



“A Common Obsession”: Children’s and Young People’s Perceptions of Learning in an Intensive Summer Choral Program

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This article reports the findings of an investigation of children’s and young people’s perceptions of learning and life outcomes, environmental supports and teaching and learning strategies encountered in an intensive summer choral program. Whilst the recognition of children’s and young people’s right to voice their perspectives was enshrined in the UN Convention on the rights of the child (1989), the music education profession has taken some time to foreground children’s and young people’s voice as a research focus. Initial investigations of music “student voice” have focused largely on school environments with fewer studies addressing youth music settings. The study addressed this gap through investigating children’s and young people’s perspectives of an intensive summer multi-level choral program (participants aged 11–24 years). Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 11 choristers during the second and final week of the program. Stage One analysis identified 8 emerging themes and 28 sub-categories describing the experience of choral engagement. This was further refined through a Stage Two analysis against the five themes of a framework for understanding the meaning and value of music participation for children and young people in these settings, comprised of: (1) love of performance; (2) unity of purpose; (3) challenge and professionalism; (4) relationships and community; and (5) individual growth and wellbeing. Participants’ love of choral performance was supported across a virtuous cycle of choral engagement developed through being part of a motivated cohort of like-minded “choir nerds” sharing a love of music and unity of purpose. Their appreciation of musical challenge and professionalism was evidenced in descriptions of intensive and demanding rehearsals focused on music detail and refining singing and general music skills. Key to their participation was a sense of being a member of an inclusive community with shared values for high standards of musicianship and performance, and connection with leading conductors and accompanists. Choristers reported individual growth and wellbeing citing increased singing and general music skills, increased confidence and independence, improved motivation, persistence and leadership skills, and, improved social skills including team-work and time-management skills.

Keywords: choral singing, children’s and young people’s voice, youth music, music education, professionalism, choral pedagogy, challenge

INTRODUCTION

Children's and young people's right to voice their opinions regarding decisions that affect their lives was proclaimed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child over 30 years ago (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1989). Since then, researchers investigating childhood experiences have sought to access children's voices in efforts to honor, acknowledge, understand, and value their perspectives. These efforts have led to the development of participatory approaches in research with children and young people which not only seek to access their voices but also engage them in the research process as co-researchers generating data (e.g., Barrett and Smigiel, 2003, 2007; Barrett et al., 2012; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Visual research methods—such as asking children to draw a picture to initiate conversations about specific topics—have been employed to elicit responses about the role of the arts (Barrett and Smigiel, 2003, 2007) and music (Zhukov and Barrett, in press) in children's and young people's lives. Participatory methods including youth-led participatory action research, where young people identify problems in their lives, conduct research and advocate for change, not only honors and acknowledges their experiences and perspectives; they have also been shown to promote adolescent health and wellbeing (Ozer, 2017). These studies emphasize the importance of ensuring that young people's voices are accessed in any investigation of the life and learning outcomes of their participation in community and educational programs. Accordingly, in this paper we report the findings of a research project that sought student perspectives on participation in an intensive summer choral program. Distinctive features of this program include a structure of multi-level choirs, providing opportunity for interaction across age-groups (11–24 years) and levels of experience, a non-assessed learning environment, and culminating in public performances.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a growing trend in music education to consider children's and young people's perspectives concerning the nature and content of music engagement and activity in schools (Barrett and Bond, 2015; Spruce, 2015; Kokotsaki, 2017) and youth music learning environments (Barrett and Smigiel, 2007). An Australian investigation of student perceptions of a music program designed by the Australian Children's Music Foundation and delivered in four disadvantaged schools found that music participation for these students fostered Positive Youth Development (PYD) competencies: specifically, those of competence (musical, academic, social), confidence, connection, character, and caring (Barrett and Bond, 2015). The findings demonstrated that participation in music learning can have a positive impact not only on acquisition of music skills but also on broader aspects of learning and student wellbeing for children living in disadvantage.

Music curriculum in schools is typically devised by music specialists and educational professionals without input from students. In efforts to counter this approach, students transitioning from primary to secondary school in six schools in the north-east of England (97 focus groups in total) were interviewed across the transition year concerning their enjoyment of school music (primary and secondary), their musical activities, their expectations of music education and what they would change (Kokotsaki, 2017). Findings reveal some disillusionment concerning music at secondary school. Students "reported a desire to be somehow involved in this decision-making process where they would appreciate an element of *choice* regarding the content and nature of their musical involvement" (p. 11; author's italics). Similarly, Spruce (2015) warned that "despite a disposition toward inclusion and participation, music education in England has often failed to "hear" the student voice in the discourse of curriculum, pedagogy and musical value, resulting in the disengagement of many young people from formal music education in school" (p. 297).

A recent systematic literature review of learner's voice in music education located only seven papers that reported student voices (Després and Dubé, 2020). The literature search was limited by the chosen keywords "learner/student/pupil voice and music" and, therefore, did not capture publications that reported "children's" or "young people's" or "youth" voice. Nevertheless, a secondary thematic analysis of student quotations drawn from the reviewed studies revealed a focus on what students liked to do in music and disliked in music education. Specifically, they liked: "to play music, to create, to help each other, to realize projects, to be creative and to express themselves", whilst they "(a) don't like to be lectured and tested, they prefer to be active in a collaborative and non-stressful environment; (b) don't like to be directed in a top-down approach, they want to take part in the decision-making process, and (c) prefer not to specialize too quickly: they value learning various instruments and songs" (p. 11).

