

Singing Together, Growing Confident: Social Relationships and Music Performance Anxiety in Pre-Adolescent Voice Students

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ABSTRACT: The study reported in this article investigates how social relationships shape experiences of music performance anxiety (MPA) among child voice students aged 7–12 in a group voice lesson setting. Despite growing research on MPA in adult and adolescent musicians, more is needed about its manifestation in younger children, particularly in group learning environments. This practitioner-based case study follows eight children through a 10-week program of group voice classes culminating in a public performance, generating data through semi-structured interviews, student drawings, reflective activities, and researcher observations. Findings indicate that implementing a community of music practice (CoMP) approach can foster social participation, collaboration, and shared emotional experiences among students, reducing MPA and increasing singer confidence. The study highlights the significant role of peer relationships and social feedback in shaping children's experiences of MPA.

KEYWORDS: Music performance anxiety (MPA), pre-adolescent singers, social relationships, group voice lessons, community of music practice (CoMP)

INTRODUCTION

“What would you do if I sang out of tune? Would you stand up and walk out on me?”

As the well-known Lennon and McCartney (1967) lyrics ask, many musicians experience the anxiety of performing in front of others and the subsequent fear of being judged. Child and adolescent performers face this same fear, which has the potential to negatively impact on participation in music-making and performance activities (Gifford-

Smith & Brownell, 2003). While making music can be a joyful, creative, and socially engaging activity with well-documented health benefits (Clements-Cortés, 2015), for some, it evokes debilitating emotions and physical reactions, including fear, shame, and panic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Music performance anxiety (MPA) is a complex phenomenon affecting musicians of all ages, including children (Juncos & Markman, 2016; D. Kenny, 2004, 2011; Osborne et al., 2014; Zhukov, 2019). Kenny (2011) defines MPA as “the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance that has arisen through specific anxiety-conditioning experiences” (p. 61). MPA manifests through a combination of affective, cognitive, somatic, and behavioural symptoms and can occur in various performance settings but is usually more severe in situations involving high ego investment and evaluative threat (D. Kenny, 2011).

Studies have shown that children as young as 3–4 years old can experience elevated cortisol levels and display anxious behaviours in performance situations (Boucher & Ryan, 2011), with third-grade students reporting high levels of anxiety prior to school concerts (Ryan, 2005). Kenny and Osborne (2006) noted that the characteristics of MPA in young musicians are similar to those observed in adults, suggesting that

this issue is not exclusive to mature performers. As children transition to adolescence, they develop enhanced self-evaluation skills and the ability to imagine others' opinions, potentially exacerbating anxiety and self-criticism (Osborne et al., 2005).

Recent research has begun to explore MPA in younger musicians more extensively. Patston and Osborne (2016) found that MPA and perfectionism tend to increase with years of experience in adolescent musicians. Dempsey and Comeau (2019) observed a main effect of age on self-report MPA scores in musicians aged 7–17, with older students reporting higher levels of anxiety. These findings suggest a need for early intervention and prevention strategies specific to young musicians.

Gender differences in MPA have been consistently reported, with female musicians tending to be more severely affected than males across various age groups and career stages (Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; González et al., 2018; Papageorgi & Welch, 2020). This gender disparity may be related to broader trends in anxiety disorders, as women are generally more likely to develop anxiety symptoms than men (Altemus et al., 2014).

The relationship between MPA and self-efficacy has been well-documented in music literature. Studies indicate that lower levels of self-efficacy are linked to higher MPA in both adults (Orejudo et al., 2017; Robson & D. Kenny, 2017) and younger musicians (Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; Hendricks, 2016; McPherson & McCormick, 2006), suggesting that strategies to increase performance confidence may also help reduce MPA.

Various interventions to address MPA in musicians include cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), acceptance commitment therapy (ACT), relaxation techniques, biofeedback, and medication (Juncos & de Paiva e Pona, 2018; Juncos & Markman, 2016; D. Kenny, 2004; D. Kenny, 2005; D. Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Osborne et al., 2021; Osborne et al., 2005, 2007). Recent studies have explored novel approaches such as mindfulness-based interventions, yoga, and virtual reality exposure training (Bissonnette et al., 2016; Juncos & Markman, 2016; Khalsa et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2008). While many of these interventions show promise, their efficacy varies between individuals, highlighting the need for personalised treatment approaches (Matei & Ginsborg, 2017).

The role of parents in children's musical development and experience of MPA has only recently begun to receive attention. Creech (2010) proposed a theoretical model of parental involvement in music education, including

behavioural, cognitive-intellectual, and personal support. Ryan et al. (2023) found that parents' prior music education was significantly associated with performance anxiety in their children, suggesting that musically educated parents may unknowingly propagate anxiety in their children.

