



A theory of the dynamics of choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study

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Thesis accepted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Visual and Performing Arts with Music at
the North-West University

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Graduation: October 2026

Certification

Dedication

To all the choristers and staff of the Drakensberg Boys Choir School who worked tirelessly during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond to keep the “Drakie experience” alive.

Preface

Choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that choir singing entails much more than the sum of its parts.

Acknowledgements

A sincere thanks to:

My heavenly Father, who was beside me every step of my journey, the Provider and Giver of Life in abundance;

My family, especially my husband Jan, for believing in me, providing wisdom, care and support; and my daughters, Elrize, Jani and Christi, for your unwavering support and prayers; and Kevin, who helped me with the layout of my inquiry;

My parents, Chris and Jo Boshoff, who taught me to love and respect others and to never give up; and my sister, Dr Magteld Smith—you have always been an inspiration to me;

Prof. Liesl van der Merwe for your guidance, inspiration, understanding and expertise;

Prof. Edwin Hees for your patience and wisdom, for the language editing of my thesis;

The staff of the Drakensberg Boys' Choir school, especially the Executive Headmaster and my colleagues in the Music Department for standing in for me when I desperately needed time;

Every participant: thank you for opening your hearts and sharing your deepest experiences with me.

Deo Gloria!

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected society in many ways, specifically in this case choir activities, which were initially seen as potential superspreader events. In response, all choir activities were suspended globally. This qualitative case study examined how the Drakensberg Boys Choir School (DBCS) managed the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this explanatory intrinsic case study was to develop a theory explaining the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary research question guiding the research was: How did the choir staff experience the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic? The first research sub-question guiding the integrative literature review in Chapter 2 was: What does the scholarly literature reveal about choir practices during COVID-19? The second sub-research question was to develop a theory: What theory explains the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, as interpreted in the context of the scholarly literature? (Discussion–Chapter 5). The participants were the choir staff at DBCS. Data were collected via online and in-person interviews, email correspondence, documents and audiovisual content from social media to better understand the case. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 choir staff members, including conductors, music teachers, accompanists and other staff who worked with the choir during the pandemic. The findings of this study showed that choir practices at DBCS during and after the COVID-19 pandemic could continue, survive and thrive by valuing the choir staff, choristers and their support systems. Furthermore, the choir was able to become resilient, grow and flourish through its ability to identify, evaluate and respond to the impact of the pandemic. A number of pandemic-related events served as stressors and leverage points which reinforced choir practices either positively or negatively. Choir practices addressed challenges that negatively impacted the choir's functioning (Negative Reinforcing Loops), with problem-focused or emotion-focused responses that reinforced choir practices through Positive Reinforcing and either Positive or Negative Balancing feedback loops that stabilised choral activities. Positive Reinforcing Loops included the staff who became innovative through a community of practice, supporting and learning from one another, reverting to various online formats and adapting to restricted rehearsals and performances to ensure continuity in choir practices during lockdowns and restrictions. Meaningful musical experiences in various formats generated solidarity in the choir and contributed to the collective energy that lifted

morale during challenging times. The social and emotional well-being of choristers and staff played a significant role in providing stability during the pandemic. Furthermore, the choir's cultural values and the school's heritage, along with its isolated location, promoted cohesion, strengthened identity and enabled the choir to adapt, innovate and thrive, even as many other choirs globally could not continue rehearsing or performing during the pandemic.

Key terms

COVID-19; choir practices; times of crisis, online practices; adapted in-person choral activities; coping and resilience strategies; musicking; relational interaction rituals; antifragility; viability; multi-layered, dynamic, cultural system

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Chapter 1: Introduction and background of the study

This study examines how the Drakensberg Boys Choir School¹ navigated the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a music teacher and accompanist at DBCS, I witnessed the changes in the choir's daily activities, teaching methods, rehearsals, performances, and personal and professional relationships during the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak. In the following paragraphs, I will relate some of my personal experiences.

I am practising a reduced-score version of Brahms's German Requiem. Serendipitously, we plan to perform the whole requiem this year, 2020. Singing the complete work from memory is quite a milestone for 11- to 15-year-old boys. We are performing it with the KwaZulu-Natal Symphony Orchestra at our annual music festival (Music in the Mountains, MiMS), generally held during the last weekend of April. We usually use a two-piano arrangement for regular weekly concerts. The ebb and flow of the melancholic melodies and the juxtaposition of major and minor chords resonate with a labyrinth of thoughts and emotions. I am finding solace in the words of the second movement:

*Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras, For all flesh, is as grass,
und alle herrlichkeit des Menschen and all the glory of men as*

¹ In the South African context, the DBCS is a “middle” school for learners between Grades 4 and 9, offering an academic and music curriculum, sports activities and cultural enrichment with a main focus on choral singing while providing boarding to all learners. In an international perspective, the word “school” can be used for part-time activities during afternoons and weekends.

wie des Grases Blumen.

the flowers of grass.

*Das Gras ist verdorret und die Blume
abgefallen.*

*The grass withereth and the flower
thereof falleth away.*

I sit in the new boys² rehearsal space, practising this intricate piece solo. At the same time, in the distance, I can hear the soaring voice of our singing teacher, who is engaged in an online lesson with one of the boys, the purity of her notes ringing through the empty corridors. What is happening? This is supposed to be the beginning of the second school term, buzzing with activities that batter the senses: boisterous boys running around in the dormitories above me, scrambling down the stairs for choir practice, the conductor planning the upcoming festival, new boys practising newly acquired skills, sports in the afternoon, and academic teachers pleading to have extra time with some boys as a matter of urgency! Nevertheless ... there is nothing! Only a jarring sense that something is out of order in our world. I feel restless, unable to be soothed by the music that spills from my keys. I close the piano in the rehearsal room (called Injasuthi, one of the secret valleys of this world heritage site in the central Drakensberg). I pass through the empty junior sleeping quarters ... bare mattresses neatly turned on their sides and propped against

² The new boys at the DBCS are the recruits of choirboys each year. They receive induction training in choral singing and practical musicianship until they have passed a series of tests. After successfully completing this training, they are welcomed into the choir as choristers with 'concert status'. They can then perform with the concert choir and go on tours.

the back of the adjacent vacant cubicle. A photo of a boy's family on the side of a cupboard, a forgotten choir file in the corner, a cycling helmet, a lonely sock. No sign of life pervades the campus. No energy, really.

