	2
Kate	3	Retired school principal and choir conductor	16

3.4. Limitations and Challenges

Using semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection has many advantages. However, it is also acknowledged that some limitations and challenges were expected with this methodology. For example, due to busy school schedules, teachers are not always able to dedicate time to projects such as this (Gerwitz et al., 2009). As a researcher, I had to be conscious of this and remain considerate of the research participants' generosity in offering their time (Bergman, 2019). In some cases, I had to resist extending the conversation beyond

the agreed timeframe – an action which surely deprived the research of potential further depth. Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted over Zoom. Silverman warns against overlooking the importance of body language and movements in interviews, as these ethnographic observations can often inform and deepen research. (Silverman, 2014) These elements were unfortunately somewhat obscured due to the online nature of the interviews.

Though the interview sample is small, the interviewees' opinions provide, to a certain extent, a general picture of schools' experiences with the NCC (Flyvberg, 2006). This is not as reliable as evidenced research, however. Research indicates that, "threats to external validity arise when the researcher generalizes beyond the groups in the experiment to ... groups not under study" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 244) For example, though this research provides insight into children's experiences of the NCC, no children were interviewed to confirm the teachers' perceptions.

Furthermore, the majority of the participants in this study have musical experience and interest. While this adds to the validity of their comments in that they have specialist knowledge in this area, it is naïve to assume that teachers who do not have the same background will so readily report identical experiences of the NCC. Though this issue was ventured upon in interviews, the answers given can only be considered to be speculation, as the interviewees cannot reliably speak on behalf such teachers. Such an issue certainly threatens the generalisation of the research results, and warrants further research.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Considering the power dynamic in a researcher and participant relationship, I was conscious to facilitate an interview process led by "careful reflection, consideration, open

communication, courage, and the preparedness of being open to adjustments and compromises” (Bergmark, 2019, p. 11).

An audio recording of each of the interviews was made using two devices to protect against technical difficulties. Denscombe reports the consent of interview participants to be of particular importance to the researcher (Denscombe, 2014). Each participant consented to being interviewed and recorded through written consent forms. Before the interviews, they were informed in writing how long the sessions were expected to take, what the overall research was about, and what questions were going to be asked. The participants were reassured of their right to clarify any concerns they had before, during, and after the interview. All participants were aware of the audio recording of their interview and understood their right to withdraw their data. As the researcher, I assured the participants that I would respect any requests to withdraw from the interview process (Silverman, 2013; Denscombe, 2014).

The names of both the researchers and the schools have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The location of the schools have also been redacted. Research participants were offered the chance to review the final research results and findings. Prior to conducting this research, approval was granted from the Marino Ethics in Research Committee regarding the method, process, and content.

3.6. Researcher Positionality

As mentioned in the abstract and chapter one, this research is conducted partially because of my own passion for music education and choral singing. Though I have never participated in the NCC, I am an experienced musician and have enjoyed singing in choirs since childhood. As such, I have a level of insider knowledge of the benefits and challenges of choral singing. This knowledge strengthened the depth of my research in that it informed the interview

design and analysis of the data. However, it was also important to be careful throughout that my potential bias towards positive results did not influence the overall research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

3.7. Data Analysis

The research data consist of six interviews which were conducted over a five-week period (See Fig. 2). The interviews were then transcribed and coded¹ based on the thematic analysis model by Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2008). In accordance with this model, the researcher searched for and reviewed themes within the codes which emerged from the data. These codes were collated into two primary themes which are presented in Fig. 3. Data from three different schools served to triangulate and validate the findings (Cohen et al., 2007). A detailed analysis of the data was conducted under each theme, with the focus on how the data address teachers' perceptions of the NCC, and how the themes relate to each other. (Braun & Clarke, 2008)

Fig. 2: Data Collection Schedule

Teacher Participant	Data Collected	Transcript Number
Mary	25 th February 2021	One
Sarah	3 rd March 2021	Two
Kate	10 th March 2021	Three
Anne	12 th March 2021	Four
Jack	24 th March 2021	Five
Lucy	31 st March 2021	Six

¹ An example of coding can be found in the appendices of this dissertation.

Fig. 3: Themes for Analysis

Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes

1. Teachers' perceptions of children's experiences of the NCC

- Skills development
- Rehearsal process and concert performance
- Self-esteem and confidence levels

2. Teachers' experiences of the NCC

- Challenges
- Benefits
- Resources and training from the NCC
- Teachers' confidence levels

3.8. Conclusion

As a researcher studying 'a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context' (Yin, 2014, p.78), I used a small sample of in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers with the aim of reflecting their perceptions of the NCC. This was conducted in the hope of gaining understanding of the benefits of a choral singing programme for young children in accordance with existing literature. In the next chapter, the findings of the data will be discussed and analysed.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents, analyses, and discusses data which were collected in the six semi-structured interviews with the aim of answering the question: how do teachers perceive the NCC? These interviews produced rich data regarding the experiences of the children and teachers who have taken part in the NCC programme.

