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Title: "I'll Sing with My Buddies" – Fostering the Possible Selves of Male Choral Singers

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**Author's Statement:**

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**Signed:** Patrick K. Freer (electronically submitted)

**Biographical Note:**

Patrick K. Freer received his BM and MM degrees from Westminster Choir College of Rider University, and his Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University. He is an assistant professor of choral music education in the School of Music at Georgia State University (USA). His DVD series, "Success for Adolescent Singers: Unlocking the Potential in Middle School Choirs," is published by Choral Excellence Press, Inc.

## ABSTRACT

### “I’ll Sing with My Buddies” – Fostering the Possible Selves of Male Choral Singers

The stories of three high school boys about their experiences in school-based choral music provide the framework for a discussion of the role music educators can play in retaining male singers. The “possible selves” construct (Markus & Nurius, 1986) is explored alongside research-based implications about specific steps toward developing boys’ identities as choral musicians. Possible selves are future conceptions of the self that are either positive (hoped-for) or negative (feared). The changing adolescent male voice occurs at approximately the same time as major social, academic, and other physical changes. It is thought that these issues coincide in a manner that discourages boys from participation in choral music (Freer, 2007). Drawing upon a successful non-musical model, the author proposes a variant of the “Possible Selves Program” (Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006) for use in music settings.

## KEYWORDS

Boys  
Choral Music  
Instruction  
Motivation  
Possible Selves

“I’ll Sing with My Buddies” –  
Fostering the Possible Selves of Male Choral Singers

*“I find it interesting about how I’ve started talking about my father. It’s not like I’d ever realized how much of an impact that he had on my singing . . . I mean, he’s good, he’s legitimately good. I’ve just always looked to my dad for sports, and now, just looking at him musically, he’s a very skilled man.”*

-Roger, age 17

I recently had the opportunity to interview a number of boys about their experiences with school-based choral music (Freer, 2009). As I neared completion of the interviews, I happened across a discussion of the “possible selves” construct and how it frames the hopes and dreams of young people. In the simplest of terms, possible selves are conceptions we hold about the types of people we hope to become, can become, or fear becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). One of the cognitive developments of adolescence is the ability to hypothesize about the future and plan courses of action to either realize or avoid elements of those potential futures. When I reviewed the interviews I had collected, I found numerous consistencies between the boys’ comments and the literature about possible selves. This purpose of this article is to introduce music teachers to possible selves, using the words of three of these boys as springboards to highlighting potential implications for musical involvement throughout the lifespan. A Possible Selves Program in Music is proposed as a way to initiate and sustain related conversations in the choral music classroom.

Especially for adolescents, both strongly positive and strongly negative experiences assist in the organization of thoughts and behaviors that lead toward self-definitions (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001; Sharp, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsille & Ranieri, 2007). These self-definitions are particularly malleable during adolescence as young people try on possible selves without commitment or expectation of permanence (Erickson, 1968). Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) have indicated that the development of

adolescent self-regulation and self-esteem are strongly related to the envisioning of future conceptions of the self. Studies within the possible selves framework suggest that adolescent boys ascribe self-esteem to skill and ability (Block & Robins, 1993; Knox, 2006; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Boys tend to adopt parental views of their child's possible selves less frequently than do adolescent girls (Zentner & Renaud, 2007). Adolescent boys tend to hold a single possible self as paramount, with the selection based on perceived skill competence related to that self (see Sharp, 2007). Related studies within music indicate a positive relationship between active involvement with music making and musical self-identity (Hallam & Prince, 2003), and the importance of musical role models to guide progress and encourage persistence (Papageorgi, Hallam & Welch, 2007).

### Gathering Information

Music teachers need methods of discerning the possible selves held by their choristers if they are to address the self-perceptions held by those students. The possible selves construct was originally assessed through a structured survey called the Possible Selves Questionnaire (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and this remains the dominant research method in the field. A review of the various research methodologies used to investigate possible selves indicated narrative techniques are becoming nearly as prevalent as questionnaire/survey methods (Packard & Conway, 2006).