While extensive research is conducted on MPA in adult and adolescent musicians, a significant gap exists in understanding how social relationships influence these experiences in younger children, particularly in group voice environments. This study addresses this gap by examining how social relationships shape pre-adolescent voice students' experiences of MPA within group voice lessons. Furthermore, while the relationship between MPA and self-efficacy has been well-established, less is known about how these factors interact within a group learning environment. This research explores group interaction and peer support, providing new insights into how peer relationships and social feedback might influence MPA and self-efficacy in young singers.

Additionally, few studies have focused on group-based interventions for young voice students. This research examines the potential of a Community of Musical Practice (CoMP) (Barrett, 2005, 2012; A. Kenny, 2016) approach in fostering social participation, collaboration, and shared emotional experiences among students, potentially reducing MPA and increasing singer confidence. The following sections will outline the research questions, theoretical framework and methodology for investigating these issues, present the findings and discuss their implications for music education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study explored three main research questions:

1. How does mutual engagement in group vocal lessons shape students' experiences of MPA?
2. What role does social feedback play in the joint enterprise of performance, and how does it influence anxiety among pre-adolescent singers?
3. How can understanding these social dynamics and shared repertoire of practices inform strategies to mitigate MPA in young performers?

The research questions arise from the intersection of two theoretical perspectives: Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice (CoP) and Bourdieu's field theory and social capital

(Wacquant, 2004). While CoP illuminates how mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire shape students' collective experience and management of performance anxiety, Bourdieu's concepts reveal how power dynamics and social capital influence individual manifestations of MPA within the group context. These theoretical constructs enable systematic investigation of the collaborative mechanisms students use to navigate music performance anxiety and the underlying social hierarchies that may intensify their experiences. This dual theoretical lens facilitates the examination of the observable patterns of social learning in anxiety management and the subtle power relations that influence anxiety responses in the group voice classroom, providing a comprehensive framework to analyse the study's central inquiries into MPA's social dimensions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To investigate these questions, this study's theoretical foundation rests on two primary concepts: Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice (CoP) and Bourdieu's field theory and social capital (Wacquant, 2004). These frameworks provide a lens to examine the complex social dynamics and power structures within the group voice classroom and their influence on music performance anxiety (MPA) in pre-adolescent students.

Community of Practice (CoP) and Community of Musical Practice (CoMP)

The Community of Practice (CoP) framework, developed by Lave (1991) and elaborated by Wenger (1999), forms a central pillar of the theoretical framework for this study. A CoP is a concept in social learning theory that describes a group of people who share a common interest, profession, or passion and engage in collective learning and knowledge sharing through regular interaction. A CoP is characterised by three key elements: a shared domain of interest, a community that fosters relationships and interactions, and a shared practice that includes resources, experiences, and problem-solving approaches. Within a CoP, members learn from one another, develop shared repertoires, and negotiate meaning through joint activities and discussions. This social structure facilitates the exchange of tacit knowledge, promotes innovation, and supports individual and collective learning within a specific field or area of expertise (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1999); in music, this is referred to as a Community

of Musical Practice (CoMP) (Barrett, 2005, 2012; A. Kenny, 2016). The CoMP that serves as the focus of this study is grounded on the presence of three key dimensions:

1. Mutual engagement in group voice activities and performance preparation
2. Joint enterprise towards developing singing skills, developing and curating a performance experience and managing MPA
3. The shared repertoire of music-making, vocal development and coping strategies for performance practices and the mitigation of MPA

A theory of practice

Within the CoMP of a vocal studio group class, Bourdieu's theory of fields of practice (Harvey et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2004) offers a salient framework for analysing how social relationships shape experiences of music performance anxiety (MPA) in pre-adolescent voice students. This theoretical lens conceptualises the voice class as a distinct field of practice wherein students, teachers, and other participants function as agents negotiating their positions through complex social interactions that shape the learning environment and influence MPA experiences. Within this field, students possess varying levels of capital (e.g., musical proficiency, social aptitude, performance experience) that inform their status and experiences. Through sustained engagement in the voice class, students cultivate a habitus—a set of internalised dispositions and practices related to singing and performing—which mediates their experience and management of MPA. The student's cultural capital, derived from their backgrounds and prior musical encounters, may significantly influence their approach to performance and susceptibility to MPA.

Moreover, the voice class operates according to its own rules, with implicit and explicit norms governing performance, participation, and peer support. Applying Bourdieu's theory enables a nuanced analysis of how the social structure of the voice class influences individual MPA experiences, how power dynamics modulate student confidence, and how collective practices shape individual responses to performance situations. This approach situates MPA not merely as an individual psychological phenomenon but as a socially constructed experience profoundly influenced by the specific field of practice.

Research approach

The practitioner-researcher and participants

The study was conducted in the researcher's private music studio in Brisbane, Queensland, with weekly group lessons from October to November 30, 2023.

A purposive sampling method (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Tongco, 2007) was used to recruit participants, allowing for a balanced and varied selection of cases (Lichtman, 2023; Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). The selection criteria included:

- Age range: 7 to 12 years during the research period
- Self-assessed or parent/guardian-assessed nerves or anxiety about voice performance activities
- Availability for weekly lessons
- Willingness to participate, with parental/guardian consent
- Consent for video recording of performances

Eight participants aged 7 to 12 participated in the study. Participant's names have been changed to de-identify for privacy purposes.

METHODOLOGY

This practitioner inquiry case study (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Robbins, 2014; Robinson & Lai, 2005) examined how social roles and relationships shape experiences of music performance anxiety (MPA) in pre-adolescent voice students aged 7–12 years through the lens of a community of music practice (CoMP). The CoMP framework allowed for an in-depth exploration of the collective learning experience, focusing on how students develop a shared repertoire of coping strategies and performance practices. By examining the mutual engagement of students in vocal activities and their joint enterprise of musical performance, the study sought to uncover how the group's social fabric influences individual experiences of MPA. This approach emphasised the interconnected nature of learning, performance, and anxiety management within a shared musical community.

The research design incorporated elements that fostered a CoMP, including collaborative learning activities, peer feedback sessions, and group reflections. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of how the community's shared practices, language, and experiences contribute to or mitigate MPA. By situating the study within this

framework, the study aimed to gain insights into not only individual experiences of MPA but also how these experiences are shaped by and contribute to the collective knowledge and practices of the group.

Research design

The study was conducted over ten weeks and divided into three distinct phases:

1. Learning Phase (7 weeks): Group skills development and relationship building.
2. Recital Rehearsal Phase (2 weeks): Preparation for the final performance.
3. Recital Performance Phase (1 week): Culminating in a group singing performance.

Throughout these phases, students engaged in various learning activities in a group setting, complemented by individual one-on-one interviews to gain in-depth feedback.

Group voice lesson structure

Group lessons were conducted weekly for eight weeks, and activities were conducted to develop skills in voice and confidence in a group learning environment. In most cases, students attended all lessons (illness permitting), and the weekly routine was maintained so that students could feel safe knowing what we would do and what was coming up in future classes. Students were encouraged to participate in all activities but were not required to do so. Weekly activities were designed to encourage group interaction and consisted of:

- Ice breaker activity
- Physical warm-up
- Vocal warm-up
- Functional voice exercises
- Repertoire development
- Reflection activity

Data generation methods

This study employed a multi-faceted approach to data generation, primarily focusing on Draw and Tell interviews incorporating artefact elicitation (Barrett, 2009, 2012; Barrett & Baker, 2012; Goopy, 2003). Each participant engaged in three 45 to 60-minute individual interviews conducted in the music studio, where their drawings served as a springboard for discussion. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how mutual engagement in group vocal classes shapes students' experiences of MPA over time. Appendix 1

provides an overview of the data generation methods employed in this study.

The use of drawings as a research tool has been successfully implemented in music education contexts (Bennett, 2013; Goopy, 2023) and has proved invaluable in investigating the role of social feedback in the joint enterprise of performance and its influence on anxiety among pre-adolescent singers. This method's strength lies in its ability to materialise thoughts and feelings, fostering a sense of community between the child and the researcher (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019).

Through their drawings, participants could express feelings, sentiments, and experiences related to MPA that might have been difficult to articulate verbally. This visual representation allowed for a deeper understanding and facilitated a rich, nuanced exploration of the participants' lived experiences with music performance anxiety, providing insights into peer interactions, social feedback, and the development of a shared musical repertoire that might have remained hidden using traditional interview techniques alone. This method enabled a comprehensive investigation into how peer relationships and social dynamics function within the CoMP and their influence on pre-adolescent singers' experiences of MPA, yielding valuable data for analysis.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which involved familiarisation with data, initial coding, theme development, refinement, and final analysis. This method was selected for its ability to explore complex human experiences while acknowledging the researcher's active role in interpretation. The iterative analytical process ensured findings were grounded in data while being informed by theoretical considerations.

Trustworthiness and rigor

Several strategies were employed to ensure research quality. Data triangulation included interviews, observations, and student artefacts, enabling comprehensive understanding and corroboration of findings (Vanner & Kimani, 2017). Member checking verified interpretations with participants, while peer review sessions provided external perspectives. An audit trail documented methodological decisions, supported by reflexive journaling to maintain researcher transparency (Johnson et al., 2020)

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from Griffith University (GU Ref No:2023/438). Age-appropriate information packs and consent forms were provided to both young participants and parents/guardians. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw. Data were de-identified and stored securely on password-protected university drives, and interview recordings were destroyed post-transcription, with anonymised transcripts scheduled for destruction after five years.

