



# All Together Now: A Review of the Mary Immaculate College Children's Choir



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# All Together Now: A Review of the MIC Children's Choir

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## SECTION



The Mary Immaculate College (MIC) Children's Choir is a university-school-community initiative aimed at complementing and enhancing existing music education provision in primary schools. From the outset, a research and evaluation element has been built into the project, to strengthen the efficacy of the initiative and ensure that the future of the project is research informed and led. This report outlines the learning from the first two years of the MIC Children's Choir, 2013-15.

The choir is a partnership between the Department of Arts Education and Physical Education and the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project at MIC, in partnership with Music Generation Limerick City (MGLC). The choral initiative supports each one of the partners in varying and complementary ways. It feeds directly into the MIC Strategic Plan by welcoming children from schools in the PLUS<sup>1</sup> Network on campus. The children engage in learning and cultural processes which aim to create positive experiences within a third level institution and raise aspirations for educational progression. From a teaching and learning standpoint, MIC students build choral leadership skills and experiences to impact on schools and communities into the future. From a TED perspective, the choir strengthens connections between DEIS schools and the expertise of college staff, enabling MIC to develop enhanced outreach strategies and make meaningful links with the community. The choir supports the MGLC aim of contributing to the development of a national system of local music education services which are publicly supported, socially inclusive, community focused, multi-genre and of high quality to complement the teaching and learning of music in the classroom.

The choir was conceived and set up under the direction of Dr. Ailbhe Kenny, Lecturer in Music Education at MIC in 2013. The initiative commenced in October of the same year with children from four schools in the TED Project PLUS Network supported by TED personnel. The choir continued in the 2014-15 academic year under the

<sup>1</sup> Primary Liaison with University Services (PLUS) is a network of fourteen DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools, two DEIS Rural primary schools and two special schools. Please see Appendix 1 for member details.

direction of Máiréad Ní Chondúin, a part-time lecturer in Music Education at MIC. The specific aims of the choir are:

### *The Student Teachers*

- Acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop their own future community and/or school choirs
- Encourage active participation and inclusion within communities
- Widen civic engagement through creative outlets

### *The Children*

- Develop musical skills through music participation and interaction
- Create awareness of third level education through collaboration with MIC
- Develop academic, social and artistic skills through choral participation
- Fulfil elements of the Music curriculum strands through an innovative project

### *The Schools*

- Extend existing music education provision in Limerick primary schools
- Develop teacher skills, knowledge and repertoire for choral music in schools
- Build awareness of the benefits of choral singing

The initiative sees third level students at MIC involved in active voluntary engagement with selected DEIS<sup>2</sup> Band 1 primary schools in Limerick City. Students gain focussed professional development in choral leadership during weekly mentoring sessions with the choral director at MIC and go on to deliver a common repertoire in schools. This work builds to large and small-scale performances throughout the school year. The choir's repertoire draws from multiple genres and cultures to broaden musical awareness. All schools involved come together in MIC during the academic year for masterclasses or 'Big Sings' with the choral director as well as for performances. In 2013-14 and again in 2014-15 all schools involved came together five times during each academic year in MIC for 'Big Sings' and for final performances in the Lime Tree Theatre with an invited audience of parents, teachers, principals, MIC staff and students. In the second year of the choir, MIC Composer in Residence, Anne-Marie O' Farrell was commissioned to write a piece of music for the choir, which they premiered in the Lime Tree Theatre alongside two local choirs.

Over this two-year period, fourteen students per year volunteered to visit eight classes each week to sing and rehearse with children aged between nine and twelve. One hundred and forty children from 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> classes across the schools involved participated in the first year of the choir and subsequently continued their participation in the second year when they progressed to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> class. The schools involved were:

- Corpus Christi National School, Moyross
- Our Lady of Lourdes National School, Rosbrien
- Our Lady Queen of Peace National School, Janesboro
- St. Munchin's Girls School, Ballynanty (subsequently amalgamated into Thomond Primary School)

In October 2015, all PLUS Network schools were once again invited to participate in the choir and a new group of children from 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> classes in five schools became involved namely: Corpus Christi N.S.; Our Lady of Lourdes N.S.; St. Anne's Girls, Rathkeale; St. John's Girls and Infant Boys School, Cathedral Place and Thomond Primary School. The choir continues to deliver a high quality, long-term innovative choral initiative through a mentorship approach between the director, student teachers and classroom teachers.

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<sup>2</sup> Schools in receipt of additional supports under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. The action plan focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage.



This report presents the research findings of a review of the first two years of the choir from 2013-2015. The research team comprised of Dr. Ailbhe Kenny, Ruth Bourke and Máiréad Ní Chondúin. The aims of the evaluation are to:

- Investigate the effectiveness of this choral initiative in making meaningful links between the college and community, in particular with four DEIS primary schools in Limerick city;
- Evaluate the development of choral leadership capacity amongst student volunteers to work in school and community settings in creative ways;
- Examine the effects of the initiative on student teacher awareness of educational access and opportunity;
- Outline the benefits of project participation for children, students, teachers and schools as well as challenges involved;
- Explore the perceptions of children from DEIS primary schools about third level education and how such initiatives can potentially build aspirations to progress to third level.

The research sought to include the perspectives of all who participated in the initiative: MIC students, primary school children, classroom teachers, principals, the choral directors, and supporting members of the TED team. Through the review, it is hoped that the MIC Children's Choir can act as a model of sustainable music education policy and practice, inform future partnerships, as well as stimulate other such projects into the future.





The literature that underpins the review of the MIC Children’s Choir draws from two distinct research fields of choral participation and university-school-community partnerships. Thus, relevant insights are drawn from across educational, arts, policy and music research to illuminate key issues and concerns for this report.

## 2.1 Choral Participation

A recent European-wide study recognises choral singing as a major cultural activity across the continent, with claims that there are 37 million choral singers in Europe (Bartel & the European Choral Association, 2015). Five per cent of Ireland’s population is documented as being involved in collective singing (2015) which resonates with a previous report recognising 400 choirs in existence in the country (Arts Council, 2008). The European report emphasises the high impact of a quality music education in schools to encourage life-long singing, stating (2015, p. 67):

...early-age access to collective singing is a powerful incentive to keep on singing all life long...collective singing at an early age is an efficient educational tool that translates very clearly in academic results, regardless of the social or cultural origins.





A longitudinal study of the UK flagship primary school singing programme 'Sing Up' found that children who participated (an estimated 4.2 million), gained, on average, a two-year advantage in singing development. Furthermore, these children tended to have a more positive view of themselves and a stronger sense of social inclusion (Welch et al. 2010).

The benefits of musical participation attract continued research focus in both community music and music education research (Bennett, 2000; Burnard, 2012; DeNora, 2000; Finnegan, 2007; Green, 2002; Kenny, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007; Pitts, 2005; Turino, 2008). Overall, the literature points to the significant effects of musical participation on social and personal development with multiple benefits long reported on improving good health, quality of life and mental well-being (Coffman & Adamek 1999; Bailey & Davidson 2003; Vanderark, Newman, & Bell 1983; Hallam, 2010). 'Badges of identity' for children and young people are also viewed as continually negotiated and informed within the contexts of musical experience (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2002; Lamont, 2002; Lamont, A., Hargreaves, D., Marshall, N. & Tarrant, M., 2003; North, & Hargreaves, 1999).

Studies of group music-making, within varying contexts, highlight the inherent dual nature of both musical and social life where relationships, identities and membership are key to such examinations. Turino refers to 'sonic bonding' or 'seamless synchrony' (Turino, 2008, p. 19) during group music-making activities, which he believes have a significant impact on people's lives at local level, claiming, 'People develop a deeper sense of engagement and investment through direct participation in contrast to simply being a spectator or consumer' (2008, p.231). Pitts (2005, 2012) has repeatedly shown that through participatory music-making, members potentially create a sense of 'belonging' amongst groups, while Kenny (2016) describes the formation and sustainability of 'communities of musical practice' within local contexts. Here, shared knowledge is created and built through mutual engagement and membership where the learning is 'situated' within context-specific musical experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).



Such benefits of musical participation naturally extend to choral musical experiences, with many reports of positive emotional, social, physical and creative outcomes (Arasi, 2008; Ahlquist 2006; Bailey & Davidson 2002, 2005; Bell, 2004; Beck et al. 2000; Welch, 2014). In a study of a high school choral ensemble, Parker writes (2010, p. 344), '...everyone contributes towards the whole. They work in collaboration with one another to support the larger ensemble'. This action research study found singing as a shared experience created the medium for 'belonging', a 'safe space' and strong choral identities. Power (2010) also writes of 'social bonding' within an examination of community singing where it emerged, '...participants never lost sight of the gathering that happens in rehearsals as a social event as well as a learning event' (2010, p. 9). Bithell echoes such findings claiming (2014, p.224), 'Choir leaders and members regularly speak of the way in which their choir comes to represent a kind of family, one where members can experience a strong sense of togetherness and find friendship and support'.

## 2.2 University-School-Community Partnerships

The MIC Children's Choir represents a university-school-community partnership within a growing diverse field of educational partnership or 'service learning' for higher education institutions. For universities, such partnerships often have laudable aims of connecting students to the communities they study within by providing 'authentic' experiences to improve learning and offer unique professional and personal development opportunities. For local schools and communities there is often the explicit aim of breaking down third level elitism by providing access to its physical space, expertise and resources as academics 'reach out' from perceived ivory towers. Within teacher education in particular, such 'field experiences' have become essential parts of programme development with Brophy claiming (2011, p.149) '...the idea of school and university faculty working together to prepare high-quality teachers for the twenty-first century has become a standard practice'.

Partnership projects with a specific music education remit are following such trends and thus there is an emerging body of research in this area (Addo, 2003; Bartleet, 2012; Brophy, 2011; Burton, 2011; Burton and G. R. Greher. 2007, 2011; Colley, B., Eidsaa, R. M., Kenny, A., and Leung, B.W., 2012; Conway and Hodgman 2008; Emmanuel, 2005; Kenny, 2014b; Power and Bennett, 2015). Burton and Greher claim (2011, p. 105):

Preparing new music teachers to face the increased challenges awaiting them as they enter the field requires a rethinking of traditional curricular practice rooted in learning about teaching toward practice that favors a concentrated emphasis on multiple, context-specific, field-based experiences throughout the course of their studies.

In a study of an intergenerational university-community project, Conway (2008) found that participants developed better understandings of each other and had a heightened performance experience due to their collaborative involvement.

The targeted nature of the MIC Children's Choir involving designated disadvantaged schools further advances the importance of such partnership approaches. Broeske-Danielson (2013), reporting on an intensive refugee camp initiative in the Lebanon, related that student teachers were forced to call upon their built-up knowledge across their university courses in order to make decisions on appropriate strategies within an unfamiliar context. Similar in its attempt to connect to minority groups, Power and Bennett (2015) report on the powerful potential of 'arts-based service learning' heavily connected to experiences of 'place' in their study of three universities involved with partnerships projects with Australian Aboriginal people. Through 'moments of becoming' (Ellsworth, 2005), these student teachers were 'transformed' (Kiely, 2005) through, '...their embodied connection to place and their connection to the people of the place' (2015, p. 163). Such field experiences then are viewed

as a means for students to develop tools to be responsive to context, broaden social awareness, examine previously held assumptions and engage in 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1987, p. 26). Burton asserts, 'Music teachers increase their ability to be culturally and pedagogically responsive to the students they teach when they have flexible use of cultural knowledge' (Burton, 2011, p. 124).

Previous research on a short-term music education partnership project between final year student teachers at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), a community resource organisation and a designated disadvantaged primary school offers distinct insights into exploring the development of a 'community of musical practice' between participants (Kenny, 2014b). The inter-relatedness of musical and social interaction as well as favourable models of meaningful musical and community experience were highlighted in the study. Through this after-school music project, children and students appeared to be engaged in collaborative learning where, 'There was a sense of community, in the actions being carried out simultaneously, in watching one another and taking cues from each other, all building up to a shared practice of musical learning' (Kenny, 2014b, p. 405). This project was used to inform and shape the current choral project from both research and practice perspectives.





