

# Are girls more resilient than boys? Lessons in gender justice from the Boys Keep Singing project.

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*Boys Keep Singing* was a large scale knowledge transfer project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and undertaken by Edge Hill University and the University of York in collaboration with the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain. It was based upon the findings of a previous AHRC funded research fellowship, published as a monograph in 2008. The two projects sought to identify the underlying causes of a significant gender imbalance in singing and to explore, test and evaluate solutions that would be of value to practitioners in music education. The underlying approach conceptualized the issue as a complex one of gender justice. It was considered that boys' education was incomplete without an adequate grounding in the arts, including singing. The facilitation of increased young male participation was an obvious benefit for music professionals, but not the primary motivation which was that singing and other arts were believed to be an indispensable part of the social, cultural and "spiritual" development of boys. A greater benefit might thus accrue to society if a larger proportion of the young male population experienced higher levels of emotional literacy and health, social competence and wellbeing through participation in the performing and social arts.

In spite of the efforts expended, the 11 – 14 year old boy and his voice remains a real enigma for identity studies. It is possible to tell the eleven year olds newly promoted to secondary school that they are now becoming young men and can begin to access lower voices as the proof of this. It is equally possible that eleven year olds could be told they are on the cusp of a unique and short lived singing career in which their soprano voice will peak in power, beauty and intensity. The majority of boys receive advice of neither sort. Most flounder vocally without support to develop the resilience necessary to cope with an unpredictable and changing voice. If, as is so often argued, there is a crisis of boyhood, the apparent difficulties in giving such advice arguably are part of it. This paper examines whether the concept of resilience can be used to progress the analysis of gender imbalances in application and attainment within a context of gender justice.

## **What is gender justice?**

Any attempt at a simplistic or "motherhood and apple pie" definition of gender justice –for example that boys and girls should be treated equally, or that there should be no discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexual orientation, breaks down rapidly under the complexities of the competing equity discourses associate with feminism, pro-feminism and the so called "boy turn" or anti-feminist backlash (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Zyngier 2009). The field is complex and strongly contested. This presentation is concerned with a populist discourse which seems to have drawn in teachers in ways differentiated by social class, intellectual capital and their positioning within a diverse education system. It is the discourse of "boys don't sing", now promoted as orthodoxy by the popular media.

In the UK the media have found profitability in the creation of folk heroes such as Gareth Malone. Programmes such *The Choir, Boys Don't Sing* (Isaacs, 2006) exemplify the genre. More recently "choirmaster Gareth" has been constructed as a knight in shining armour able to tackle other alleged

problems with boys and the education system. The TV series *Gareth Malone's Extraordinary School for Boys* constructed him as capable of motivating primary school boys to improve their literacy skills where female teachers, by implication incompetent, working in a feminised and risk-averse schooling system, had failed. Such an enterprise might well be located within the discourses associated with a backlash against feminism and pro-feminism (Connolly, 2004; Titus, 2004; Francis, 2006; Mills & Keddie, 2007; Jackson, 2010).

The "boys don't sing" discourse is, of course, a discourse within a discourse and some further probing as to where "boys don't sing" sits within the overall panoply of gender justice discourse is necessary. Epstein et al (1998) formulated what has now become a classic analysis of commonly encountered discourses associated with the boy turn: "poor boys", "boys will be boys" and "failing boys/failing schools". Perhaps a fundamental question to ask is that of where, in overall terms, "boys don't sing" fits in relation to this. Is the absence of young males from the arts, and singing in particular, to count as failure and if so, by whom? Is it an essential, biological quality of a boy that he does not possess a voice?

