

Broken voices or a broken curriculum? the impact of research on UK school choral practice with boys

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Abstract

Work such as that of John Cooksey on boys' changing voices has influenced choral practice in the United States and in certain UK youth choirs, but has hitherto had little impact in UK schools where many teachers continue to believe that boys' voices "break". Different practices are found across the independent and maintained sectors of secondary education. The former draws on the choral tradition associated with cathedral music. The latter tends, with notable exceptions, to subscribe to the populist media view that "boys don't sing" or that singing by boys is individualised and the exceptional result of "X Factor" style talent shows. In neither case is there much evidence of a systematic attempt to apply research findings to develop a structured programme of vocal development for boys in early adolescence. The paper examines case studies of different choral practice in schools where boys do sing, but as the result of enthusiastic teachers working in isolation rather than a systematic, research based approach to boys' singing development.