FINDINGS

Three main themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Music performance anxiety manifestations and experiences
2. Social learning environment and peer relationships
3. Evolution of confidence through group participation

Each theme is explored through student experiences and evidence from the data.

Students developed enhanced confidence in both singing and general music-making, with benefits extending beyond the classroom into broader school and private settings. The classes provided active and passive learning benefits, allowing students to engage through direct participation while learning through observation and peer interaction. Students demonstrated an increased willingness to take musical risks when they were supported by a learning environment where they could make conscious choices about their participation without fear of judgment or isolation from peers. These findings were validated through observable behavioural changes, as students actively chose their level of involvement in various activities and performances and through their self-reported experiences of increased participation in both school and extra-curricular activities. The safe, supportive environment fostered authentic engagement with musical activities, allowing students to develop independently while remaining connected to the learning community.

Music performance anxiety manifestations and experiences

Before commencing the group voice classes, a pre-commencement draw-and-tell interview was conducted to learn how students felt about performance, singing, and participating in group music classes and to better understand their expectations about the research. Students expressed anticipation, nervousness, and excitement before commencing the group classes and participating in the research. All students who volunteered to participate in the research shared that they enjoyed singing but had expressed concerns with music performance anxiety at varying levels.

Draw and tell 1

In Draw and Tell Session 1, students were asked to draw a picture of themselves singing in performance to establish a baseline and get to know participants before classes commenced.

The manifestations of MPA symptoms varied among students, though common patterns emerged. Alex (aged 7), the youngest participant, articulated both physical and social concerns:

My tummy starts to hurt. I start to think, what if they don't like me. What if they don't like the way my voice sounds? (Alex)

Similar physical symptoms were described by Jordan (aged 8), who also highlighted how environmental factors contributed to their anxiety:

When I'm at a concert, I feel like I need to throw up. I don't like the kids laughing. My pants were uncomfortable. I just thought - I want to get this over with! (Jordan)

The physical and psychological manifestations of MPA emerged clearly through student descriptions. Taylor (aged 9), who struggled with catastrophic thinking patterns, described an overwhelming combination of cognitive and physical symptoms:

Well, it's in my brain. I was thinking there are about a million people. My legs start shaking. I'm so nervous I just know I won't be able to sing. (Taylor)

While Taylor's experience centered on cognitive spiraling and physical symptoms, Morgan (aged 8) expressed more specific performance-related concerns, particularly about memory and accuracy:

There's butterflies in my tummy. I'm afraid I'll make a mistake. I'll forget the words. (Morgan)

The impact of anxiety on vocal production itself was particularly evident in Quinn's (aged 7)

reflection, where physical symptoms directly affected their ability to sing:

It feels fluttery in my tummy. And fluttery in my voice. Sometimes, my voice doesn't make the notes. It gets crackly. (Quinn)

Riley (aged 11), a dedicated young musician, created a revealing two-part drawing that captured the duality of their performance experience. While the initial image showed a confident performer, unfolding the drawing revealed deeper emotional complexities:

This drawing is sort of meant to represent who I am. So, I sort of look confident on the outside, but this is what I feel on the inside. I've got to get over it because I've got to do this perfect. (Riley)

This drawing unlocked a rich conversation with Riley, describing painful physiological and emotional responses to the thought of performing—where their body freezes and the world around them stops.



Figure 2. Drawing by Riley: “This is how people see me – but it’s not how I feel.”



Figure 3. Extension of drawing (unfolded): “I feel nervous, unwilling.”

Taylor (aged 9), a piano student who typically communicated through brief responses and gestures, captured their performance anxiety in both their drawing and a concise description of the freeze response:

I feel scared. Sweaty hands. I can't make sound.
(Taylor)



Figure 4. Drawing by Taylor performing on stage.

Social learning environment

The social learning environment of the group voice class fostered a flexible and supportive place for students to experiment and create, allowing students to navigate their participation and anxiety levels with autonomy that enhanced their comfort and engagement in the musical learning process. In some cases, students chose not to sing occasionally, and from time to time, students were observed not singing but instead mouthing the lyrics. This was never highlighted or brought to the class's attention, and in doing so, students had autonomy over their levels of participation in each activity. Support was offered privately when it was noticed that students may be experiencing individual challenges.

Things did not always go as planned in the group lesson environment; despite this, the classroom was a safe and supportive environment for students to be themselves.

Researcher field note group class 3

Today, things did not go as planned. Despite gentle encouragement, one student sat under a desk and remained there for much of the lesson. I thought this would disrupt the class and was interested in how other students would respond. Students responded with empathy by smiling and encouraging the student to sit with them if they chose. However, they didn't draw additional escalated attention to the situation or display unkind or rude behaviour towards the student. The student contributed to the class by singing and joining in from their unusual choice of location, and the class went on with minimal disruption. The student joined us when they were ready to, and nothing further was mentioned. A change in floor plan was initiated for the following lessons for safety reasons, introducing a chill-out corner that

students were welcome to use should they need to do so.

Draw and tell 2

Students were asked to draw a picture of themselves in the singing class—questions related to these drawings and the student's experiences during the lessons and rehearsal phases. Most drawings included pictures of classmates, and discussions in the interviews revealed how relationships developed in the classroom environment. Interestingly, even if direct connections in friendships/peer relationships were not formed, students expressed comfort by having a group to play and make music with. Students revealed that the group environment reduced pressure to perform, which enhanced the pleasure of participation. This was particularly evident in conversations with three students who each brought unique perspectives to the group dynamic. Avery (aged 10), who had previously only performed solo, discovered newfound comfort in group performance settings. Their reflection highlighted how the presence of peers helped mitigate performance anxiety. The supportive nature of group learning emerged as a key theme in student responses. Avery's experience highlighted how the collective environment helped reduce individual pressure:

I like that I don't have to stand here by myself. So yeah, I don't get stage fright while I'm here with more than three people. (Avery)

Building on this sense of shared experience, Morgan reflected on how group participation enhanced musical learning itself:

I like that we get to share things when we're all in a group singing. So then, we get the right notes, the right sound. The music sounds right. (Morgan)

The evolution from initial nervousness to comfort through group participation was particularly evident in Quinn's experience. As one of the quieter members of the group, their journey from apprehension to acceptance illustrated how the supportive environment facilitated personal growth:

I felt nervous the first week, but now I feel calm. I really like singing with everyone. (Quinn)

Jordan's drawing captured the joyful social atmosphere of the class, depicting students making music, laughing, and enjoying themselves together. Their enthusiasm for the weekly classes was evident in their response:

I feel really excited coming to class each week. At first, I felt very nervous and excited. But at the end, I didn't feel nervous because everything came out ok! (Jordan)



Figure 5. Drawing by 8-year-old student Jordan “Me and my voice class.”

Quinn learns piano. They are a quiet and supportive class member and speak about the importance of having friendships in the class and how it makes it easier for them to try new things, speak up, and feel more confident about their voice.

I got a bit more confident after I made friends. After I felt a bit more comfortable, I could ask more questions. (Quinn)



Figure 6. Drawing by Quinn “In the voice classroom.”

A significant finding was the positive impact of the group environment on reducing MPA. Students like Avery expressed feeling less anxious when performing with others.

Singing with my friends, with the group means I can sing loud, or softly, or not at all. Because we've got each other. It means I can be myself and not worry that someone will hear me and judge. (Avery)

Avery's feedback supports the notion that peer support can contribute to building resilience against performance anxiety, providing a sense of shared experience and mutual encouragement. It aligns with the community of music practice (CoMP) framework, highlighting the importance of social learning and shared experiences in music education.

Performance and post-performance experiences

All students participated in the final performance, which was held in a small community hall. Students were encouraging and supportive of each other, and all came to the stage willingly despite experiencing nerves. The participant's family and friends comprised the audience, who contributed to a safe and welcoming performance environment. Students chose to include an audience participation activity in the concert to engage the audience and create a shared experience in learning and performing a short song in a group environment. Students performed five songs, and most had a self-nominated additional task of introducing a song or thanking the audience for attending either solo or with a buddy. Students were proud of themselves and their achievements and were supportive of their classmates, exchanging hugs, high-fives, and words of encouragement after the performance.

Students were asked to draw a picture of themselves performing before the group singing performance. Interview questions were related to all three drawings from the research period and their experiences with the lessons, rehearsal, and performance phases. The final performance elicited a range of emotional responses that demonstrated both the persistence of some anxiety and the growth in confidence. Taylor, who had previously expressed severe performance anxiety, reflected on their journey:

I felt proud. I was nervous when I started singing. I had a tummy ache and wobbly legs. But it was ok. I did it! (Taylor)

This mixture of excitement and accomplishment was echoed by Jordan, whose enthusiasm captured the group's collective achievement:

We were great! I had fun singing all the songs. My pants were comfortable. I liked seeing Mum and Dad singing too! (Jordan)

The sense of collective achievement was further emphasised by Casey, who had previously been reluctant to perform:

I always wanted to sing on stage, but I was really scared to try. When it came to the day of the concert, I didn't think I'd do it. I told my parents I was sick. But I went. I knew I was safe – even though I was frightened. We got up there together and it was wonderful! (Casey)

Perhaps most telling was Avery's observation, which captured how individual growth had contributed to collective success:

I can't believe we all did it! It was awesome! We all worked together, and it sounded so good (Avery)

Morgan also learns piano. Morgan is a quiet and encouraging class member and speaks about their performance experience and how even though they felt nervous, it was made even better by sharing it with their new friends.

I wasn't really worried about messing up any notes because everyone else was singing. I really wasn't worried about anything, but I was nervous because I was getting up in front of everybody. (Morgan)

Evolution of confidence over time

The study tracked the evolution of students' feelings about performance through the lens of Community of Musical Practice (CoMP), demonstrating how mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire contributed to anxiety reduction. Initial participant drawings and comments reflected high levels of anxiety, but as students developed within the group lesson environment, their responses showed increased confidence and enjoyment. The transformation in students' confidence levels was particularly evident in their reflections over time. Early expressions of anxiety gradually gave way to more positive self-assessments, as demonstrated by Quinn's initial experience compared to their post-performance reflection:

I feel scared. Sweaty hands. I can't make the sound. (Quinn – first interview)

I got on the stage. I didn't think I would, but I did. And I sang! (Quinn – last interview)

This evolution of confidence extended beyond individual achievement to encompass a sense of group accomplishment. Morgan, who was initially concerned about making mistakes, later reflected that they weren't worried about making mistakes since they were singing with the group.

The development of peer support structures played a crucial role in this transformation. Students began to recognise and value their relationships with classmates.

This transformation suggests that the structured support of a peer relationships—rather than mere exposure to group singing alone—can effectively reduce MPA over time by providing students with both the social resources and practical strategies needed to manage performance anxiety within a supportive community context.

Social relationships and peer support

The importance of friendships and peer relationships in the music classroom was evident, illustrating Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital in action. Social capital manifested through the networks and relationships students built with peers, while cultural capital emerged through their shared understanding of musical practices and performance norms.

I got a bit more confident after I made friends. After I felt a bit more comfortable, I could ask more questions. (Quinn)

Quinn's statement demonstrates how social capital (friendships) enabled access to cultural capital (musical knowledge and skills) through increased participation and engagement. As students developed these relationships, they gained both the social confidence to participate more fully and the cultural knowledge needed to navigate the musical learning environment. The accumulation of these forms of capital created a positive feedback loop: stronger social connections led to greater access to musical knowledge, which in turn enhanced students' status and confidence within the group. This interplay between social and cultural capital supported the effectiveness of the CoMP approach in fostering a supportive learning environment where anxiety could be collectively managed through shared experiences and mutual support.



Figure 7. Drawing by Morgan "At the concert".

The findings demonstrate that participation in group voice classes provided both active and passive benefits and opportunities to support students' confidence in singing and music-making in classroom and performance environments, with far-reaching implications and reported examples of increased confidence in school and private settings.

These findings were validated by students demonstrably taking risks in class and feeling safe to contribute or not contribute to class activities and performances by making conscious choices about which activities they participated in without fear of judgment or isolation from their peers. Students reported far-reaching, inclusive and external benefits to the research environment, with increased participation in school and extra-curricular activities.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how peer relationships shape pre-adolescent voice students' experiences of music performance anxiety (MPA) within a Community of Musical Practice (CoMP) framework. While previous research has explored MPA in adult musicians and older students (D. Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Osborne et al., 2014), understanding these dynamics in younger children, particularly in a group learning environment, represents a significant gap in existing research. This gap is critical given that early experiences with MPA can profoundly impact a child's lifelong relationship with music-making.

Manifestation of MPA in pre-adolescent singers

The study revealed distinct patterns in how MPA manifests among young singers aged 8–11, both physiologically and psychologically. Students reported various physical symptoms, including stomach aches, shaking legs, sweaty hands, and vocal difficulties. These physical manifestations were frequently accompanied by cognitive symptoms such as fear of judgement, worry about mistakes and catastrophising thoughts. For example, one participant, Taylor, expressed, “I'm so nervous I just know I won't be able to sing”, while another student, Sarah, described feeling “like my throat is closing up when everyone looks at me”. These examples demonstrate how anxiety can lead to both negative self-predictions and physiological responses that directly impact vocal performance.

These findings align with Dianna Kenny's (2011) definition of MPA while providing specific insights into how anxiety manifests in this particular age group. The combination of physical and psychological symptoms suggests that effective interventions must address both aspects simultaneously. The observations extend previous research by Ryan (2005) and Boucher and Ryan (2011) on anxiety in young performers by explicitly

focusing on the unique challenges pre-adolescent singers face in group settings.

The role of peer relationships in MPA management

A central finding was the crucial role of peer relationships in transforming students' experiences of MPA. This research extends Wenger's (1998) concept of mutual engagement within Communities of Practice to pre-adolescent voice education, demonstrating how supportive peer relationships can facilitate learning and anxiety management. This finding builds upon Gifford-Smith and Brownell's (2003) work on the importance of peer relationships in children's development, specifically addressing their role in managing music performance anxiety.

The development of supportive peer relationships emerged as particularly significant in several ways.

Enhanced confidence through social connection

Quinn's experience exemplified this transformation, demonstrating how social relationships can enhance learning outcomes while reducing anxiety levels.

At first, I couldn't even sing when anyone looked at me, but after making friends with Jamie and Alex, we practice together, and now I feel brave enough to sing solos. (Quinn)

This perspective was echoed by Madison (aged 8), a quiet but attentive student who particularly valued peer support during performances. Madison's reflections highlighted how simple gestures from friends could help manage performance anxiety:

When my friends smile at me during performances, I remember to breathe and feel calmer. (Madison)

Social capital in musical settings

The findings reveal a novel application of Bourdieu's (2002) concept of social capital in the context of childhood MPA. Students actively leveraged social connections within the musical community to manage anxiety. Field notes documented how students developed informal support systems, such as creating pre-performance rituals together and offering encouraging gestures during performances.

Collective learning experiences

The shared experience of learning and performing together created opportunities for peer support and mutual understanding. Evidence from the research diary showed that students organised independent practice sessions during breaks, with more confident performers naturally mentoring their peers.

Creating safe and supportive learning environments

The study identified that creating a safe, supportive classroom environment is fundamental to supporting MPA mitigation and aligns with Higgins's (2012) concept of creating safe spaces for artistic expression and identity formation while extending it specifically to pre-adolescent voice education. Several key elements contributed to this supportive environment:

Flexible participation

The research demonstrated that allowing students to choose their participation levels was crucial. Field notes documented various examples of the benefits of flexible participation options and include the experiences of a student who initially participated from under a desk but gradually gained the confidence to join the group and another who preferred to hum rather than sing for the first few weeks. By the term's end, both students actively participated in group performances.

Development of musical habitus

The progression of students' musical development revealed what can be termed as *musical habitus* within Bourdieu's framework (Wenger, 1998). This was evidenced through the progression of students' drawings and comments. Early drawings often showed isolated figures with visible anxiety indicators (such as sweating or shaking), while later artwork depicted group scenes with smiling figures and musical symbols. This transformation reflects the internalisation of dispositions, tastes, and skills acquired through participation in the musical community.

Peer support structures

Establishing formal and informal peer support structures in the classroom increased students' confidence. Documentation revealed numerous instances of spontaneous peer support, such as students creating "confidence circles" before

performances and developing hand signals, the use of facial expressions and gestures to encourage each other during challenging passages.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The small sample size (n=8) and specific geographical context of Brisbane, Queensland, while appropriate for a practitioner inquiry case study (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009), limit the generalisability of findings to broader populations. The dual role of practitioner-researcher, while offering valuable insights into the learning environment, may have influenced student responses and behaviours during the research period. Additionally, the relatively short time frame of ten weeks may not fully capture long-term changes in students' experiences of MPA or the sustainability of peer support mechanisms. The study's focus on group voice lessons in a private studio setting means findings may not transfer directly to other musical contexts such as instrumental ensembles or school-based programs. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal studies across multiple settings and teaching contexts.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATORS

The findings from this study offer several practical strategies that studio or classroom teachers can implement to support pre-adolescent singers experiencing MPA in group settings. These approaches, grounded in the Community of Musical Practice framework and supported by the study's findings, can be adapted to suit individual studio or music classroom contexts while maintaining the core focus on peer support and social learning.

Structured peer support implementation

Strategic implementation of peer support structures can significantly enhance the learning environment while reducing MPA. Teachers can create intentional student partnerships based on complementary confidence levels and musical interests, fostering natural mentoring relationships. Including small group practice opportunities within lessons allows these partnerships to develop organically while building musical skills. Structured peer feedback activities, when

thoughtfully designed, help students develop both their musical abilities and supportive communication skills. The key is selecting repertoire that naturally encourages collaboration, whether through partner songs, small ensemble pieces, or works that allow for different levels of participation.

Classroom environment strategies

Thoughtfully designing the physical classroom space can create safe havens and flexible participation options for students managing different levels of anxiety. Creating designated quiet spaces within the classroom could allow students to participate at their comfort level. Visual aids tracking individual and group progress might help celebrate small wins and incremental achievements. Simple non-verbal signals could be developed collaboratively with students to communicate anxiety levels discreetly. Clear, student-informed protocols for peer support during performances can help create predictable, comfortable performance experiences. While maintaining consistent lesson patterns provides security, flexibility within these patterns allows teachers to respond to student needs as they arise.

Anxiety management techniques

Effective anxiety management techniques can be seamlessly integrated into regular teaching practices without disrupting lesson flow. Breathing exercises included as part of warm-up routines serve the dual purpose of developing breath control and providing calming techniques students can use independently. Pre-performance routines incorporating both individual and group support elements can evolve naturally from class discussions about what helps students feel confident. Creating safe spaces for students to share their experiences with performance anxiety, when they feel comfortable doing so, helps normalise these feelings. Regular inclusion of movement and relaxation exercises, designed for both individual and group participation, supports a holistic approach to technique and well-being.

Performance preparation approaches

A graduated approach to performance opportunities allows students to build confidence progressively while maintaining autonomy over their participation level. Beginning with informal singing in small peer groups, teachers can gradually introduce more structured performance experiences. Providing multiple ways for students

to participate in group performances—whether through solo singing, small ensemble work, or non-singing roles like introducing pieces—allows students to engage at their comfort level while still feeling part of the group achievement. Regular informal performance moments within classes provide low-pressure opportunities for building confidence. Celebrating collective achievements while acknowledging individual progress helps maintain a supportive environment that encourages musical risk-taking.

Group dynamic development

Cultivating positive group dynamics is essential for creating a supportive learning environment that naturally reduces MPA. Teachers can foster a classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as valuable learning opportunities rather than failures. Creating opportunities for student leadership and peer mentoring helps build confidence while strengthening social bonds within the group. Developing class traditions and shared experiences builds a strong group identity that can help buffer against performance anxiety. Active encouragement and reinforcement of spontaneous peer support when it occurs helps to establish this as a natural part of the group's culture.

Parent communication

Maintaining effective communication with parents is crucial for supporting students' musical development while managing MPA. Teachers can share specific strategies with parents for supporting their children's musical development without inadvertently increasing anxiety. Clear information about the role of group singing in building confidence helps parents understand and support the collaborative learning process. Creating opportunities for families to observe and understand the group learning approach can help extend the supportive environment beyond the studio. Regular, open communication about student progress and anxiety management ensures a consistent approach between home and studio.

These practical strategies can be implemented gradually, allowing teachers to adapt them to their specific studio context and student needs. The alignment with the Communities of Musical Practice framework (A. Kenny, 2016) is evident in how these approaches foster the three key dimensions identified in the study: mutual engagement (through structured peer support and group dynamics), joint enterprise (through collaborative performance preparation), and shared

repertoire (through integrated anxiety management techniques and collective experiences). This aligns with Barrett's (2005) application of CoMP principles to music education settings, particularly her emphasis on how shared musical experiences contribute to learning and development. Additionally, Bourdieu's concept of social capital (Wacquant, 2004) is reflected in how these strategies help students build networks of supportive relationships and develop shared understanding of performance practices. For example, when students develop non-verbal signals for anxiety support or participate in group traditions, they are building both the social connections and practical tools that constitute valuable capital within the musical community. This social approach to anxiety management is supported by Hendricks's (2016) findings about the relationship between self-efficacy and peer support in young musicians.

Future research possibilities

Several promising areas for future investigation emerged from this study. Longitudinal research examining the long-term effects of early MPA experiences could provide valuable insights into the lasting impact of supportive interventions. Such research might follow students through primary and secondary education to understand how their relationship with performance anxiety evolves.

Exploring these findings across diverse cultural contexts could reveal how social dynamics and MPA manifest in different settings, particularly within various Australian communities. This understanding might help adapt support strategies for different cultural contexts.

Investigating whether peer support benefits transfer between the group and solo performances could provide helpful insights for educators working across different performance contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to understanding MPA in pre-adolescent singers while suggesting possible frameworks for exploring connections between social dynamics, music education, and music performance anxiety. The findings indicate that supporting young singers with MPA might benefit from considering individual and social factors, particularly in group settings.

Building on previous work regarding self-efficacy and music performance anxiety in young musicians (Dempsey & Comeau, 2019; Hendricks,

2016; McPherson & McCormick, 2006), this study highlights the potential benefits of social relationships and peer support in group voice settings. These insights might contribute to developing varied approaches for supporting young singers with performance anxiety, potentially fostering positive musical experiences that encourage ongoing engagement with music performance.

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BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca Yarnold, a PhD researcher at Queensland Conservatorium of Music, explores social relationships and music performance anxiety in pre-adolescent singers. With over two decades as a music educator and CCM singer, she advocates for inclusivity and access to music education through the Access to Music for Inclusion and Equity (AMIE) Network. Yarnold participated in Griffith University Story Festival 2023, facilitating songwriting workshops with teenagers and highlighting music's power to connect communities and inspire change. Passionate about creating environments that foster creativity, confidence, and joyful play, her research aims to develop empathetic and inclusive approaches to music education and music-making.

APPENDIX 1

Figure 1: Data generation methods