The researchers chose a multi-site case study approach across the four participating schools and MIC in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the initiative over a two-year period (2013-15). This research sought to investigate the efficacy of the MIC Children's Choir within the framework of a university-school-community initiative from multiple perspectives and thus a series of research questions emerged:

#### *Mary Immaculate College*

- How are college/school/community links fostered through this initiative?
- How does collaboration with multiple partners and stakeholders further, widen and strengthen these links?

#### *The MIC Students*

- What knowledge, skills and attitudes are developed?
- How does taking a leadership role in the classroom, the 'Big Sings' at MIC, and preparing the children for performances develop choral leadership capacity?
- Can participation in the initiative impact on student understandings of DEIS contexts?

### The Children

- Does the initiative facilitate musical participation, development and interaction?
- What are the musical and social benefits of participation?
- What awareness of third level education is fostered through collaboration with MIC?

### The Schools

- What are the outcomes for teachers and schools in terms of participating in this initiative?
- What are the enablers and barriers to the effectiveness of this initiative?

## 3.1 Data collection

Data was gathered over the first two years of the MIC Children's Choir initiative, 2013-15. This research was conducted in accordance with the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) Guidelines and MIREC approval was granted in both years. All participants were invited to participate in the research and non-participation did not affect their involvement in the overall initiative. Information sheets as well as informed consent forms were distributed to and signed by MIC student volunteers, teachers, children, their parents and principals. A parental consent form was adapted specifically for the children involved. Once signed consent forms had been received the research process began.

A number of data tools and techniques were employed which are outlined in table 3.1 below. End of year semi-structured focus group interviews were carried out with students which were audio recorded (see appendix 2). The students also completed an online reflective survey including open-ended questions (see appendix 3). A survey was distributed to teachers of the classes involved in the choir at the final performance each year to elicit responses to mainly open-ended questions (see appendix 4). Semi-structured child focus groups were conducted in schools involving 35 children in total (see appendix 5). In the second year semi-structured individual interviews were also conducted with two principals (see appendix 6). Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was maintained throughout analysis and write up within this report.

Participants	Data Tools	Year 1: 2013-14		Year 2: 2014-15	
		Date	No.	Date	No.
Students	Focus Group Interview	April 2014	6	April 2015	6
Students	Reflective Survey	Dec 2013	10	April 2015	6
		April 2015	7		
Children	Focus Group Interview	May 2014	14	May 2014	21
Teachers	Questionnaire	April 2014	4	April 2015	5
Principals	Individual Interview	N/A		May 2015	2
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>41</b>		<b>40</b>

**Table 3.1 Data Collection**





### 3.2 Data Analysis

The audio files of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically. Additionally, open-ended responses from student surveys were analysed in the same manner and triangulated with the student focus group data collected. Teacher responses to the surveys and principal interviews were also coded and analysed thematically.

This thematic analysis was employed as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns in the form of themes arising from an in-depth analysis of data (Braun and Clarke 2006). One of the advantages of the approach is that it can facilitate a rich description of the data set as well as aiding the interpretation of various aspects of research. Themes were identified inductively on the basis of repetition and prevalence i.e., the frequency with which they appeared in the data as well as on the basis of the number of participants who spoke about an item. Similarities and differences across accounts were also considered.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six step iterative approach to data analysis and interpretation which was adopted in this evaluation:

- 1 Firstly, all interview data was transcribed. Emerging themes from these data sets alongside the survey data were noted and ultimately fed into the overall thematic coding.
- 2 The transcripts and surveys were systematically analysed for repeated patterns and an initial list of codes were generated.
- 3 The third step refocused the analysis where codes were sorted into potential themes, collating all the relevant data extracts within the identified themes.
- 4 The data went through a process of review and refinement of these themes. This involved reviewing the coded data extracts to check if they formed a coherent pattern and reworking or discarding those where data extracts did not fit. Once this process was completed, the thematic map was revised to more adequately reflect the coded data. Following this, the entire data set was re-read to ascertain whether the themes reflected the essence of the data set. The researchers also sought to recode data in themes that were missed at an earlier stage.

- 5 The fifth step involved further refinement of the themes and analysis of content within them. Themes were then organised into a coherent and internally consistent account with accompanying narrative. As part of the refinement process, themes and subthemes were clarified.
- 6 The final step in the thematic analysis process was the write up of the analysis as a concise, coherent and logical review of the MIC Children's Choir. This was accomplished by embedding data extracts to demonstrate prevalence of the theme within an analytic narrative.

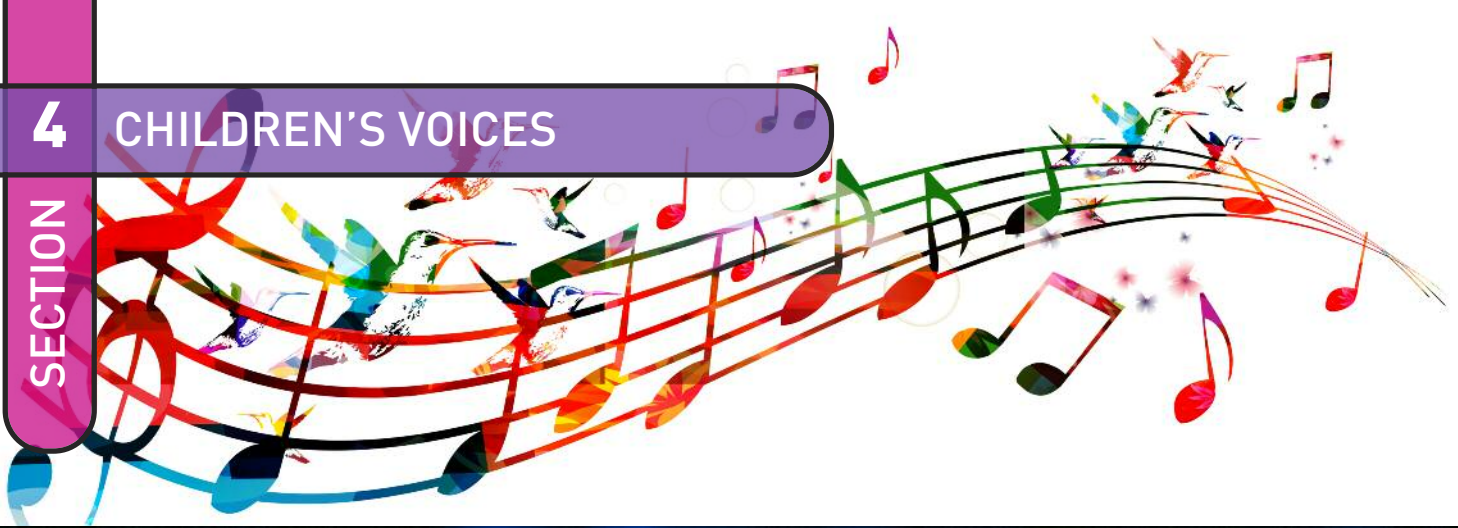
The findings within the report were subsequently considered in relation to the literature review and the explicit aims and objectives of the choir to establish whether or to what extent they had been achieved. The recommendations and conclusions made in the review are therefore substantive i.e., based on the accounts presented in the findings that are grounded in the data emerging from a systematic and iterative process of analysis and interpretation as detailed above. The analytic approach undertaken also enabled the research team to check for plausibility of research findings and conclusions through the recursive process of refinement and verification of themes in the data.

This research signifies an important step in the process of producing valid and reliable data in relation to the three-way relationship between the college, the school and the community. In particular it addresses key questions relating to the impact of such a partnership in the development of choral initiatives.



## 4 CHILDREN'S VOICES

### SECTION



This section presents the voices of the children speaking of their participation in the MIC Children's Choir. In order to include child perspectives in the review, focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 35 children who participated in the choir during the first two years of the choral project. Four schools participated over this two-year period with 140 children in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> class continuing their involvement as they progressed to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> class. Three short exploratory focus groups were conducted in two of the four schools that participated in 2013-2014 and a further five semi-structured focus groups were conducted in the four schools in 2014-2015.

The focus groups explored children's perceptions about their experiences of choral participation, working with the students in their classroom, trips to MIC for 'Big Sings' and performances. The findings detailed in this section are primarily that of the 2014-2015 cohort. Where relevant, feedback from the 2013-2014 child focus groups has been included and attributed to this cohort. The children's responses are discussed under the following headings:

- Working with MIC students (4.1)
- The campus experience (4.2)
- Song repertoire (4.3)
- Singing for stage (4.4)
- Singing and performance development (4.5)
- Perceptions of third level education (4.6)
- Looking forward (4.7)

## 4.1 Working with MIC students

Overall, the children spoke very positively about the experience of students visiting them in their classroom to work on choral repertoire and singing skills. The variety of classroom activities involved are listed here in figure 4.1, as identified by the children:

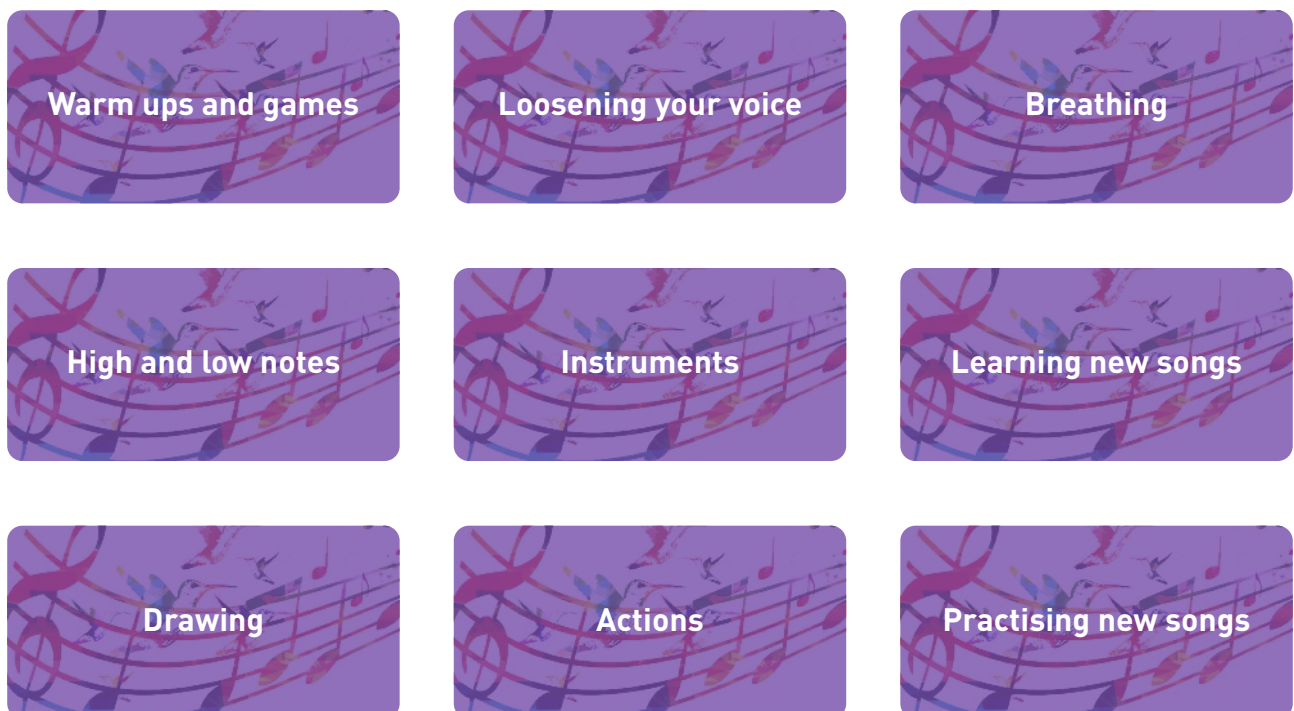


Figure 4.1 Variety of Classroom Activities



The following child quotes illustrate some of these activities:

*(Student) teaches us all different things like how to reach the high notes and low notes and how to breathe properly and take a deep breath before you start singing and em she really helps us. (CFG5<sup>3</sup> – 14/15)*

*Child 1: Well we play games as well as singing.*

*Child 2: Song games like if you have chewing gum, mock chewing gum. (CFG4 – 14/15)*

*He says up and all of us says down and he says left, we say right. Kind of the opposite. (CFG3-14/15)*

Children in four of the 2014-2015 focus groups spoke about how the students had helped them to learn, citing developing confidence in performing as one of the key ways, as well as learning how to raise/lower your voice and how to get the right note. One child commented:

*I like the way (student) em she works with us properly. She's very confident about teaching us and she's a really nice person to work with. She gives you great confidence in singing. (CFG5-14/15)*

Across all focus groups, singing and movement emerged as the activities that the children most enjoyed with the students highlighting the importance of movement to engage children in choral singing. Figure 4.2 below details the activities that children enjoyed most about working with the students.

2013-2015	Activity	No. of Focus Groups
	Actions	6
	Singing	4
	Working with students	3
	Having fun	3
	Break from work	2
	Going on the bus	1
	Warm-ups	1

**Figure 4.2 What children enjoyed most in the classroom**

When asked if there was anything that they did not like about working with the students, the children generally said 'no'. Aspects that were identified included a student visiting the school on her own, as *'(Student) might need some help'*, (CFG1 -14/15). Two other focus groups highlighted that the length of time the students spent in the school was quite short and when they left, they had to resume their 'normal' school work, as explained here:

*Child 1: They only spend little time like and then they have to go away. Like it's nice when they're here, then when they go away we...*

*Child 2: Have to do work!*

*Child 1: Yeah. (CFG4 -14/15)*

<sup>3</sup> CFG5 indicates 'child focus group 5'. All of the focus groups are coded and numbered in this way.

These children's reference to the departure of the student as a return to 'normal' school work indicates their perception of choral singing as separate or different to their everyday school work, despite it being a part of the music curriculum. This raises questions as to why children do not perceive choral singing to be part of the regular school day. With regard to repertoire and singing techniques, one child indicated s/he would like to have learned more songs, while another found the warm-ups 'weird'. A third child indicated that they did not like being split into groups to sing different parts of songs as it was quite difficult and 'you get mixed up'.

## 4.2 The campus experience

The children described visiting the MIC campus to meet the other schools involved for 'Big Sings' and what they liked least and most about being in the larger choir. They listed a wide variety of aspects as can be seen in table 4.1 below.

What children liked most	Number of Focus Groups	What children liked least	Number of Focus Groups
Singing with other singers/schools	6	Feeling shy or nervous about being on stage	5
Singing on stage	5	Some songs were difficult because the notes were too high	2
Everyone has an equal part	5	Standing up and sitting down	2
Treats	5	The piano position on stage as it was in the way	1
Singing/learning new songs	4	The tambourine was too loud	1
Going to MIC/going on the bus	3		
Getting off work/out of class	3		
Songs with actions	2		
Anything to do with music	1		
Warm-ups	1		
The design of the buildings	1		
New opportunities	1		

**Table 4.1. Children's likes and dislikes of campus visits**

It was consistently clear that the children took great pleasure in the opportunity to sing with others and perform on stage. Going to the MIC campus to participate in the rehearsals and performances was viewed as a break from the 'normal' routine of school life and there was a strong emphasis placed on the fact that everyone in the choir could participate equally. This sense of fairness amongst the children was again reiterated when it was found that the choir was also perceived as creating opportunities for children that they may not otherwise have, such as meeting children from other schools, singing as a large group, performing with 'The Three Tenors'<sup>4</sup> and singing in the Lime Tree Theatre. The comments below made by individual children highlight some of these aspects:

<sup>4</sup> 'The Three Tenors Ireland' are a popular singing trio who tour regularly.





*It was fun and I love singing and it was great because everybody had the same part, we were all equal. Nobody had a solo or anything and that made it better because you all felt you were special and you were part of the choir and you were helping. (CFG5-14/5)*

*I like going there and get off work and (student) helps us and we do the songs and I liked at the end of the year when they gave us jellies and sweets. (CFG3-14/15)*

*Yeah because it gives us something to do and keeps us entertained and keeps other people entertained. (CFG4-14/15)*

*I really liked singing in the Mary I children's choir because the sound was really nice when we're all together and our voices are all different so that made it nice. (CFG5-14/15)*

*Having the opportunities that you never had. (CFG2-14/15)*

Performing on stage emerged as an aspect that children either enjoyed most or least in equal measure. Those that liked it least attributed this to either stage fright or having to stand and sit on the stage 'like a yo-yo'. The comments here reflect this:

*For me singing in front of strangers is embarrassing. (CFG8-13/14).*

*Child: If there's one thing that I don't like, it would definitely be having to stand up on the stage 'cos I don't like standing up on stage.... When we were singing it was like there was complete darkness and we couldn't see the crowd so it was like we were singing to ourselves.*

*Interviewer: Did you prefer that?*

*Child: Yeah, a lot. (CFG2-14/15)*

*...when I looked up I saw the whole of Mary I watching me. (CFG7 - 13/14)*

The children interviewed spoke excitedly about the choral trips to the MIC campus, performances in the Lime Tree Theatre and other Music Generation initiatives. Children from one school highlighted the opportunity they had to perform in the Lime Tree with the 'Three Tenors'. However, there was some confusion amongst other groups about whether they had visited the Lime Tree Theatre for choir, to see a show or attend other Music Generation initiatives. This raises the possibility of project overload for children attending DEIS schools that are often targeted by multiple external stakeholders for intervention programmes. In addition, DEIS schools themselves either run or are part of a variety of school-based curricular programmes and interventions aimed at promoting school attendance and participation.

### 4.3 Song repertoire

The majority of the children in the focus groups cited 'Riptide', as their favourite song because most of them were familiar with it and also because they identified the song as one of 'our songs'.

*Child 1: You just knew the words before.*

*Child 2: It's one of our songs. It's one of the songs on SPIN<sup>5</sup>, like so we know it. (CFG2-14/15)*

*It was a catchy song (CFG3- 14/15)*

*'Cos all our class knew it. (CFG5-14/15)*

This is not surprising, given their age and their preference for music that they can identify with while also reflecting the increasing significance of popular music as an essential part of choral repertoire.

'Blackbird' was cited by three children as their least favourite song commenting that:

*Child 1: I really liked it at the start but then..*

*Child 2: It kind of gets old and you're tired of singing it. (CFG5-14/15)*

In another focus group, two children felt some of the songs were 'weird':

*Child 1: The jungle one?*

*Child 2: Remember Yenamanoa<sup>6</sup>. The African one?*

*Child 1: You can't understand some of the words. (CFG2-14/15)*

This quote illustrates the children's lack of familiarity with Irish traditional and world music, and the important role that both choral music and participation in a community choir can play in providing opportunities for exposure to the same.

Inability to reach or difficulty in reaching high notes was also perceived as a least enjoyable aspect of the choir by some children (see table 4.1) as the following extracts illustrate:

*Child 1: Some songs aren't like that good.*

*Interviewer: Ok. What's not good about them do you think?*

*Child 1: They go too high.*

<sup>5</sup> SPiN South West is a regional radio station for 15-35 year olds based in Limerick

<sup>6</sup> 'Yenamanoa' is a song with words that have no meaning (in the liltig tradition) from Ireland.

*Interviewer: And is that hard?*

*Child 1: I can't sing it like that*

*Interviewer: You can't get the high note?*

*Child 1: No*

*Child 2: It's because it's harder to get the high notes for boys but it's easier for girls. (CFG2-14/15)*

*Child 1: And the high notes*

*Interviewer: High notes, ok. And what was hard about them? Was it the high notes or the words?*

*Child 2: The high notes (sings 'Aaaa')*

*Child 3: And some people can't get em and you go 'ahhh'*

*Child 1: Your voice just goes screechy. (CFG3-14/15)*



#### 4.4 Singing for stage

Participation in the MIC Children's Choir provided opportunities for children to rehearse and perform as a large group on campus. Children from the 2013-2014 cohort gave mixed feedback on the experience of 'Big Sings' and their level of confidence in performing on stage. As revealed in section 4.2, some children enjoyed the experience of singing on stage for an audience whereas others indicated that they did not. However, as the children progressed into the second year in 2014-2015, they expressed greater confidence in performing on stage, with some noting how singing as part of a larger group increased their confidence, helping them to overcome their shyness and fear of performing. The following extract demonstrates how some children, once they had overcome their shyness and fear, actually enjoyed the experience and fulfilled their desire to perform on stage:



*Child 1: If you're ever sat in the audience before, you're wondering how those people can be up on the stage and do it. But then when you're actually on the stage it's so fun you don't feel a bit shy. So it was really fun to kind of just let it loose and not have to be shy.*

*Child 2: When you're like watching a play or something or musical, you're like how do they do it? Are they not shy? But when you're actually up there, it seems very easy.*

*Child 3: Yeah I think the same because when you're watching like say someone else doing it, then you're like, I wish I could be up there doing that and then a couple of weeks later then you're up doing it. [CFG5-14/15]*

The most ambitious and large-scale performance during the review period was of a newly commissioned choral piece, *Flying Things* by MIC composer-in-residence Anne-Marie O'Farrell in 2015. Most of the children agreed that they liked the *Flying Things* concert in the Lime Tree Theatre with the invited audience. Children commented that the concert was enjoyable, they got to learn new songs, they sang beautifully and it was a great opportunity for other people to hear them sing. However, there was confusion for one group about which song *Flying Things* was. In another, children noted that they found the 'big beasts' part complicated:

*All the animals are in it. Like the dog will come when he is called – I get very confused with that. [CFG1-14/15]  
When you're singing it, it just goes down, down and then it goes up, up. [CFG1-14/15]*

Despite some of the perceived difficulty with *Flying Things*, one child felt that it 'actually sounded nice and I thought the people who did it really worked on it, because it was actually really hard doing it 'cos you'd be doing one song and then you'd be in another song the next minute' [CFG5 – 14/15]. Another child in this group added that all the schools worked together as a team to 'get it really nice'.

In addition to performing a newly commissioned piece of music which connected to the MIC composer residency, this performance in the Lime Tree also provided an opportunity for the children to perform with other choirs, namely Limerick-based *Cantette* (under the direction of Máire Keary Scanlan and the *Burren Children's Choir* (under the direction of Máiréad Ní Chondúin, supported by Music Generation Clare). Children across four of the focus groups discussed this, highlighting *Cantette* in particular. In three focus groups, the children compared their choir to *Cantette* and felt that this choir was 'better' than they were, exemplified here:

*They were in a league of their own. [CFG2-14/15]*

*They were better singers than us. [CFG2-14/15]*

*And it was like oh my God, they're singing much better than us, then I was kind of jealous 'cos they could sing higher notes. [CFG3-14/15]*

*Child 1: No there was one choir at the concert and em they're a bit older than us.*

*Child 2: And I really thought they were like good.*

*Group: Really good, Yeah.*

*Child 3: Like they probably practise like every day.*

*Child 1: And we were all like 'wow!' [CFG5-14/15]*

These quotes highlight two important issues. Firstly, the children clearly recognised that *Cantette* had more advanced singing skills than theirs, as well as the level of commitment and practice required for a choir to reach this level of competence. Secondly, they also identified that the other choir was different to them and

perceived them to be 'better', as evident above. This raises issues in the context of working with DEIS schools and creating opportunities for children to engage in cultural activity that they may not otherwise experience (due to socio-economic factors and family circumstances). This finding suggests that it is important that interaction with children from other choirs, potentially from more affluent backgrounds and with greater resources to engage in musical skill development, requires sensitivity to avoid the children perceiving themselves, as a school or at individual level, in a deficit manner.

## 4.5 Singing and performance development

In discussing what they had learned through singing and performing together at rehearsals and in performance, children described how they had developed their repertoire of songs as well as a variety of skills and techniques for singing and performing. Children from the 2013-2014 cohort identified learning about their posture for performing on stage, as the following extract demonstrates:

*Interviewer: And what did you learn about singing?*

*Child 1: That you have to stand up straight and don't slouch down*

*Child 2: You have to sing out and you don't have to shout*

*(CFG7 -13/14)*

As the choir progressed into the second year, some children identified more technical and complicated skill development including keeping in time, harmonising, working together to 'get it right', singing different parts of the music and looking at the conductor to keep on track. The following quotes illustrate the same:

*Child 1: I learned how to stand when you're performing.*

*Child 2: And pretend to have no pockets. (CFG1 - 14/15)*

*We learned loads. We learned new songs and em we learned other new exercises from when we started. And then like she split us up in three different groups and we sing as part of each one. (CFG5 - 14/15)*

*And we learned em if you stood up in groups, even though you might be singing something different and something that completely might not even be the tune of it, they might go together well, like a harmony. (CFG5 -14/15)*

*I think we learned always look at the conductor because if lots of them are looking at her, then you sing the right things and know what to do but if I wasn't looking at her then I'd be singing the wrong thing and then it would just sound all weird. (CFG5- 14/15)*

Children in one focus group detailed the variety of skills learned as evident in the individual quotes below, reflecting their engagement over the two years of the choir and thus a greater level of awareness of the purpose of warm up and other exercises.

*I learned that you have to practice your breathing when you're singing and it helps you more. (CFG5-14/15)*

*That you have to use your muscles inside your body that's why you have to practise your breathing so you can hold notes longer. (CFG5-14/15)*



*Listening to music when you're singing to get the right tune. (CFG5-14/15)*

*And listening to the rhythm so you know like the beat of it when you started because there might like be a beat before you sing. (CFG5-14/15)*

Children also discussed how their attitudes and beliefs about singing and performing had developed through the experience of singing in the MIC Children's Choir, as well as some of the social benefits of singing in the choir. One child reflected that they had good vocals, 'I learned something, I learned I had good vocals and I never knew' (CFG8-13/14), while another child learned that 'everyone can sing' (CFG5-14/15). Other children commented that their belief in their own capabilities had developed. One child spoke about how the choir helped to 'lose our stage fright' (CFG4-14/15) and another felt that being in a group was good because 'you don't feel that much nervous, you feel confident' (CGF4-14/15). This feedback, in addition to the extract below, emphasises the capacity of group singing to help develop children's confidence and promote the development of positive self-esteem.

*Child 1: Yeah, I learned that you can do anything.*

*Child 2: Like if you put your mind to it.*

*Child 3: Yeah.*

*Child 4: Like everything can work if you do everything in a group if we work together hard. (CFG3 -14/15)*

Children here highlighted the importance of group singing to create opportunities to work together 'to get it right' as well as for group cohesion. One child added that when everyone participates in singing 'it looks better', whereas the one person not singing 'would stand out and everyone would be able to see them' (CFG3 - 14/15). Demonstrating the social benefits of singing in the choir, one child spoke about how they met lots of people from different schools as well as new teachers and another child spoke about bonding with other schools stating that 'ye feel like ye know each other, that ye always come to choir' (CGF5-14/15).



## 4.6 Perceptions of third level education

The children were asked what they thought about Mary Immaculate College as a third level college. Many commented on physical aspects such as the size of the campus and the positive atmosphere as illustrated below.

*Child 1: I think it's very big.*

*Child 2: It's massive like.*

*Child 3: Every college now has to be big. (CFG2-14/15)*

*It's a really bright colourful place. It makes you happy as soon as you walk in the door. (CFG4-14/15)*

They were also impressed with the range of facilities they encountered during their trips on campus such as the Student Union shop, the Farmer's Market, the availability of food and spaces to eat food as well as places to sit down and study. Children identified the college as somewhere you could go to study or where studies take place. The following quotes are from children who shared their aspirations to go to third level and/or to become a teacher.

*Yeah, I definitely want to be a teacher when I grow up. Since I was a little child like I always wanted to be a teacher, but I've never been in Mary I. But now I really want to go there 'cos it's really nice in there. (CFG5-14/15)*

*When we're on the bus home to our school we're always talking about going to Mary I. Cos we're always like, look at how everyone is happy there and then I think they really enjoy it there so maybe we'd enjoy it there. (CFG5 -14/15)*

*And if you were up there you might be able to be a student or go back to other kids and come into their schools. (CFG4 -14/15)*

*I'd like to go there because it will be very interesting like to learn young kids some songs and stuff like that and remembering we were here when we were younger and wondering if there's still a choir going on. (CFG5-14/15)*

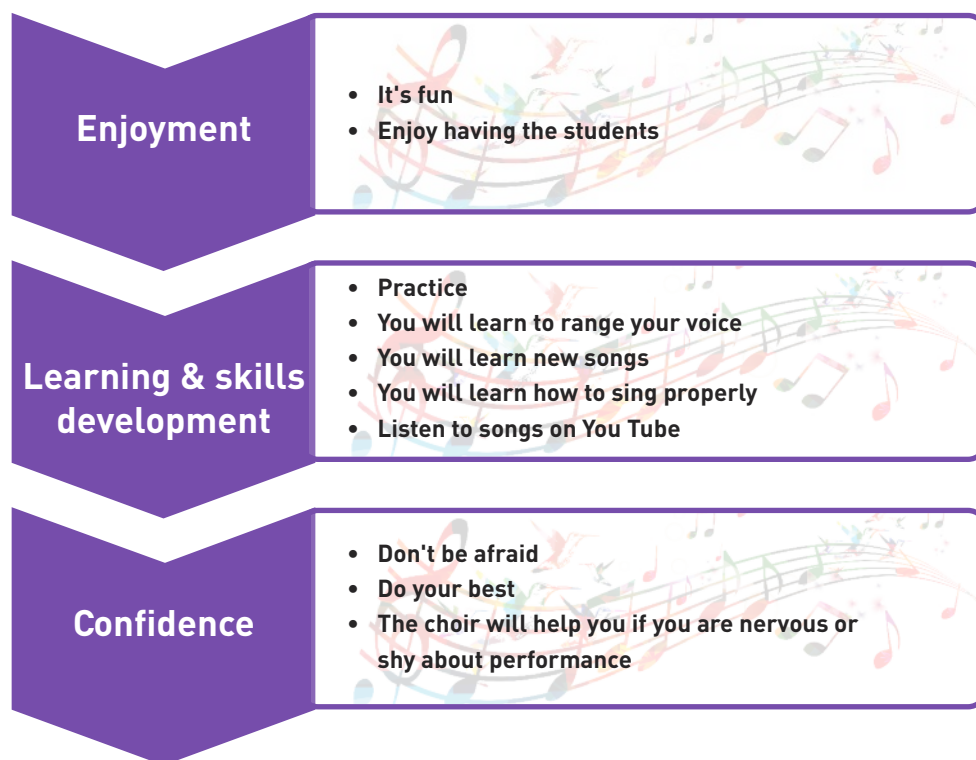
Some children indicated that going to MIC for the choir had made them think more about going to third level and reasons for going to third level that were cited included: to get a good education; to stay off the streets; to get a good job and to be a teacher. This feedback provides some support that a significant aim of the MIC Children's Choir is being met from the perspective of children, that of creating opportunities for children from DEIS schools and areas of socio-economic disadvantage to visit the campus and to nurture children's aspirations to progress to third level.

## 4.7 Looking forward

The children made a number of suggestions about how the choir could be improved or what could be done differently. Children from one focus group indicated that they would like the students to keep coming with more songs and increased time. Children from the 2014-2015 focus groups felt that there should be greater consistency across schools in the songs or versions of songs that they learn with the students. Children in two schools highlighted that they had learned different songs or different versions of warm ups and one child felt that when they practiced with the other schools they felt like they were doing it wrong or were out of step with the other

children. In the second school children spoke about how they hadn't learned a particular song and the other schools had and they felt it would be better if everyone learned the same songs as 'when we're doing the performance and stuff, they know more than us but if we all knew it, it would be louder and better' (CFG5-14/15).

In response to what advice they would give to other children and schools interested in participating in the MIC Children's choir, two focus groups replied that they would tell them to practice. Other advice offered by the children is detailed in Figure 4.3 below and focuses on enjoying the experience, what children could learn and developing confidence in performing on stage.



**Figure 4.3 Advice to other children and schools**

Across all schools children indicated that they would like to continue the following activities with their teacher: learn new songs; sing songs learned in choir; sing; practise singing games and get off work. These responses correspond with the aspects they enjoyed most about participating in the choir (see table 4.1) and demonstrate that children gain pleasure from singing in the classroom and would like to continue doing so with their teacher. The importance of class teacher involvement in choral development is to the fore amongst these children. In addition, that some children perceive choral singing as an opportunity to 'get off work' or separate from normal classroom activity is reinforced here.

## 5 STUDENT VOICES

### SECTION



Student perspectives on the MIC Children's Choir gathered over two years are presented here. To retain anonymity, the students are coded in the data according to their degree course and year of study<sup>7</sup>. Key findings from the three online student surveys (coded as SS1, SS2 and SS3) and two focus group interviews (coded as FG1 and FG2) are drawn together under the following themed headings:

- Skills-building (5.1)
- Emerging teacher selves (5.2)
- Performance opportunities (5.3)
- Access and educational opportunity (5.4)
- Looking forward (5.5)

<sup>7</sup> For example, 'B.Ed2' is a second year on the Bachelor of Education degree, and 'B.A4' is a Bachelor of Arts student in fourth year.



## 5.1 Skills-building

The student volunteers had varying motivations to join the MIC Children's Choir initiative. The most frequent responses included accessing hands-on experience in classroom settings as well as gaining skills, knowledge and understandings in:

- Effective communication
- Classroom management
- Conducting
- Singing
- Music literacy
- Choral preparation, coordination and organisation
- Age-appropriate repertoire choice
- Choral leadership
- Performance preparation

From the list above, the students were clearly focused on the dual purpose of their involvement with regard to building choral leadership capacities as well as gaining broader classroom skills in situ, as further demonstrated in the box below.

*Going out to schools and engaging with the children first hand was a very valuable experience. Throughout secondary school I was involved in various choirs, so it was very different to see this process from a conductors'/teachers' point of view. Conducting a lesson in front of a class was a very good experience, as it will definitely help me on the school placements I will have to undertake in the future. (B.Ed2, SS3)*

*The rapport you build with the children during the year as you watch them achieve was wonderful. Also, I felt like I had grown as a teacher through the project. My classroom management skills had improved. I felt that if someone came to me and told me that I had to teach a music class that instant I would be able to. (B.Ed2, SS3)*

*I have gained classroom management skills that will stand to me throughout the rest of my course. I have gained understanding about how to reach out to children and how to get them involved in a task/in learning when they don't particularly want to. This is an important skill in my opinion. (B.Ed1, SS2).*

Many of the students commented on the hugely beneficial process of applying skills learnt together in choral leadership workshops on a weekly basis within school contexts during that same week. This process also facilitated communal reflection each week where students could discuss together 'what worked' the previous week, what did not, challenges and next steps. In this regard, the students built skills, knowledge and understandings incrementally while at the same time gaining experience in 'real-life' classroom situations, as seen in the extracts below.

*We were taught how to conduct and how to explain vocal techniques in a child friendly way. Things like stance and breathing were made accessible...I have learned some conducting techniques, how to warm children up so they are ready to sing. I have gotten experience with directing a choir session, things like giving the children their note and teaching a new song using call and response have all been developed. I understand more about how children interact with music and the range of ability you can have in a primary classroom as well as interest. (B.Ed2, SS1)*



*I find it funny that there are very few opportunities like this because it's so hard to get practical, worthwhile experience. You learn so much from it. Like I was out teaching through this, teaching music before I ever went on a school placement because I'm in first year. I benefited so much from it because then I wasn't nervous at all going into my actual school placement for the degree. D'you know, it made thing a whole lot easier. (B.Ed1, FG2)*

*It was an excellent opportunity to be out in the classrooms to experience classroom life each week. I believe that this project has given me a lot more confidence...I also understand what the children really enjoy and that will be very beneficial to me in the primary school classroom in the future. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

The confidence building evidenced above was repeatedly referred to across data sources. In particular, all of the students studying to be primary teachers spoke of the multiple benefits this brought when embarking on assessed school placement as part of their degree. This very direct application of skills gained was never far from their minds, which is perhaps unsurprising given the nature of their preparation for the profession. However, these students also commented on how it was unlike school placement – there was no assessment or in-school supervision – and so offered them room for more risk-taking, creativity and experimentation. One student commented, 'compared to teaching practice it is very different, because you've a lot more freedom in how you do things' (B.Ed2, FG1).

The feeling of progression in skills-building was very strong amongst the students. This was most acute with the cohort of students who were part of the initiative over the full two years examined, as seen below.

*When I walked in two years ago, I knew nothing...I've learned so much more in these two years in the children's choir than I've learned in probably all my three years of lectures in the college. I was on school placement there and I had to take the class unexpectedly and I spent the time doing music because I was like on the spot - what can I do? Music. That's what you need, you need to be able to just straight away come up with an idea and not be relying on having resources and lesson plans and Power Points. With this you just don't need anything else except your voice. (B.Ed3, FG2)*

*In the 'Big Sing's' and at the Christmas Performance it was required that I stand in front of the children, either to conduct or to play accompaniment. Last year this was an impossible task for me, just to stand up in front of such a big group. However, with each passing 'Big Sing' I felt more confident and now I would be much more comfortable to do this. (B.Ed2, SS2)*

*I'd be way more confident in doing it...like you've had so much practice of just like that routine of that choir lesson. I think even if you had to tell me now, 'oh teach a choir lesson right this minute', I could do it off the top of my head. (B.Ed3, FG1)*

That these students felt prepared to teach a choral lesson 'off the top of their heads' is a remarkable achievement considering they are not fully qualified teachers as yet. This level of self-confidence and preparedness is most unusual for student teachers as seen in previous literature (see section 2).

## 5.2 Emerging teacher selves

It was found that student emergent identities as pre-service teachers were informed and influenced through their roles in the children's choir. Values, judgments and beliefs about teaching, and in particular music teaching appeared to develop alongside their choral leadership experiences. With regard to values, the student's own strong musical backgrounds had a role to play here where students felt a strong motivation to 'pass on' their love of music. Furthermore, many of the students saw their involvement as a way to reconnect with music again as seen in the extracts below.

*Throughout my childhood, I have been studying music in and out of school and it has always been something I've been interested in. However, since I started college, this involvement had slowly decreased, and I really did miss music, especially being involved in choirs and singing. Therefore, once I heard of this project, I decided to give it a go. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

*I love singing and when I heard about the project I immediately wanted to be a part of it and to share my voice with the young children and to encourage them to sing and be heard. (B.Ed3, SS2)*

*One of the major reasons for partaking in the project was because I have really missed partaking in choir since starting college. I have been a member of a variety of choral groups since a very young age and therefore believe that choral singing is incredibly beneficial to students as well as being enjoyable. Giving these children an opportunity to be a part of a choral group is a fabulous opportunity to them as some of them may not have this opportunity without this project. In addition to this I enjoy doing voluntary work as it makes me feel good as I am giving something back to the community. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

The data also revealed that students were making critical judgments about the place of music in schools and in the curriculum, based on their experiences. As might be expected, they placed a high value on the place of choral music in children's lives but also on the beneficial aspects of its inclusion. For instance, as seen in the box below, students recognised the value of children taking 'initiative' to build on their work in-between sessions as well as the difference children perceived between choral sessions and 'monotonous textbook work':

*My partner and I came to teach one week and our class had made up actions to the song lyrics without us teaching them to them. This showed great initiative on the children's parts and that the music we were teaching was having an effect on the children not only in the classroom but on the rest of their lives. (B.Ed3, SS1)*



*No matter how much they really enjoyed the singing itself, they firstly and foremost saw it as a welcome break from often monotonous textbook work, which is the first step in children seeing that music occupies a valuable space in the primary school classroom as well as in life. (B.Ed1, SS1)*

In addition, one student, using their own built-up knowledge and experience, was enabled to critically reflect on a classroom teacher's approach to song-singing while observing on school placement:

*I was looking at a choir in the last school placement and it was quite bad. The kids weren't singing like. And they all had sheets and the problem was like that they [the teachers] weren't actually just getting them to sing it line by line, they weren't really taught it...They were kind of just told to sing along, and they hoped they'd pick it up but they weren't really taught. You know it wasn't broken down for them into sections or anything. (B.Ed2, FG2)*

Here the student is able to identify what s/he perceives to be an ineffective method of teaching a choir but s/he goes a step beyond this to suggest how they might approach it differently to effect a positive change. A primary concern here for the student is that the children are not actually singing which s/he attributes to a poor approach to teaching. This demonstrates quite a sophisticated reflective response within an emerging student teacher identity.

Student beliefs about the kind of teacher they would like to become, the work involved and teaching approaches they aspire to were also significantly evident, shown in some examples below.

*I now know that singing does not just happen, a lot a preparatory work outside of choir time is also needed. I have gained much understanding in terms of what the children have taught me. All children in the class, were really enthusiastic about the choir and had a really positive attitude about it and have given me an understanding of how music can be used to transform the classroom atmosphere. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

*I just like helping children to be the best that they can be and I thought this was a great opportunity to do so. (B.Ed1, FG3)*

*I have learned that you need to be flexible with the children e.g. letting them stand up and sit down while singing in rotation, giving them dance moves to do while singing so they do not lose interest. It is also important to note that some children may not want to participate in the singing and it is okay for them to just be there and engage in their own way be in humming or even tapping their feet...The key is to be enthusiastic and show complete interest in the children'. (B.A1, SS2).*

*Never underestimate the abilities of the children. And to keep encouraging everyone because the ones who seem to have no interest will be the very ones who will surprise you. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

Students also commented on the benefit of watching the choral director during the 'Big Sing' rehearsals and performances. They felt that these opportunities were very valuable for them in terms of observing how to control large groups of singers, choral direction techniques, pacing and style of teaching. One student commented:

*I found the most beneficial thing of the whole thing was when we had all the children in. To watch you have command of a hundred and fifty children...you know, they did it, they listened. That definitely opens your eyes, that it would give you the confidence that okay I can do it too, that there are ways to control huge crowds like that'. (B.Ed2, FG2)*



### 5.3 Performance opportunities

The performance aspect of the MIC Children's Choir was deemed to be an essential component of the initiative by the students. The lead up to performance opportunities they claimed excited the children during choral workshops, focused their rehearsals and motivated the children to progress with their singing. Coming together as a large group with other schools appeared to heighten the performance experience for all involved as each school 'played their part' to contribute to one large sound. A great sense of achievement at such performances was emphasised amongst the students as revealed here.

*The highlight of the semester was when all the children came into the college and sang with the other schools. It made me feel proud that they remembered all the words of the songs and were able to sing in rounds. It was rewarding to know that we as directors, taught them what they knew. (B.A1, SS1)*

*I enjoyed being part of the choir project when the children all got to perform in Mary I. That showed the progress that the children had made and showed the work that they had put in during our time with them. It allowed them to showcase what they had achieved and it made me proud to know that I had a hand in that. (B.Ed1, SS2)*

*I really enjoyed the times when the schools came together to sing because it gave a sense of achievement and pride both to them and to me as a volunteer. It showed that we, as a whole had achieved something and seeing the kids enjoy themselves while doing it makes it worth anything. (B.Ed1 SS1)*

*...when the children from all the different schools came together in the forum. To see how happy it made all of the children. It was spectacular. (B.Ed1, SS1)*

As evidenced above, when on campus performing, the students all commented on the enjoyment and sense of pride felt by both them and the children. As well as this however, they also noted how such performances acted as a vehicle to raise awareness of the initiative amongst the wider college community. In this way, the scope of the impact of the initiative was broadened out on such occasions. The extracts below reflect this.

*Even people in my year like were asking me what was going on, showing an interest in it, like I got a few people said to me next year they'd be interested in getting involved. (B.Ed1, FG1)*

*...there was huge reaction, and I know a lot of people did say to me afterwards that they enjoyed it. It's good for other students to see children in the college, because it's a teaching college, d'you know? (B.Ed2, FG2)*

The students viewed different types of performance opportunities in different ways. For instance, they all lauded singing alongside 'The Three Tenors' in the 'Lime Tree Theatre' as a wonderful experience. The 'Big Sing' events where the children gathered in a large tiered communal area of the college, the Forum in the Tara Building, were deemed a success and as highly enjoyable. Here, the children were placed on steps amongst staff and students who were passing by, having their lunch or taking a break to enjoy the singing. In this manner, these events were relatively casual yet the students commented on the value and multiple learning points for the children during these performances.

*It was very good that it kind of brought them, all the music together at once, cause when you're going out you do such a short snippet of what you're meant to be doing, and it's such a short space that when you actually get the 'Big Sing' you do it all and you know what it's like then to hear them all together at once. (B.Ed3, FG1)*

*The 'Big Sings' were good for pulling things together. I was surprised a few times at how well they did when they got into the bigger group, they just seemed to be more confident. They learn so much from being there and you [director] trying to pull them up. (B.Ed2, FG1)*

*They hear the other schools and they pick up what they're doing and it kind of motivates them. So it's good to just get stuff done and to motivate (B.A1, FG1)*

However, not all performances were viewed in the same manner. In particular, a specially commissioned contemporary piece 'Flying Things' (O'Farrell) was perceived to be very difficult for the children and students believed that the children therefore did not enjoy it as much as more easily accessible repertoire. Teaching this piece for a performance in the 'Lime Tree Theatre' was felt to be a huge pressure by the students due to the difficulty level of the music and lyrics as well as the lack of familiarity with contemporary classical music for children. Despite this, some of the students also recognised the advantage of the steep learning curve encountered in order for this piece to be performed, as revealed below.

*I learned a lot about how to prepare the children for a performance and make sure everything runs smoothly on the day. Also that it is okay for them to make mistakes in the performance. (B.Ed1, SS3)*

*It took a lot of work to try and make it accessible to them, and it was good from my point of view to be able to teach something that isn't immediately motivating in itself because that is part of teaching, you know everything that you teach isn't going to be loved by children, so from that point of view I thought it was good. (B.Ed2, FG2)*

*Teaching 'Flying Things' was the most difficult part but it was very rewarding when they performed it so beautifully in the concert. (B.Ed1, SS3)*

Whatever the opportunity, it was significantly clear throughout the data findings that performing repertoire taught was all-important for both children and students. Thus, while the focus of the initiative was consistently on the choral workshop sessions themselves (both in school and in the college), the performance aspect of choral singing was repeatedly emphasised as a main priority amongst the student participants.



## 5.4 Access and educational opportunity

The choral initiative specifically targets DEIS band 1 schools. Due to this, the students were acutely aware of the socio-economic and geographical contexts of the schools they were working within. Through their involvement, the students were challenged in their assumptions and stereotypes about educational disadvantage as evidenced here:

*Because it was a DEIS school everyone had that sort of idea that it was going to be more difficult but it wasn't at all, it was just the same. (B.Ed2, FG1)*

*Some of the children were not very enthusiastic about it at first, possibly because of their background, but after a few weeks they all thoroughly enjoyed it. It proved to me that anybody can make and enjoy music regardless of their social or cultural background. (B.A1, SS3)*

*I was expecting it to be difficult as I didn't know what to expect on entering a DEIS School. I wasn't sure what I was going to be getting myself into. I was also worried about classroom management problems...I found that it was not near as difficult as I was expecting. Almost all of the kids were willing to get involved which was very helpful and even classroom management wasn't too bad. I have gained an insight into the children themselves. I found that more than anything, they just wanted someone to notice them and a little bit of attention and that this sometimes made them act out. (B.A4, SS1)*

Students also appeared to develop a keen and informed sense of social justice in relation to access issues – to both third level education but also to music. Opening up access to a third level institution within the city was of course one of the goals of the initiative and the students all spoke of the beneficial nature of bringing children into the college for rehearsals and performances:

*The children really enjoy the 'Big Sings' themselves and coming in, it's like a really exciting and daunting experience for them. Coming to college is really good, the link that they have with the college and the school as well, that they know they're always welcome in the college - I think that's really good for them. (B.Ed3, FG1)*

*Bringing them into the college, it's getting them to kind of think oh this is really fun, this kind of stuff happens here. (B.Ed2, FG2)*

In particular, the relationship built between the students and children appeared to facilitate an 'opening-up' to future educational pathways for the children. Students all noted the children's curiosity around what they did at college, how one 'got in' and what happens there. This the students felt overwhelmed by as for many of them, college life was an assumed future direction growing up. Once inside the college buildings themselves, the students noted a dramatically increased level of curiosity about third-level life from the children as revealed below.

*A few children have said to me that they're gonna' study in Mary I, like careers you can't do here and stuff but it doesn't matter 'cause they feel that they could actually come here, d'you know? They're not afraid of it. (B.Ed2, FG2)*

*It's lovely for the kids to see this side of life...one boy was asking me, 'what do I have to do to come to a place like this' and I was like 'study and try your best in school'. So it's lovely to see that as well, it does give them an incentive. (B.Ed3, FG2)*



*This for me is what is all about. Showing children that there are endless opportunities available to them, no matter what their situation is. (B.A4, SS3)*

With regard to access to music, students took note of existing inequalities in relation to private music tuition and limited opportunities for certain children in this regard. This they linked back reflexively to their own childhood, therefore making meaningful connections to ‘gaps’ within societal systems, as seen below.

*I have been extremely lucky throughout my life to get many diverse opportunities in music, and music has played a formative role in my life so far providing me with so many benefits. Therefore I really wanted to play a part in giving such musical opportunities to children who might otherwise not get the chance to experience the benefits and joys of music. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

*I have learned that children in a DEIS school love music and that to make music with them is extremely rewarding. There are many talented children within DEIS schools who just need the opportunity to show what they can do. (B.Ed3, SS3)*

*I believe that every child should be given the same opportunities in all aspects of life, especially in educational resources. Many children do not have the opportunity to partake in music lessons so I became involved in the project to help these children learn and enjoy music through a creative forum. (B.A4, SS3)*

References to the students perceiving themselves in an altruistic role was prevailing, as seen above, perhaps due to the nature of the choir being an initiative for ‘disadvantaged’ school children and/or the fact that they were volunteers. Three students went on to set up Christmas Charity Choirs within their own local communities during the research period perhaps also signaling a desire to ‘give back’.

## 5.5 Looking Forward

The students were most interested in how the MIC Children's Choir would progress into the future and offered interesting ideas based on their experiences. They all wished for the initiative to expand to a greater number of Limerick schools and for there to be increased contact time in schools. This was in spite of the extra volunteering workload and timetabling difficulties acknowledged. Students felt that the project could grow significantly with an online presence linked to the MIC website. As one student commented, 'I believe a website for the choir would be effective. This could be a teaching tool as well as facilitating communication regarding any issues which arise between training sessions during the week' (B.Ed2, SS2).

The students envisaged such an online space could be used to recruit more student volunteers, raise awareness of the project, share choral repertoire and resources, act as a means of sharing information on the project with schools as well as facilitating a discussion forum for the student volunteers to share ideas, experiences and resources.

Many students spoke of the sense of community between themselves facilitated through the weekly meet-ups, as well as the benefit of delivering school workshops in pairs:

*I really enjoyed meeting other students who have similar interests to me. (B.Ed2, SS1)*

*The time here [weekly meet-ups] it kind of made you a lot less nervous when you had the opportunity to discuss what people were doing and get ideas and just see where everyone was at. That made it a lot easier to go into the classroom. (B.Ed1, FG2)*

Some students however felt that after some time on the project, they needed less weekly meet-ups and suggested that this could be reduced to once a month. Some students also commented that they could move on working by themselves in the classroom, highlighting the confidence and skills-building recorded earlier. There were opportunities in the second semester for students to 'fly solo' in classrooms which many of them enjoyed.

The repertoire chosen for the initiative was questioned by some of the students where they felt an inclusion of more popular songs was needed to be 'relevant' to the children's contexts. Furthermore, they expressed a desire to input into repertoire choice at the start of the year, as seen below:

*More songs that are relevant to the children themselves. The children loved to sing what they LIKED to sing. For example they loved singing the Christmas songs they knew. How about if we took the songs they know and love ALREADY and IMPROVE them? Like add harmonies, two-part, canons, dynamics, pulse (maybe body percussion?), etc. Furthermore, on the final week the children asked us if we could sing with them 'What Does a Fox Say' which is a current pop song. They were all really interested in this! Why not use these songs? (B.Ed2, SS1)*

*I think the repertoire is a big issue which makes or breaks the enthusiasm of all involved. I think in September before any workshops or class trips are made, the volunteers and lecturer should discuss the repertoire they intend to perform for the year. It would have been nice if the volunteers could have participated in song choice. (B.A4, SS2)*

In addition, it was suggested that some songs could be unique to different classes, allowing opportunities to



perform to each other as individual classes as well as joining together with common repertoire. Furthermore, some students suggested the student volunteers as a group performing for the children, 'I think we should try and prepare a piece as a group that we could perform in front of the children. Since we're acting as role models and trying to promote choirs, I think it would be nice for the children to see us performing' (B.Ed2, SS1).

The students also had interesting insights to make regarding teacher involvement in the initiative and were largely complementary of the support shown them in schools. It was noted that this support largely came in the form of active participation in the class singing, classroom management, as well as in some cases work completed on the songs between visits by the teacher. In other cases, some students noted that the teachers let them 'get on with it' while they completed other tasks which the students were satisfied to do. Where teacher involvement was strong, the students acknowledged the multiplier effect this had on the children, their own leadership development but also teacher's professional development, as demonstrated in the comments here:

*I was fortunate, the teacher I was with was fantastic, he really got involved and you could see they'd been practicing it during the week when I wasn't there. And that makes such a huge difference. I think the role of the teacher in this entire programme is huge, it's monumental to the success of the programme...it gives the kids extra time to make things more concrete so that they enjoy the time with the volunteers even more. (B.Ed2, FG3)*

*The teacher that I'm with this year commented to me that she's learned a lot about percussion stuff and other parts of music rather than just song singing through watching me because I did a lot of clapping work as part of teaching songs. I think she realised that teaching a song isn't literally just putting on a CD or singing it. (B.Ed3, FG3)*

The students here are clearly expanding their views beyond their own development to acknowledge 'big picture' issues for choral leadership in schools. It is worth noting that the students above made such comments after a two-year involvement with the project indicating the benefits of sustained engagement with an initiative of this nature.



## 6 TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL VOICES

### SECTION



This section presents the views and comments of the classroom teachers and school principals. A total of nine teacher surveys were completed over the review period, four at the final performance in 2013-2014 and five in 2014-2015. The perspectives of two principals were also recorded in a semi-structured interview at the end of year two. The teachers and principals were asked to comment on both classroom sessions and MIC rehearsals/performances from their own perspective, and in 2014-2015, teachers were also asked to elaborate on any perceived benefits for the children over the two years. A number of central themes which recurred in the responses are discussed below under the following headings:

- Children's engagement and benefits (6.1)
- Student teacher identity (6.2)
- Campus visits and performance (6.3)
- Design of the initiative (6.4)
- Looking forward (6.5)

To retain anonymity the teachers are coded numerically and according to the year they completed the survey (T1-13/14 etc.). Principals are coded numerically e.g., P1 and P2.





## 6.1 Children's engagement and benefits

The classroom sessions are the lynchpin of the MIC Children's Choir experience – these are where the children, students and teachers meet on a weekly basis and where the relationship between the student and the children is forged. The teachers' description of these weekly classes reflect the very positive and vibrant learning environment created by the students. A significant number of teachers talked about how much the children enjoyed themselves, and how this enhanced their learning – they were interested, engaged and active. The comments below attest to the effort students made to build positive relationships with the children and their success at sharing their own enjoyment of music. The students' approach appears to have resulted in a significant encounter with music for the children:

*The children were very engaged and active in all lessons. (T1-13/14)*

*Each lesson was well prepared and as a result the children were learning. Every child enjoyed the lessons. (T1-13/14)*

*The classroom lessons [...] were well balanced and captured the children's attention and interest. (T3- 14/15)*

*It added a great focus to choral singing and the students really enjoyed it. (T1- 14/15)*

The teachers described many ways in which they believed the children had benefitted from their participation in the MIC Children's Choir. The excerpts below highlight this:

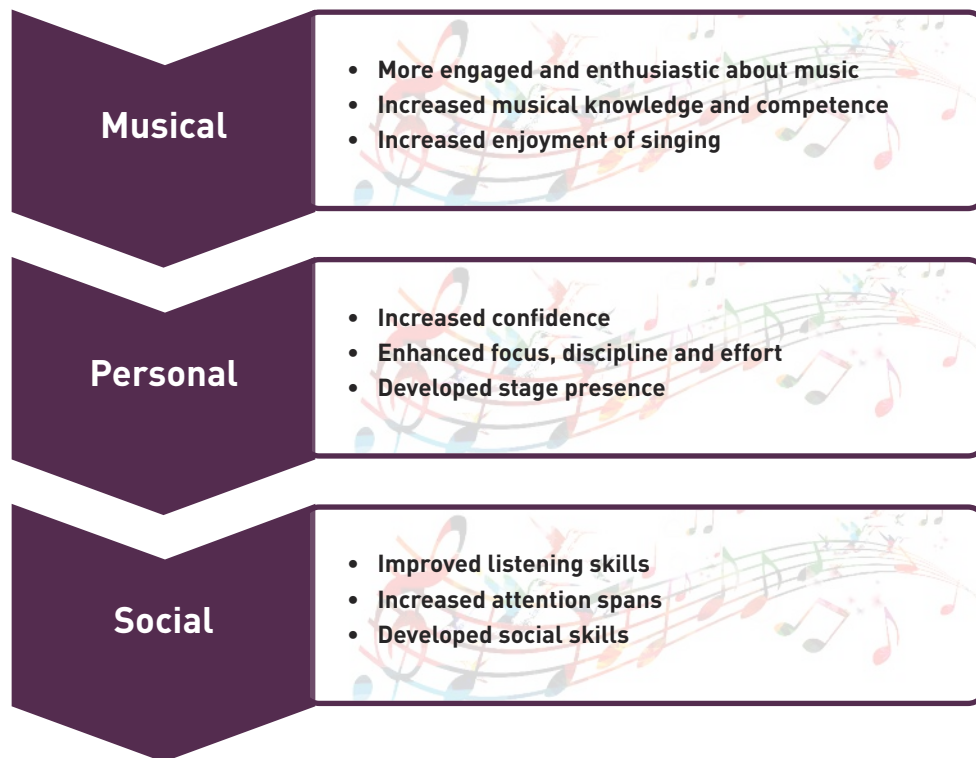
*Introduced choral singing to the class- the children loved the lessons and engaged completely. (T4- 13/14)*

*Children's confidence grew each week. (T1- 13/14)*

*The children really enjoyed the experience. They are more enthusiastic about singing in the classroom and have a great new collection of songs and rhythm activities. (T3 - 14/15)*

*Enthusiasm, fun, knowledge, practice – great! (T5- 14/15)*





**Figure 6.1 Teacher and principal responses on choir benefits**

In the 2014 - 2015 survey, teachers were asked to comment on the experience of taking part in the choir over two years. Their responses highlight the significant benefits of sustained engagement in a musical project for the children. It was noted that the children became more attuned to the collaborative nature of singing together, and during the second year they were perceived by teachers to be both willing and able to make a greater effort. Teachers felt this personal commitment increased the children's interest in, and enjoyment of, music, which in turn improved their confidence and their musical competence. By singing together with children from other schools, they became part of a community of music-making. Teachers believe this sense of social inclusion also gave them a more positive view of themselves, as evidenced in the comments below:

*They have become used to the discipline required for a choir and the need to play close attention. (T1-14/15)*

*The children are very enthusiastic about singing and put in a greater effort in choral singing. (T2-14/15)*

*... knowledge, confidence, competence, enjoyment, plus social skills practiced at the 'Big Sings'. (T5-14/15)*

*Confidence improved, stage presence, more interest in music. (T2-14/15)*

## 6.2 Student teacher identity

Teachers were very positive about the very high teaching standard of the students in the classroom sessions. Every teacher agreed that they were well prepared – they commented that the lesson structure was well organised and balanced; that the students were reliable, punctual and professional; and that the classes

exceeded their expectations. The teachers endorsed the musical material covered: warm ups, songs, vocal technique, rhythm activities, movement and percussion accompaniment. It was evident that the students understood that the development of their classroom teaching skills would enhance the delivery of their musical goals:

*The two students were punctual, professional and really great with the girls. We are delighted with them. (T3 -13/14)*

*Yes the students were very well prepared with words, actions and percussion pieces for the lessons in the classroom. The lessons were very well structured and organised. (T3-13/14)*

*I was very pleased with the lesson delivery- time, duration and content. (T1 -13/14)*

Even though the students had chosen to take part in the MIC Children's Choir in a voluntary capacity the teachers described the classes as if they were being delivered by professionals. This suggests that the motivation of the students to teach music positively impacted on the quality of their teaching. These students chose to share their music with children in their spare time and thus their emerging teacher identity flourished. This model of supported volunteer teaching emerges as a valuable platform for the emerging teacher to develop their classroom skills.

*The student was extremely reliable; always came when he was supposed to come and when he said he would come; the programme was very varied; he got the children involved in rhythm activities; a huge variety of songs; he taught them how to sing well; she [teacher] thought it was very valuable – and she said the children then really enjoyed meeting the children from other schools when they all got together in Mary I. (P1 -14/15)*

These findings point to a dynamic between classroom teacher and student that was both healthy and helpful. Teachers could clearly identify how they benefitted from the classroom sessions; they learned new ideas and material and the children in their classes developed a new engagement with and enjoyment of music. One teacher noted, 'Personally I feel I have benefitted with many new ideas and approaches' (T4-14/15). The students' commitment to the MIC Children's Choir clearly motivated them to teach at a consistently high level. The teachers acknowledged the musicality, hard work and commitment they observed on a weekly basis which validated the students' emerging sense of confidence and competence.

### 6.3 Campus visits and performance

Throughout the programme the children periodically visited MIC, both for rehearsals with the MIC Children's Choir Director ('Big Sings') and for performance opportunities. The teachers noted distinct benefits to both formats. An upcoming rehearsal was found to motivate the children and provide a focus for the classroom sessions. This was a helpful framework for the children, the teachers and the student teacher – it set clear expectations of what was to be covered in the weekly classes. The rehearsals positively reinforced the classroom work and teachers felt this enhanced the children's sense of achievement. Teachers were happy to bring their children to rehearse and perform at a third level campus and also remarked on the high quality of the rehearsals. Teachers frequently commented on the value of singing together with other schools, as seen in the example here:

*The girls enjoyed their experience. They looked forward to their trips to Mary I. I found it great to see our classes working so comfortably with other schools. (T4 -14/15)*

*[The rehearsals] raise confidence and children see a purpose for all the practising. (T4 -13/14)*

*The workshops were very child friendly. [The director] was excellent with children. (T2 - 14/15)*

Teachers commented on the benefits of bringing their children together with children from other schools to work together towards a common purpose. During the Big Sings the songs that the children had learned in their separate classroom became a shared repertoire. These songs represented a 'membership badge' to join this singing community, which bestowed a sense of belonging.

*The 'Big Sing' dates benefitted the children as it gave them the opportunity to hear other schools singing the songs and to sing as part of a large choir. (T3 -14/15)*

*...was very rewarding – the children liked it – I think there's great value in going up to Mary I. (P2 -14/15)*

MIC has a number of performance spaces including a professionally managed 510- seat venue, the Lime Tree Theatre. Over the course of the two years the children participated in a number of performances. These performance opportunities 'gave the choir an extra element - the kids loved it' (T3- 13/14) and gave them 'exposure to that type of event' (T2-13/14). The comments below highlight the value the teachers attached to performing on stage, and how it added value to the classroom work. They showed a clear appreciation that the choir afforded rare performance opportunities for the children in their classes:

*The choir has given many children the experience of performing on stage. This is a unique experience for most. It is great for them to see people coming together as a group and being able to produce a performance. (T4-14/15)*

*... great experience to perform in front of people. (T2-14/15)*

*The girls certainly knew the songs with all the preparation in school and the Lime Tree Theatre. It was a huge transition to go from classroom to stage but they enjoyed the challenge. (T4-13/14)*

*The children loved showcasing what they learned in the classroom to a larger audience outside the classroom. (T1-13/14)*

These two distinct performance opportunities appear to have enhanced the classroom learning experience greatly. According to the teacher and principal responses, the 'Big Sing' rehearsals developed the children's understanding of and appreciation for collaborative music making. The teachers particularly noted the personal benefits for the children of the live performance opportunities. The visits to MIC provided a positive link between their classroom experience and the outside world.

*A lot of it is about sociability, working with others, going into Mary I, I think for them to have some sense of third level, what's expected of them working with larger choirs [...] all that is of huge value. (P2 -14/15)*





## 6.4 Design of the initiative

The teacher and principal comments attest to how well the design of the MIC Children's Choir helped to fulfil the original aim of the initiative: 'to deliver a high quality, long term innovative choral initiative to complement and enhance existing music education provision through a mentorship approach between the director, student teachers and classroom teachers.' The data from the teacher's surveys particularly highlight the set up and facilitation of reciprocal relationships between the children, students and teachers. Findings indicate that the children had an enthusiastic musical ambassador to open up singing opportunities for them in their classrooms. The students were teaching a subject they identified with, that had meaning for them, and they had the support of the programme director, the teachers and their peers. Many of the teachers spoke of their appreciation for the initiative as it provided an experience for the children that otherwise they would not have had. Everyone, therefore, within the child-student-teacher dynamic contributed to the success of the project and as a result everyone also benefitted. The comments below emphasise this:

*I was delighted to be involved with my class with the MIC children's choir this year. It was an excellent experience. Thank you very much to all involved. (T3 -14/15)*

*Well done to all involved and thanks to the students and [the director] in particular who really gets the best from the children. (T2-14/15)*

The MIC visits were shown to provide both a focus and a context for the classroom sessions. The preparation and performance of the commissioned work 'Flying Things' illustrates how an upcoming performance motivated the students to develop their classroom teaching skills. The teachers were generally positive about rehearsing and performing 'Flying Things'. This speaks to the professionalism of the students, as many of them had reservations about the music, yet still managed to present the music in a manner that was well received, as recognised in the teacher responses below:

*The children enjoyed preparing for 'Flying Things' very much. They were really looking forward to the final performance. (T3 -14/15)*

*The air was difficult but they mastered it and it was good to expose them to new material. (T1 - 14/15)*

There was a mixed reaction to the repertoire choice within the choral initiative. It overall received a generally positive reception, although in the opinion of one teacher 'the girls were not really inspired by the chosen songs. They really enjoyed 'Riptide' but perhaps some of the other songs were not really too appealing to them' (T4 - 14/15).

## 6.5 Looking forward

While the teacher and principal data was overwhelmingly positive about the MIC Children's Choir, a number of suggestions for future developments were made, as shown here:

*Perhaps give a presentation in the individual's schools. (T2 -14/15)*

*It has been positive but there has been too little interaction between children. Maybe some game/fun non-singing activities could help. (T2- 14/15)*

*The project may be a bit too ambitious for the timeframe to really allow the kids do themselves justice and to give the piece [reference to 'Flying Things'] the respect it merits. (T5-14/15)*

The teachers/principal comments also highlighted some organisational difficulties with the choral project. There was a considerable variance between college and school timetables. On occasion there was also delayed communication between student, college and school. This resulted in one class missing much of the second term's classroom sessions, and one very willing student left without a class to teach in the second term of the 2014-2015 choir. Unfortunately, as a result, these children did not participate in subsequent MIC performances.

The development of teacher skills, knowledge and repertoire is an aim of the MIC choir initiative. However, in the survey teachers were predominantly asked about and commented on the experience of the children in their class. As previously discussed, the teachers were very supportive of the students, however they often perceived the classroom session as a stand-alone event delivered by the student, not necessarily an opportunity to actively collaborate. The data suggests that there is scope for the role of the classroom teacher to be more clearly defined within the initiative into the future. Otherwise, without setting clear expectations, the MIC Children's Choir may lead to a perception that because some teachers do not view themselves as 'musically gifted', this initiative is a convenient way to 'opt out'. One teacher was comfortable to remain disengaged for instance, 'To be honest, choir isn't my thing so I'll leave it to them' (T3 -14/15). This principal's comment further illustrates how the initiative needs clear direction in this regard:

*From my point of view it is good, it does add to the school. Not every teacher is musically gifted; obviously they're all trained to teach the music curriculum, but they wouldn't be gifted, so it's great when a student comes in who has a particular gift, it opens up a whole new experience for the pupils I think. (P1 -14/15)*

There is scope therefore into the future for the classroom teacher to be encouraged and facilitated to engage in this 'whole new experience' of music that the student may bring to the classroom and to develop their own skill set to deliver the music curriculum.





The MIC Children's Choir was set up as a university-school-community initiative primarily to make meaningful links with primary schools, build choral leadership skills amongst third level students, enhance choral provision in schools, widen civic engagement through student volunteerism and raise child aspirations about educational opportunity and progression. Collating research data over a two-year period has afforded deep insights into a particular cohort of participants over time. The benefits of the MIC Children's Choir for children, students and schools ascertained are summarised in table 7.1 overleaf.



Children	Students	Schools
Widen opportunities for musical participation and education.	Acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to lead future community and/or school choirs.	Build a meaningful partnership with a third level institution.
Develop musical, performance and singing skills.	Widen civic engagement through active participation in a volunteering initiative.	Extend existing music education provision in schools.
Develop social and emotional skills through choral participation and performance.	Creatively engage in various approaches to choral singing.	Expand the repertoire for choral music in schools.
Fulfil elements of the Music curriculum through an innovative project.	Build choral repertoire for future use.	Increase awareness of the value of choral singing.
Create awareness of and build aspirations towards third level education.	Acquire and develop classroom skills and pedagogies.	Collaborate and meet with other schools in the environs.
Meet and interact with other children from schools within their community.	Assist in large scale rehearsals and performances in terms of preparation and execution.	Access high level performance platforms.

**Table 7.1 Benefits of the MIC Children's Choir**

Through research into child, student, teacher and school leadership perspectives, a number of common issues have also been highlighted from across the various data findings. These are discussed here, followed by a series of recommendations for future planning and development.

## 7.1 Singing with others

The power and impact of group singing was evident throughout the research process. The children repeatedly spoke of the enjoyment and sense of community singing with others brought to them, firstly within their classroom sessions but even more so during the 'Big Sing' events and performances at MIC. This coming together of many voices to create one large sound was recorded as the most frequent child response to what they liked most about being in the choir (see table 4.1). Many of the children identified how working with the students in their classrooms as well as singing collectively as part of a larger group also helped to develop confidence and overcome feelings of fear in performance. Similarly, teachers identified many musical, personal and social benefits including greater listening skills and increased engagement and focus. The students also spoke of the benefits of group singing for themselves as a group, both within the preparation sessions with the choral director as well as the 'Big Sing' events at the college. This key finding underlines the musical and social values in choral singing identified as well as the potential to form sustainable 'communities of musical practice' (Kenny, 2016).



## 7.2 Partnership working

The choral initiative is completely reliant on a number of partnerships for project rollout as well as sustaining its development into the future. These partnerships are important in terms of choir directorship, mentoring, teaching, school access, funding, organisation, event-planning and administration. The key partners are:

- The Department of Arts Education and Physical Education, MIC, from which the choir director has voluntarily committed time to mentoring the students and directing the choir to ensure its continued success;
- TED (Transforming Education through Dialogue), MIC, which has committed funding and personnel to coordinate and administer the initiative including organising 'Big Sing' events, end of year performances and liaising with schools and teachers;
- Music Generation Limerick City who provided the essential funding for students to travel to schools to engage in this voluntary activity as well as funding for children to travel to the MIC campus for 'Big Sing's' and end of year performances, without which the initiative would not have been possible;
- Schools and teachers who dedicated their time and supported the children and students to successfully engage in this initiative.

The partnership nature of the choir has created the need for constant dialogue and review which has benefitted the choir greatly. There is great depth and breadth of relevant experience and expertise from each partner involved. These various complementary strengths helped to deliver a high quality initiative.

In addition, this partnership way of working has extended to include other partners over the years in varying capacities. To name a few: The Lime Tree Theatre hosts the choir for rehearsals and performances regularly; Dr Paul Collins from the Music Department at MIC accompanies the choir in performance; the MIC composer in residence Anne-Marie O'Farrell has written new pieces for the choir and two local choirs have joined for performances. It hoped such partnership opportunities will continue to grow and develop.

### 7.3 Third level awareness and opportunity

The MIC Children's Choir represents a college 'outreach' initiative aimed at breaking down third level elitism and expanding access opportunities afforded disadvantaged communities in Limerick city. It was clear from the children's perspectives gathered that visiting the college campus and participating in the choir was viewed in an overwhelmingly positive light. These campus visits appeared to raise awareness of third level education and in particular the student experience of university with children noting such details as facilities students enjoy, the food they eat and physical size of lecture halls. These campus experiences coupled with their engagement with students in their own classroom no doubt led to or aided the children sharing their own aspirations about third level education which included primary teaching. The teachers and students also noted the 'opening up' of third level awareness amongst the children that sparked curiosity in higher education due to the initiative. Teachers also spoke of the partnership with a third level institution raising the quality of the initiative to a high degree. From a student perspective, assumptions and stereotypes about educational opportunity and disadvantaged communities were challenged through the experience and there was much reflection on musical opportunities afforded to children within different societal contexts.

### 7.4 The place of performance

While the emphasis of the choral initiative was on mentoring students and classroom work, repeatedly it was found that performance held pride of place for children, teachers and students. These twice-yearly concerts on campus provided new opportunities for the children as well as a platform for others to hear them sing. This also had the extra benefit of raising awareness of the initiative amongst the wider college community and parents of the children. After sustained engagement over two years children spoke about how their repertoire of songs had grown and of how their performance and singing skills had developed. They also reflected on how their own attitudes and beliefs about singing and performing had changed with greater confidence noted in their second year. The teachers and principals found that the performances allowed for important goal setting for the children and students, giving the rehearsals a focus for progression. Furthermore, the benefit of performing as one large community, for and with others was emphasised by the teachers, principals and students.

### 7.5 Skills-building

A central aim of the MIC Children's Choir is to build choral leadership capacity amongst students for the benefit of future schools and communities. The student volunteers recognised a twofold purpose of their involvement with regard to gaining such leadership capacities as well as building on classroom skills. The choral leadership skills most frequently cited related to conducting techniques, repertoire choice, music literacy, approaches to singing, choral and performance preparation. The broader classroom skills noted were effective communication and classroom management. Learning such skills in a hands-on and immersive way emerged as highly significant for the students. The children too outlined much learning and choral skill development stemming from their membership. This skills building related to an expanded song repertoire, improved singing and listening, enhanced confidence in performing, keeping time, progression with part-singing and following a conductor. From a teacher perspective, the skills building aspect of the choir was less effective. The findings reveal that while the teacher's recognised clearly the benefits for children and students, they themselves did not perceive the initiative as an opportunity for professional development. This is unsurprising perhaps given that the initiative was not designed to address such needs explicitly, however this finding warrants considerable attention to consider potential opportunities for enhanced teacher collaboration into the future.



## 7.6 'Out of the ordinary'

The findings repeatedly show that this choral initiative was viewed as 'out of the ordinary' from a number of perspectives. Firstly, the children themselves viewed the MIC Children's Choir as a 'break from work' and very different to 'school music'. The fact that students were visiting their classrooms, the trips to MIC, and performances of course facilitated this view of the initiative as something special. However, it does raise important questions concerning the place of choral singing in schools as well as time spent on this activity. The students too saw their work in the classroom as very distinct from their college school placements. This was no doubt due to the volunteering nature of the work but also the autonomy afforded them to experiment, take responsibility and be creative in the classroom. Despite an being a voluntary activity, distinct from a graded School Placement, the students excelled on this initiative – a point repeatedly noted by children, teachers and principals alike. In particular, the high level of professionalism and preparedness amongst the students was found to be highly significant in the data. While these students were of course self-selecting in their involvement, such an approach to classroom experiences within teacher education is worth further consideration in light of these findings.

## 7.7 Recommendations

Based on the data findings across all data sets, a series of recommendations can be put forward. These recommendations are both specific to the future of the MIC Children's Choir but also macro in nature with regard to broader university-school-community partnerships:

- 1 Significant time and human resources are needed to prepare students to work in a volunteer capacity in schools and communities as well as to coordinate and administer the initiative. Increased commitment and support is needed from third level institutions to ensure this happens.
- 2 School leadership and teacher buy-in is required from the outset of initiatives to ensure maximum benefits to all involved.
- 3 Performance and showcasing opportunities are essential to ensure initiatives maintain progression, attain a sense of achievement and involve communities beyond the direct participants.
- 4 Increased opportunities for student volunteering while in higher education need to be developed and built-on. Recognition is also needed to foster sustained student engagement in such initiatives.
- 5 A focus on skills building through participation within initiatives will aid long-term partnerships where all participants' feel their needs are addressed.
- 6 Continued partnership approaches and ways of working are required to ensure initiative sustainability, sharing of resources and expertise exchange.
- 7 As well as building skills in certain disciplines such as music, the social and emotional benefits of such initiatives need to be recognised and valued.
- 8 Campus experiences are hugely important within initiatives in order to address access issues, raise third level awareness and connect meaningfully to local communities.
- 9 Administrative support is required to source partners, facilitate effective communication and for the overall smooth running of initiatives.
- 10 Academic staff involvement in partnership initiatives requires significant support to allow time for preparation, delivery and evaluation. Involvement in such initiatives needs to be recognised as part of an academics' core workload.

## Appendix 1 - Primary Liaison University Services (PLUS) Network Member Schools

School	Address
Ballylanders N.S.	Kilmallock
Corpus Christi N.S.	Moyross
Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy	Kennedy Park
Le Chéile National School	Kennedy Park
Our Lady of Lourdes N.S.	Rosbrien
Our Lady Queen of Peace	Janesboro
Presentation Primary	Sexton Street
Scoil Íosagáin C.B.S.	Sexton Street
Scoil Na Mbraithre	Doon C.B.S.
St. Anne's G.N.S.	Rathkeale
St. Augustine's	Augustinian Priory
St. Canice's	Coovagh House Mulgrave St.
St. John's G.N.S.	Garryowen
St. John the Baptist B.N.S	Cathedral Place
St. Joseph's B.N.S.	Rathkeale
St. Mary's N.S.	Bishop Street
St. Michael's N.S.	CBS Grounds
Thomond Primary School	Ballynanty

## Appendix 2 – Student Focus Group Interview Schedule

- Why did you decide to get involved in the choir?
- What is your understanding of the role of choir volunteer?
- How did you find the weekly sessions with the choir director on Tuesday evenings? What worked well? What could be improved?
- How would you describe your relationship with the:
  - Choir director
  - Teachers and schools
  - Children
- Tell me about your experience volunteering in the schools. What worked well? What could be improved?
- Tell me about your experience of the big sing events in the college. What worked well? What could be improved?
- Tell me about the Christmas concert and the performance of 'Flying Things' in the Lime Tree. What worked well? What could be improved?
- Overall experience – What helped you to be involved? What made it difficult?
- Way forward - What else would you like to see happening in the choir?
- Would you do anything different? Or anything new?
- How could we get other students involved in this type of activity?



### Appendix 3 – Student Survey Questions

- What course are you studying in MIC?
- What year are you in?
- What age are you?
- Gender
- Why did you volunteer to get involved in this choir project?
- What were your expectations of this project at first?
- Have your expectations changed since then? If yes, in what ways?
- What type of skills or understandings have you gained from the project so far?
- Looking back over the semester, describe a time when you really enjoyed being a part of the choir project
- Looking back over the semester, describe a time when you did not enjoy being a part of the choir project
- Can you describe one or two ways you developed as a choral leader from your involvement in the 'Flying Things' performance.
- What have you learned about making music with children a DEIS school?

## Appendix 4 – Teacher Surveys



### MIC Children's Choir Teacher Evaluation

1. Was the choir what you expected? (please circle your response)

Yes	No
-----	----

Comment:

2. What went well?

3. What could be improved?

4. Were the students prepared?

5. How did the students add to choral music in your classroom?

6. Would you like them to do anything different next semester?

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7. Is there a benefit to the 'big sing' dates with all schools in MIC? (please circle your response)

Yes	No
-----	----

Comment
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9. Any other comments?

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**Thank you for taking the time to fill this in.**



## Appendix 5 – Child Focus Group Interview Schedule

### Introduction – reflect on the choir and their participation

#### 1. Likes/dislikes of the project

- Do you like singing in the Mary I choir? Why/Why not?
- What do you like most?
- Is there anything you don't like about it?

#### 2. Students

- Do you like singing with the students who come to your class?
- What do you like/not like about it?
- What do you like to do most when they come to your class?

#### 3. Learning that occurred

- Did you learn anything new in this choir?
- What did you learn about singing?
- Did working with the students help you to learn? How?

#### 4. MIC visits

- What was it like singing in a big group in Mary I/the college?
- What do you like/not like about it?
- What did you learn when you went to Mary I to sing together?
- What was the best bit about singing in Mary I?
- What kinds of other projects could your school could do in Mary I? Prompt: Music, Sport, Art etc.

#### 5. Attitudes towards singing

- Did you like singing before starting the choir?
- Do you like it now?
- What do you like about it?
- What was your favourite song this year?
- What did you like about singing it?
- Did you like singing 'Flying Things' with the other choirs at the Lime Tree Theatre?
- What did you like/dislike about it?

#### 6. Attitudes towards third level

- What do you think about Mary I as a college where you can go to study after you have finished school?
- Would you like to go to Mary I or another third level college? Why/Why not?
- Has your experience of visiting Mary I with the Choir helped you to think about whether you would like to go to third level? Why/Why not?

## Appendix 6 – Principal Interview Schedule

- Was the choir what you expected? (please circle your response)
- What went well?
- What could be improved?
- Were the students prepared?
- How did the students add to choral music in your school?
- If the choir were to continue, would you like them to do anything different next year?
- Is there a benefit to the 'big sing' dates with all schools in MIC? (please circle your response)
- Is there a benefit to the 'big sing' dates with other Choirs in the Lime Tree Theatre in MIC?
- What do you think are the benefits, if any, of schools participating in this partnership with MIC and Music Generation Limerick City?
- What have been the outcomes for your school, if any, of participating in this partnership with MIC and Music Generation Limerick City?
- What advice would you give to other schools that are interested in participating in similar initiatives?
- Any other comments?

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