Two main themes emerged, each of which is discussed in turn. The themes which emerged are:

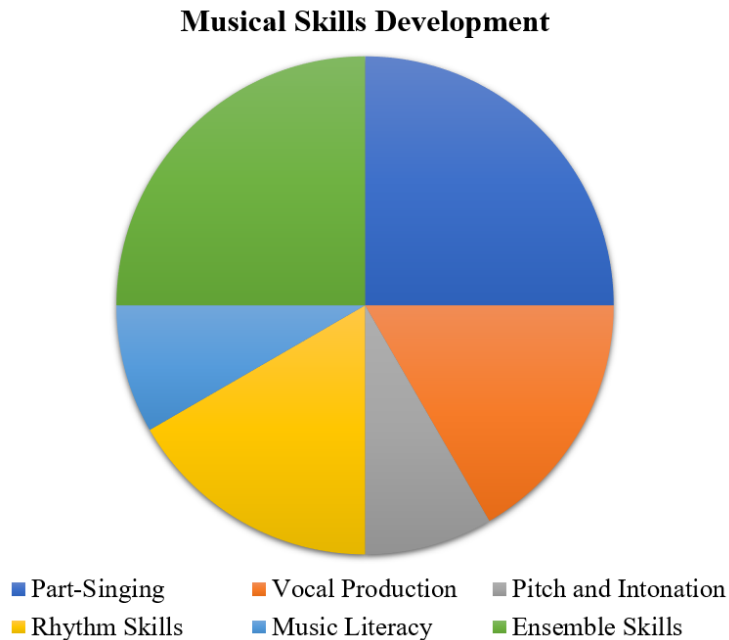
- Teachers' perceptions of children's experiences of the National Children's Choir
- Teachers' experiences of the National Children's Choir

4.1. Theme One: Children's Experiences of the National Children's Choir

In relation to children's experiences of the NCC, three key areas emerged from this data: skills development; rehearsal process and concert performance; and self-esteem and confidence growth.

4.1.1. Skills development.

Each of the six participants indicated that they noticed an improvement in children's musical skills as a result of the NCC. Some teachers commented on the enduring effect of these musical skills, with Lucy remarking that the sixth class children managed to perform a "challenging" piece for graduation because of their NCC training. In this sense, the NCC can be considered a solid foundation which sets up musical skills. Fig. 4 outlines specific musical skills improvements identified by the teachers.

Fig. 4: Musical Skills Development

All commented on the improvement in part-singing, which Jack described as “impressive.” Commenting on the sense of pride felt by the children relating to part-singing, Lucy said “they have an awareness that they have achieved something that isn’t the easiest thing to do.”

Ensemble skills mentioned include responding to conductor motions regarding entries and cut-offs, tempo, and phrasing, as well as attentive listening and counting. Verster, Viljoen, and Niemann remind us that technical excellence in choral singing is dependent on the mastery of these very skills, all of which contribute to a “beautiful tone” (Verster, Viljoen, & Niemann, 2009, p. 57). One can surmise several ways by which this standard might be achieved: effective rehearsal techniques, for example. A repertoire of “high artistic and pedagogic quality” is also influential in producing a high-quality children’s choir (Verster et al., 2009). Participants in this study remarked on the NCC repertoire as being challenging but enjoyable. Though the sheer amount of music was reported to cause stress for

teachers and children alike, interviewees did emphasise that learning this repertoire resulted in children performing to a higher standard than they have experienced in the Peace Proms or their own school choir.

Each of the teachers discussed wider ranging benefits for the children accruing from the NCC, including self-discipline in their learning. Children from all three schools are responsible for memorising song lyrics as homework. Most teachers regarded this assignment positively. As Jack acknowledged, “memorising ... is extremely tough and it’s a great skill. It taught them a little bit about rote learning, having to go home and learn off the lines and practise, practise, practise.” Mary and Lucy also emphasised that student commitment to this responsibility made for efficient rehearsals, and also contributed to the children’s enjoyment, stressing that “they see that if they put in a little bit of time themselves, then it does pay off” and “they get out of it what they put into it.”

Personal accountability was visible in other ways, too, such as in attendance, punctuality of rehearsals, and in attentive listening to the conductor and the rest of the choir. These experiences foster “understanding, collaboration and respect” in choral singers (The Arts Council, 2008, p.5). Mary emphasised that the NCC was a lesson in “self-discipline and concentration; and you do see that improving as the time goes on, definitely.” These skills were also noted by Anne, who observed that they were most noticeable during the cluster rehearsals: “They realise that maybe they are a bit better than the other school choirs, sometimes, or that we have a *lot* more work to do to catch up. And they would take that seriously. A bit of healthy competition!”

Collaborating with other choirs in such a way is a feature of the NCC that children may not experience if limited to their personal school choir. Each of the teachers spoke positively about the musical, social, and motivational benefits of these cluster rehearsals.

Lucy indicated that the children's experiences of working with other choirs heightened their determination and motivation: "if we're going to do something, we're going to do it right!" The perseverance and concentration skills highlighted by the teachers are likely to contribute to greater levels of self-regulation in children (Blair, Protzko and Ursache, 2011), which in turn is influential in positive behaviour, strong social skills, and the capacity to make good choices (Harvard University, 2012).