Children's and young people's perspectives have also informed the growing body of research in choral singing activity. This research has largely focused on health, wellbeing and attitudes toward singing by participants across all ages: children (Welch et al., 2014; Barrett et al., 2020), adolescents (Lucas, 2011; Parker, 2014; Freer, 2016; Orton and Pitts, 2019) and the adult life-span including young adults (Clift and Hancox, 2010; Clift et al., 2016; Fernández-Herranz et al., 2021). A recent survey developed specifically to access the perceptions of 6–17-year-old choristers who were engaged in high-level choral performance ensembles demonstrated a strong association between choral participation over time and positive improvements in the domains of self-esteem, self-efficacy, identity and social impact (Zhukov et al., 2021).

Beyond school, children's and young people's perspectives of life and learning in youth music environments have provided insights into the meaning and value of music participation (Barrett and Smigiel, 2007). Twenty-five students aged 6–17 across four youth music organizations in Australia participated in artifact-elicited interviews concerning the nature, extent and meaning of their participation. Findings identified a framework for understanding the meaning and value of music participation

for children and young people in these settings, comprised of five themes: (1) love of performance; (2) unity of purpose; (3) challenge and professionalism; (4) relationships and community; and (5) individual growth and wellbeing. It may be argued that these students' positive views of music learning arise in part from their voluntary (rather than compulsory) participation in music education, the lack of state-mandated assessment of their participation, and a unique focus on active performance in a music ensemble (largely orchestras and choirs). Nevertheless, this work has been employed in the analysis of children's music perspectives of in-and out-of-school settings (Griffin, 2009), including a school world music ensemble (Hess, 2010) and a Mennonite school choir program (Dabback, 2018), as well as organized youth arts activities (Ennis and Tonkin, 2018).

The choral research to date has given little attention to children's and young people's perspectives of learning and life outcomes from choral participation, and the teaching environments and strategies that support these. The aim of this paper is to address this gap in the literature by reporting chorister perceptions of teaching and learning during an intensive choral training program for children and young people, and the life and learning outcomes that arose from these. Our research questions focused on:

- (1) What learning and life outcomes do choristers report from their participation in an intensive summer choral program?
- (2) What environmental supports and teaching and learning strategies underpin these outcomes?

METHODOLOGY

Research Site

This paper documents chorister perspectives (aged 11–24 years) of learning and life outcomes and environmental supports that emerge from participation in an intensive choral training program, the Australian National Choral School (NCS), that takes place every year in Sydney during the Australian summer school holidays. Intending participants apply for the NCS through an audition which is designed to demonstrate both singing ability and other musical skills relative to the age and experience of the applicant. The choral residential school lasts 2 weeks and consists of intensive rehearsals culminating in several high-profile public concerts. The School is organized in four choral groupings—Voices (treble singers aged 10–17), Singers (SATB aged 13–17), Latitude (SATB aged 17+), Chorale (mixed choir aged 17–25)—ranging from those aimed at developing young choristers to advanced groups of experienced singers, with participants from around the country auditioning to be accepted into the program. Those enrolled in Chorale spend the NCS preparing repertoire for a tour that takes place later in the year, as well as preparing for the culminating concert. Each choir meets several times a day to rehearse a range of different repertoire with two conductors who work as a team and provide exposure to different conducting styles. In addition to choral rehearsals, a number of electives are offered as well as social events, resulting in an activity-packed 14 days. A key feature of the NCS is regular

meetings between students and all staff to discuss progress and perceptions, connect and share ideas. We report chorister voices regarding their participation in the 2019 NCS that included over 300 choristers (pre-Covid).

Participants

After obtaining ethical clearance from The University of Queensland, volunteer participants were recruited *via* the NCS administration from four different choirs to obtain an overview of the intensive choral training program from multiple perspectives. Eleven students took part in interviews during the second week of the program, ranging in age from 11 to 24 years ($M = 17.3$). Students identified as female (7), male (3) and non-binary (1). The youngest participant, Chloe was 11 and in Year 6 (primary school) with the oldest, Charlotte, aged 24 and about to complete her sixth year of university. Eight participants were returning attendees at the NCS and three were first-timers, with the average NCS experience of 4.5 years. **Table 1** provides the participants' demographics, using pseudonyms.

Data Collection

The researchers attended the School to observe and conduct interviews. Using an interview guide (see **Appendix**), individual chorister interviews were conducted during the second week of the program by one researcher in a quiet space during the breaks between choral rehearsals and audio-recorded. Interviews lasted between 10 and 30 min, with an average of 20 min. Older participants tended to provide more fulsome responses to interview questions, with younger participants responding more briefly. These interviews produced rich data concerning choristers' perspectives of the learning and life outcomes of their participation and the unique characteristics of this environment that supported those outcomes. Audio files were transcribed by a professional transcription company and transcripts subjected to analyses.

Analyses

In Stage One (the initial analysis) the transcripts of participant interviews were inductively coded by two researchers independently, following the interview questions (Saldanña, 2014). The coding was refined through iterative discussions and consensus reached on the grouping emerging from the data (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). In the report of findings below, participant quotes are used to illustrate the responses to each question and sub-categories that were identified, and to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings (Given and Saumure, 2008).

In order to further theorize learners' voices describing their experiences of an intensive choral training program, a Stage Two thematic analysis was undertaken following the same procedure as in Stage One, with researchers working independently first and refining the categories through discussions (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The initial coding was deductively mapped against a framework for understanding children's and young people's perceptions of the meaning and value of their participation in youth music contexts (Barrett and Smigiel, 2007), illustrated through the themes of: love of performance; unity of purpose; challenge and professionalism; relationships and community;

TABLE 1 | Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	School/university year	Age	Sex	NCS choir	Years attending NCS
Charlotte	Y6 university (second degree)	24	F	Chorale	14
Thomas	Y4 university (graduated)	22	M	Chorale	5
Mia	12	17	F	Latitude	5
Henry	Y1 university	19	M	Latitude	1
Lukas	11	17	Non-binary	Singers	1
Jack	8	15	M	Singers	1
Chloe	6	11	F	Voices	2
Olivia	11	16	F	Voices	5
Ella	11	16	F	Voices	4
Grace	10	16	F	Voices	6
Zoe	12	17	F	Voices	5

and individual growth and wellbeing. Stage Two analysis helped to refine the findings of Stage One analysis and articulate answers to the research questions. As one focus of this article is to access and amplify children's voices and perspectives, we have quoted extensively from the data to illustrate a broad range of responses from the study participants.

FINDINGS

Stage One—Initial Analysis

Question 1: Musical and personal reasons for choosing NCS

Many of the interviewed choristers have attended NCS previously, so we were interested in why they returned, in one case for fourteen years (Charlotte). For new attendees we asked if they would return and *why*. Choristers reported unanimously that the main reason for returning year after year was that NCS provided the highest level of choral singing they have ever experienced.

It is probably the highest standard of singing that I can do each year, because I live in a small town. (Jack)

I enjoyed it so much last time and I love the music here and the choirs and just the level, amazing singing. (Chloe)

The singing is just great. I love singing this kind of repertoire, and being able to have a choir sit down, sight-read through our works and have it sound decent—this doesn't happen very often, even in a professional level. (Henry)

New and unusual repertoire and vocal techniques that broadened their musical horizons and improved musical skills were also referred to as significant factors in the choristers' attendance. They also spoke of the fulfilling and invigorating experience of working intensively with amazing conductors to create "beautiful music" and produce "high caliber" performances. Implicit in all of these statements is the NCS's focus on a "high standard of musicianship."

I get to sing a bunch of really interesting music that I wouldn't really otherwise. I get to see a lot of friends and work with amazing conductors as well, and pianists. It's just really great! (Grace)

To do this much music coaching and work and really train myself musically, that I really, really enjoy. I think it's an incredible opportunity to give people from around the country this chance, which they wouldn't normally have, to perform in choirs of high calibre and very focused and very good. (Olivia)

I love creating beautiful music with groups of people and I have lots of friends here, which are from all over Australia. It's the high standard of the musicianship and just how welcomed I feel and how supported. (Mia)

I definitely learned new vocal techniques so that'll help me with my singing performance. The learning curve at NCS starts off slow and then it just skyrockets. (Lukas)

You just can't drag your feet here, it really pushes you to do your very best and to be the best musician you can be. Socially it is very important for personal growth and development, the patience that you need to be with the same people for two weeks, sometimes four weeks when it's a tour, is super helpful for real life. (Thomas)

As Thomas references above, the social dimension of participation was important for choristers. Being with like-minded "choir nerds" (a term many used to describe themselves and the community) and building long-term long-distance friendships with people across the country was viewed as important. For some, the NCS was an annual reunion that generated a sense of community where everyone was welcomed and supported; and put simply, everyone just enjoyed singing in great choirs.

We all consider ourselves choir nerds, so we're going to go and practice our music, but really, we love singing, and so we put in the hard work. (Henry)

It's like a family reunion every year, there's a lot of anticipation leading up to it to see our friends to come here and sing with them. It's really fun! (Ella)

The friends that you make here, you keep them forever. It's this other circle of people outside of your normal everyday life that you come back to after 12 months, and it feels like you never left. I really like having that. (Zoe)

Question 2: Comparison to home choir experience

When asked to compare the NCS experience to the choral singing they typically experience in their home choirs, the participants commented on the high level of singing at NCS,

the expertise of staff (conductors and accompanists), and the expectation that all singers will develop sight-reading skills.

The general ability of everyone here is remarkably high, as well as the expertise of all the staff, and it's really unlike anything else, just being with such good choristers and such good conductors, and pianists. (Henry)

The level of musicianship is so much higher because everyone can sight-read. We just sight-read every piece, and it was by no means perfect, but we could read through a piece in eight parts. (Mia)

In further comparisons, choristers commented on the frequency, intensity and fast-moving nature of rehearsals that focused on details, and their exposure to more varied and advanced repertoire.

The choirs are just so much better, everyone in the choir is amazing at singing. We have rehearsals pretty much all day and back at home there's usually one once a week. (Chloe)

It's very intensive—we're singing for about six hours a day—and (at home) we never really get into the kind of detail that we do here. We'll often spend ages on one or two bars, and never get the luxury of that anywhere else. (Charlotte)

The amount of music we get through and the standard that we are expected to have it at by the end of two weeks is just totally different from anything else. So, I find it a lot more rewarding because I really have to work hard and it's really fun. (Grace)

Choristers remarked on the experience of working with expert conductors demonstrating a variety of approaches whilst challenging singers to learn new repertoire in a very short time. Participants evidently appreciated that they were part of a motivated cohort of singers who attend every rehearsal and work hard, and valued the opportunity to meet like-minded choristers from across Australia and bond with them over the 2 weeks.