Reports by possible selves researchers indicate that adolescents seem to respond most favorably through structured surveys that are delivered during face-to-face sessions with researchers rather than completing surveys or writing stories without verbal interaction (Hooker, 1992; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). One of the earliest of these was the Possible Selves Mapping

Interview where both participants and interviewers wrote notes on index cards that were later sorted and coded for themes (see Shepard & Marshall, 1999). The original Possible Selves Questionnaire asked participants to identify up to three hoped-for selves and three to-be-avoided selves (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). A related format called the Possible Selves Questionnaire – Qualitative Extensions was designed to elicit narrative discussion of the subjective meaning and significance of a participant’s possible selves (Kortsch, Kurtines & Montgomery, 2008).

As research about possible selves has developed, the types of questions used on surveys and interviews have changed. In response to findings that well-elaborated possible selves were particularly motivating, participants in one study were asked about what steps they were taking to foster their hoped-for possible selves or prevent their feared selves (Marshall, 2002). Several attempts have been made to examine changes in how individuals view their possible selves through longitudinal studies (e.g. Richardson & Eccles, 2007). One study used beepers to signal participants to complete either hand-written or online journal entries about the relationship of their in-the-moment behaviors to their conceptions of possible selves (Hoppmann, Gerstorf, Smith & Klumb, 2007). This technique was developed to mitigate potential short-term memory loss in the study’s elderly population. Kivetz and Tyler (2007) encouraged students to respond in the third-person when describing their possible selves during questionnaires and interviews. The researchers noted that the use of third-person perspective encouraged students to think more abstractly and place more importance on descriptions of their imagined possible selves.

### The Possible Selves Program

Several studies have examined the effects of school-based programs focusing on the possible selves construct. One study found that a school-based, possible self-focused program

can moderate the effect of parents who are either not involved in school life or who actively undermine the efforts of schools to promote academic motivation (Oyserman, Brickman & Rhodes, 2007). A key component in the success of this program was the linking of hoped-for academic possible selves with important social identities for students. Planning for the achievement of hoped-for possible selves included the development of a timeline into the future for each student participant.

Another study examined a school-wide program for the development of possible selves as a means toward enhancing student academic motivation (Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006). This program, called the Possible Selves Program, is designed to provide a framework for adolescents to both identify potential possible selves and develop related achievement or avoidance strategies. The six stages in the framework are discovering, thinking, sketching, reflecting, growing, and performing (p. 211). Table 1 suggests how these six stages might be reframed to focus on music and includes questions students might ask themselves within each stage. The stage “sketching” originally included the drawing of a tree with limbs representing possible selves. In Table 1, the label “sketching” was changed to “imagining,” more accurately depicting what might occur in the music classroom.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE
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Research indicates that possible selves may lead to personal growth and change in two broad phases (Wurf & Markus, 1991) as reflected in Table 1: the conceptualization of possible selves (stages I, II and III) and the realization of those possible selves (stages IV, V and VI). The American Psychological Association (1997) has highlighted two characteristics of motivation that are particularly relevant to how music teachers can influence the development of positive possible selves in their students. First, motivation to learn is influenced by an individual’s

perception of emotional stress, interests, and goals (stages I and II). Second, extended learner effort and guided practice (stages V and VI) are required for the development of complex knowledge and skills such as those encountered in choral singing, especially during the adolescent voice change (Thurman & Welch, 2000).

Stage IV can be viewed as a bridge from the expression of interests to the planning of strategies. It is during this stage that both hoped-for and to-be-avoided possible selves need to be identified and shared. Suppressed conceptions of to-be-avoided (feared) possible selves have been found to negatively impact both the curricular and extra-curricular choices adolescents make upon transitioning from middle school (grades 5-8 in the United States) to high school (Aikins, Bierman & Parker, 2005). For that reason, teachers using the Possible Selves Program framework should acknowledge the existence of any negative possible selves involving singing while focusing on the planning of strategies for students to achieve success in choral music (Dunkle & Anthis, 2001; Ross & Wilson, 2003).

### High School Boys' Stories of Singing and Choral Music

The six stages of the Possible Selves Program are reflected in the comments of three high school boys about their choral music experiences. Doug, Coy and Roger (pseudonyms) are students in their final year at a private school in the southeastern United States. Each boy will be attending college in the coming year. With the consent of their teachers and parents, these boys were individually interviewed on three occasions for a total of 90 minutes. The boys were asked to relate their previous experiences (past selves), current involvement (present self), and their

expectations for future involvement in music (possible selves). The stories that follow were reviewed by the boys for accuracy and are presented with their approval.