All the boys had to leave quickly when lockdown level 5 was announced. There is a strange smell of sanitiser in the air. The whole school had to be cleaned and sanitised before the boys could return to school at some future date. I walk past the sanatorium and down the stairs to my studio. Everything is pristine, indeed soulless. No rambling of eager fingers on pianos or boys aiming to strike a super high note! I stop at my window and look at the misty mountain, only partially visible ... what will the future hold?

This explanatory intrinsic case study examines the dynamics of choir practices at DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study intends to focus on and explain the various relationships within the choir, including rehearsal and performance protocols, recruiting, social media posts, touring, and the social and personal well-being of choir members and staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unexpected impact on all aspects of society (Fancourt et al., 2020; Leiden Madtrics, 2021). Governments worldwide implemented lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus since it was first identified at the end of December 2019. More than 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries had to switch to online learning (United Nations, 2020). Accordingly, schools had to find alternative ways to continue their educational programmes (Mikszta et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 outbreak also affected social activities, including choir singing, which was restricted and disrupted. From March 2020, choir activities became potential super-spreaders after increasing incidents of infections were observed and reported during rehearsals and performances in the USA, France, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany (Charlotte, 2020; Hamner et al., 2020; McKie, 2020; Miller et al., 2021; Van der Lint, 2020). Consequently, in-person choir sessions were halted or limited worldwide.

South Africa followed suit and suspended all social activities that could facilitate the spread of infection, including choir rehearsals during lockdown levels 4 and 5 in 2020 and 2021. In-person choir rehearsals at DBCS stopped abruptly after the announcement of an alert level 5 lockdown on March 26 2020. Choir rehearsals were not allowed during alert levels 4 (1 to 31 May 2020) and 3 (1 June to 17 August 2020) (South African Government, 2020a). However, special permission from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in KwaZulu-Natal enabled the DBCS to resume face-to-face (F2F) choir activities in July 2020. Concerts proceeded amid constantly changing performance protocols and restrictions on the number of patrons. Choir rehearsals, performances and social events resumed in February 2022, lifting the strictest social distancing rules. From Thursday, 23 June 2022, after two years and three months, South Africa no longer had COVID-19 restrictions in place after an announcement to that effect by South Africa's State President (Ramaphosa, 2022). The Drakensberg Boys Choir had the unique opportunity to hold its first two post-COVID concerts at the Mandela Theatre in Johannesburg, with no restrictions, on 23 and 24 June 2022. It was a joyous occasion to perform for an audience of nearly 1,000 people on June 24.

Choir practices at the DBCS were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting the choir staff to experiment with various teaching strategies, including online teaching, WhatsApp group messaging, virtual choir rehearsals and choir video recordings. Because of the constantly changing protocols, multiple difficulties arose. The DBCS did not receive operational government funding (and still does not), resulting in financial losses at the time. This led some choristers leaving the school, while staff members faced salary cuts and retrenchments. The staff of DBCS had to adapt to unprecedented pandemic-related challenges, compelling them to be creative in their approach to all aspects of choir activities, including making changes to choral practices. These were the events that motivated this study, which aimed to understand the network of adaptive practices and relationships related to the choir's functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A growing body of academic research aims to understand the relationship between choir singing and SARS-CoV-2. Several investigations shed light on how and where the SARS-CoV-2 virus spreads and the precautionary measures adopted to prevent infections. Additionally, studies also have explored how choir conductors have adapted to not being able to meet and rehearse with their choirs, including experimenting with online

rehearsals and virtual choir options. The literature also has explored the psychological and social impacts of virtual choirs and the absence of in-person choir singing during the pandemic, including the experiences of music teachers and choristers. Researchers have studied the psycho-sociological experiences of choristers during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person choir rehearsal practices had to be modified to prevent contamination.

Before the pandemic, there was no data on how viruses could spread during singing activities or on how to congregate safely in choral environments such as rehearsal spaces, concert halls, stages, theatres, churches and other venues. Additionally, preventive measures such as maintaining the safest distance between singers, the duration of singing activities, the number of singers, their positioning in rehearsal spaces, room sizes and ventilation strategies specific to singing environments had not been systematically studied; this made it difficult to provide sound advice for safer singing during the pandemic (Naunheim et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers worldwide conducted studies to determine the likelihood of SARS-CoV-2 virus transmission during choir activities (Charlotte, 2020; Katelaris et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2021). The findings of these studies indicated that indoor choir rehearsals were highly conducive to transmission, with person-to-person transmission occurring through close contact and airborne particles (Charlotte, 2020; Hamner et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021). Choir activities were identified as super-spreader or high-risk events, and group gatherings were suspended globally (Berghöfer et al., 2022; Charlotte, 2020; Hamner et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021).

Although the mode of transmission during singing was initially unclear, subsequent studies recommended that singers avoid crowded places, practise social distancing, wear properly-fitted facemasks, and regularly sanitise high-touch surfaces as preventive measures (Charlotte, 2020; Hamner et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021). These recommendations were endorsed by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the USA (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a, 2020b) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in Stockholm, Sweden (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020) and the World Health Organization (WHO) (World Health Organization, 2021). Subsequent studies showed that the virus can be transmitted through exposure to

respiratory fluid carrying the virus, either by inhalation or by touching mucous membranes that have come into contact with the virus (Bahl et al., 2021; Bauer et al., 2022; Hamner et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2021; Katelaris et al., 2021; Mürbe et al., 2020, 2021; Naunheim et al., 2021; Schijven et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Several studies have found that asymptomatic patients can also transmit SARS-CoV-2, presumed to occur via respiratory transmission (Charlotte, 2020; He et al., 2020; Hijnen et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2021; Naunheim et al., 2021; To et al., 2020).