As Mills and Keddie (2007) point out, there is a discourse of recuperative masculinity politics that assumes that just because certain types of boy appear to have become disengaged from schooling, it is "all boys" who are disengaged and "all girls" who are engaged with schooling. What "all girls" are imagined to do at school thus becomes the source of the criteria which supposedly exclude boys and justify compensatory "boy friendly" curricula. The result of this allegedly "boy friendly" approach is that many boys are in fact excluded from a wide range of experiences that would develop them and promote their full engagement with all that schooling has to offer. Some of the more extreme discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) might even see boys' non-participation in singing as virtuous, the eschewing of feminine or gay work in favour of sport and other heartily masculine activity as confirmation that the boy is on course to become a "real man". It is difficult to ascertain the true position of the right leaning recuperative masculinity politics with regard to this since music and singing tend simply to be ignored in right wing educational discourse.

Against this must be considered the fact that singing by boys often features more significantly in the curricula of selective grammar schools (favoured by the right wing) and independent schools than in the non-selective comprehensive schools where the "boys don't sing" belief has been most frequently encountered. Connell adds a further dimension to the debate through the suggestion that, though gender equity has been placed as an issue in the public domain mainly by women, gender justice cannot be ultimately accomplished without the willing co-operation of boys and men (Connell, 2003). If this is true, boys and men must presumably declare that a full manhood cannot be achieved by boys without the arts. This raises the intriguing possibility that, whilst boys may just be "boys" or "poor", or attending "failing schools", some ecological failure in gender justice within the system that involves boys, girls, men and women might need examination.

### **What is resilience?**

Resilience research is a relatively young field. Resilience was defined in the early days in such terms as "the process of, or capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Masten et al, 1990). Luthar & Cushing (1999) defined it as constructive rather than debilitating reactions to disadvantage. Both competent functioning and exposure to adversity must be present when conceptualizing resilience (Masten et al, 1999). The association of resilience with risk and significant adversity has continued to characterize much of the literature (Ungar, 2008). Resilience research looks for explanations concerning why some individuals collapse

when confronted with relatively minor setbacks yet others press on cheerfully in the face of such extreme hardships as war, famine, fire, flood or bereavement.

In order for there to be resilience, there must thus first be exposure to adversity. Although adversity is most readily conceived in terms of a disaster such as famine, it need not be. It is proposed here quite simply that schooling itself is adversity against which young people must develop resilience. Martin & Marsh (2009) are amongst those who have considered whether or not this general concept of resilience against adversity can be applied in the context of schooling as opposed to more traumatic life situations. They cite a substantial literature in support of their contention that it can, but introduce the terms *academic resilience* and *academic buoyancy* to refine the concept. They cite a definition by Alva of academically resilient students as those who ‘sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school’ (Alva, 1991:19). This definition is reserved for chronic conditions, such as ethnic groups confronting poverty or gang violence. For the everyday ups and downs of school life, such as a poor grade, low-level stress, negative feedback or other knocks to confidence, they propose the term *academic buoyancy* (Martin & Marsh, 2009: 356). Another potentially useful construct to have emerged in the literature is that of hardiness, defined as a buffering factor that increases the likelihood of reactions that promote resilience (Wiebe, 1991).

Can such concepts be brought to bear upon gender justice? Is it a viable proposition that, for whatever reasons, resilience is available with some degree of inequality between the genders? Can such questions be considered without recourse to homogenizing stereotypes such as “poor boys”, “failing schools/boys” or “boys will be boys” (Epstein et al, op.cit.)? There is an obvious danger of making careless assumptions of an essentialist nature. Both boys and girls must cope with the adversity of schooling and it is clear that they do so in varying degrees according to context. Nevertheless, when indicators such as boys’ participation in singing are employed, the level of gender inequity is shown to be a factor of undoubted significance – far more so than in other commonly cited instances such as relative achievement in English. For example, Welch *et al* (2009) confirmed the present author’s previous findings that girls were more positive and self-confident in singing, and that boys believed (wrongly) that girls were better singers (Ashley, 2003; Joyce 2005). Further work by Welch’s team moreover appeared to demonstrate that the sustained £40m investment of the UK government’s National Singing Programme had not had a great impact on the gender imbalance of participation in three cathedral run singing outreach programmes studied (69% female: Welch et al, 2010: 23).