The level of conductor competence is far superior to anything that I've experienced. They tell us things to do in terms of colour and the phrasing of the music, the particular details that you wouldn't ever otherwise hear from other choirs, even professionally. (Thomas)

There is a real sense of community and friendships that are really amazing. It's cool to say you've got friends from all over the country. I think that's a really appealing aspect—it's the people that you get to spend it with and learn from as well. (Olivia)

Question 3: Comparison to home choir teaching

The choristers were asked to highlight the differences between the teaching approaches at the NCS and what they normally experience in their home choirs. The comments included respect for the expertise of NCS conductors who provided detailed feedback, specific technical advice and high expectations; extensive warm-up exercises, movement and physicality; fine-tuning of intonation for different vowels; focus on interpretation, meaning, sound quality, phrasing, color and choir cohesion; subtle teaching techniques using questioning and analogy to make choristers think for themselves; time-efficient coaching by focusing on multiple aspects at the same time; and conductors' sense of humor and experience in working with younger children.

Their life is kind of focused on conducting and working with young kids in music. They really know what they want out of all of these choristers, and they're here to make the choristers better. (Zoe)

Tuning was a big thing. For example, they've given us exercises, getting us to sing in a specific way to make us think more sharp. (Henry)

A lot more is about the interpretation, and what does this music mean? What do we want to convey to the audience? How do we perform the music? How do we create something magical with the repertoire that we're given? (Mia)

It's really subtle. You don't even realise that you're being taught until it comes to the end and you're singing really good, like a slightly different breathing technique and different warm-up techniques so your voice can do different things. (Lukas)

The conductors will put questions out there. They won't tell us how it is. They'll make us think, make us work. (Olivia)

The conductors are so motivated and the choir respects them to an utmost degree so that it just makes rehearsals so efficient and of huge quality. (Thomas)

A lot of things are being learned at the same time as each other, there's less bits and pieces been broken down. (Ella)

I've noticed that all the conductors here have a lovely sense of humour. They seem to be just much nicer and understand the level of work children can do well a bit better. (Chloe)

Question 4: Key learnings

When asked to reflect specifically on the new knowledge acquired during the NCS, choristers discussed improved singing ability, commenting on: improved range and posture; specific vocal techniques to achieve better vowel shapes, intonation/tuning, breath control/support, sound placement, and voice preservation.

My sight-singing skills have very noticeably improved, and even just over the course of the two weeks. (Olivia)

It's helping to improve my range so I can sing a bit lower and a bit higher than I could before I came. (Chloe)

Vowel clock was a really cool new thing I learnt—which is just a clock with different vowels on the whiteboard. It's different vowel sounds and the difference between singing a vowel so that you can hear and what the audience will hear and how you have to brighten the vowels so that they hear what you want the sound to be. (Lukas)

We do a lot of a cappella, it's very hard to stay in tune because they're quite isolating pieces. We spend probably about 70 to 80% of our rehearsal time on the vowel shape that we want that will keep it in tune. That's really helped me learn more about intonation personally and as a choir how to match all the intonation and what that sounds like when it's done really perfectly. (Mia)

I learn a lot more about my own breath support and that I need to conserve my voice to go high in my range without wrecking it, being able to sing through phrases in one breath, using the proper support to really keep that up throughout all of it. (Thomas)

Choristers described varying strategies for learning and memorization, ranging from repeated listening to recordings, memorizing the text first (particularly, if it was in a language other than English) and then combining it with the melody, whilst others memorized text and melody simultaneously. Several singers commented that hearing the total sound of all parts together helped them learn; to facilitate this, some choristers listened to recordings and others practiced in small groups with other vocal parts.

When learning new songs, I find listening to them on repeat really gets it into my brain. But for the lyrics, especially because a lot of

our songs are in different languages, I find writing them out really helps me. (Zoe)

In rehearsals we just go over and over through pronunciations, to get the words right. We'll speak them, make sure we're getting the rhythm right, and then sing it. Language takes a lot of work and a lot of effort in our own time to memorise it. (Olivia)

In the evenings I'll sometimes get on YouTube and have a look at the songs so I can hear what the whole thing sounds like in my head and then hear how my part fits into it. (Ella)

I actually learn best just by rehearsing (with friends), it helps a lot to sing it and hear how it works with the other parts and with piano. (Grace)

In addition to improved general music skills such as sight-reading, memorization, practicing, listening, and blending, choristers also spoke of the ways in which the experience developed personal skills such as motivation, working as a team, independence/self-sufficiency and leadership skills.

It reminded me that I have a long way to go, and I should be working, I should be practising more, and trying to improve myself. Because the people around me were my level and better, I was just very conscious that I should listen to them rather than trusting myself all the time. (Henry)

The conductors are always constantly reminding us: listen to the people around you, blend, match your vowels with everyone. (Zoe)
NCS showed me how to work as a team and just that hard work pays off and if you don't get too stressed about it you can still enjoy it. (Chloe)

NCS taught me self-sufficiency. Like making yourself get up and get ready and go to meals at the right time. And there's no bells or anything, so it's not like school. You have to actually check the time and be responsible for making sure that you don't miss the metaphorical bus. (Grace)

We sometimes break up into parts and do sectionals. And we'll become the teachers and we'll start working in teams to learn our part in songs that we've been assigned. In a new team we get a lot of leadership skills like how to tackle a challenge. (Ella)

Question 5: Musical and personal achievements

When highlighting the musical and personal achievements from participation in the NCS, the most frequently mentioned point was improvement in singing ability, including confidence in singing, increased vocal range, strengthened voice, new vocal techniques and refinement of tone quality.

My singing technique has improved and I often try out for solos and occasionally I've gotten them. I've gained lots of experience of singing in concerts and also singing overseas on tour. (Grace)

I've achieved doing some very high-standard performances that, before I came to NCS, I wouldn't have thought was possible for me to do. You hear of adult choirs, but I didn't know that producing such high-quality music was something I was capable of. (Mia)

It's strengthened my voice, because just using it a lot and training it, and actively making sure I'm using it properly has just developed it a bit. I feel like a lot of my register is stronger. (Olivia)

To be able to memorise music for five songs at least 10 pages each in two weeks is quite incredible. The speed of learning is incredible! (Lucas)

Definitely sight-reading, massive one because I don't get much opportunity to sight-read at home, especially singing. And here they

give you pieces of music, and they say, "Okay, sing." I feel like that's definitely improved for me. (Zoe)

Taking part in demanding performance experiences had pushed the choristers to become better musicians and focus on communicating the emotional content of the music. General music skills were also developed further during NCS, for example sight-reading, memorization, faster speed of learning music and ability to absorb many musical details straight from the start. On the personal level, the choristers learnt perseverance and honed their leadership skills.

In terms of your own sharpness, alertness, focus and attention to detail hugely improves every year with NCS. I think every year that you do intensive sight-reading, memorisation of music with people always develop your more. I achieve the next level of musical competence, especially now that I'm experienced and I feel like I'm leading rather than following. (Thomas)

The discipline required to learn your music, I think that comes with a dedication and love for the music. If you recognise that, you can learn to do things that you enjoy and will allow you to put in the hard work. Because, loving something makes the hard work not that hard. (Henry)

It's taught me how to stick to something and see it through. It's taught me how to lead and teach. Once you become more senior it's sort of your job to teach younger kids about rehearsal that occurred, and teach them about going through things and memorising and going into tutorials and you run the tutorials essentially. (Charlotte)

Question 6: Contribution to life

When reflecting on the contribution that the participation in NCS has made to their lives, the issues highlighted by choristers included the importance of belonging to a special choral community, the acceptance of difference, and feeling of inclusion offered by that community.

It's nice to just be around people who are also crazy about choral music, because that's not a very common obsession. (Grace)

People come here to seek friendships because they are not well socialised or are ostracised in their own home environments. This gives them a chance to feel included in something because there is that point in common. (Thomas)

Choristers also spoke of the impact of participating in memorable experiences and performances and fostering their love of music.

NCS really taught me that music is not just about the notes. It's about performing and it's about conveying a certain emotion or story or feeling to the audience and to each other in the choir. (Mia)
It's an incredible opportunity to give people from around the country this chance, which they wouldn't normally have, to perform in choirs of high calibre and very focused and very good. That's why I love it! (Olivia)

Choristers commented on the ways in which the NCS built social skills, teamwork, time-management and helped them interact with different people. These experiences were perceived not only to increase personal confidence, independence, and create new friendships, but also establish future potential professional contacts.

I didn't really have any friends at school. I didn't really know how to talk to people. I think it was sort of my first experience of really interacting with people and learning all these different things and I would be struggling a lot more if it weren't for NCS. (Charlotte)

I've gained a lot of independence coming here because usually I've travelled here on my own. (Ella)

These people here, they're some of the best, if not the best singers in Australia at this age group. These people are going to be the composers, the conductors, the choristers in all of these professional choirs. I think knowing people like that gives me an opportunity to do something. (Henry)

Question 7: Impact on future learning

When considering the impact of participation in NCS on future musical learning, choristers referred to: their desire to continue singing during and after secondary education; the enhanced level of music-making through learning from the experts; sharing the knowledge acquired at NCS with their home choirs; and their greater openness to broader cultural experiences through exposure to singing in Indigenous languages.

I can keep music until after high school, I definitely want to keep it with me some way or another. I do hope to create my own music. I think that will be amazing. (Ella)

I don't want to just give up music because I'm out of school and studying engineering. I want to keep doing. I think that's a really important part of me, and I think NCS has taught me that you can have fantastic musical experiences no matter what walk of life you're from. (Mia)

It's made me a better musician, for sure. It's improved my skills, and it's confirmed that I do really love music. I really, really treasure and value the experience of learning from these really esteemed people. (Olivia)

I've been talking to my conductor about different sight-singing techniques because that is assessed in HSC exams and he's given me all these pointers and a really good program to use. I'm going to start using that and improving my sight-singing skills. (Lucas)

I definitely think that the skills I'm taking away from NCS will stick with me forever. The way the conductors explain things, sometimes they just click. I can use those little ways of explaining things to help the other kids in my home choir. (Zoe)

I love singing in Indigenous languages. The language that we see written is very easy to pronounce because it's just exactly how it would sound because Aboriginal languages were verbal. (Lukas)

In terms of non-musical future learning, many choristers recognised the transfer of skills to other disciplines and to areas of personal growth. Particular points raised included memorization skills and focused attention as being necessary for university study, and the musical ear helping to learn foreign languages. The sense of community and support at NCS was perceived to build choristers' personal confidence and capacity to relate to diverse groups of people and to speak fluently.

Attention to detail is something that both comes naturally to me, but also something that I've really honed in NCS. It does tell me that I have the capacity to learn such a large amount of material in the space of one week and that my capabilities are maybe more than I would have normally assessed them as. (Charlotte)

I speak Japanese, and my musical ear has definitely helped in my pronunciation; people who are very good at pronouncing things are the musicians, the singers. (Henry)

I'm sure it's indirectly affecting my confidence as a person to be able to stand up with my shoulders back and to meet the world with confidence and people within it. I think having those two weeks to really hone in those skills of patience, of constantly being focused and detailed, but friendly and looking after and developing your friendships, will be hugely beneficial for my career. (Thomas)

NCS definitely helped me develop as a person and learn to interact with people who I wouldn't necessarily choose to because you're kind of put together and that's something you have to do. I realise you really do have to do this in jobs and in real life. (Charlotte)

Question 8: Highlights of the program

The choristers' comments highlighting the most memorable experience from the 2019 NCS could be broadly divided into three categories: aspects of singing, elective activities and friendships. The highlights of choral singing included singing in the mass choir, singing in mixed parts, working with expert conductors and working with composers on newly composed works.

I adore singing in the mass choir. When everyone joins together there's over 300 of us. That's always a highlight for me, because it's just incredible to be singing with so many talented musicians. (Olivia)

I really love it in our rehearsals when conductors tell us to spread out and mix the parts. I sit right in the middle of Soprano One part and I'm not used to hearing the other parts. One time I was sitting next to Alto Two on the complete opposite side of the choir, and it was just so cool to hear that part. (Zoe)

I thought our guest conductor was utterly superb. He was going through what seemed simplistic things, but we were sounding so much better, and it was like remarkable to me just that how effective he was at teaching and conducting. (Henry)

The composers are with us during the rehearsals so they can tell us exactly how they want it to sound. And they tell exactly what they want us to fix. (Ella)

I really liked the composers' concert last night, new pieces that composers have made for us, and that's pretty awesome to know that they've been composed for my choir. (Chloe)

The particular elective courses mentioned by choristers were Indonesian dance and preparation for an overseas tour.

I'm doing Indonesian dance, it is very strict movements that produce a rhythm, so it's lots of body percussion as well as the parts drumming. Every time we finish our set, we just have these huge grins on our faces. (Mia)

After this week, we're going to the Baltic States to do a two-week tour. And even though that's all my life savings every time, it's the kind of thing that I'm happy to spend money on because the experience of those two weeks of being with your friends, with the quality of the choir, seeing other countries, is just incredibly unique and not something you want to miss. (Thomas)

Catching up with old friends and meeting new people and forming new friendships were important social elements.

It's been nice hanging out with old friends and making new friends. On the excursion day I went out with a bunch of friends and we went into the city and had a picnic. (Grace)

The choir changing around is the biggest thing that can make each year new or special. It's always different in that it's the people that change and your relationships with them that develop. (Thomas)

When asked to summarize why they value the NCS experience, the choristers highlighted the sense of belonging to the unique choral community and the positive impact it has had on their lives.

The first moment when everyone starts to sing is just incredible, because you go, "Wow, I'm really surrounded by people who really are in this as much as I am, and who love to and are able to sing really well." So it's just incredible to be surrounded by all these people who have very similar interests, similar passions, and you're all there for the same thing. (Olivia)

NCS nurtured my love of music, which I then take into all aspects of my life. I feel really confident and secure in being very happy with loving music and with sharing that with other people. (Chloe)

For some, the thought of getting too old to attend NCS in the future and missing out on this very special experience was disheartening.

I don't know what I'm going to do without it once I hit the age limit. (Charlotte)

It just feels very daunting that I only have 3 years left possibly doing this. (Thomas)

The findings from the thematic analysis provided above are summarized in **Table 2**.

Discussion of Initial Analysis

The findings from this study both reinforce and extend previous understandings of the life and learning outcomes of choral participation and the environmental supports for this activity. Question 1 findings show that both musical and personal reasons influenced participants' decision to audition for the summer program and participate multiple times over several years. Zhukov et al. (2021) have previously reported that participation in high-level choirs is seen by choristers as leading to improved self-efficacy (choral skills) and chorister identity, whilst Ferrer et al. (2018) described "friendship [as] the most valuable aspect for singers" (p. 334).

The findings for Question 2 illustrate how the NCS offered an intensive environment for choral learning, featuring the experience of working with expert conductors who held high expectations for a highly motivated cohort. Whilst this setting is similar to the intensive training of English Cathedral choristers (Barrett, 2011; Welch, 2011; Dong and Kokotsaki, 2021), the opportunity to undertake elective extension activities (Indonesian dance) and strong social supports throughout the 2-week NCS was also noted as important by participants.

Chorister responses to Question 3 enumerated a range of different teaching approaches utilized in the intensive choral program. As Abrahams and Abrahams (2017) highlighted, expert choral pedagogy involves more than mastering technical aspects of singing: as illustrated in these participants' responses, it also helps choristers' construction of meaning by inducting them into a choral community of practice in which they take responsibility for their own and peers' learning.

Findings for Question 4 demonstrate rapid development of specific vocal skills, general music skills and personal skills. Similar results have been reported in the literature. For example,

Barrett (2011) described focus on "vocal production, music reading and interpretation, and performance practice" in the training of young cathedral choristers (p. 282). Orton and Pitts (2019) highlighted motivation as a strong influence on choristers' enjoyment of singing. Kirrane et al. (2017) showed that effective team-work and leadership are essential elements of success in a professional chamber choir. Parker (2014) identified "team" as the fundamental element in chorister social identity. The findings describe a range of chorister-led learning strategies used to facilitate mastering of new repertoire in a short period of time. These individual approaches are supported by Kokotsaki (2017) who states that "pupils learn best and are more engaged in music when [they] have choice, take control of their learning, make music with friends and perform to others" (p. 17).

Question 5 findings center on chorister achievements in vocal and general music skills and in personal resilience and leadership. Similar results were reported by Barrett and Bond (2015) with a music program delivering musical competence and building competence, confidence, connection, character and caring for disadvantaged youth.

Findings for Question 6 focus on belonging to an inclusive NCS choral community and special friendships formed during the program. Clift et al. (2016) and Fernández-Herranz et al. (2021) have reported similar results for adult choristers, in particular group engagement, belonging and improved social skills. Palkki and Caldwell (2018) showed that LGBTQ students viewed high school choirs as safe places where their identity was acknowledged. In this study, the group identification as "choral nerds" emphasize the importance of this unique identity for the NCS choristers.

Question 7 responses show chorister intention for life-long engagement with singing, broadening of their cultural horizons and awareness of skill transfer to non-music areas. Research has described how extra-curricular instrumental and vocal tuition can shape lifetime involvement with music when the programs focus on creative youth development (Crech et al., 2020). Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010) emphasized the importance of creative activities that are culturally meaningful to children in order to extend their cultural repertoire. While a recent meta-analysis of studies claiming skill transfer from music to cognitive and academic skills demonstrated weakness in research (Sala and Gobet, 2017), nonetheless educators have asserted for some time that "musical skills may transfer to other activities if the processes involved are similar" (Hallam, 2010, p. 269), and that "music instruction confers consistent benefits for spatiotemporal reasoning skills" (Črnčec et al., 2006, p. 579). It should be noted that the findings reported here represent personal views of the participants.

Question 8 findings describe memorable experiences of singing and choral learning, cultural exposure and strong friendships as the highlights of the NCS program. Research has demonstrated that "choral activity is a powerful musical educational experience" (Fernández-Herranz et al., 2021, p. 12). Culturally meaningful experiences have been identified by Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010) as vital for building cultural capital in children. Friendships have been highlighted by

TABLE 2 | Initial coding of factors impacting chorister development in NCS.

Question	Sub-categories	Coding	
1. Musical and personal reasons for choosing NCS	Musical	Highest level of choral singing Working intensively with amazing conductors High caliber performances Learning new and unusual repertoire	
	Personal	Being with like-minded choir nerds Building long-term long-distance friendships; annual reunion Sense of a community where everyone was welcomed and supported	
2. Comparison to home choir experiences	Higher level of singing	All choristers are expected to sight-read	
	Intensive rehearsals	Fast-moving; attention to details	
	Repertoire	More advanced and more varied	
	Personal	Variety of approaches; challenging	
	Motivated cohort	Full attendance and hard work	
3. Comparison to home choir teaching	Opportunity to meet peers	Bonding over 2 weeks	
	Respect for conductor expertise	Detailed feedback, technical advice, high expectations	
4. Key learnings	Extensive warm-ups	Movement; physicality	
	Intonation fine-tuning	Different vowels	
	Focus on interpretation	Meaning, sound quality, phrasing, color	
	Teaching techniques	Questioning and analogy	
	Time-efficient	Multiple aspects addressed all at once	
	Sense of humor	Experience in working with children	
5. Musical and personal achievements	General singing ability	Improved vocal range and posture	
	Specific vocal techniques	Focus on vowel shapes, intonation/tuning, breath control/support, sound placement, and voice preservation	
	General music skills	Sight-reading, memorization, practicing, listening, blending and fitting one's part into context	
6. Contribution to life	Personal skills	Motivation, working as a team, independence/self-sufficiency and leadership skills	
	Musical	Improved singing ability	
		Improved general music skills Better musicianship Capacity to communicate emotions	
	Personal	Persistence Leadership	
7. Impact on future learning	Musical	Importance of belonging to a special choral community Participating in memorable experiences and performances Fostering their love of music	
		Personal	Improved social skills; interact with different people Teamwork, time-management Increased personal confidence and independence New friendships and professional contacts
	Transfer to non-musical areas	Musical	Continue singing beyond NCS Enhanced level of music-making through learning from the experts Sharing the knowledge with home choirs Greater openness to broader cultural experiences
			Memorization skills and focused attention Learn foreign languages Sense of community Personal confidence

(Continued)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Question	Sub-categories	Coding
8. Highlights of the program	Singing	Singing in the mass choir
		Singing in mixed parts
		Working with expert conductors
		Working with composers on newly composed works
	Electives	Indonesian dance
		Preparation for overseas tour
	Friendships	Old friends and new friends
		Sense of belonging

TABLE 3 | Mapping of findings from the initial analysis to the five themes.

Theme (Barrett and Smigiel, 2007)	Sub-categories and coding from initial analysis
Love of performance	High caliber performances Singing in mass choir Participating in memorable experiences and performances Continuing singing after NCS
Unity of purpose	Importance of belonging to a special choral community Being with like-minded choir nerds Fostering love of music Capacity to communicate emotions Motivated cohort, full attendance and hard work Preparation for overseas tour
Challenge and professionalism	Highest level of choral singing Intensive rehearsals, fast moving, attention to details Learning new and unusual repertoire Time-efficient teaching strategies, addressing multiple aspects all at once Extensive warm-ups, movement, physicality Intonation fine-tuning Singing in mixed parts Fitting one's part into context Memorization skills Focus on interpretation New vocal techniques Working with composers on newly composed works
Relationships and community	Respect for conductor expertise, detailed feedback, technical advice, high expectations Conductors' sense of humor, experience in working with children Opportunity to meet peers, bonding over 2 weeks Sense of community where everyone is welcomed and supported Building long-term long-distance friendships, annual reunion New friendships and professional contacts Sense of belonging Greater openness to broader cultural experiences (learning foreign languages, Indonesian dance) Sharing knowledge with home choirs
Individual growth and wellbeing	Improved general singing ability Improved general music skills Enhanced level of music-making through learning from the experts Increased personal confidence and independence Improved social skills, interaction with different people Growth in personal skills, independence and self-sufficiency Persistence Leadership skills Motivation Teamwork and time-management Positive impact on life

Ferrer et al. (2018) as being very important for choristers. Sense of belonging and positive impact on life identified in Question 8 have been documented in previous choral research on adults (Clift et al., 2016; Fernández-Herranz et al., 2021), and adolescents and children (Parker, 2014; Orton and Pitts, 2019; Zhukov et al., 2021). While much of this research has been

conducted *via* surveys, the findings presented here let us hear children's voices directly.

Stage Two—Framework of Meaning and Value of Music Participation Analysis

The initial analysis outlined above produced 28 sub-categories of responses to eight questions which probed choristers' perceptions of the life and learning outcomes of participation in the intensive choral training program. In order to further refine these responses, we mapped the sub-categories and coding to the five themes identified in a previous study of children's perceptions of participation in youth music settings, those of: love of performance; unity of purpose; challenge and professionalism; relationships and community; and individual growth and wellbeing (Barrett and Smigiel, 2007; see **Table 3**).

Discussion of Stage Two Analysis

This study investigated chorister perspectives of participation in an intensive summer choral program, specifically their perspectives of learning and life outcomes (RQ1), and the environmental supports and teaching and learning strategies that underpin these outcomes (RQ2). It is evident from both Stage One and Stage Two analyses presented above that choristers' participation is driven by a *love of choral performance* and the opportunities the NCS provides for high-caliber public performance of demanding choral repertoire. This *love of choral performance* is not only the driver of their participation, but also the outcome, creating a virtuous cycle of choral engagement. Choristers' spoke of a sense of *unity of purpose* developed through being part of a motivated cohort of like-minded "choir nerds" sharing a love of music. *Challenge and professionalism* were key elements in the choristers' descriptions of the unique features of this learning environment. Their appreciation of these elements was evident in their accounts of intensive rehearsals in which attention to fine details of singing technique (e.g., vocal warm-ups, intonation, blending), musicianship (e.g., sight-reading and memorization), and interpretation was the focus. The choristers identified the quality of the *relationships and community* experienced in the NCS as a characteristic feature and support of their learning and engagement. Their respect for and appreciation of the staff (conductors and accompanists) and their peers was evident in responses that highlighted the enduring nature of friendships, the developing personal and professional networks that emerged through the NCS, and their sense of belonging to a unique community. The learning and life outcomes of participation in the NCS were reported in terms of *individual growth and wellbeing* as a musician and person. Choristers described their growth as a musician through reference to improved singing and general music skills, and learning from interactions with leading practitioners (conductors, accompanists, and composers). In terms of extra-musical learning and life outcomes choristers reported increased confidence and independence, improved motivation, persistence and leadership skills, and, improved social skills including teamwork and time-management skills.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We acknowledge that the NCS offers a unique environment. Choristers audition voluntarily into the program, thereby ensuring that applicants demonstrate sufficient singing and general musicianship skills relative to their age and experience and are driven largely by a personal rather than external compulsory educational motivation. The program is not affiliated with a learning institution and is, therefore, not bound by mandated standards of achievement and assessment. The NCS occurs as an intensive 2-week learning environment with a sole focus on singing and learning new repertoire, and a goal of performing this repertoire at a high-stakes public concert at the conclusion of the program, and for some, in preparation for an international tour following the NCS. Students and staff live and work together over this period, developing connections and networks that endure. The staff of the NCS are leading choral conductors nationally and internationally, supported by accompanists whose skills and musicianship are recognized in their professional roles with Australia's leading arts companies. These elements differentiate this learning environment from that encountered in the school sector. Nevertheless, the findings outlined above have relevance to choral educators in schools, and align with the findings of studies undertaken in music education (e.g., Ferrer et al., 2018; Zhukov et al., 2021). The virtuous cycle of choral engagement described in this study reflects students' desire to be musically active, to be able "to play music, to create, to help each other, to realize projects, to be creative and to express themselves" (Després and Dubé, 2020, p. 11). The focus in the NCS in preparing for a collaborative high-stakes public performance may be viewed as an example of authentic assessment, a real-world alternative to the lecturing and testing that is reported as a negative in school settings (Kokotsaki, 2017). Despite being an exclusive, elite environment, the findings from this investigation illustrate the potential for active music-making projects to generate a sense of inclusive community amongst participants where a common purpose and set of values are foregrounded and supported. Significantly, these choristers sought out challenges, both musical and personal.

Our focus on children's and young people's voices in this study has provided an opportunity to deepen understanding of the meaning and value of choral singing, the learning and life outcomes, and environmental supports and teaching and learning strategies that underpin these. These participants' reports of their engagement in the NCS, and the outcomes in their lives demonstrate their capacity for insightful and critical analysis of their experience. We recommend that greater provision be made in curriculum design to access children's and young people's perspectives and support their engagement as co-designers in educational planning, implementation and evaluation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because data were generated by interview and are

potentially identifiable given the nature of the study, the context, and the content of the data transcripts. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of Queensland. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants. For those under the age of 18 written informed consent was provided by participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MB devised the study and outlined the article plan. KZ undertook the field work. Both authors contributed equally to the literature review, the data analysis, the writing of the articles, and claim joint first-author status.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedule, Impact of Summer School Program

1. What are some of the reasons for your attendance of this music program?
2. How is this program the same/different from other choral learning experiences you have had?
3. How is the teaching in the program the same/different from other choral learning experiences you have had?
4. What are the key things that you are learning from participation in the program (about music/learning/life)?
5. What have you achieved from participation in the program?
6. What does participation in this program contribute to your life?
7. How do you think you might draw on this learning in later life?
8. What was the best thing about the 2019 program?
9. Are there any changes you would make to the program?
10. Anything else you would like to tell us about your participation?