Respiratory aerosols can carry SARS-CoV-2 and, therefore, play a vital role in the airborne transmission of the virus. It has been established that singing generates more respiratory aerosol particles and droplets than talking, and the exhaled particles increase with loudness of singing and with loudly aspirated consonants (Alsved et al., 2020; Bahl et al., 2021; Gregson et al., 2021; Mürbe et al., 2020, 2021; Richter et al., 2021; Schijven et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021). However, children and adolescents emit fewer aerosols than adults while singing, reducing the risk of spreading the virus in these groups (Good et al., 2021; Heavey et al., 2020; Mürbe et al., 2020, 2021; Riediker & Morawska, 2020; Wegehaupt et al., 2023). A study in Germany found that a higher percentage of singers contracted the virus while singing than orchestral players or the control group did, making choir activities a greater transmission risk than orchestral activities (Kähler & Hain, 2020).

To mitigate the risk of transmission during singing, researchers recommended several measures, including improving indoor air quality through ventilation and airflow (Berghöfer et al., 2022; Coleman et al., 2021; Gregson et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2020; Nusseck et al., 2020), using properly-fitted facemasks (Echternach et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2020; Kniesburg et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021), and utilising virtual choir rehearsals (Miller & Srebric, 2022; Naunheim et al., 2021; O’Keeffe, 2020; Spede & Weaver, 2023). Ultimately, the adoption of such preventive measures and the implementation of safe alternatives during traditional choir rehearsals significantly reduced the risk of SARS-CoV-2 virus transmission among choir members, thereby ensuring the safety and well-being of all involved (Alonderé, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Jeannotte, 2003; Phyland, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020; Wegehaupt et al., 2023).

A growing body of research focused on the way that choir conductors responded to their inability to hold normal choir rehearsals. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Eric Whitacre had been organising Virtual Choir productions since 2009 (Friedman, 2020; Schultz, 2021; Spitfire Audio, 2018). These experiments with virtual and online choirs made it possible for other choral conductors to follow his example during the COVID-19 outbreak (Alonderè, 2020; Cusworth, 2021; Daffern et al., 2021; Foulkes, 2021; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Grushka et al., 2021; Theorell et al., 2020). Virtual choir rehearsals during the pandemic were found to provide numerous benefits, such as connecting individuals without imposing physical constraints, fostering collaborations, and providing safe spaces for social connection and improved self-esteem (Draper & Dingle, 2021; Foulkes, 2021; Seckam & Hallingberg, 2021; Theorell et al., 2020). However, numerous studies found that virtual platforms could not fully replicate the benefits of in-person interaction and connection as a result of issues with connectivity, latency and limited resources (Alonderè, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Jeannotte, 2003; Theorell et al., 2020).

Other kinds of singing activities emerged during COVID-19, including balcony singing³ (Corvo & De Caro, 2020; Granot et al., 2021; Van der Sandt & Coppi, 2021). Researchers concluded that balcony singing provided new forms of community music, creating opportunities for lifelong, intergenerational, and transformative learning (Van der Sandt & Coppi, 2021). Findings indicated that spontaneous singing also contributes to social cohesion and the development of social capital, and alleviated loneliness (Corvo & De Caro, 2020; Granot et al., 2021; Van der Sandt & Coppi, 2021).

Music-making, including virtual singing activities, has been found to help people cope with the challenges of COVID-19 lockdowns, according to numerous studies (Dingle et al., 2021; Ferreri et al., 2021; Foulkes, 2021; Van der Merwe et al., 2021). In-person choir activities particularly benefitted adolescents and children in Austria, who were found to experience better stress reduction, greater calmness and increased social

³ Balcony singing can be defined as spontaneous singing from windows as a coping strategy and to improve social cohesion during COVID-19 lockdowns (Corvo & De Caro, 2020).

connectedness (Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022). However, a study by Miksza et al. (2021) suggested that music teachers and choir conductors experienced a lower sense of well-being and higher levels of depression during the pandemic as a result of the uncertainties and disruptions in school and choir activities. Similarly, choristers in Canada also experienced negative effects, such as anxiety, isolation, as well as a loss of purpose, joy, and spiritual fulfilment during adapted choir rehearsals and restricted performances (Lozano et al., 2023).

Despite these studies, there is still a gap in the scholarly literature regarding the dynamics of choir practices during turbulent times such as pandemics and the associated socio-economic conditions. This study aims to fill this gap by examining factors that contributed towards a better understanding of choir practices during the pandemic. Specifically, it examines the embedded aspects of choir practices, or more specifically boys' choir practices, and investigates how choral practices evolved during the COVID-19 crisis. This study also focuses on the experiences of DBCS choir staff⁴ (not just choristers or conductors as in most research on this topic). It explains how they adapted their choir practices during the pandemic.

The aim is to generate new knowledge and contribute to the literature on music and specifically choral education. Other choirs and choir administrators can learn from the evolving dynamics in choral practices at the DBCS during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The results and conclusions of this study are presented in narrative form and should be of interest and value to academics and scholars in the social and human sciences, as well as to choral conductors and choir administrators seeking deeper insight into the influence of disruptions such as COVID-19 on choir practices. This research also serves as advocacy literature to preserve a unique boys' choir with a history deeply rooted in our South African choral heritage.

⁴ Choir staff in this case study include all staff at the school who were involved with the choir, including the choir conductor, accompanist, new boy teachers and conductor, choreographer, recruitment and marketing officer, tours and operations manager, health officer (school nurse), sound engineer, production manager, academic teachers on duty during tours and concerts and executive heads.

1.1 Purpose statement

This explanatory intrinsic case study aimed to develop a theory explaining the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Research questions

The primary research question that guided the research was:

How did the choir staff experience the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The first research sub-question guiding the integrative literature review in Chapter 2 was:

What does the scholarly literature reveal about choir practices during COVID-19?

The second sub-research question was formulated to develop a theory:

What theory explains the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic when interpreting the data in the context of the scholarly literature? (Discussion–Chapter 5)

Chapter 2 explores the scholarly literature to reveal what the theory states about choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 4 analyses the data and identifies themes from the choir staff's experiences of choir practices at the DBCS during the pandemic. Finally, Chapter 5 interprets the data within the context of the scholarly literature and discusses the implications for choir practices during and after the pandemic.

1.3 Procedures

1.3.1 Philosophical assumptions and approach

The conceptualisation of my research problem, purpose and questions determined my approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Patton, 2014; Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña & Omasta, 2021; Yin, 2017). Firstly, qualitative research investigates socially constructed meaning by individuals interacting in a real-life situation (Patton, 2014), at a specific time, and in a particular context (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). In this case, the

participants' experiences extended beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed to a better understanding of choir practices during and beyond the crisis.

The exploration of individuals' experiences and interactions within their social world as well as their understanding of it is grounded in a constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Grenier, 2019), which is part of a qualitative approach. This inquiry adopted a qualitative perspective within the constructivist framework, as choir staff members derive meaning from their experiences. My goal was to gain a clearer understanding and explanation of staff members' social interactions and the meanings they attribute to their experiences regarding the dynamics of choral practices during the pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Patton, 2014; Yin, 2017).

1.3.2 Role of the researcher

A characteristic of a qualitative research design is that the researcher has a distinctive role in framing and executing the research (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I experienced choir singing as a way of life in both my personal and social life. As an insider at DBCS, I saw how young boys grew into well-rounded teenagers, adapt to society, and make a difference in public life as adults. I also experienced the pandemic's influence on the social lives of teachers and choristers at the DBCS during COVID-19.

I conceptualised the inquiry and determined the goals, research methods and research strategies. My role was that of the bricoleur, piecing together a set of representations to illuminate participants' experiences. The procedure entailed an emergent construction, resonating with the view that this kind of inquiry is an interactive process between the researcher's subjective values (biases) and the values of the participants, conveyed during interviews with the participants, namely the choir staff (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I brought my personal and cultural experiences to the inquiry, shaping the data collection and interpretation.

As the primary instrument for collecting and analysing data (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), I expanded my understanding through verbal and non-verbal communication during the interviews; I then processed the information immediately, clarified and summarised data from the interviews, and adapted to unanticipated responses.

1.3.3 The participants

This qualitative study invited twelve DBCS choir staff members to participate in the research. Purposefully chosen participants explained how they experienced choir practices at the DBCS during the pandemic. The voluntary participants included conductors, music teachers, accompanists, sound engineers, music producers, choreographers, school nurses and the touring staff who worked with the choir during the pandemic. The invited participants included six females and six males, representing a diverse group in terms of gender and background. Not all participants were graduates; some were specialists in their respective fields. Choristers were not interviewed, but their experiences posted on social platforms were used as data.

As purposefully chosen subjects, the participants brought their own subjective experiences to the inquiry, thereby allowing for the creation of a detailed description of the dynamics of choral practices during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Patton, 2014).

1.3.4 Research strategy of inquiry

As a research strategy of inquiry, a case study is appropriate for illuminating the research problem when the researcher has an identifiable case with boundaries and seeks to acquire an in-depth understanding through detailed, in-depth data collection, analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2017). This specific case study focused on the dynamics of choral practices at the DBCS, which was investigated as a bounded system. The choir staff were a homogenous group of participants (choir staff), bounded by context (the DBCS), activity (choir practices) and time, roughly from the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in December 2019 to 23 June 2022, when all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in South Africa. Yet, the knock-on influence of the COVID-19 crisis was an ongoing process after the lifting of all the COVID-19 regulations in June 2022, which has not yet been resolved. Therefore, the timeline for the research was extended to December 2024, when the impact of COVID-19 was still playing a significant factor in society.

I chose an explanatory case study, which was appropriate for examining operational processes over time and explaining “why” and “how” choir staff adapted to the difficulties posed by the pandemic. As this was also an intrinsic case study (focusing on a specific

case), I attempted to elicit the choir staff's unique experiences of the evolving choir practices at the DBCS; this enabled me to construct an in-depth understanding of the case and generate a theory of choral practices during the COVID-19 pandemic that may also resonate in the post-COVID world.

1.3.5 Data collection

Case study data collection entails multiple forms of gathering data to build an in-depth understanding and detailed description of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2013). Data collection elicits three basic types of information: interviews are the primary form of data, while documents and audio-visual materials ranging from social media posts to videos also contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2017). Social media posts also served to confirm the data and to express the views of supporters and choristers.

The interviews in my qualitative case study explored participants' personal and professional experiences in a detailed manner (Smith, 2015). I conducted in-person and online interviews (when necessary) and asked open-ended questions. I therefore played an active role in the data collection as the choir staff and I tried to make sense of their real-world experiences.

Semi-structured interview questions enabled me to engage in conversation and establish rapport with participants. These questions allowed me to explore relevant areas, leading to a more detailed case description (Smith, 2015). This interview format enabled me to adapt and change the questions during the inductive data-gathering process to provide more information that was not originally covered by my original questions. Analyses of the interviews may be time-consuming and challenging; nevertheless, they produce unexpected data and insights. I recorded the interviews using internet platforms, e.g. Skype or Teams. Alternatively, I conducted in-person interviews, and one participant answered the open-ended questions via email.

Recording procedures included using an interview protocol or form to plan my schedule and research questions, record interviewees' responses, and organise information such as starting times and length of interviews, venues and concluding ideas. I adopted introduction and closing protocols and made descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell & Poth, 2013). The video recording and writing-up of the interviews were also part of my

data-collection process. I used Skype and Microsoft Teams to record online interviews and TurboScribe for transcription. The presentation of participants' transcribed interviews was captured in Microsoft Word.

The use of documents, the internet and phone-based messages, photos, posts on social media and other audio-visual material such as posts on YouTube released during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a better understanding of the experiences I investigated. I formally asked the participants, the DBCS management and the board for permission to conduct the inquiry and utilised documents relevant to the research questions and purpose. All the data collected during the investigation have been stored securely in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive file for five years.

1.3.6 Data analysis and presentation

Thematic analysis within a qualitative paradigm implies that the researcher would want to make sense systematically of the collected data within a specific real-world context (Smith, 2015). Developing codes and themes rely on the researcher's reflexive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Miles et al., 2018). The analysis of data from multiple sources can also provide evidence for each step in the evolution of the case study (Creswell & Poth, 2013).

Researchers have suggested various approaches to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis usually consists of six phases (Smith, 2015, p. 334): familiarisation, coding, "searching for themes", reviewing, defining and naming themes, and the conclusion and writing up of the inquiry. Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 311) propose five steps in their data analysis spiral: reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into categories and themes, developing interpretations, and representing and visualising data. Braun and Clarke (2021) focus on the interpretive processes during thematic analysis. I utilised a combination of these procedures to construct the themes and explain the findings.

Firstly, I prepared and organised the data for analysis, adopting an inductive process (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2021; Yin, 2017). During these initial stages, I organised the data into files, prepared them for storage and utilised the ATLAS.ti 25 computer software program to assist with their management and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2013). The collection and analysis of evidence can co-occur in smaller case studies,

where all data will be collected and then analysed through a reiterative coding process (Smith, 2015). I inductively collected data, transcribed interviews, reflected on the data and then analysed the information after each interview, repeating the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2013). I also utilised multiple sources and evaluated them on a timeline aligned with the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, as different stages of the pandemic posed different challenges to choir practices.

Secondly, I familiarised myself with the data during an inductive data-collection process, therefore allowing me to build a theory from the data. This process entailed reading and rereading transcripts, watching audio-visual material, writing reflexive memos in the margins of field notes or transcripts, and exploring the database to acquire in-depth knowledge and a complete sense of the data set after each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Smith, 2015). Familiarisation enabled me to synthesise my reflexive thoughts into more advanced analytical thinking, preparing me for the next stage of analysis.

Thirdly, I developed codes for inductive and iterative data collection and analysis. Coding involves systematically classifying and interpreting relevant data features and formulating codes. These codes could be described as short data segments in words or the exact words participants used (in vivo codes) (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Yin, 2017). This process enabled me to identify patterns and categorise the codes. I searched for codes that would illuminate how the choir staff reacted and adapted to challenges in choir practices during the pandemic. These challenges included adapting performance, rehearsal and health protocols during the pandemic. The next step in the thematic analysis process entailed “searching for themes” (Smith, 2015, p. 334), involving a process during which I clustered codes together into categories and created a map or code book of key patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Miles et al., 2018; Smith, 2015). Similar categories were grouped into themes. I intermittently paused the theme-generation process and reviewed the themes to determine whether they illuminated the coded data and the entire data set. This procedure led to the definition and naming of themes, with a summary of each theme ensuring conceptual clarity and providing a roadmap for the final write-up of my inquiry. However, by this time, the themes had been established in line with the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the coding in ATLAS.ti 25 had to be adapted to developing themes in line with the progression of the COVID-19 crisis, reflecting how the various aspects of choir singing evolved and transformed before, during and after the pandemic. In writing the final report, I wove together the analytical narrative and

supportive data extracts, while the emerging themes provided the organisational framework for the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Miles et al., 2018; Smith, 2015). In the final stage of my study, I compared the findings from the case with those from the published literature to develop a theory of choral practices during the COVID-19 crisis. The final chapter of this study includes recommendations for further studies on the basis of these findings.

1.4 Trustworthiness

Validation mechanisms ensured the trustworthiness of the findings. There are various perspectives on strengthening trustworthiness in academic inquiries (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2017; Miles et al., 2018). My focus was on six validation strategies. They entailed acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity, declaring the researcher's positionality in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), triangulating data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2018; Patton, 2014), and constructing a detailed description of the case (Stake, 2010). Member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2018), peer review (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), and negative case analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Miles et al., 2018; Patton, 2014), further contributed to the validity of the inquiry.

My positions as an accompanist, new boy coordinator, music teacher and head of music enabled me to engage with participants who were working at the DBCS at the time. I also acknowledged my researcher bias, which could have shaped my interpretation and approach to the inquiry, as I experienced the challenges imposed by COVID-19 first-hand. However, my experiences may have differed from those of participants, which is why the thick case description was so important. My subjectivity did not influence the participants' views.

The corroboration of evidence from different data sources, including interviews, documents, social media posts and videos to document codes and themes added to the trustworthiness of my study (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Miles et al., 2018; Ridder, 2017; Yin, 2017). This process also required a detailed description of my case. The building and

connecting of codes and themes were evidence-based, enhancing the validity of the results.

Member checking and peer reviewing further validated my findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2017). Member checking involved asking participants to compare and verify the accuracy of my inquiry to assess whether it corresponded with their own experiences of choir practices. Peer reviewing further enhanced the trustworthiness of my study, as my promoter and co-promoter constantly checked and/or challenged my research objectives, methods, analysis, interpretation and findings. Another validation strategy I used was negative case analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Miles et al., 2018; Patton, 2014), which accounted for the evidence that might not fit the theme, code or pattern. I shared this negative or disconfirming evidence to provide a more layered depiction of the experience of choir practices.

1.5 Research ethics

Ethical considerations were central to my research and enhanced the study's trustworthiness and validity. I was the primary investigator, collecting and analysing data, mainly without the aid of a research assistant, at the DBCS, where I lived and worked. An outside agency did not fund my study; therefore, there is no conflict of interest between funders and me. This inquiry adhered to specific ethical procedures outlined by researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018) and by the NWU BaSSREC Ethics Committee.⁵

After obtaining ethical clearance from the NWU BaSSREC Ethics Committee (Addendum 3), I followed the protocol and requested formal permission from the DBCS management and board to conduct the study. I sought permission to access the participants (choir staff employed by the DBCS at the time), the school premises, documents, social media posts and digital resources. I formally invited the participants via email to participate in the study and obtained their free, informed consent. A formal consent form (Addendum 2) explained the purpose of the research and assured them of their anonymity. Participants could also

⁵ BaSSREC is the acronym for the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University's Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

choose to withdraw from the study at any time. The consent form was in English and provided information about the interview process, explaining that semi-structured questions would be asked (Addendum 4). All participants were fluent in English and had no problem understanding the content of the consent form. Participants had to give their consent for the video recording of interviews. Single interviews sufficed, but I did request follow-up interviews if necessary. Further ethical considerations included ensuring that the inquiry would cause no economic harm, personal or cultural embarrassment, breach of confidentiality, physical pain, injury or emotional distress to any participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). If any risks were involved, participants could opt out of answering questions that might cause emotional distress. I was sensitive to any signs of distress during interviews and avoided situations in which participants felt overwhelmed or uncomfortable.

I did not share participant data with the DBCS, the board or any other third party. The participants' names were masked and could not be connected to a specific person. Participants chose pseudonyms to protect their identities. All interviews were documented, but I would only release transcripts of videos to the examiners to ensure anonymity. Participants, the DBCS management and school members had access to the findings before the study's submission. Amendments were made accordingly, if requested.

I did not compensate participants for their participation in the study. I had no authority over the participants, and their positions at the school were independent of the study's outcomes. Published theses are kept at the DBCS Museum and made available to choristers, parents, patrons and choir alumni.

I utilised supportive AI tools such as Grammarly, to check grammar, spelling, punctuation, tone and style to enhance clarity and conciseness, and to detect plagiarism. I did not utilise AI features to generate text for drafting content. Additionally, I utilised Microsoft Co-Pilot to refine my writing, but I did not utilise its generative AI functions to create text.

1.6 Thesis structure

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 3: Procedures

Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter 5: Discussion of the findings

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter presents an integrative review (IR) of current knowledge about a relatively new phenomenon, choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of literature review integrates the findings of multiple types of evidence (Hopia et al., 2016; Knafl & Whittemore, 2017; Lubbe et al., 2020; Oermann & Knafl, 2021; Toronto & Remington, 2020; Torracco, 2016). This allowed me to analyse and synthesise findings from primary and secondary research studies, as well as other secondary data, such as interviews or social media posts (Soares et al., 2014). This IR process also accommodates the integration of diverse methodologies, including qualitative and quantitative data (Broome, 2000; Knafl & Whittemore, 2017; Oermann & Knafl, 2021; Toronto & Remington, 2020; Torracco, 2005, 2016; Tricco et al., 2016). Moreover, this approach provides a broader, more inclusive understanding of the processes that shaped choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. This IR should also provide a foundation for developing a framework for future research, theory building and choir practices (Cram et al., 2020; Lubbe et al., 2020; Webster & Watson, 2002).

2.1 Research approach: Integrative literature review

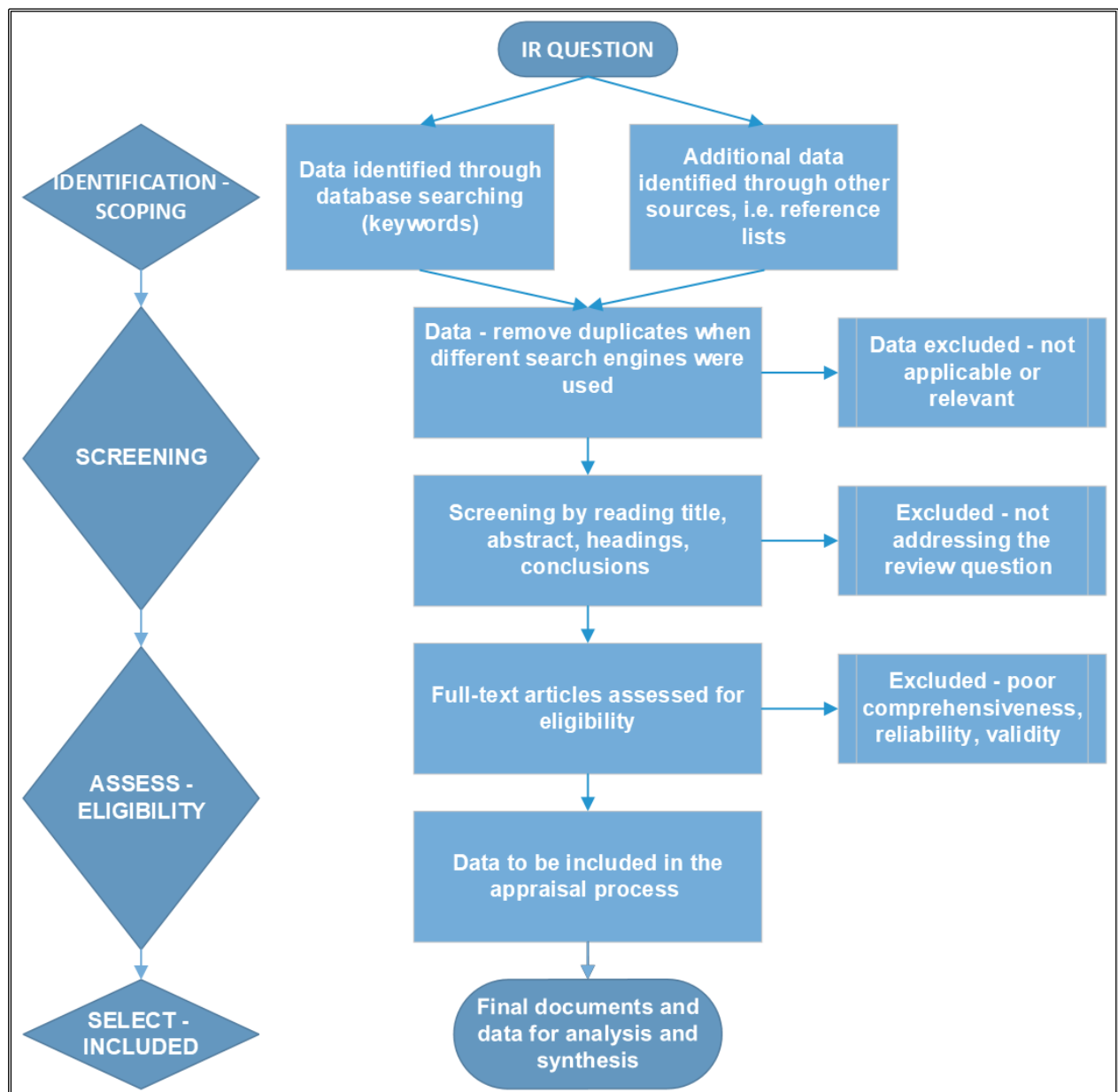
I utilised six steps in an inductive IR process, guiding the design of this chapter (Cooper, 1984, 1998; Cram et al., 2020; De Souza et al., 2010; Toronto & Remington, 2020), namely:

- identifying a problem and formulating a broad review question;
- sampling the literature;
- evaluating (critical appraisal) selected literature (data collection);
- analysing and synthesising the body of knowledge (extracting data);
- discussing newly accumulated knowledge; and
- presenting the findings.

2.1.1 Data search strategy

Searching for and collecting data for this IR had to be comprehensive, ensuring the review's credibility, reducing bias and increasing the repeatability of the research (Booth et al., 2010). As a data search strategy, I adapted the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). This model was adapted to include qualitative procedures and other data sources, such as reference lists in related articles. The following flow diagram breaks down the iterative process of searching for and selecting data:

Figure 1: Data search strategy: Adapted from the PRISMA Model (Moher et al., 2009)



2.1.2 Formulating a broad review question

The purpose of the integrated literature research (IR) is to identify relevant literature that can contribute to evidence-based knowledge. The IR question is guided by this study's research problem, which is important because it addresses a specific gap or lack of information identified in the existing literature. Essentially, the review will explore previous studies and findings to contextualise the problem and highlight why it warrants further investigation (Booth et al., 2010; Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2019; Toronto & Remington, 2020). The guiding question for this integrated literature review, which serves as the first sub-research question for this inquiry, is as follows:

What does the scholarly literature reveal about choir practices during COVID-19?

This review question ensures a rigorous review that not only defines the concepts related to choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also guides the IR regarding the search strategy and data selection.

2.1.3 Scoping research and identifying keywords

The literature review research question determined the identification of relevant keywords, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the types of documents eligible for inclusion in this IR (Lubbe et al., 2020). I initially conducted a scoping search, exploring the most relevant keywords based on the topic's broadest interpretation, guided by the IR question (Gray & Grove, 2020). The School of Music librarian at NWU helped find related articles using keywords: 'singing', 'choir', 'choral singing', 'COVID-19', 'in-person choir', 'virtual choir' and 'boys' choir'. In an extended search, I have utilised Boolean operators. My search contained the following keywords:

'singing' AND 'COVID-19'; 'choir' AND 'COVID-19'; 'virtual choir' AND 'COVID-19'; 'choir' AND 'transmission'; 'singing' OR 'choir' AND 'COVID-19'; 'face-to-face choir' OR 'singing'; 'rehearsals' AND 'COVID-19' AND 'choir'; 'choir practice' AND 'COVID-19'; 'choir' AND 'well-being' AND 'COVID'; 'choir' OR 'singing' AND 'social aspects'; 'choir' OR 'singing' AND 'psychological aspects'.

I used the following words interchangeably or synonymously:

'choir', 'group singing', 'choral singing';

‘face-to-face’, ‘in-person’;

‘virtual’, ‘online’, and

‘COVID-19’, ‘SARS-CoV-2’, ‘COVID pandemic’.

2.1.4 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The IR question guided the development of the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the data search. The question meant that the time frame was a significant factor in the selection of literature (Lubbe et al., 2020). Because this study investigated choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, documents dated before December 2019 were excluded. Published data after December 2019 were included in the identification of data for further screening. Exceptions could include related research on virtual singing before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Excluded were literature or media posts that were not available in English. Secondary research reports were excluded when primary investigations were available and included in the review. Published peer-reviewed articles from a thesis were chosen above actual doctoral or master’s theses. The most recent studies relevant to choir practices were preferred over older ones because COVID-19 only surfaced in 2020. Therefore, older studies could not investigate choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lubbe et al., 2020). I searched for and utilised blog posts and YouTube interviews with respected choir experts, organisations such as Chorus America, and composers such as Eric Whitacre. Not all blog posts were included unless proper research strategies were implemented and the information could be triangulated or verified in related posts. Online newspaper articles from reputable news agencies reporting a specific event were included. The above criteria contributed to the trustworthiness of the IR.

Literature related to balcony or karaoke singing is excluded from this IR, since it is not directly related to choir practices. However, I refer to aspects of karaoke and balcony singing that can be linked to the results in my closing discussion.

2.1.5 Assistive tools for data gathering

Multiple data sources were used to identify relevant data, including electronic databases, catalogues and grey literature, ensuring that all relevant literature could be accessed. During the iterative search process, I utilised various online databases and search

engines, including the SOCIndex in EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, MasterFILE Premier, RILM, SCOPUS and Academic Search Premier. Duplicates were removed from the list when the same documents appeared in different search engines. Additionally, I explored the bibliographies of related articles, abstracts, journal content and data on choir practices during the pandemic to compensate for incomplete databases. Alternatively, I emailed experts requesting unpublished studies or documents (grey data) on their choir practice experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could be included in this IR. I used the Zotero software program to store my saved articles in one place for easy accessibility. This programme also helped to manage my reference list and the format required by my tertiary institution or academic journals (Gray & Grove, 2020).

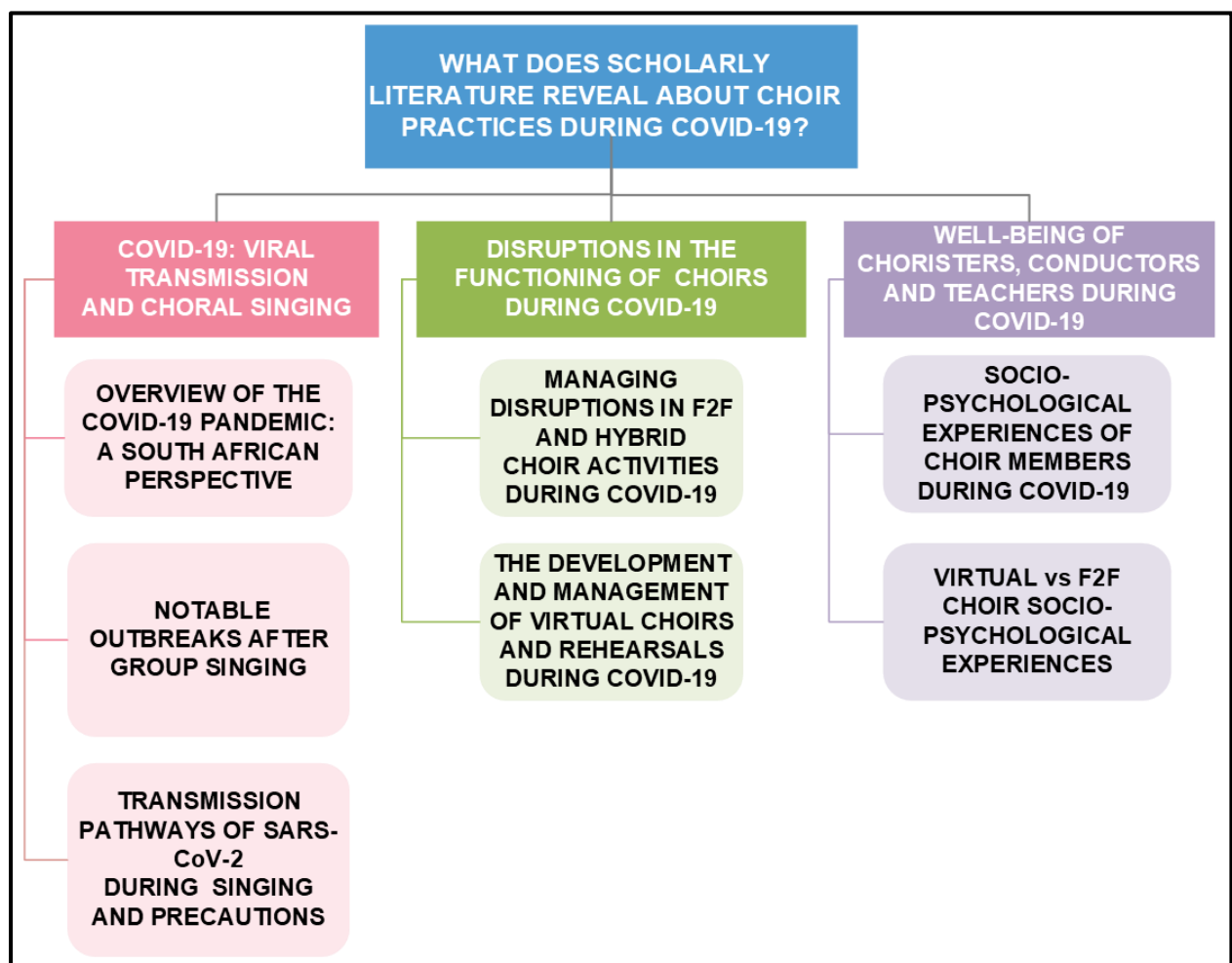
2.1.6 Processing data for review

The initial search with keywords identified many studies that could be eligible for inclusion in the IR (Smith et al., 2011). However, the inclusion and exclusion criteria narrowed the selection of resources for screening. To ensure the selection of unbiased and relevant data, the selection process had to be specific to the precise scope of the research (Grove et al., 2012) and address the literature review question. I initially selected 334 peer-reviewed articles from journals, blogs and websites. The literature screening (Figure 1) involved reading the title, the author's name, the abstract or introduction. Skimming the main headings, the first few sentences of sections, tables, figures and the conclusion or summary enabled me to make a preliminary judgement and evaluate the source in relation to the review question. This evaluation established whether a source was primary or secondary data. Nevertheless, secondary data were used to identify and search primary sources cited by an author. During this process the comprehensiveness, validity, efficacy, and applicability of the data for review were assessed for inclusion (Smith et al., 2011). