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Children's experiences of choral singing: evaluating reflexive choir journals with primary school pupils

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the lived experiences of primary-aged children participating in the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme (SSP), a choral outreach initiative delivered in schools across the Liverpool City Region. Based on 288 reflexive choir journals completed over ten weeks in Spring 2023 (April – July), including tick-box responses, written prompts and drawings, the study examines how children reflect on their educational, cultural, social and emotional engagement with choral singing. Through thematic analysis, four key domains of experience are identified: musical learning and skill development, aesthetic encounter, social connectedness, and emotional expression and regulation. The findings are situated within broader debates on pupil voice, reflective pedagogy and children's musical agency, arguing that reflexive journalling constitutes a valuable method for accessing children's musical subjectivities and the meanings they attach to their choral participation. The study offers new insights into how choral participation supports children's cognitive, cultural, interpersonal and affective development, and contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship on music education, wellbeing and children's flourishing. The article also informs policy and practice by demonstrating how inclusive, reflective music education can support children's holistic development.

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Choral singing; pupil voice; reflective pedagogy; holistic development; human flourishing

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing recognition of the need to listen more carefully to children's own voices in music education research. This reflects a broader shift in educational theory and policy towards child agency, participation and rights (Barrett 2016; Marsh 2008; Young 2016; Young and Ilari 2019), influenced by the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and developments in childhood studies (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Spyrou 2018). In music education, this has been accompanied by a methodological and pedagogical turn towards learner-centred approaches (Burnard and Haddon 2015; Elliott and Silverman 2014; Huh-tinen-Hildén and Pitt 2018), reflective practice and qualitative inquiry into children's lived musical experiences (Barrett 2012, 2016; Barrett and Tafuri 2012; Young 2003).

This study contributes to these developments by exploring the lived experiences of primary-aged children who participated in the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme (SSP),¹ a long-running choral outreach initiative across the Liverpool City region. The SSP has since its conception

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in 2012 engaged over 8,000 pupils from across forty primary schools through weekly, curriculum-aligned workshops led by professional cathedral music staff, culminating in end-of-term school performances and a final public concert at the Cathedral. At the heart of the programme lies the aspiration to foster musical excellence and inclusion by embedding choral singing within state primary schools, many in areas of significant social and economic deprivation. While previous evaluations of similar choral outreach programmes are rare, and have focused on access, recruitment and performance (Preece 2024; Saunders et al. 2012), few studies have examined how children themselves articulate the meaning of their choral participation.

This article presents findings from a mixed-methods research evaluation of the Liverpool Cathedral SSP conducted in Spring 2023, drawing on data from 288 reflexive choir journals completed by children over a ten-week period (cf. Clark and Moss 2016; Spyrou 2018). These journals, designed to be developmentally appropriate and multimodal, included tick-box questions, open-ended reflections and drawing prompts, allowing children to express their experiences, thoughts and feelings in multiple ways. While the wider research project employed a mixed-methods design incorporating ethnographic observations, online questionnaires and interviews, this article focuses specifically on the reflexive choir journal strand because it offers a uniquely longitudinal, multimodal and child-centred lens on pupils' experiences. This method was selected for its capacity to foreground children's voices in their own words and drawings, capture the evolving nature of their reflections over time, and provide process-focused insights that are difficult to obtain through one-off surveys or interviews. In doing so, it contributes a distinctive methodological and pedagogical perspective to the study of choral outreach in primary education.

A thematic analysis of the journals revealed four key domains through which children reflected on their engagement with the programme: musical learning and skill development, aesthetic encounter, social connectedness, and emotional expression and regulation. These themes were informed by sociocultural theory on human flourishing (Hesmondhalgh 2013) and the wider educational, cultural, social and wellbeing value of choral participation (Krüger Bridge 2025), while offering valuable insight into how children make sense of choral participation in their own terms.

While the majority of children's comments pertained to musical learning and skill development, fewer children wrote about aesthetic experience, social connectedness or emotional response, which reflects the conditions of data production: the structure of the journal prompts, the fact that sessions took place in formal school contexts and the pedagogical framing of musical knowledge within curricular expectations. Where these comments do appear, they reveal rich and meaningful aspects of how choral singing can support children's development as *whole* persons. By foregrounding such nuances, the article offers a critically reflexive reading of the journal data. It argues that the SSP's value lies not solely in musical attainment, important as that is in a school setting, but in its potential to support children's human flourishing through multiple interconnected domains – cognitive, cultural, social and emotional.

The study contributes to several strands of scholarly debate. Within music education, the article contributes to current debates on inclusive music education by answering calls for more systematic engagement with pupil voice (Blandford and Duarte 2007; Schlaug 2015) and reflective practice (Burnard and Haddon 2015), while also engaging with research on children's emotional and relational experiences of music (Evans, McPherson, and Davidson 2013; Lamont 2011). The use of reflexive journals as a data source responds to an increasing interest in arts-based and child-centred methods that position children as co-constructors of meaning, rather than passive recipients of instruction (Barrett and Tafuri 2012; Kallio 2015).

The study also draws on and contributes to insights from cultural musicology, music sociology and ethnomusicology, fields which have long attended to the affective, social and symbolic dimensions of musical practice (DeNora 2000; Stokes 1994; Turino 2008). Within these traditions, music is not viewed solely as a pedagogical tool or expressive form, but as a medium through which people, children included, construct identity, experience belonging and negotiate emotion. Children's engagement with choral singing in the SSP reveals music's role in structuring feeling

(Hesmondhalgh 2013), mediating sociality (Small 1998) and affording moments of aesthetic intensity or transcendence (Sloboda 2005). By interpreting children's journal entries through this interdisciplinary lens, the study aims to illuminate how musical experience is lived, felt and given meaning in the everyday context of school-based singing.

The SSP also offers a particularly rich case study because of its distinctive institutional setting. Unlike many cathedral choirs historically linked to elite boys' schools, Liverpool Cathedral has no choir school and operates a deliberately inclusive model of music outreach (Krüger Bridge 2023, 2024). Its choral music outreach is both musically rigorous and socially embedded, reaching children from a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. As such, the programme challenges dominant narratives of Anglican choral music as exclusive or anachronistic,² instead positioning sacred musical heritage as a resource for educational inclusion and civic engagement. This raises important questions about how children from diverse backgrounds experience choral singing and what meanings they attach to participation.

The article first outlines the methodological approach, including design and analysis of the reflexive choir journals. It then presents the findings organised around the four domains of experience described above. The subsequent discussion interprets these findings through the lens of pupil voice, musical subjectivity and interdisciplinary theory, before concluding with implications for practice and further research. In doing so, the article seeks not only to give voice to children's perspectives on choral singing, but also to demonstrate the value of reflective journaling as a methodological and pedagogical tool in school-based music programmes.

Materials and methods

Research context and design

This study was part of a broader mixed-methods evaluation of the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme (SSP) (Krüger Bridge 2025), a choral outreach initiative delivered across the Liverpool City region, which is part of the cathedral's larger music outreach programme. The SSP offers structured, high-quality choral instruction to primary-aged children, including those from underserved communities. Weekly sessions, led by cathedral-employed staff, culminated in termly school performances and a large-scale finale at Liverpool Cathedral (Figure 4). The study aimed to investigate how children reflect on their educational, cultural, social and emotional experiences of the programme, with a focus on pupil voice and musical agency.

This article focuses on one component of the larger evaluation: the reflexive choir journals. These journals were developed to elicit children's first-person perspectives over the duration of the ten-week programme, providing longitudinal, developmentally appropriate, multimodal data. A total of 1,000 journals were distributed across the sixteen participating primary schools, of which nine schools returned completed journals ($n = 288$) (Table 1). These nine schools were self-selecting in terms of the children's research participation, as all involvement was voluntary; no school was required to participate, and neither schools nor pupils were under any obligation to complete or return journals.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Liverpool John Moores University (23/HSS/008). All participating schools provided institutional consent, and informed consent was obtained for every child who completed a journal. Participation was entirely voluntary, and children were invited to complete their journals either independently or with light-touch facilitation by their teachers. Journals were anonymised upon submission, and names are omitted where quotations are cited. Children's emotional and creative integrity was protected in accordance with ethical research guidelines (BERA 2018).

Table 1. List of 16 primary schools participating in the spring 2023 Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme, of which 9 schools completed 288 reflexive choir journals. The programme was delivered by three workshop leaders: the Cathedral’s Director of Music and two further music staff, one of whom has since left employment at the Cathedral. Full details of the workshop schedule, including times and delivery by workshop leader, are provided in the project’s Research Report (Krüger Bridge 2025, 19).

School name	Completed journals (n)
St Mary & St Paul’s Primary School	28
Christchurch CE Primary School	36
Bedford Primary School	27
Evelyn Primary School	25
Northwood Primary School	52
Huyton with Roby CE School	
Woolton Primary School	49
Mosspsits Primary School	
Gilmour Primary School	
LIPA Primary School	26
Northway Primary School	
Norman Pannell Primary School	
Childwall CE Primary School	21
Emmaus RC & CE Primary School	
Liverpool College Primary School	
Greenbank Primary School	24

Journal design and rationale

The reflexive choir journal was purpose-designed by the researcher to enable primary-aged children to articulate their musical, social and emotional experiences during their participation in the Schools Singing Programme (Figure 1). The journal design reflected an inclusive, child-centred approach to research with young participants, particularly in areas marked by low literacy, educational underachievement and socioeconomic disadvantage. Importantly, it was crafted to be accessible, developmentally appropriate and sensitive to children’s diverse expressive preferences.

Each journal included:

- An introductory section gathering sociodemographic details and musical preferences;
- Ten weekly reflection pages, each inviting the child to respond to three consistent prompts:
 - (1) ‘What I learnt this week’
 - (2) ‘My favourite moment was’
 - (3) ‘My overall score this week is [1–5] because ...’
- Optional drawing activities, enabling expression through visual means;
- A final page for reflections on the cathedral concert performance;
- A concluding ‘About the music’ questionnaire, inviting children to reflect holistically on their experiences and the musical, educational, cultural, social and wellbeing value of the programme.



Figure 1. Reflexive choir journal used with primary-aged school children from 16 schools participating in Liverpool Cathedral’s Spring 2023 Schools Singing Programme.

The design accounted for developmental differences and actively removed barriers to participation. Children completed the journals during a weekly, teacher-led timeslot, with no right or wrong answers. In this context, ‘teacher-led’ refers to the children’s own schoolteacher overseeing the journal completion during a regular weekly timeslot separate from the choral workshop. The degree of teacher intervention is unknown; however, it is possible that, in some cases, teachers provided prompts or sample answers for the children to choose from, which may explain occasional repetition of responses within the same school. Such patterns are not unexpected in research with younger children and warrant more detailed discussion of the method’s implications, which lies beyond the scope of this article. Thus, where needed, children could receive support from their schoolteacher, though the emphasis remained on authentic child voice.

The use of reflexive journalling as both a data collection tool and reflective practice aligns with calls for more inclusive, child-authored approaches in music education research (Barrett 2016; Young and Ilari 2019). Journalling enables participants to articulate meaning in their own terms, outside of adult-led interview structures, and supports quiet or introspective children in contributing to research (Clark and Moss 2016). Moreover, the weekly, cumulative format of the journals offers insight into how experiences develop over time, capturing musical subjectivities in motion. Notwithstanding some limitations, such as uneven participation, varied literacy skills and the absence of verbal elaboration, the method provided a rare opportunity for children to reflect cumulatively on their choral participation. When triangulated with observational and interview data from the broader evaluation (Krüger Bridge 2025), the journals reveal a rich and nuanced account of how children make meaning through choral singing.

Analytical approach

All 288 returned journals were scanned and transcribed into a survey platform for coding and thematic analysis. A grounded, inductive approach was adopted for qualitative data, allowing patterns to emerge from the data without being constrained by predefined categories (Charmaz 2014). Some journals were fragmentary, while others contained rich textual and visual content spanning all ten weeks (Figure 2).

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

- (1) Descriptive coding of tick-box responses to identify dominant patterns over time;
- (2) Open coding of written responses to highlight recurrent words, phrases and motifs;
- (3) Visual thematic coding of drawings followed arts-based research strategies (Barone and Eisner 2012), with attention to creative expression, musical imagery and colour symbolism.

From this analysis, four thematic experiential domains were identified: musical learning and skill development; aesthetic encounter; social connectedness; and emotional expression and regulation (Table 2). These four domains emerged through thematic analysis and reflect how children made sense of their participation on their own terms. Both, the SSP’s structure around five Curriculum Learning Objectives (LOs) that focus primarily on musical learning and skill development, and the design of the journals played a significant role in shaping the content of children’s reflections.

First, five broad Curriculum Learning Objectives provided the pedagogical framework for the SSP (Figure 3), guiding the progression of musical learning across the term and informing the repertoire, rehearsal activities and musicianship exercises experienced by pupils.³ As such, they influenced the thematic scope of children’s journal entries, which frequently referenced learning new songs, improving technical skills and understanding musical structures. This focus reflects the programme’s design and emphasis on skill acquisition, rather than the elicitation of children’s own musical thinking or composition, although improvisatory elements (LO4) were present in a limited form. A fuller, week-by-week analysis of children’s responses to all five LOs is provided in the project’s Research Report (Krüger Bridge 2025).



Figure 2. A child's journal reflections of choral workshops in Weeks 1 and 2, containing drawn, written and tick-box responses. Completed by a pupil from St Mary's & St Paul's Primary School during the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme (Spring 2023).

Table 2. Summary of four thematic domains identified through analysis of children's journals. These domains are informed by the educational, cultural, social and wellbeing value of choral participation and interpreted through the lens of children's human flourishing.

Thematic Domain	Interpretive Value (linked to flourishing)	Summary of Children's Reflections
Musical Learning and Skill Development	Educational	Children described learning pitch, rhythm, breath control, notation; expressed growing confidence in vocal technique and ensemble skills.
Aesthetic Encounter	Cultural	Children expressed awe and excitement about the cathedral's acoustics and atmosphere; drew and wrote about echo, space, sound and beauty.
Social Connectedness	Social	Children reflected on teamwork, helping peers, singing as one group or shared singing; several noted growing friendships, belonging and mutual support.
Emotional Expression and Regulation	Wellbeing	Children frequently expressed feelings of pride, calm, joy, happiness, overcoming fear; described how singing helped with nerves, sadness or feeling better emotionally.

Second, of the twelve pages in each journal, ten were dedicated to weekly reflections, one page per week, inviting children to respond to open-ended prompts such as 'What I learnt this week' and 'My favourite moment'. One page, completed at the end of the programme, asked children 'About the Music' through five structured questions addressing musical, educational, cultural, social and wellbeing dimensions, while a further page was dedicated to the final performance in the cathedral. Given this structure, it is unsurprising that most comments focused on musical learning and skill



This crib sheet is designed to allow you to cross match the Model Music Curriculum with the curriculum of the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme. You may notice that we are incorporating ideas from years above the children's age group. We believe that the MMC is a base line of musical learning and that with our curriculum of interactive learning we are able to communicate more complex musical ideas and language more quickly. Across the year we will cover all of the important words and concepts for each year group and this is matched in the latter stages of the document.

Curriculum Learning Objectives

LO1	To copy and identify rhythmic and melodic patterns	Learning songs, following patterns
LO2	To describe subject specific skills and techniques	To include articulation, dynamics, vocal health, as necessary for the year group
LO3	To implement subject specific skills and techniques	Implementation of the techniques from LO2
LO4	To adapt and devise rhythmic and melodic patterns	Ability to improvise or write music, based on a given theme.
LO5	To examine and compare pieces of music	This will include being able to use those ideas to compare and contrast pieces of music

Figure 3. Five Curriculum Learning Objectives from Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme’s Curriculum Sheet – Term One (2023).

development (Thematic Domain 1), reflecting the weekly repetition of pedagogical prompts and the centrality of musical objectives in the design and delivery of the SSP.

This emphasis was further shaped by the school-based context of journal completion. As journaling occurred under teacher supervision, children likely framed responses in line with school norms, prioritising cognitive over emotional or relational aspects. In many educational settings, emotional experience is treated as secondary to knowledge acquisition, and pupils may not feel encouraged or equipped to articulate affective responses in writing. As such, the thematic imbalance in the data reflects not a lack of emotional or social resonance, but rather the cultural and institutional conditions in which the data were generated.

Overall, the themes identified here – musical learning and skill development, aesthetic encounter, social connectedness, and emotional expression and regulation – extend beyond formal learning to capture a broader set of values. Informed by the multifaceted educational, cultural, social and wellbeing value of choral participation and its contribution to children’s flourishing, these domains serve as an interpretive framework through which the musical and extra-musical impact of the SSP may be understood.

The following section presents findings under these four themes, foregrounding children’s voices while offering a holistic view of group experience. All quotations from children’s journals are reproduced verbatim, preserving original spelling, grammar and punctuation. This approach maintains the authenticity of children’s voices, respects the integrity of their self-expression and avoids imposing adult linguistic norms on their responses. While this means that some excerpts contain non-standard spellings or grammatical structures, these are retained to reflect the language and literacy levels of the child participants, as is standard in child-centred qualitative research (Christensen and James 2017; Punch 2002).

Results

Children’s reflections in the completed choir journals revealed four central domains through which they made sense of their choral experiences: musical learning and skill development, aesthetic encounter, social connectedness, and emotional expression and regulation. These themes did not arise from predetermined criteria, but from the children’s own voices, shaped through weekly writing, self-reflection and drawing. While the SSP was pedagogically structured around five Curriculum

Learning Objectives, the themes identified here extend beyond musical skill and knowledge acquisition to reflect the broader educational, cultural, social and emotional value of choral participation. Taken together, they provide a lens through which to understand how structured choral singing supported children's flourishing and emergent musical subjectivities. Though the depth and frequency of responses varied across schools and individuals, the thematic patterns were remarkably consistent.

Musical learning and skill development

Children frequently reflected on acquiring musical skills and knowledge. This emphasis aligned closely with the SSP's five broad Curriculum Learning Objectives, which guided weekly workshop delivery and underpinned the structured design of the journals. Across the ten weeks, pupils repeatedly commented on their progress in core areas such as pitch, rhythm, vocal technique, ensemble skills and musical memory. Though often brief or non-technical, their language was task-focused and aligned with session aims.

Children made frequent reference to learning how to control their breathing and improve posture while singing. Several linked breathwork to volume and clarity, showing engagement with core vocal technique:

'how to sing long without always taking breaths'
 'i liked waterloo because its very because fast and theres lots of stops to breath'.
 'helps me with my breathing and i liked mr m ... on the piano. it was fun and exciting singing together'.
 'when we all stand up and all sand [sic] together'
 'standing up'

Many children noted improvements in singing in tune and exploring pitch range. Although often using everyday language, their comments revealed awareness of tonal control and vocal placement:

'how people do high music and low music'
 'if you can have rhythms for high and low pitch'.
 'tune'
 'how many disco songs and rocks are in prescot'.
 'how to sing high notes'
 'high notes'

The rhythmic focus of several sessions was clearly registered in the journals, with pupils reflecting on beat accuracy, tempo and the fun of rhythmic games or activities:

'how to learn to sing beateful'
 'how to sing beatifoly'
 'if you can have rhythms for high and low pitch'.
 'how many beats are in choruses'.
 'listen to every one sing'
 'every one voice was beatful including me'
 'i love every thingol voice there are beautiful'

Although children less often named 'ensemble' or 'listening' directly, their comments about singing together or following instructions reflect learning in group musicianship:

'being a team'
 'how to work as a team and ta have fun'
 'to work together'.
 'singing with my class'
 'how to use teamwork'

Children frequently mentioned songs they remembered from earlier weeks, often referring to favourites by name. Some expressed enjoyment in expressive singing, while others noted how repetition supported memory:

‘new ... and a new song to sound be better up and at sing not to be nervous’
 ‘about new songs’
 ‘i hope to learn about the songs’
 ‘learning forced) to new songs’
 ‘all of the song’

Across the ten weeks, the journals suggest an arc of increasing musical confidence and self-efficacy, along with pride in musical achievement, often expressed in their own terms such as:

‘how to do high notes to low notes ... puppet on a string ... the crescendo’.
 ‘i learned about how to sing low not low and high just low and when he and us finished it he said you guys are getting better and then he said this is the best ive seen you all wow’.

While some children simply repeated terms from the workshops, others offered more reflective insights on musical improvement, indicating a growing sense of achievement and motivation. A recurring theme was memory, both musical and verbal, with children describing satisfaction at remembering lyrics, melodies and warm-ups across time. Taken together, these reflections suggest not only skill acquisition, but also a gradual internalisation of musical habits and identities.

Aesthetic encounter

Children also reflected on their sensory, spatial and emotional experiences of singing, particularly in relation to the final performance at Liverpool Cathedral. Though often fragmented, these reflections reveal awe, joy and symbolic meaning. They offer insight into how sacred space, ritual performance and choral sound shaped aesthetic engagement. Several pupils described the cathedral as large, echoing or beautiful, often noting its uniqueness or scale:

‘yes because i got to in the fifth biggest cathedral in the world’
 ‘listen to every one sing every one voice was beautiful including me i love every thingol voice there are beautiful’
 ‘singing makes me feel very happy & peaceful’

These descriptions, while brief, suggest a heightened sensitivity to acoustics, architectural space and group resonance. One child attempted to write ‘cathedral’ as ‘cathebdpal’, and another expressed aspiration to ‘train to sing in the cathedral’, indicating that the setting itself had symbolic and aspirational weight. Some children reflected explicitly on the emotional intensity of the final concert:

‘the find concert was very scary. i was very nervos but after the concert i felt very proud of my song’.
 ‘we all sang together and even got to make frends and that ... after the concert was amazing’.
 ‘it was amazing, i loved it’.

These statements present the aesthetic encounter as both sensory and transformative where vulnerability and accomplishment intertwined. Others commented on the privilege or specialness of participation, capturing aesthetic pleasure, participation and a sense of value:

‘i am proud to sing in the choir because it is a once in a lifetime opitynaty’.
 ‘the choir was amazing. i loved it. im so happy that i went’.

Here, pride, gratitude and collective identity merge, pointing to how children understood their choral experience as culturally significant. Despite spelling errors or fragmented syntax, the affective clarity is strong: children felt part of something rare and valued. Some drawings accompanying the journals often reinforced these meanings, showing tall ceilings, musical notes, stars and smiling singers, suggesting that the Cathedral performance was both a literal and symbolic high point of their choral journey.

While terms like ‘aesthetic’ or ‘cultural capital’ were absent from children’s reflections to prompts such as, the consistent use of emotive language, visual imagery and statements of pride suggest that the grandeur and ritual atmosphere of the Cathedral experience played a powerful role in shaping their musical subjectivity and their sense of musical and social belonging.

Social connectedness

The theme of social connection emerged clearly in children's journals, particularly in response to prompts such as 'My favourite moment was ...' and 'Does singing help you to make friends?' Many described the joy of singing with others, teamwork and growing confidence in shared settings. Several comments referenced collaboration explicitly:

'being a team'
'how to work as a team and ta have fun'
'are singing and dancing in school'.

Others highlighted how group singing supported emotional wellbeing, especially in overcoming nerves. For instance, in the lead-up to the final concert, two children wrote:

'new ... and a new song to sound be better up and at sing not to be nervous'
'to not be nervouse'

Many comments show that group singing fostered self-assurance, with several reflecting on growing confidence:

'to build my confidence'
'fun i want to learn to be confident'
'to get more confidence'

Alongside these verbal reflections, a small number of children included drawings showing groups of figures smiling or standing together beneath musical notes or on informal stages, visual cues that reinforce the role of singing as a social and communal activity.

Although these statements are often brief and written in non-standard orthography, they convey a consistent message: that singing together made children feel supported, connected and encouraged. The relational quality of the choral experience – singing in class, as a school or with other schools at the final concert – helped build interpersonal confidence and a sense of inclusion. Even among pupils, who described nervousness or shyness early in the programme, comments in later weeks often expressed pride, enjoyment and belonging. These reflections suggest that collective singing not only created a socially cohesive environment but also enabled children to develop and express themselves more freely within it, supporting the acquisition of social capital in a meaningful and embodied way.

Emotional expression and regulation

The emotional dimensions of choral participation emerged across several weeks of the journals, particularly in responses to the prompts 'My favourite moment was ...' and 'How does singing make you feel?'. While emotional vocabulary was often sparse or idiosyncratic, children described feelings of happiness, calmness, pride and nervousness, both as fleeting sensations and as signs of deeper emotional development over time. Several pupils spoke simply and directly about enjoyment and emotional uplift:

'it was fun singing with all my class-mates. and it was super fun singing new songs. i enjoy singing'.
'we went to the moosik room it was so fun singing to it was fun i loveit somch i wish you was thir i love it i love singing love komkik'.
'we done all the songs in are booklet and mt favourite song was let a love shine a light or shine a light and it was soooo fun'.

Some children described more complex emotional experiences, including transitions from nervousness to confidence. One child reflected:

'i kept getting compliments of how good i was. and because i found out we were doing waterloo and i was really happy because i grew up singing waterloo so i knew all the lyrics and i have performance it on stage before'.

Another child wrote 'happy and confident'. Alongside this entry, the child drew a stick figure standing beside a microphone with arms raised in the air and a speech bubble reading 'la la la la la'.

Reflections on calmness and tranquillity also emerged:

‘it was lovely i love calm voices micing together so i loved that experience so lovely and calm it is a lovely experience i will never ever forget’.

Occasionally, the journals revealed emotional sensitivity to overstimulation or noise, with one child remarking, ‘it was kind of worse and i dont like noise at all i like it verry calm’. This comment was accompanied by a drawing of four isolated figures in colour-blocked tiles, suggesting an introspective or overstimulated emotional state. Even so, many children frequently wrote about how singing made them feel.

‘happy and confident’ (with accompanying drawing of a stick person at a microphone saying ‘la la la la la’), and

‘i was super confident, and i loved singing too! mr. mac was really good at the piano and that made me be better at singing:’).

The emotional range across the journals suggests that choral singing offered both affective stimulation and emotional regulation. Children described feeling energised, reassured and more confident over time. Some entries overlapped with earlier themes: breath control and group support were often framed as strategies for managing nerves, while collaborative singing contributed to feelings of safety and social trust.

Although children never used explicit terminology like ‘wellbeing’ or ‘health’, their words and drawings indicate that singing provided a means to express joy, manage anxiety and feel more secure in themselves. As such, the journals offer meaningful evidence of the wellbeing value of choral participation, as part of a broader vision of music supporting human flourishing.

Discussion

The findings presented above suggest that children’s participation in the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme (SSP) supported a broad spectrum of musical, cognitive, interpersonal and emotional outcomes. Through their own reflections in reflexive choir journals, children articulated not only what they had learnt, but also how singing made them feel, how it shaped their relationships with others, and how they interpreted the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of their choral experience. In this section, these findings are interpreted through the four interrelated domains – musical learning and skill development, aesthetic encounter, social connectedness, and emotional expression and regulation – drawing on scholarship from music education, sociology, ethnomusicology and wellbeing studies. Taken together, these domains contribute to a more holistic understanding of how structured choral participation may support children’s human flourishing.

Musical agency, reflection and growth

Journal entries showed clear musical growth over time, including improved awareness of pitch, rhythm, vocal technique and group coordination. This aligns with existing studies on the cognitive and metacognitive benefits of sustained singing (Hallam 2010; Welch et al. 2010), which show that musical learning fosters concentration, auditory discrimination and self-regulation. More importantly, the children’s own language, such as ‘i learnt ceeping in time with the beets learning new beets and long and short rithaness with others’, signals their growing musical self-efficacy and sense of agency.

Within music education, this emphasis on pupil-led reflection is increasingly recognised as vital to effective pedagogy. Burnard and Haddon (2015) argue that creative and reflective musical learning enables students to make meaning from their musical experiences, not merely to reproduce technical skills. The journals offered children space to express meaning in their own words and

drawings, without adult filtering. This resonates with Barrett's (2006, 2016) call for methods that access children's 'musical worlds' through participatory and child-authored approaches.

The children's regular written engagement with questions like 'What I learnt this week' and 'My score this week is ...' not only captured musical outcomes but offered insights into their musical subjectivities – how they viewed themselves as learners, performers and participants. One pupil reflected, 'i dint know i could sing that well at all i sing soo good all the time but this is how i sing now', accompanied by a drawing of a smiling face with musical notes and a speech bubble reading 'lala'. Other entries showed growing awareness of pitch and vocal control: 'how to do high notes to low notes ... puppet on a string ... the crescendo'.

From a cultural musicological perspective, these subjectivities are shaped by the interplay of voice, identity and performance within institutional contexts (Green 2011; Krüger 2009). The SSP, by embedding musical rigour within an inclusive, outreach-based structure, provided a context in which musical skill development could occur without the exclusions historically associated with Anglican choral traditions (Day 2014; Preece 2024). Children were not simply learning to sing more accurately but were also developing musical identities and affective investment in the act of choral participation, key indicators of musical agency and ownership.

Space, sound and cultural meaning

The children's responses to singing in Liverpool Cathedral underscore the powerful interplay of space, sound and symbolic meaning. Their journals reveal what Sloboda (2005) calls aesthetic chills, that is, intense experiences that mark music as transformative. Though lacking formal aesthetic terms, their words and drawings show strong sensory engagement. Children often captured the symbolic and sonic magnitude of group performance, which resonates with the ethnomusicological concept of *musicising* as a situated, contextualised act (Small 1998), in which the meaning of music emerges through its social, spatial and performative contexts. The grandeur of the cathedral, the collective ritual of singing and the interaction with architectural acoustics (Figure 4) all contributed to what DeNora (2000) might term an *aesthetic environment*, one that helped to shape emotion, self-awareness and symbolic identity. For many children, the Cathedral concert was more than a performance; it was a grand, emotionally charged event.

Crucially, for many pupils from socioeconomically deprived areas, the Cathedral represented a cultural space they might not otherwise have entered. Their journals suggest that performing in this venue held deep symbolic significance. The opportunity to sing sacred choral repertoire, sometimes in multiple languages and surrounded by architectural grandeur, offered access to a cultural tradition historically restricted to elite participants. One child drew light bulbs, stars and musical notes to accompany the lyric '*shine a light*', a visualisation of emotional intensity and spiritual uplift. Such expressions suggest that the aesthetic encounter was also a cultural one. Performing in the Cathedral enabled children to inhabit a cultural world that might otherwise seem distant or exclusionary, challenging dominant narratives of classical music and sacred heritage as inaccessible. From the perspective of Bourdieu (1984), this may be understood as a form of *symbolic capital*: access to valued cultural experiences that shape aspiration, identity and belonging. This reflects a broader concern in music education and cultural policy with democratising access to high-cultural spaces and affirms the value of Cathedral outreach programmes in unsettling traditional boundaries of inclusion.

Belonging, reciprocity and ensemble solidarity

The journals consistently highlighted the social dimension of singing. Children wrote about 'being a team', 'learning together' and the joy of shared music-making, suggesting that choral participation fostered a sense of belonging, reciprocity and group cohesion. These findings align with extensive research showing that group music-making promotes empathy, trust and prosocial behaviour (Hallam and MacDonald 2009; Rabinowitch, Cross, and Burnard 2013). From a sociological perspective,



Figure 4. Final performance on the theme of *Fit for a King: The Eurovision Big Sing* held at Liverpool Cathedral for participating primary schools in July and September 2023. Photograph by author (July 2023).

music functions as a *technology of social bonding* (Hesmondhalgh 2013), and choral singing, with its embodied synchrony, shared breath and interdependence, is a particularly potent example.

One child reflected on the emotional strength of ensemble performance:

‘it was fun singing with all my class – \nmates. and it was super fun singing new songs. i enjoy \nsinging’.

Another described the relational energy of group harmony:

‘we are in harminy when we sing together we are very noisy and creative. if you can’t see us you can probably hear us. we all have diferent personality’s’.

Such reflections speak not only to interpersonal connection but to the formation of what Prest (2016) and Bourdieu (1986) describe as *social capital*: the benefits that accrue through participation in networks of trust, cooperation and mutual recognition. The SSP functioned as a catalyst for building this capital, offering children opportunities to interact across year groups, schools and social boundaries in a collective, affirming context.