4.1.2. Rehearsal process and concert performance.

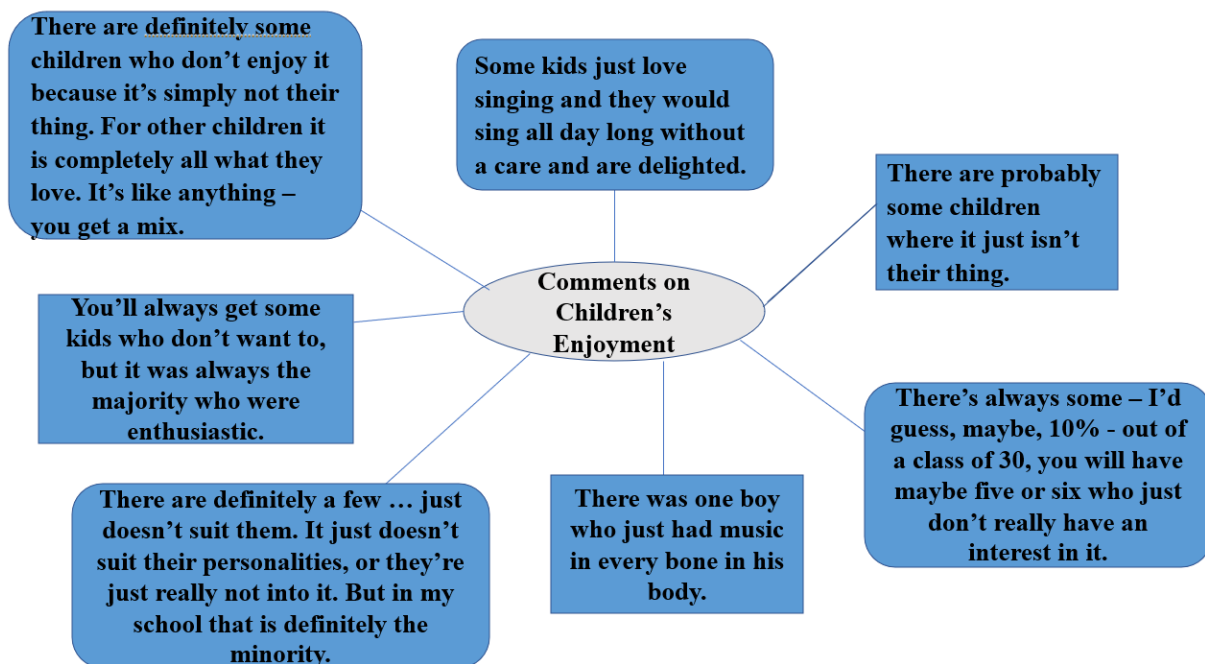
Responding to the question "do you think the children generally enjoy their experiences of the NCC?", teachers offered a somewhat mixed response. While the majority of children "absolutely" enjoy their experience of the NCC overall, each teacher also admitted that the amount of challenging repertoire to learn occasionally resulted in feelings of pressure or demotivation, with Kate describing rehearsals being "a bit of a slog at times." Mary summarised it in saying:

The reality is, there's a huge amount of work, and some kids find that really, really hard. There's an awful lot of learning, there are a lot of words to learn, and there's a lot of Irish. Some of them are really, really challenged by that.

The Irish language songs were remarked on by all the participants as being one of the biggest challenges involved in the programme. There was a never a suggestion, however, that this was something that should change. Anne even suggested that "when they perform the Irish songs, they are *fabulous*. The children actually love them when they get in on them." Repertoire was also considered to be a *contributing* factor in the children's enjoyment of the experience. Lucy spoke of the shared joy felt by the children, remarking that "there's always a cheer when we're rehearsing a particular one."

According to participants, children’s enjoyment of the NCC waxes and wanes throughout the year. A surprising finding, in this researcher’s view, was that each choir, irrespective of the circumstance, had some children who absolutely love the experience, and some children who simply do not. Fig. 5 highlights some comments made regarding the children’s enjoyment or lack thereof.

Fig. 5: Comments on Children’s Enjoyment



These comments imply that some children are going to be interested or disinterested in singing no matter what – that it is simply in their nature. The notion of a person’s natural disposition is complex and eludes straightforward understanding (O’Brien, 2011).

Nonetheless, it is interesting to consider the children’s enjoyment and engagement of the NCC in this way - that some children, even from an early age, are more predisposed to engaging with music. Conversely, if some children have a natural *disinterest* in signing, it might be said that the NCC can simply never be enjoyed by everyone. Nevertheless, Sarah was adamant that “it’s good for them whether they all love it or not!”

Two thirds of the participants suggested that sixth class boys were perhaps less likely to find the programme engaging. The researcher questioned if the boys' voices breaking caused them to feel self-conscious, thus detracting from their enjoyment. However, this was not an issue for the students in these schools. Interestingly, Mary and Anne adopt juxtaposing approaches when accommodating boys whose voices have broken. Mary was emphatic that these boys are still encouraged to participate – “there’s *never* a situation of ‘don’t sing’” – whereas Anne was frank in admitting that, on occasion, “you’d have to say to some of them ‘just don’t, for a moment, try to hit that note.’”

Mary, Sarah, Jack, and Anne suggested that some boys felt that singing was “uncool.” The gendering of singing as a girls’ activity is a perpetual problem in the world of choral singing (Heywood & Benyon, 2007; Adler, 2003), and one that requires further research. Despite these comments, however, the teachers still felt that the majority of boys did enjoy the experience. Sarah referred to her time teaching in an all-boys’ school, in which the boys thrived, and sang “really, really well” in the NCC.

All participants were emphatic that the joy of final performances make the whole experience “worth it”. Each spoke animatedly and enthusiastically when reminiscing about these performances. Even Jack, who admits to not having any particular personal interest in choral music, described the concerts as “phenomenal”, and spoke excitedly about the children’s evident thrill in performing on the stage. Speaking about the NCC concerts, Lucy said:

They *love* it. The vast majority of them will just be *glowing* and so excited ... they’ll just be buzzing with energy, and most of them are shouting “that was so cool!” and “did you see this bit?” and all of that. Every year without fail I get the cards at the end of the year, and they say that their

favourite experience of the whole year was the National Children's Choir.

It *always* comes back.

These testimonials draw attention to the value of the NCC for the children. They also echo findings in Dolloff's report on the North York Choral Development Project, in which children declared "I FEEL GOOD achieving all of these things" (Dolloff, 1997, p. 94). Kate indicated that the buzz of the concert performance has a *lasting* effect, declaring that "any of the children ... will tell you they will never forget the excitement." Indeed, this enduring excitement was evidenced in this research, when Lucy – who never participated in the NCC herself - recounted her teacher colleagues fondly reminiscing about their own childhood experiences of the NCC. They explained that it was these experiences which "motivates them to give the kids this experience."