It is possible that there may be some genetic or heredity factors that impact upon resilience, but the substantial focus in the literature is upon environmental or socially constructed factors. It is likely that significant similarities between the construction of gender and the construction of resilience may be encountered. For example, participation rates in singing vary not only between girls and boys, but between some boys and other boys, differentiated by a whole range of identity markers which would certainly include social class, ethnicity, religious belief and geography but also include differentiated aspects of life history. Boys’ participation in singing may tell us useful things about other aspects of boys’ education and integration into society. The gender equity question concerns the degree to which such differences average out between the two genders, but it also concerns the degree to which young people are seen as in need of resilience enhancing nurture, pedagogy or leadership according to the beliefs of teachers and parents about gender appropriate behaviour.

## What is the particular adversity faced by boys in singing?

Until relatively recently, boys' choirs thrived and were a significant part of the cultural scene in the UK. It is likely that considerations of toughness and manliness have always rendered some degree of ambivalence toward singing amongst certain classes of young males, as recorded for example by Koza in a much cited study (Koza, 1992). Nevertheless, significant numbers of boys overcame such doubts, particularly in the English boys' public (i.e. independent, fee paying) schools where singing by boys took its place alongside rugby football, army cadets and other "manly" pursuits. To a not insignificant degree it still does, a fact which is not uninformative about identity construction, social class and power. It is outside such institutions that boys' resilience against the risk of using the voices in the pursuit of art is sometimes more likely to be put to the test. The *Boys Keep Singing* project consistently found two main areas of adversity which interacted and exposed boys to risk:

- Competition from girls
- Lack of subject knowledge in teachers and low expectations

### *Competition from girls*

A factor which has changed significantly over the last three decades has been the demise in the UK of the Anglican church and the ending of boys' special "protected" status with regard to singing. Until the youth revolution of the 1950s (see Ashley, 2009: 23 – 39) it was generally accepted that only boys could sing in church choirs, which were numerous and influential. Although the direct influence of the church has slumped, its indirect influence on the question of how high boys should sing and what they should sound like has proved surprisingly enduring. Boys, up to the age of fourteen or so, continue to receive adult approbation as well as the attention of the commercial music industry if they sound "like angels". Where there still are church choirs or comparable choral groups, girls have now supplanted boys in all but a few exceptional cases. This is partly because the rise of youth music culture has made it harder to recruit boys to "angelic" singing but at least equally because of considerations of gender justice which make girls' exclusion more or less indefensible.

However, the removal of boys' "protected" status seems to have had perhaps unintended consequences. For reasons summarized elsewhere (Willis & Kenny, 2008), it is often easier for girls to appear competent in singing than boys. To say this is not to join the "poor boys" discourse. It is simply to highlight a reality that boys have traditionally excelled at singing only because patriarchal structures have excluded girls. In a more gender just world, boys must compete on equal terms and the majority have so far manifestly failed to do so. Large volumes of evidence were gathered by *Boys Keep Singing* which suggested that many boys feared girls when they felt themselves forced into the position where it was impossible to save face when confronted by female competence. It appears that some girls at least have seized upon this area of young male vulnerability to attack boys. For example:

They poke me if I start singing in assembly  
They stare at us  
They gang up against us and talk about us  
(Primary school boys)

They (girls) are like hyenas and they'll go for the weakest (boy) and make a kill.  
Some of them coming up from Y7 will be intimidated by girls and just fade into the background.  
If a girl says something, they just crumble.  
(Secondary school boys)

The only way out for most boys in such circumstances was to dissociate themselves from the activity, rejecting it as “gay” (Ashley, 2008). Two areas of theory have proved empirically helpful in accounting for the evidence. Jackson (2003) ventured outside the mainstream orthodoxy of relational gender construction through a turn to psycho-social theories of self-worth. Drawing on earlier work of Covington (1992) she suggested that self-worth theory posits that some pupils may be more motivated to protect their sense of self-worth than to succeed academically at school. Both girls and boys experience disruption to laryngeal function as a result of puberty (see Gackle, 2000 for girls and Cooksey, 2000 for boys), but the effect in boys is much greater. Although essentialist arguments which appeal to fixed biological properties are unpopular, it is unavoidable that boys aged between the ages of about ten and fifteen are potentially vulnerable to identity insecurity because of quite traumatic biological disruptions to their vocal functioning.

Self-worth protection theory is complimented by earlier work by the author and a colleague (Ashley & Lee, 2003) which drew on attachment theory to explain the deviant or anti-school behavior of primary school boys. According to this study, the degree to which boys were pro or anti-school was dependent upon the nature of peer attachments. Anti-school or unsuccessful boys tended to form bonding attachments to other anti-school boys in order to protect their self worth against teachers’ carelessly concealed preferences for successful or pro-school boys (Ashley & Lee, 2003). Pro-school or successful boys tended to form bonding attachments to other groups of pro-school boys who identified with the teacher’s aims. This theoretical perspective has proved helpful in interpreting those exceptional cases where boys appear to demonstrate resilience with regard to the risks of singing. The following factors appeared regularly to be associated with success in keeping boys singing and require further, more formal testing:

- A male peer group of singers which exceeded a numerical critical mass and included boys of high social status and sporting accomplishment
- A knowledgeable and skilled teacher about whom the boys spoke with warmth and affection and who expressed an enthusiastic and often affectionate commitment to the boys she taught

It is a moot point as to whether boys singing under such circumstances are demonstrating resilience. On the one hand, the risk of failure and embarrassment in front of girls is significantly reduced. On the other, the literature repeatedly describes conditions such as strong attachments and the support of a significant non-parental adult as necessary to the building of resilience.

#### *Lack of subject knowledge in teachers*

Nowhere does a boy look more stupid than in the singing class where the teacher does not understand how to cater for adolescent voice change. English maintained secondary schools faced stinging criticism from the schools inspectorate OFSTED (2009) with regard to the general lack of knowledge amongst music teachers of basic principles long established by leading researchers such as Cooksey (2000), Collins (2006), Cooper & Wikstrom (1962) or Swanson (1977). Why this should be so is itself a question that demands serious investigation, but the expectation that “real boys” should simply demonstrate masculine stoicism in the face of publicly embarrassing voice flips may be part of the explanation. Willis & Kenny (2008) provide a compelling account of how it is that physical laryngeal changes lead to a loss of pitching accuracy in young adolescent boys that had previously been wrongly and speculatively ascribed by practitioners to imagined brain differences. It is this ongoing lack of practitioner engagement with research that is disturbing.

The *Boys Keep Singing* research confirmed that OFSTED’s criticism was justified, teachers’ understandings of boys’ needs and voices being a significant variable in the study. This long

continued lack of engagement with essential knowledge was simply reiterating a point made earlier by Cooksey and Welch (1988) but it also has to be considered that teachers of music are under relatively little pressure from managements to improve their knowledge since music is seldom a subject through which the performance of the school in league tables is judged. If anything, the situation has worsened since 1998 as a result, not only as a result of the media hyping up the boys don't sing discourse, but as a result of the exponential growth in the popularity of formulaic TV talent shows. By no means all teachers pause to analyse in any depth what the so-called "X factor" actually is. Were they to do so, they would connect with the literature that discusses how adolescent girls and older women are constructed as "fodder" for a heavily patriarchal commercial music industry that exploits the sex appeal of boys as young as 12 or 13 (Ashley, 2010; 2011).

It is not only in popular and commercial genres that problems with subject knowledge are encountered. Perversely in some of the independent schools, where otherwise highly accomplished classical musicians are often to be found, there remains a lack of knowledge, or willingness to engage with knowledge, about the development of adolescent voices, both boys' and girls'. The result is that boys can become confused about the possibilities for their voices once puberty begins to set in from the age of about ten upwards. The consequence of this confusion for many boys is frustration and disempowerment. If such boys share their lessons with girls who are confident in singing, the resilience demands can simply become too great and a whole range of anti-singing self-worth protection strategies will be deployed.

### **Towards a strengths based approach**

Resilience theory demands that we do not simply throw in the towel and declare neighbourhood social disadvantage a sufficient excuse for poor schooling and poor school results. Quite to the contrary, it requires us to examine why some young people develop the resilience to do well in spite of such disadvantage. In the case of singing, support is given to this demand by Welch (2000) who discovered that there was a "school factor" in singing success that operated independently of socio-economic environment. Schools in poor backgrounds could do well whilst those in advantaged circumstances could do less well if there was no committed, competent teacher. This finding appeared to remain true after the introduction of the National Singing Programme Welch *et al* (2009:12).

The belief that schools can make a difference to neighbourhood or life disadvantage is now reflected in clearly discernible changes of direction in resilience research from medical deficit models to strengths based models. Howard & Johnson (2000) describe these approaches and highlight how they tend to ask such questions as

- What is it about these children and adolescents that enables them to survive?
- What makes them apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others?

Tellingly though, Rhee *et al* (2001) complained that whilst there is in the US a State mandate to assess disability and deficit, there is no comparable mandate to assess well-being and assets. Such an imbalance in priority may remain a reference point against which policy might be judged for some time to come.

If resilience is located in those positive life factors that help young people to cope with each new developmental task that is required of them by society (Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999) the task of research at the present juncture is to discover what those positive life factors are. Placed in a context of the improvement of schooling, it is also to discover why some environments are more

likely to offer these than others, irrespective of economic advantage. None of this work need displace relational theories of gender, but can add to them. The insight obtainable through studies of boys and the performing arts foregrounds the connection between fear of failure and fear of the feminine and asks the fundamental question

- What is it about boys who engage in the performing arts that enables them to survive the context specific fears of failure and feminine success?
- To what extent does this apparent resilience manifest itself in other contexts?

Resilience may be observed, recorded and analysed in the present context at two levels. There is first the general level that is derived from a synthesis of the resilience literature, and there is second the specific level, which can be derived initially from the reopening of data files on boys and singing and subsequently through the creation of new observational or experimental objectives derived from a synthesis of both these levels. Concerning the first of these, the general level, Rhee et al (2001) derive the following synthesis of what they describe as decades of longitudinal research into the subject:

- Caring, supportive adult in the life of the child or adolescent
- Opportunities for initiative or involvement in meaningful activities
- High expectations for behaviour

A more detailed synthesis can usefully be obtained from the work of Doll & Lyon (1998).

**Table 1 Factors associated with high academic resilience**

Individual/personal	Family	School and community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good intellectual ability</li> <li>• Language competence</li> <li>• Positive temperament</li> <li>• Positive social orientation/peer friendships</li> <li>• Self efficacy and self-esteem</li> <li>• Achievement orientation/high expectations</li> <li>• Flexible coping style</li> <li>• Engagement and initiative in productive activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Close affectionate relationship with at least one caregiver</li> <li>• Effective parenting (warmth, structure and high expectations)</li> <li>• Access to guidance from extended family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to responsive school</li> <li>• Relationship with positive adult role model</li> <li>• Connection with pro-social organization</li> <li>• Support of significant non-parental adult</li> </ul>

(Derived from Rhee et al, 2001)

Many similar models exist across the literature. A factor they have in common is some blurring of the boundaries between cause and effect, particularly with regard to efficacy. They are in the main descriptive in that they are derived from summaries of longitudinal studies or life histories. To an extent, they are predictive and prescriptive in that, for example, they indicate that if an individual is to develop resilience he or she must have access to a responsive school. Schools might, in theory at least, be made more responsive. There are obvious difficulties, however, in prescribing that an individual must have effective parenting and even greater difficulties with the suggestion that good intellectual ability or language competence is necessary for the development of resilience. The

boundaries here between traits which may have some genetic base, factors which might be constructed around the individual and constructed factors beyond the reach of intervention are complex and arduous to negotiate.

Nevertheless, when the above table is compared with the table below which summarises factors associated with success in *Boys Keep Singing*, there is clear scope for building a case that boys' participation in singing might be associated with the building of resilience in boys.

**Table 2**  
**Resilience Factors associated with evidence from *Boys Keep Singing***

Resilience Factor	Evidence form BKS Research
1. Language competence	1. Certain types of choir require and develop high language competence, eg the sight reading of difficult texts or texts in foreign language as well as the interpretation of musical terms.
2. Positive social orientation/peer friendships	2. Choir singing is a pro-social activity and boys reported with a high degree of frequency that they sought or gained friendship through choir.
3. Self efficacy and self-esteem	3. Boys participating in choirs frequently used language such as "proud"
4. Achievement orientation/high expectations	4. Choirs often have high expectations and boys frequently reported positively on this
5. Engagement and initiative in productive activity	5. Performing arts, including singing, count as productive activity
6. Access to guidance from extended family	6. Extended family, particularly grandparents, have been motivated to support boys through choir
7. Access to responsive school	7. <i>The most significant variable in the BKS research</i>
8. Relationship with positive adult role model	8. Successful choirs invariably had positive adult role models (male or female)
9. Connection with pro-social organization	9. Choral singing, as opposed to solo/celebrity style singing, is overtly pro-social and this was recognized by boys
10. Support of significant non-parental adult	10. Some positive case studies were recorded, though child protection fears operate as a constraint.

This table paints a very positive picture of the possible association between singing and resilience factors in boys. Given the degree to which the opportunity to sing might be part of a culture that builds resilience in boys, questions need to be asked about why such a culture is so infrequently encountered. Table 3 below summarises the most frequently encountered factors in the thirty three secondary schools and twenty one primary schools in which research has taken place and where there was little or no singing by boys:

**Table 3**  
**Factors that mitigate against boys' recruitment/retention in school singing across 11 – 14 age group (approximately ranked in order of frequency)**

1. Unresponsive school. Senior leadership places little importance on the activity
2. Unresponsive school. Not prioritized by music department
3. Low expectations of boys
4. No champion for boys' singing in the school
5. Lack of understanding of voice change and how to cater for it
6. Unwillingness to consider and address boys' fear of girls
7. Organisational factors such as clash of singing time with sport

## Conclusion: Do schools need to change?

Mills & Keddie (2007) reiterate a question posed by Skelton (2001) – that of whether boys need to change. Popular authors writing from an essentialist pop-psychology perspective, such as Biddulph (1997) or Gurian (2001) have encouraged the belief that they do not. If “boys are boys” and are perceived as the victims of a schooling system that is allegedly feminized or unfriendly to boys, boys do not need to change, “failing schools” do. It is possible, however, that certain inconvenient truths are being overlooked. Table 3 above does not paint a picture of “feminized” institutions. Senior leadership that places little value on the performing or creative arts is not “feminized”. School management systems that are not prepared to disrupt boys’ schedules for sport in order to make time for choir rehearsals are not “feminized”. Low expectations of boys in the arts subject are certainly not the product of a conspiracy of female teachers. Most tellingly of all, a state of denial concerning boys’ fear of girls is less likely to be the product of feminist conspiracy against boys than more traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity. An unwillingness to countenance the possibility that boys might actually have emotional needs related to the development of resilience is the key pointer to the change that is needed and the justification for opening further research into resilience as an issue of gender equity.

If Connell is right that gender justice cannot be ultimately accomplished without the willing cooperation of boys and men, then schools do need to change, but not in the way desired by recuperative masculinity politics. Without a turn against attitudes of hegemonic masculinity that resist boys’ development through areas of the curriculum such as singing, too many boys and girls will continue to struggle in patriarchal and narrowly masculinised regimes of schooling. It is true that schools are in need of more male teachers. The need for highly skilled male teachers who will work collaboratively and respectfully with their female colleagues to develop emotional strength in boys has never been greater. Research into the distribution of resilience across the genders and the gender equity of provision in resilience building may prove to be an interesting barometer.

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