Children also wrote about overcoming shyness and performing confidently with others. One child drew a large smiling face and wrote:

‘<3 that it is lovley to sing with other <3 people because all the voices going up and down and long, short. it was a lovely moment i will never forget i love newing new songs’.

The journals also captured intergenerational and interprofessional relationships, what Wright (2010a, 2010b) describes as the *sociology of musical learning*. Several children referenced teachers, choir leaders or family members in their reflections, for example through a drawing of a child and adult stick figure with speech bubbles reciting lyrics from ‘National Anthem’, ‘Waterloo’ and ‘Puppet on a String’.

Clearly, children’s musical worlds extended beyond peer relationships to include trusted adults and family figures, reinforcing the role of music in sustaining wider relational networks. Children’s accounts of making friends, overcoming shyness and relationships suggest that the SSP created what ethnomusicologists might call a *musical micro-community*, a space of temporary affiliation and mutual recognition (Turino 2008). As Green (2011) and Barrett (2016) argue, the social value of music is not limited to the act of performing together, but also lies in the feelings of solidarity, recognition and shared experience it enables.

Voice, wellbeing and flourishing

The journals show that choral participation supported musical growth as well as emotional expression, regulation and wellbeing. Across the weekly entries, many pupils described feeling ‘happy’, ‘calm’, ‘confident’ or ‘less nervous’, and associated singing with a sense of pride, release or inner calm. These reflections align with a growing body of scholarship in music, health and well-being, which highlights the therapeutic, expressive and regulatory benefits of singing, particularly in group settings (MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell 2012; Welch and McPherson 2018). Group singing is linked to reduced anxiety, higher endorphin levels and improved mood regulation, outcomes mirrored in children’s reflections.

In this study, wellbeing is understood primarily through the lens of *human flourishing*, a socio-cultural concept that emphasises how musical engagement can enrich lives across emotional, social, cultural and ethical domains (Hesmondhalgh 2013; O’Neill 2012), while situating children’s singing within broader contexts of belonging, identity and cultural participation. At the same time, the findings also resonate with the psychological framework of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), which posits that wellbeing is supported when three basic psychological needs are met: competence, relatedness and autonomy.

Some children described emotional uplift with simple clarity. One wrote ‘happy and confident’, which was accompanied by a drawing of a stick figure with both arms raised beside a microphone and a speech bubble reading ‘la la la la la’, a visual depiction of joyful self-expression. Others associated singing with calmness and sensory pleasure:

‘[star emoji] the best day ever [star emoji] it was lovley i love calm voices micsing together so i loved that experience so iovely and calm it is a lovly experience i will never ever forget’.

Another child shared:

‘microfone ... that it is lovelly to sing with other <3 people because all the voices going up and down and long, short. it was a lovely moment i will never forget i love newing new songs’.

While not all pupils articulated their emotions in extended prose, many used symbols, colour and musical imagery in their journals to express how singing made them feel. These forms of expression reflect what Barrett and Tafuri (2012) describe as *musical selves*, which refers to children’s unique ways of knowing, feeling and reflecting through sound and performance. Importantly, these emotional experiences were not isolated from broader social and relational contexts. Several children gained confidence from peer and adult validation, such as ‘he said this is the best ive seen you all wow’.

These affirmations enhanced self-esteem and reinforced the connection between music and personal growth. Seen through the lens of Self Determination Theory, such experiences demonstrate how choral singing can simultaneously cultivate *competence* through the progressive development of vocal and musicianship skills; *relatedness* through collaborative singing and shared performance experiences; and *autonomy* through children’s ownership of songs and personal expression, leading to both immediate and sustained wellbeing benefits. This is closely aligned with the concept of *musical flourishing* where music enables the development of emotional, social and ethical capacities. Singing offered these children not only enjoyment, but also a sense of emotional anchoring, achievement and connection. Moreover, the structure of weekly journalling may have helped children to track emotional shifts over time, offering space for self-reflection and expressive processing.

The implications here are both pedagogical and ethical. If singing enables emotional regulation and confidence-building, then its role in primary education extends far beyond curricular enrichment. It becomes part of what O’Neill (2012) calls *eudaimonic music education*, an approach that values music for its contribution to meaning, connection and wellbeing. In this light, the SSP becomes not just a musical intervention, but a means for children to live, feel and connect through music.

Conclusions

This study has explored the lived experiences of primary-aged children participating in the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme (SSP), a large-scale choral outreach initiative delivered across the Liverpool City Region. Drawing on 288 reflexive choir journals written weekly over a ten-week period, the article foregrounded the voices of school pupils to understand how they reflected on their educational, cultural, social and emotional engagement with structured choral singing. Through thematic analysis, four key domains of experience were identified: musical learning and skill development, aesthetic encounter, social connectedness, and emotional expression and regulation. The study contributes to scholarship on pupil voice, reflective pedagogy and musical subjectivity, while offering new insights into how singing supports children’s development.

Generally, the findings demonstrate that structured, inclusive choral participation can support children’s flourishing across multiple dimensions: cognitive, social, cultural and affective. By engaging with children’s own voices – written, drawn and reflected over time – the study affirms that musical participation is not a singular event but a multi-layered process of becoming. Through music, children learn, connect and discover who they are.

First, children’s reflections on musical learning and skill development revealed clear evidence of cumulative growth over the course of the programme. Children described learning to pitch correctly, keep time, breathe musically and listen actively, key competencies in ensemble singing. Their journals showed increasing self-efficacy and pride in musical achievement, revealing both technical learning and its personal meaning. This reflects a learner-centred model of musical growth that supports broader educational aims, including concentration, memory, confidence and attention.

Second, the theme of aesthetic encounter was particularly prominent in children’s responses to the final performance at Liverpool Cathedral. Here, children articulated powerful sensory and

symbolic experiences: they wrote of echo, height, sound, light and occasion. The grandeur of the Cathedral, its acoustics, atmosphere and ritual context, heightened their perception of music as something special, beautiful and transcendent. Some children used spiritual or metaphorical language, suggesting that choral singing, particularly in iconic sacred spaces, can foster aesthetic sensitivity and cultural imagination. They affirm that children are capable of encountering music not only as a set of skills but as an embodied form, place, feeling and symbol.

The third domain, social connectedness, revealed the extent to which children experienced singing as a relational and cooperative activity. Many described how singing together fostered a sense of unity, belonging and shared accomplishment. They mentioned helping peers, gaining confidence in group settings and forming new friendships. This sense of ensemble solidarity affirms the civic and communal dimensions of choral singing, particularly when structured as inclusive and non-competitive. These findings reinforce long-standing claims about music as a vehicle for social bonding, emotional attunement and collective trust.

Finally, perhaps the most emotionally resonant theme was emotional expression and regulation. Children frequently described happiness and confidence, managing nerves, coping with worry or gaining confidence through performance. Weekly reflections suggested increasing emotional awareness, while the act of weekly journalling may have amplified this awareness, offering a rare space for emotional tracking and expressive fluency. This domain underscores that singing supports wellbeing not only through enhanced mood, but by developing resilience, self-recognition and emotional articulation.

Taken together, these findings affirm that the SSP contributes to children's flourishing in ways that transcend curricular attainment or musical output. Choral singing functions here as a vehicle for developing musical confidence, cultural engagement, interpersonal connection and emotional depth. These outcomes are especially significant given the inclusive nature of the programme, which serves schools in areas of economic and social deprivation. The SSP demonstrates that cathedral-based musical traditions can be reimagined as socially generative and community-facing, challenging historical associations with exclusivity and elitism.

Methodologically, the study also contributes to music education research. The choir journal, both a pedagogical and research instrument, proved highly effective in capturing children's evolving perspectives. It enabled child participants to reflect cumulatively, revisit prior insights and express themselves across multimodal forms: tick-box, written and drawn. In doing so, the method aligns with calls for voice-led, process-focused and ethically grounded research in music education (Barrett 2016; Kallio 2015). Reflexive journalling offered children a rare opportunity to reflect on music making in process, over time and on their own terms. This focus on the reflexive choir journal strand reflects its unique capacity to capture children's evolving perspectives in their own words and drawings, and to provide process-focused insights that complement and enrich the broader mixed-methods dataset generated by the project.

Theoretically, this article contributes to broader interdisciplinary conversations about music in childhood, particularly the role of singing in primary education. It bridges the empirical precision of music education with the interpretive depth of music sociology and cultural musicology. It affirms that children's musical lives are shaped not only by curriculum and instruction, but also by meaning, emotion, memory and affect. In a time when arts provision in UK schools is increasingly precarious, and where the sustained defunding of music education has left many primary schools without the resources or expertise to deliver the National Curriculum for Music, this study underscores why music matters, not only for what it teaches, but for how it enables children to feel, flourish and be heard. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the article speaks to music education, music sociology, cultural musicology and wellbeing studies. It affirms that children's musical experiences are woven through place, ritual, emotion, imagination and community. The children in this study sang not only to perform, but to *become* – to connect, to feel, to explore and to grow.

Future research might explore how such experiences shape children's musical identities over time or how reflective journalling could be applied to other arts-based domains. Longitudinal

and comparative studies could further evaluate how musical participation intersects with social mobility, cultural access and wellbeing outcomes, including through sector-wide developments in cathedral choral outreach, which now serve both to sustain the choral tradition, which is currently recognised as being in crisis, and to address critical gaps in equitable school music provision.

The implications for policy and practice are clear. Choral music education should not be viewed as curricular enrichment, but as a core domain of child development, supporting not only knowledge, but the flourishing of the whole child. Programmes such as the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme offer a powerful model for how musical excellence and social inclusion can be combined meaningfully. As pressures on music provision continue amidst government calls to enable all children and young people to sing and create music together (Department for Education 2022), this study evidences what is at stake. When we listen attentively to children, when we enable them to narrate their musical journeys, we gain insight not only into music education, but into the aesthetic, social and emotional dimensions and value of choral singing itself. These insights have clear transferability beyond the cathedral sector, offering evidence for educators, policymakers, heritage bodies and cultural organisations on the transformative potential of collective singing in fostering cultural participation, educational equity and community cohesion.

Notes

1. Liverpool Cathedral is the Cathedral Church of the Diocese of Liverpool in the Church of England. It was formerly known as the Anglican Cathedral, a designation that has since been discontinued. See: <https://liverpoolcathedral.org.uk>.
2. Scholarly critiques of Anglican cathedral music often highlight its historical associations with exclusivity, elitism and gendered tradition, particularly through the recruitment of boys from private choir schools and the reproduction of Eurocentric liturgical norms. See Garnett (2009), Day (2014), Green (1997). For broader critiques of music education's complicity in reproducing cultural capital, see Bull (2019), Wright (2010a, 2010b).
3. While the spring 2023 SSP did not include a theological Learning Objective, the subsequent SSP now offers distinct options for Church schools, aligned to RE and SIAMS requirements, and for non-Church schools without theological content. See further: <https://liverpoolcathedral.org.uk/cathedral-music/the-schools-singing-programme/>.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in LJMU Data Repository at <https://opendata.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/233/>.

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