4.1.3. Self-esteem and confidence.

Each of the participants described that the majority of the children grew in self-confidence throughout the NCC, and felt a "sense of achievement, and definitely a sense of fulfilment and pride at the end of it." Especially noteworthy are the comments of five of the participants on the particular benefits for children who are regarded as "shy and timid" or "maybe not typically good at sport, or whatever." Mary's comments reflect these perceptions:

You've got other children who, maybe music is their real talent, and there would be lots of times in school that they struggle with other areas, but music is their thing. This is really their time to shine ... and be acknowledged for that in the group. There might be someone in the class who might be quite quiet and would struggle to speak out and struggle with maths or literacy or whatever, and then they come to choir and they're sort of ... well, they blossom!

Unprompted by the researcher, four of the teachers spoke of memories of children with additional needs when discussing confidence and self-esteem. Fervent in their telling of these stories, it was evident that the confidence growth in these children was a source of pride for the teachers, with Kate laughing that “there are actually shivers going down my spine when I think of this!” One story in particular stood out in the data. Lucy recounted a student with additional needs who had a “wonderful singing voice” and a “beautiful, expressive singing face”. At a cluster rehearsal, the musical director praised this student for her effort and enthusiasm, encouraging the rest of the choir to “pull an Alannah!”. The student’s classmates continued to exclaim this phrase in school choir rehearsals, and Alannah became synonymous with the standard for which everyone should aim. Regarding Alannah’s feelings on this, Lucy said “you could just see it on her face how proud of herself she was every time somebody mentioned it.”

The boost in confidence and self-esteem in these students is important for them, of course; but it goes further than this. Students who “come out of their shell” and shine in the NCC programme are seen in a new way by their peers and their teachers. Indeed, one has to contemplate how these students would have fared had they not had this opportunity to succeed and to excel at something about which they are passionate. These stories are perhaps an example of why, to choral educators, “access to choral singing must exist for *all* children” (Tagg, 2013, p. xix).

Benefits for the participants in the NCC, then, are bountiful. In the words of Barbara M. Tagg, “children learn a lot when they are part of a hardworking group of like-minded kids who have fun when they perform beautifully” (Tagg, 2013, p. 204).

4.2. Theme Two: Teachers' Experiences of the National Children's Choir

Teachers' perceptions of their experiences of the NCC draw attention to a number of challenges and benefits inherent in undertaking this project in their schools.

4.2.1. Challenges.

Each of the participants was frank in admitting that the NCC results in a great deal of pressure and stress for teachers. Three primary challenges were highlighted: preparing the choir to the required high standard; maintaining engagement and motivation in the children while doing so; and the time pressure involved.

On average, fifteen songs are performed at the NCC concerts. As Mary describes, the tricky dichotomy, when teaching fifteen songs to a high standard, is the "challenge to keep it fun and engaging whilst also getting through the repertoire." All teachers reminded their students of the ultimate goal of the rehearsals throughout, promising that the final performance is "worth it." This was viewed as a key motivator for students.

Each of the schools devoted one hour a week to rehearsal, and teachers also spoke of the extra rehearsals required in the run-up to the cluster rehearsals and final performances. Indeed, one might argue that the challenges of time pressure and achieving a high standard, as mentioned by the participants, are inextricably intertwined here. Rosenshine, Froehlich and Fakhouri provide insight into the time-consuming nature of music rehearsals. They indicate that, for rehearsal to be effective, it must involve revising material from previous sessions, methodically introducing new music in small steps, checking student understanding, as well as lots of repetition and continuous teacher feedback (Rosenshine, Froehlich, & Fakhouri, 2002). Mary felt that, if the NCC were to release some repertoire scores and CDs to participating schools in the final term preceding the programme year, "it would take a little

bit of pressure off, because I do think the time pressure is the biggest challenge and it can get quite stressful.”

4.2.2. Benefits.

Each of the participants remarked on the NCC’s alignment with the music curriculum. This is an advantage they can rely upon, as the NCC cultivates “performance which is explicitly linked to primary school curricular music requirements” (Doyle, 2019, p. 15). Jack, a sixth class teacher with limited musical experience, praised the programme, saying, “it covers a huge amount of the curriculum” while remarking that he is “very lucky that I have an expert teacher” to facilitate rehearsals. This luck may refer to the advantageous chance to learn from a skilled practitioner: an opportunity also afforded to the school conductors in the cluster rehearsals.

However, in light of comments made by Sarah, it must also be considered that Jack is simply glad for a break from music teaching responsibilities. Referring to her observation of the NCC programme, Sarah confidently declared “the *aim* of it was that we were supposed to upskill as well, as teachers, and the *reality* was that the teachers viewed it as a time to correct their copies.” It is interesting to consider this, especially in light of Mary Stakelum’s suggestion that less musical teachers are reluctant to improve their skills (Stakelum, 2008a). However, it must be noted that Sarah’s comments were made in relation to experiences in a previous school and do not speak directly of Jack.

Importantly, even teachers who already had music experiences credited the NCC as being beneficial to their teaching. Mary, Anne, and Kate in particular referred to games, songs, and warm-ups that they learned through NCC which they now use when teaching. Mary stated “it’s also about upskilling ... I am aware that I have quite a lot of experience, and yet I find it very challenging at times.” For these teachers passionate about music, the NCC is

a professional musical outlet in which they can apply their specialist skills. Each of them enjoys this opportunity, with Kate asserting that “Even though I’m retired I will go back and do the training at the next online course that is offered, so I can go out to the schools and continue conducting.”