*Doug - "There's always something new. There's always something to learn."*

Doug is an 18-year-old senior who has sung in school and church choruses since fifth grade. He transferred to the current school in tenth grade. An accomplished chorister, Doug has been selected for six All-State Choirs, the ACDA [American Choral Directors Association] Southern Division High School Honor Choir and the ACDA National Junior High Honor Choir. When asked what intrigues him about choral music, he commented, "The overall point of music is expression. It's the expression of one's mindset and personality and relationships, the situation at the time. It's like music never ends. There's always something new. There's always something to learn."

Doug has been active as "... a worship leader at my church for two and a half years, playing guitar, singing, organizing band practices and schedules, communicating with the band and their parents, and arranging and coordinating the music for that Sunday. They'll say, 'Why don't we try this song in a different way,' take the song we hear on the CD and flip it to the way I want it, and we'll do that, changing keys and stuff like that. It's been a good few years, you know." He took guitar lessons for six years, stopping last year "... because of time. Time got in the way."

The experience of Doug's sister in middle-school chorus prompted his own interest in singing: "She loved her chorus teacher, and I loved her, too, when I was in middle school. Our chorus teacher was one of those exciting [teachers]; she just grabs you and brings you into it and challenges you and pushes you beyond what you think you could do. Besides, we sang a lot in

music class, so it was an easy transition to being in chorus. The teacher taught us that music isn't supposed to be just how the arranger described it, it's open to interpretation. Nobody does it the same way, and it shouldn't be sung the same way. It was open to creativity, and I liked that. I don't like doing things exactly like they're supposed to be; I like being creative. Maybe that is wrong for some people, but oh well.”

Doug counts the influence of older boys in his previous school as one of the factors in his choral success. He recalls when “. . . one of my friends didn't know how to sing falsetto, and one of the seniors took him into another room and taught him how to sing falsetto. We really looked up to them. They were telling it like it was; it was stuff that they had learned from personal experience. The older guys were the ones who would give more of the examples, like when the conductor would say, ‘Sing it like this,’ they would sing it back, and then she would change them a bit, and then we would learn from them. It was like passing it down, passing down of the lesson. And then the senior guys would conduct the practices when the teacher wasn't there, which was great because we worked hard and we appreciated their musicianship and stuff like that.” Doug continued, “I think middle-school chorus has a lot to do with embracing the changing voice rather than laughing at it, because some of the boys that were laughed at when their voices would crack sort of got their hopes down, whereas me and a few of my friends, we would crack, but we would just keep going on. Of course, there were some giggles, but the director should embrace that, and say, ‘If it happens, it happens, just move on.’”

The need for male role models in choral music carries over to the influence of the teacher: “It's an awful misconception, but when the guys see a female teacher, they say, ‘I guess chorus is just for girls,’ whereas they don't have really strong male role models. I think some of the best conductors I've had personally have been males.” In contrast, his first high school

choral teacher “. . . didn't really concentrate on the whole voice change, and when boys didn't know what falsetto was, she couldn't really teach it to us as well as she should have. So, boys dropped out because they thought their voices had changed for the worse and not for the better.” Because that teacher could not sing the boys' parts at pitch, “. . . she just let us on our own. She used words to explain how she wanted us to sing but she could never really sing it to us. That was my introduction to high-school chorus here. It was just too much of a transition from middle-school chorus. I would have dropped out, but it just took the older, more experienced guys to show us what she meant.”

Doug related his perceptions about how boys are treated in choral situations. He said, “Some of my choral conductors in the past, some of them loved having boys, and others treated the guys like the minority since they were more female-trained. I started thinking why this was, and I just kinda thought about choral teachers' diversifying their skills to treat boys as well as they treat girls. And, then, I've been on the other side of the spectrum where the teacher loved the boys so much that she treated us better than the girls, so the girls didn't like that.” However, Doug does not advocate separate choruses for boys and girls at middle-school or high-school levels: “Let's drop this ‘being scared thing’ because you want to impress this girl over here. I mean, the whole purpose of music for guys is just to be romantic, so I think with the girls in the room, it's more of an inspiration than anything” [*laughs*].

Camaraderie with both peers and the teacher during rehearsals is important to Doug. But, he enjoys seeing the teacher allow singers to develop independence as the concert approaches. He said, “I like it when the teacher teaches us from the front for the first couple of weeks, and then at the middle they're either walking around trying to listen to people who aren't sure, trying to listen to sections to make sure they know what we need to work on and what is fine, and then

the last couple weeks we try to work on memorization.” He continued, “One thing that I've experienced here, is that me and the other two basses (we have a section of three), once we learn our parts we have to sit while our teacher goes through the rest of the sections. So, we sit there and think of time-wasters, like counting the ceiling tiles or whatever, and it's just kind of gets to a point where we're getting tired of sitting all the time.” When his choral teachers focus too much on whole-group instruction, Doug senses that his fellow singers “. . . feel that they don't have the music down, and that's why I would do sectionals. They have to feel confident. They can't be scared.”

Doug feels that his chorus teachers often worry too much about boys dropping out of chorus. The bigger problem is when boys “. . . don't feel like they can ever sing again once they've dropped out. A lot of kids don't see music as a field that they want to go into. I know that here, a lot of things run around the business world. But, a lot of the older males that I see in choruses don't pursue music for a living. In my church choir, all [of] them are volunteers; they're not in professional music at all. And, I think that it's more of a thing where they established their business first and went back into music later.” Despite his own musical proficiency, he stresses the emotional components of choral music as potential attractors for adult men: “I think teaching more of the background and passion, like conductors expressing their own passion for music, would make it more easy for older guys and men to say, ‘Oh, I had a really fun time when I was in chorus. I had a really good time expressing myself through music, so why don't I get back to it?’”

*Coy – “My family does sing a lot. Radio comes on, we're singing along.”*

Coy is an 18-year-old senior who had been active in his high-school chorus until this year, when a scheduling conflict prevented him from enrolling. He maintains involvement with the choral program as an officer of the ensemble, but he does not sing with the choir. He began singing with the choirs when he transferred to the school in eighth grade. Coy recalls that the week before classes began, he went to registration and began speaking with the middle-school choral teacher: “. . . she came up to me and we just started talking, and she said she teaches choir, and I said ‘Well, that'd be a great class’ and that's why, I think, I signed up for it. That made the difference for me.”

Coy has been active as a member of the baseball team, peer leadership activities, and was selected to the Homecoming Court. Coy's family is full of singers, including a brother who sings in the high-school chorus, his mother who sang throughout high school and college, and his dad who mainly sings around the house, “. . . just like I did when I was little. So, I'd say that I didn't grow up from a group of singers, but in general, my family does sing a lot. Radio comes on, we're singing along.”

His first experience singing in a choir was in grade eight. Prior experiences in elementary school music class were limited to “. . . playing around with recorders, [singing] some songs, and stuff like that. We didn't really play instruments; we ‘played around’ with instruments. We didn't become experts, which was [*sighs audibly*] weird, I guess. We'd also watch instructional videos on people who were famous in music. Then, it was when I went to this school in eighth grade that I focused on choir and singing. The teacher knew what she was talking about. And, it was nice to center on the pieces, work for three months, and then see the concert come together. That was awesome. I'd never done that before. And, I gained a lot of friendships when I went into choir. Because of all that camaraderie, you know? It was one of

those things where everybody enjoyed it just because we were friends; we were buddies. And, we just sorta hung out together and enjoyed each other's company. I remember school back then being very carefree.”

Coy could recall middle-school boys who dropped out of choral music because of discomfort with their changing voices. He commented, “If you're in a group of guys and everybody changes different, so you've got guys who matured quickly and guys who didn't, well, that's hard for some to get through. Some of the boys who dropped didn't want to have to go through that embarrassment, you know what I'm saying? They're not singing now . . . they just never sang again. Hmmm.”

Coy enrolled in the ninth-grade chorus “. . . because I loved it. I really did. And, I heard good things about it from upper classmen, as well. Every time I go to chorus class, except near the concert when it gets sorta hectic, it's like a break for me because I love it so much. I go in and I do what I'd do anyways at home – I sing with my friends, I learn things about my vocals, about how to read sheet music, just music things in general. I get irritated with boys who don't think that chorus matters. To the people who think that way, I say that there are things called extra-curriculars, things larger than academic life. Just because, in your opinion, it may not serve any relevance in your life doesn't mean that it's not fun, can't be enjoyable, and can't be a learning experience in other ways. Me playing baseball in the afternoon, me practicing, does that mean I'm going to go pro and earn millions of dollars? No. But, I do it because it's fun, it teaches me teamwork skills, leadership skills. You learn different things from different areas. You know what I mean?”

Coy has had two choral teachers during his time in the high-school beginning men's choir. Compared to the middle-school teacher who invited him into chorus, the first high-school

teacher “. . . was a lot stricter but we got a lot done. But, it was sort of one of those things where, if I didn't already love it, I don't know if I'd have stayed. Every day was a ‘you never stop’ kind of day. You’d just walk in there and think, ‘Well, here we go.’ Like, you’d have a break in a song, she’d be doing something, you’d start talking to your friend, and BOOM you're in trouble. It was always, ‘Whoa, here goes 45 minutes of me sitting still.’ It was sorta painstaking rather than the enjoyment of an actual thing out of love.”

Coy noted that the arrival of a new teacher prompted a change in attitude because “. . . the new teacher is very positive. The former teacher wasn't very positive or upbeat, or, to be honest with you, she wasn't very nice. I think that's why a lot of students dropped out. Teachers need to have patience with students who may be taking chorus as a filler class, because those students are part of *your* class. And maybe they are trying, but they just don't know how to do it right, I guess.” He added that the way the new teacher handles the men's ensemble is to make them feel important. That feeling of self-confidence translates into “. . . a lot of guys from the middle school who see the men's ensemble as ‘cool’ and want to join. I think teachers should put the guys on a pedestal in chorus, and let the other boys in the school see them do something well.”

Coy enjoyed instances when the men's ensemble combined with the other school ensembles to sing mixed repertoire: “When we joined with the women's ensemble, the guys started setting down a little bit, you know, I guess be more mature. When we merged with the women's ensemble, it was a lot more enjoyable so everything just came together— personalities, more maturity, better singing because of the passion for it.” Since we've had the new teacher, almost nobody has dropped out (except for me!) while about three-quarters of the men dropped out each year with the old teacher.”

The idea of separate male/female ensembles in the middle school only makes sense, says Coy, if there is “. . . a male teacher for the boys and a female teacher for the girls, because if you put a woman with the male students or a male with the female students, that might not accomplish anything. If your goal is to help their changing voices and to keep them separated because of that, then you have to do more with them; you have to advise them from an expert level based on your [the teacher’s] own experience. When I came into the middle-school choir, it was both guys and girls. I liked that a lot more, because you can do a lot more types of music.” However, Coy cautioned that quality literature could not be sacrificed for greater quantity of repertoire: “I remember that we sang songs that were popular as well as ones that were very difficult. It’s interesting, because when it’s a breeze to sing or learn a new piece, then it isn’t as fun. If I were a visitor who just showed up to the concert and heard all these different parts instead of some easy ‘I could do that’ parts, it’s much better for the listener, too. “

In the end, Coy believes that “. . . if you have a teacher who loves their job and loves being around kids, it makes everything a lot easier, more fun, and you get a lot more out of it. I think when you have a good personality and can create good social relationships with students, everything else will fall into place. If you know the people, if you know when to goof around and when to be serious, you get a lot more done than if you're just there simply to teach.”

*Roger – “I didn’t realize until looking back at it that he was the one.”*

“I think it’s interesting that you want to talk to me about chorus. Music’s been a pretty big part of my life, and I’ve always liked to sing, but I’ve never been in organized choir except for in fifth grade. But, for skits and stuff, I’ll be one to say, ‘I’ll sing with my buddies.’” Roger is a 17-year-old senior who will enroll in the United States Naval Academy after high school.

Roger is a tuba player who has been the marching band drum-major for two years and is active in many sports activities: “Athletics is a pretty big part of my life. Keeping in shape – I enjoy that.”

Roger would like to sing in a male chorus at the Naval Academy “. . . to meet people older than me in some areas different than athletics.” He would have joined chorus at school, but his involvement in the marching band precluded singing in chorus. Roger related, “My dad likes the idea of me singing at the Academy. They just want me to be able to find a way to relax there, a way to let loose, because that place can eat you alive. So, it will be kind of a fun, very social activity.” For a variety of scheduling reasons, singing in the Academy’s choral program would allow him more time to “. . . go lift, and go play intramurals with other people” than if he were involved in band.

Roger recalls that as an elementary student, his voice was “. . . extremely high, awkwardly high, for a guy. It's not like anyone ever commented, but I would notice that when I was singing, my voice seemed to be higher, and I would hit different pitches than they would.” When asked whether his vocal role models were much older than him at the time, Roger fell silent for a few moments. Then, he said, “You know, that actually makes sense. My father has a very, very deep bass voice. We're also very different, like he's a very large man. My dad's 6'5,” and I'm now 5'9.” I look up to my dad, oh yeah. He sang in choir all throughout his high school years. He was very good. He was All-State in Connecticut. He played football as well, but he'll still sing karaoke. He was actually on a Carnival Cruise Ship and sang for the talent show and he made it to the finals. I mean, he's good, he's legitimately good. I've just always looked to my dad for sports, and now, just looking at him musically, he's a very skilled man.”

Roger continued, “In my case, my parents are divorced, and my father lives in New Hampshire. So, he's a considerable distance from me. And my stepfather, he has zero musical

ability. But, you know, I did look up to my father, and because I saw him less and less, I learned more and more from him. It's counterintuitive, but because the times you have with him are so short, you're kind of like a sponge; you kind of want to suck everything up. He's always liked my voice, and we've always sung together, but he always wanted me to be in the band. We would sing in church when I would go up to visit him. I continue to sing with my father in the pews. My voice is nowhere as low as his is, but it's gotten lower. I find it interesting about how I've started talking about my father. It's not like I'd ever realized how much of an impact that he had had on my singing, it's just like, over all those experiences, I didn't realize until looking back at it that he was the one."

Roger remembers his voice change, though "... I had it lucky. It obviously wasn't overnight, but I never was cracking up and down. It was not a problem for me. When I was a freshman, I would go down to the middle school to do something, and I would hear these boys talking in voices lower than I knew they should be talking just because they didn't want to talk where it was comfortable because they were afraid they'd crack. I don't know if I did that, but all I know is I did not have voice cracks."

The changing voice became an issue for one of Roger's friends when both boys were in fifth-grade chorus: "He was very small, both in stature and in size, but his voice was lower than mine in elementary school. And then mine got lower smoothly, but you could just tell that his voice cracks bothered him. He wanted to sing down with the rest of other guys, but he would crack. He figured out that he either had to sing high or low, and he couldn't sing low, so he kept on going high, and who wants to do that at his age? He eventually dropped out of choir. He chose baseball over choir, and you could see that he was really losing his cool in choir." Roger recalled that the two options for the boys were to sing the melody "up high or an octave lower"

rather than a part specifically for the changing voice. Roger recalled, “That would have clearly helped. It would have made him more comfortable.”

When asked how he would work with band students who had difficulty making sounds on their instruments, Roger gave a lengthy and detailed explanation of buzzing into brass mouthpieces. But, when asked if he was aware of how the voice works, he replied, “I do not. I’m assuming it’s vibrating the air molecules in your throat. I only know this from science class.” Roger suggested, “Maybe if there was some instruction on how the voice works, like we learn how muscles work when we play sports. It helps with our training and coordination, and it helps us know how we can improve our skills. That would probably help out in chorus a lot, especially with guys who are getting frustrated with their voice range and just that awkward zone. ‘Cause, you just hit a crack and [*makes a grimace*]. It’d be an excellent thing to teach if it could be absorbed. I’d do this with the boys alone, in an all-boys chorus if possible.”

Roger was asked for his impressions of how teachers could support boys in choral programs. He stressed the need for different types of choral ensembles to meet the musical needs of different boys. Roger said, “I’d provide the men an incentive for success. Right now for the guys in this school, there’s only the beginning men’s ensemble and the Chamber Singers. So, if you’re not good enough to make Chamber Singers, you’re stuck with the people that maybe take chorus just to raise their grades, actually. So, I can see how the lack of challenge plays into it for these guys and they drop out. Like, with sports, if you could make chorus more competitive, especially for the guys, that would get results out of them. Then they would have to ask themselves, ‘Do I really want this?’ and if they do, then they have to step up. Competition is a driving force for middle-school and high-school boys, whether that’s good or bad.”

Roger feels that boys drop out of chorus because “The attraction of sports is so much bigger than music. In middle school, the sports start getting more serious at that point; it stops being Little League. You know, a lot of guys like to do things with their hands, you know, play sports or swing the bat, and there's not a lot of capacity for that in chorus, which is why I think the band has more of a draw for guys, along with the aspect that if you play in the band you can go to the football games, and that's a chance for social activity, too. You're part of a team. In this school, chorus events are very sheltered. You maybe hear an announcement that there's a chorus concert in two days, at 7 in the theater on a Friday night. Chorus needs to be more a part of everyday school life. But, our choruses are generally very good. In my opinion, it's harder to be in the choir than to be in the band. It just takes greater skill.”

As he concluded his final interview, Roger closed by saying, “. . . I like where we started and where we've come to. I've thought a lot about the role of music in my life and how that's changed over time. That was pretty cool. It's been a trip.”

## Discussion

Though none of these boys had engaged in a formal Possible Selves Program, they each held conceptions of their past, present and possible musical selves. These descriptions contained numerous allusions to the stages of the Possible Selves Program.

### *Discovering*

Family played an important role for these boys' discovery of their musical possibilities. Coys' family sang constantly during his boyhood, Roger's father enjoyed singing with his son,

and the experience of Doug's younger sister prompted his discovery of choral music at school. Music classes during the elementary years were pivotal for Coy and Doug, opening the door toward formal choral experiences when they entered upper grades. The preparatory music education promoted the autonomy reflected in Doug's comment, "The teacher taught us that music isn't supposed to be just how the arranger described it, it's open to interpretation." As he added, "I like being creative. Maybe that is wrong for some people, but oh well."

### *Thinking*

These boys frequently recounted the influence that other people had on their involvement in music. Roger's father made a strong impression as a skilled singer and athletic role model. The new high school choral teacher's love for both music and teaching strongly influenced Coy's experience, and Doug watched with interest as older boys guided younger students through the voice change process. Both Coy and Doug noted the ways their teachers responded to the changing voices of boys in their choral ensembles, observing both positive and negative effects of teacher actions on other boys' interest levels and self-perceptions of musical skill.

### *Imagining*

These boys indicated a need for role models of older males who have successfully negotiated the adolescent voice change process. Roger and Coy spoke of how many of their peers withdrew from choral singing due to frustration with their changing voices and comparisons with the vocal abilities of more quickly-maturing boys. Doug felt both male and female choral teachers need to address the male voice change with care so that boys don't perceive the changes as "for the worse and not for the better." Perhaps the most illustrative

comments about possible musical selves came from Roger as he imagined himself a singer similar to his father, noticing how his voice change created similarities between his voice and his father's voice. Roger now freely imagines himself singing at the US Naval Academy as both a social and musical activity.

### *Reflecting*

The ease with which boys can achieve their musical possible selves is tied to the development of skills and competence during music classes and rehearsals. These boys, in various ways, spoke of differences in how boys and girls are taught in music classes. Doug's experience was that the vocal needs of boys were ignored, while Roger argued for specific, activity-based learning experiences that promoted singing as a skill that could be improved. Coy identified vocal technique and the reading of musical notation as potential obstacles for boys, but likened the effort in music class to effort on the baseball field – both have long-term benefits that aren't readily apparent. Both Roger and Coy felt that boys' perceived obstacles of vocal technique might be diminished with carefully written vocal lines in the repertoire chosen for choir.

### *Growing*

Camaraderie was a prevalent theme as these boys discussed how to achieve their musical goals. Doug and Coy spoke of how their choral music teachers largely functioned as co-musicians with students. Doug also mentioned his love for the autonomy and independence afforded by work with his peers in sectional rehearsals. Roger reiterated his desire for instruction based on musical/singing skills, with challenging repertoire and rehearsal methods

that would engage reluctant or bored boys as active participants. It is interesting to note that each boy related plans for achieving musical growth within communities of fellow musicians as well as individually.

### *Performing*

Each boy emphasized the importance of school choral experiences that equipped adolescent boys to return to choral music as men, perhaps after long absences. They saw choral music participation as an activity that could be engaged in, withdrawn from, and reengaged in as circumstances warranted. For this to occur, however, all boys commented on how teachers should view school choral experiences as preparation for the eventual return to singing during adulthood. Though his comments were about his father rather than teachers, Roger eloquently spoke of how adults could encourage boys to feel that their previous musical experiences contributed to both their present and future possible selves: “It's not like I'd ever realized how much of an impact that he had had on my singing.”

The descriptions offered by these boys of their musical experiences were filled with allusions to other experiences within and beyond music. As their cognitive, social, and physical worlds expand with adolescence, young adults are increasingly able to select from an array of competing potential experiences. Recent studies within music education highlight the importance that individuals place on their own perception of personal musical ability when deciding to persist in musical endeavors: persistence occurs when people feel that musical success is possible for themselves (Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Whidden, 2008).

Each of these boys held a concept of a hoped-for possible self that included choral music. Whether that image came from peers, family members, or teachers, these boys persevered in choral music because of future-oriented goals. Choral music teachers need to provide choral experiences for middle school boys that evoke optimal experiences in the moment while building toward definable musical goals in the future. Research suggests that well-elaborated possible selves are particularly motivating, as are hoped-for possible selves that appear achievable (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Strahan & Wilson, 2006). Opportunities to partner with high school boys and adult male musical role models may play important functions in the nurturing of these boys' possible selves. Each of these boys highlighted the social component of choral music participation, echoing research findings that link peer friendships to boys' persistence in school activities (Aikins, 2005; Daniels & Leaper, 2006).

Doug's comment about the men he sees singing in the church choir offers some encouragement to music educators concerned about the "missing males" problem in choral music (see Freer, 2007, 2006). The increasing social complexity, academic demands and extracurricular options encountered during the transition to high school may result in a diminished number of boys electing to sing in choirs. University studies, the establishment of financial stability and career development may prolong this pattern through the early adult years. Though young adult men may further withdraw from choral music as they focus on building family relationships and careers, research indicates that previous experiences – indeed, past selves – can serve as primary motivators for the resumption of activities later in life (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Strahan & Wilson, 2006). Music educators can lay a foundation for this return to singing by purposefully encouraging their male choristers to develop conceptions of possible selves that involve choral music. These images, then, can be the focus of teacher-student conversations when boys decide

to withdraw from choral music participation during secondary school. Such conversations need to reinforce – rather than diminish – the hoped-for possible self of each boy as an adult chorister.

One outcome of narrative-based research projects such as this is the opportunity to better understand how people come to believe that being “musical” is part of their possible selves vocabulary. Narrative methods represent the second-most frequently employed research technique within the literature on possible selves (Packard & Conway, 2006). The current emphasis on narrative within music education research makes this an opportune moment to consider what the theory of possible selves might contribute to our understanding of adolescent boys, voice change, and singing. Though this article has focused attention on male choral participation, the Possible Selves Program described here can be equally applied to the development of forward-looking self-conceptions of both boys and girls (see Moore, 2008). A school-based (or choir-based) developmental approach toward possible selves is one potential means of managing the physical, social, academic, and musical transitions boys encounter during secondary school. Descriptions by boys of their choral experiences may assist music educators in conceptualizing and developing instructional environments that support boys’ needs and address their concerns. Linking boys’ descriptions of their musical experiences to the emerging, future-oriented body of possible selves research may help us better understand how the young choristers of today can become the adult choral musicians of tomorrow.

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Table 1  
*Stages of Possible Selves Program in Music*

Phase	Stage	Formative Questions	Notes
Conceptualization	I. Discovering	What are my musical strengths and interests? What am I already good at doing?	The focus here is on current strengths and interests.
	II. Thinking	Where did my musical interests come from? What musics do I like, and what musical activities do I like? Are there other musical activities that I'd like to do?	Transition to thinking about potential musical interests and activities. A structured questionnaire or interview about possible selves might be given during this stage (e.g. Marshall, 2002).
	III. Imagining	What are my possible musical selves? What can I be?	Identification of areas of musical strength and interest (present or desired) as related to possible selves.
Realization	IV. Reflecting	What possible musical selves are easily achievable? Which are not? What should be my musical priorities?	Identification of obstacles toward achieving possible selves. Determination of whether obstacles are fixed or changeable.
	V. Growing	How do I get to my musical goals?	Development of action plans for achieving musical goals.
	VI. Performing	How am I doing on my journey toward my possible musical goals?	Refinement of action plans based on progress toward musical goals.