4.2.3. Resources and training.

“NCC structures encompass high-level leadership, teacher education, CPD, vocal modelling and performance pathways” (Doyle, 2019, p. 15). As evidenced above, the NCC programme is not simply of benefit for children, but affords learning opportunities for teachers, too.

The CDs provided by the NCC for teaching and learning were also generally praised for their quality and usefulness. Many of the participants remarked that the CDs are helpful for teachers and children alike, particularly as they do not need prior musical training to reap the benefits. Lucy remarked on the particular influence of the CDs in structuring their choir, saying “I set the whole class either soprano or alto, because, that way, the class teacher will be able to teach the songs in the room.” Each participant confirmed that class teachers play the CDs in the classroom to help the students learn the repertoire.

Another beneficial resource discussed was the summer training course for teachers provided by the NCC, which Anne described as “very good.” As Kate said, “any teacher who did that was very well prepared.” Lucy emphasised her enjoyment of the course, saying, “it was just fabulous. I loved it ... You can start on morning number one and suddenly you’re singing in harmony ... you just basically sight read. It’s just incredible.” Mary described how the course was structured:

All the teachers who are on the course become a choir and learn the repertoire. Within that you have very good guidance around warm-ups and voice production. They teach you to do it one way, and then, by modelling,

they hope for you to carry this on to your own rehearsals. And then they're very good at following up on things at the cluster rehearsals.

Such comments show how the NCC produces a unified sound across all the participating choirs. It is evident from the data that the participants who have attended the summer courses feel that they are both beneficial and enjoyable.

One consideration in respect of this data – due, in part, to the sampling strategy adopted, perhaps - is that two thirds of these participants are confident musicians and singers themselves. This may not always be the case for teachers participating in the NCC. As Mary surmised, the experience might not be so positive for less musically experienced teachers:

I would wonder if you are somebody who doesn't engage with singing yourself, then it might not mean too much to you ... when they talk about singing through a phrase or keeping direction in long notes ... I don't know if you would understand the full extent of it.

4.2.4. Teachers' confidence levels.

The consideration of teachers' confidence levels was a recurring theme in each of the interviews. Principally, the participants queried whether or not the NCC could realistically be facilitated by a teacher who does not have personal musical experience. The extensive use of sight-reading on the summer course, for example, indicates that the course may not be particularly accessible for teachers who do not possess this skill.

Jack and Sarah perhaps gave the greatest insight regarding this area, as they both consider themselves to be unmusical. Imagining himself in the position of conductor, Jack said, "If I was doing it on my own ... I have to say, honestly, I wouldn't manage it ... I would really find that a struggle." Sarah discussed the idea of teacher confidence at length in her interview, stating "I have always felt that it's *really* important for children to have the

experience of the choir, but also, to work with somebody who's very *good*." Sarah's comments are perhaps that of a realist. She caveats these comments by saying other teachers' involvement in *some* capacity is important, as it increases motivation for the children, but that fundamentally, "the reality is that we all have strength in different areas, and sometimes, there is a role for specialisation." Sarah and Mary both questioned whether the NCC's philosophy of inclusivity was realistic in terms of teacher involvement. Comparing it to the Peace Proms, Mary said:

I think that Peace Proms can happen regardless of who the teacher is in the class ... I suspect a class teacher would be willing and able to step in ... [whereas] the National Children's Choir ... I would wonder if I wasn't taking it, would someone else be willing to take it on. I don't know the answer to that.

The school's perceptions of the value of the NCC were highlighted by participants as playing a role in the programme's success. The data suggest that a passionate choir teacher may not be enough for the NCC programme to run successfully in a school. Teachers from schools one and three both emphasised the importance of the NCC in their school's culture, with both Lucy and Kate describing it as "part of the fabric of the school." Anne, however, depicted the NCC as being in a slightly more precarious position in her school, particularly observing that "some teachers in sixth class felt that the NCC took up too much of their time and they felt overburdened."

It is interesting to consider the role of school culture in contributing to the success of the NCC. Sarah, though not particularly musical, recognised her responsibility as principal to "promote a breadth of things to give kids a chance to find what they are good at and what they enjoy" and that "playing a role in influencing all of that is key." A particularly poignant

example of the influence of school support was given by Lucy, when she recounted her positive experiences in contrast with a friend of hers in a different school. Despite Lucy's friend having a background in and passion for music, the culture and demographic of that particular school was less supportive of music, and their experiences of the NCC were less positive. Regarding the finale concert in the NCH, for which each school selects a cohort of representatives, Lucy described how her friend "picked out her best three ... and the three refused to go. Then she went to the next three, and the parents said that no ... in the end, she struggled to put people on the stage." In light of this, further research may be warranted regarding the realities of the NCC in schools of various demographics and cultures.

4.3. Conclusion

It is evident that the participants consider the benefits of the programme to outweigh the challenges. Jack mentioned that he was "amazed ... by what the children had achieved," while Kate was emphatic in stating "I have nothing but positive things to say about it." The issue of inclusivity and accessibility for teachers was a question for the participants, however, many of whom wondered if the high musical standard demanded by the programme could be achieved by teachers with limited musical experience. These issues will be further addressed in the next, and final, chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This final chapter summarises the research findings in response to the question ‘what are teachers’ perceptions of the National Children’s Choir?’ The chapter focuses in particular on two specific areas which reflect the findings from the data:

- The NCC as an enjoyable and beneficial programme for children
- The accessibility of the programme for teachers of any level of musical ability.

Recommendations for further research regarding the NCC and some limitations of this study are also addressed.

5.1. Is the NCC a worthwhile, enjoyable programme for children?

The participants were immensely positive about the children’s experiences of the NCC. They discussed the challenges of the programme for children, including responsibility for their learning and singing to a “high standard”. The data reveal that the hard work required of the children to perform not only advances their skills of perseverance and discipline, but also enhances their enjoyment and sense of achievement. The NCC was commended by all for the opportunity to learn from choral experts, and was also praised as a resource for children to experience multiple aspects of the music curriculum, ranging from concentration and self-discipline to the musical elements involved in the listening and responding and performance strands (NCCA, 1999).

The findings of this research affirm that “the two necessary conditions for musical enjoyment are having something to do (a musical challenge) and developing the ability to do it (the know-how)” (Rao, 1993, p. 46). The data indicate that the conditions outlined by Rao are evident in the NCC, and the participants were adamant that the vast majority of children

enjoy their experiences. Teachers confirmed that children overwhelmingly grow in confidence and self-esteem throughout, and that their resulting sense of pride is evident

A significant finding of this data is the considerable benefits experienced by children described by the teachers as being unconfident in other areas of school. These children were frequently reported to experience the most notable boosts in pride and self-esteem, with participants sharing that they “shine” throughout. Some of these children, as highlighted by the participants, had additional needs. Participants observed that this increase in confidence is not only personally important for these children, but also for their peers and teachers who get the opportunity to witness them in a “new light”.

5.2. Is the NCC realistically an achievable programme for all teachers and schools?

Though they acknowledged the “huge amount of work” involved in the NCC, the teachers in this study were extremely positive overall. Their comments were largely in relation to their joy at witnessing their students thrive, and the resources provided by the NCC.

Each of the participants speculated if the programme is realistically achievable for teachers who less musically confident. The responses were generally doubtful, particularly Jack’s, who felt sure that he would not be able to manage the programme. Participants praised the CDs provided by the NCC, but some wondered about the accessibility of the summer course, as a relatively accomplished level of musicianship, including the ability to sight sing, is required. This research casts some doubt, therefore, over whether or not the high standard of music-making of the NCC is achievable if taught by a novice teacher with low confidence levels.

Regarding teachers’ confidence and experience levels in facilitating the NCC, however, Mary finished by saying “maybe it doesn’t matter! In the end the kids are singing and that’s

great.” This comment highlights what is at the heart of the aims of the NCC: the children (NCC, 2017). Because of the structure of the NCC and cluster rehearsals, children ultimately get to perform in concert regardless of their teacher’s abilities. In this light, the NCC may be viewed as a bridge to further music-making for teachers wishing to generate a culture of music in their schools.

Conversely, some interviewees implied that the NCC should *not* cater for teachers of all levels, but instead, allow for specialisation. Sarah’s comments highlight this: “I think being taught by a confident, talented, musical teacher, of *course* impacts on children. And it goes the other way as well, unfortunately.” One might wonder in this case if the more pertinent question to be asked is if the aims of the NCC *should be* achievable by less musically skilled teachers.

5.3. Recommendations for Further Research

Two key recommendations for further research emerged from this data. As outlined already, there is insufficient research into the feelings of teachers who lack confidence in their musical ability and are intimidated by the idea of the NCC. Further research may determine if better CPD training is needed and, indeed, whether or not this is the responsibility of the NCC or the teacher training colleges. Teachers’ low confidence levels are often due to poor training (Russell-Bowie, 2009; Hennessy, 2000), so it would be an area of interest to consider that if music training in teacher colleges was further supported, the uptake in the NCC might increase among teachers who do not have a personal musical background.

Similarly, the data implied that the influence of the wider school community plays a role in the NCC’s success. Further research into the impact of a school’s demographic and culture might highlight where further supports are required. Specifically, research might consider if success of the programme relies on the school’s attitude towards and support for music education and the NCC.

5.4. Limitations

Some limitations of this study were discussed in chapter three. The conclusions of this research are based on the perceptions of only six participants and, as such, the findings cannot be generalised. As discussed, most of the teachers are also passionate about music education, and therefore, may have positive bias towards the programme. It should not be assumed that their positive attitudes would necessarily be shared by teachers without this background. Finally, the research sample in this study was limited to teachers only. It cannot be fully understood, therefore, how the NCC is perceived by the wider school community. Though the teachers were certain that the majority of children enjoy their experiences, there are no testimonials from children to confirm this.

5.5. Concluding Comments

Throughout this study, the researcher sought to uncover teachers' perceptions of the NCC. The research participants' vested interests in music education placed them in a reliable position to evaluate the NCC based on their expertise. Based on this research, the NCC is of significant value when the teachers themselves value it, and - based on their testimonials - has an extensive positive impact on the children they teach. It is especially important to emphasise these overwhelming benefits of choral music-making when, as discussed in the Introduction, the provision of music in primary school education is becoming increasingly precarious. Considering that youth singing is best led by "practitioners and educators whose skill and expertise can inspire and contribute to augmentation and enhancement of practice across all settings" (Doyle, 2019, p. 8), the NCC is presented as being a valuable programme for children and teachers alike in its promotion of high-quality, enjoyable music education and CPD. The research affirms the words of choral composer, John Rutter, who states:

In choral music, we can discover and express our own selves, we can form social units that are potentially a microcosm of an ideal society, and at the same time we assert that a diverse world can celebrate its diversity and yet be at one (Rutter, 2012, p. xiv).

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

General Questions

1. What can you tell me about the music that takes place in this school? (in the classroom, outside the classroom, after-school activities, teachers, activities; role of singing; parents, community etc.)
2. I see from the website that the school has taken part in the National Children's Choir. Can you tell me more as to why you, as a school, have chosen to take part?
3. How many times has the school taken part in the National Children's Choir? Roughly how many children have been part of the programme?

The National Children's Choir & The Child

4. In your opinion, do you think that children have generally enjoyed their experience(s) with the National Children's Choir?
5. Have you noticed any particular changes in the social activity of the students through participating in the National Children's Choir? (E.g., a more reserved student more comfortable with classmates through their National Children's Choir experience).
6. Have there been any notable changes in the self-esteem of the children who have participated?
7. In your view, what are the specific *music* benefits for the children participating in the National Children's Choir?

NCC & The Teacher

8. What is your involvement in the running of the NCC in this school? (role, activities, rehearsals, time, organising music, attending workshops, etc.)
9. Is there any particular reason you were drawn to participating yourself? (Music background, school spirit, etc.)

10. Has participating in the National Children's Choir had any effect on your own thoughts about the benefits/importance of music? (think about lit...probes)
11. Has participating in the National Children's Choir affected your own teaching of music in the classroom?
12. Are there any challenges involved in participating in the National Children's Choir?
(Boys engagement; funding, transport etc.)

Appendix B

Information for Participants

Dear _____,

I am writing to ask for your help with a research project. This project is a component of the Primary Master's in Education (PME) degree which I am undertaking at Marino Institute of Education.

The purpose of this project is to learn what teachers think about their students' experiences of the National Children's Choir, specifically any perceived benefits and values of participating in the programme. This research also looks at the teacher experience, such as the challenges or benefits to the teacher from participating in the National Children's Choir programme, and how individual musical experience may impact on their views.

The research will be conducted using a series of semi-structured interviews with primary teachers. The interviews will be audio-recorded and the transcripts used for discussion and analysis in the dissertation. You will be asked to take part in an interview with the researcher in which you will be asked a series of questions about your perceptions of the benefits and challenges of participating in the National Children's Choir. This interview is expected to last between twenty and thirty minutes. Your anonymity and the anonymity of your school is assured, and you are free to discontinue your participation in the research project at any point.

If you are happy to participate, then please fill out the accompanying consent form to confirm.

This research project has been approved by the Student Ethics in Research Committee at Marino Institute of Education in 2020.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Gráinne Logue (Researcher)

Appendix C

Consent Form for Participants

Please read the questions below and indicate your willingness to take part in this research as described in the information letter.

The purpose and nature of the study was explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. **Yes / No**

I understand that my participation involves an interview with the researcher and that extracts from the interview may be quoted in the researcher's Master's dissertation. **Yes / No**

I consent to my interview being audio-recorded. **Yes / No**

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially and that the anonymity of my identity and that of the school is assured. **Yes / No**

I understand that I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. **Yes / No**

I understand that original audio recordings and a transcript of my interview will be retained until the conclusion of the project. **Yes / No**

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information. **Yes / No**

If you have any further questions, please contact me, the researcher, at xxxxxxxx , or my supervisor, Mary Nugent, at xxxxxx.

Signature of research participant ----- Date -----

Appendix D

Coding Example

Interviewer: What can you tell me about the music that takes place in the school generally?

A: Yeah, I think there is quite a lot of music that happens within the school. There is obviously the curriculum music that happens in the classroom, and that would very much depend on the **age of the children**. There is a lot of **song singing** that happens, listening to music – and that would happen **incidentally** as well, for example in **structured music lessons**, but then also there is a lot of music played as well, and **integrated** into other areas. Then we have some more structured things as well as part of our music policy; for example the **tin whistle** is taught typically in second class – or introduced in second class – and then if the **facility** is there in terms of the **teachers** then in the following year to continue that on, then the tin whistle can be carried through into the senior classes. We also have **drumming**. One staff member is a samba drummer, so we have a collection of drums that he would often use and he would do workshops with the children.

Peace Proms is done in fourth class, and up until recently, was done actually by a **parent** who approached us who had experience with conducting choirs and being involved in **music in the community**. She would come in and work with the children in fourth class. We've probably done that for about six or seven years. Then there's the **school choir which is for the children in fifth and sixth class. That runs every year, with the focus of the National Children's Choir then being every alternate year.** So we'll have a very busy year one year and then we'll have a more relaxed approach during the other years.

After school we have activities involving kids. The one involving music the most is probably **Encore**. They use our building, and a lot of the students here would attend either here or in other centres. There is also a **music school** which uses our premises after hours. So some of the children would come back to school to take **individual lessons**.

Interviewer: So it's quite an active music community on the whole, involving the school community and outside music organisations who come into the school.

A: Yes, it's interesting, when you **list it all out** it definitely seems that way! It's funny, I always question it – for me, **it's something I'm interested in** and it's part of my **post and responsibilities** within the school – so I'm always thinking about **how you can promote music** and **teacher's confidence** levels, which has an **impact in how music is done** within the school. But I feel like there are **loads of opportunities**

Appendix E

SERC Form

Document Title:	Student Ethics in Research Committee Application Form
Description:	This form is required to be completed by all students who wish to carry out research in Marino Institute of Education.
Author (Position):	Marino Ethics in Research Committee
Version:	2
Approved By:	MIE Governing Body
Policy Approval Date:	January 2019
Date of Next Policy Review:	April 2023 (or as necessary)

Procedure for Ethical Approval of Research Proposals

1 Context

All applications for ethical approval of research proposals by Students in Marino Institute of Education (MIE) must undergo review by the Student Ethics in Research Committee (SERC).

2 Scope

This document applies to all students who wish to carry out research in MIE.

3 Purpose

- 3.1 If you are a student in MIE completing a research dissertation, you must complete this form.
- 3.2 A completed form must be returned to the SERC for review and approval.

4 Student Ethics Application Form

Please complete all sections of the form and adhere to the maximum word count for each section.

Student

Name: Gráinne Logue

Student

Number: xxxxx

Course of

Study: PME

Year of

Study: 2

Please Tick the Level of Approval Required [✓]		
Level 0*	Historical research in education. Research that uses pre-existing data in the public domain (e.g. data from the Growing up in Ireland study). Review of literature or research. Document analysis.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Level 1	Anonymous surveys of a non- personal nature. Unrecorded and anonymous observation of individuals in public areas. Analysis of anonymised data. Interviews with non-vulnerable adults. Some Action Research. Surveys where respondents can be identified and gave consent.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Level 2	All research with children (<18 years of age) and vulnerable adults. Where questions are of a sensitive nature. Video recording or observation. Research conducted outside Ireland. Research involving psychological intervention. Projects where each subject is paid.	<input type="checkbox"/>

***Important Note:** If you tick Level 0 above, you must have agreed this with your Supervisor/Course Leader who must co-sign this form before submission. Supervisors/Course Leaders reserve the right to request SERC to review Level 0 applications.

Overview of the Proposed Research				
What is your Research Question?	What are the perceptions of teachers in a Dublin school of the value of choral singing for senior primary school children?			
What is your research project about? (max. 200 words)	It is the aim of this research to learn from teachers in a Dublin school about their experiences with the National Children's Choir programme, and to learn what values and benefits these teachers perceived as a result of their experiences. I hope to learn about why this particular school participates in the programme, how they facilitate it, and most importantly, what benefits the teachers feel have resulted from taking part. The NCC is open to children from fourth class to sixth class, so I have decided to focus my study on the senior classes. Literature strongly suggests that singing in a choir contributes to increased levels of self-esteem, and it is extremely beneficial in the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. Although I am certainly keen to find out how the teachers felt choral singing benefited their students specifically, I also wish to learn if participating in the scheme affected the teachers themselves in terms of their attitudes towards teaching music.			
Please tick ✓ which approach is proposed	Qualitative ✓	Mixed Methods <input type="checkbox"/>	Quantitative <input type="checkbox"/>	Multi-Method <input type="checkbox"/>
What method(s) of data collection will you use? (max. 100 words)	This qualitative research will be carried out using a series of semi-structured interviews. I will use clear, focused, open-ended questions when conducting my semi-structured interviews. Questions for all participants will include the areas of the advantages and disadvantages of taking part in the NCC; what their music experience is; how the children were affected by their experiences; and how the school culture has been influenced. With the principal, I will also discuss further issues such as the financial issues that may come with partaking in the scheme and why this scheme in particular has been chosen over other investments.			
Who are your	Due to the restrictions on time and the word limit attached to this dissertation, this research will be carried out as a case study. It is my			

<p>proposed participants? (Include no. of participants)</p>	<p>intention to speak with between five and seven people in the school: each of the class teachers for fourth, fifth, and sixth class; the school principal; and any SNAs who worked with these age groups. Of course, it is hugely important to speak with the teacher who teaches the repertoire to the children and who facilitates the participation of NCC within the school. This teacher is the fifth class teacher, and thus is already accounted for in my sample.</p>
<p>How will you identify & invite participants? (max. 100 words)</p>	<p>The school in question will be the school in which I will be undertaking my Advanced School Placement in 2021. I know that the school has participated in the NCC on more than one occasion. I will request the permission of these participants by email before I begin my placement and conduct the interviews after school while I am on placement.</p>

Ethical Considerations			
Indicate the ethical considerations relevant to this project. (max. 150 words)	It will be important that the anonymity of the staff, the school, and the children is protected. It is also important that the participating interviewees are treated with respect and that there is a level of trust. The interviewees will not be made to feel disempowered.		
What steps will you take to minimize risk e.g. consent, assent, confidentiality etc.? (max. 200 words)	Before the interviews are conducted, participants will be made aware of the context in which their contribution will feature and they will be reassured that their confidentiality and anonymity will be protected. They will also know that they will have the opportunity to withdraw their data at any point. I will present this information in a consent form so that participants are aware of their rights. I will also ensure that no other party reads or listens to the recordings of the data. To ensure that the participants are comfortable, I will be sure to afford them time, trust, and respect and conduct the interview in a considerate manner.		
Describe how you will record and store empirical data. (max. 100 words)	I will most likely use two audio recording devices to record the interviews. I will also take supporting notes over the course of the interviews. The data will remain on the recording device used and transcribed on a laptop.		
Insert the date you received Garda Vetting.	10 th September 2019		
Do you plan to provide an incentive for participation?	Please tick ✓ Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	If yes, explain:
Complete the Checklist below			
I have attached the appropriate consent/assent form(s), please tick ✓	Yes ✓	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>

I have attached the appropriate information letter(s), please tick ✓	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
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Important Note: When preparing the above documents, you must use the template(s) provided by MIE.

5 Declaration

This page must be signed before submission:

I declare that the details in this application are the product of my own work and accurately reflect my research proposal. I have consulted an authoritative set of educational research ethics guidelines and with my Supervisor/Course Leader during the process of preparing this application. I understand that any substantive changes to the proposed research design may result in the requirement to submit another application for ethical approval to SERC.

Student Signature:

Gráinne Logue

Date:

2nd November 2020

Supervisor/Course Leader Signature:

Date:

Final Approval Signed-Off by SERC

Signature:

Date:

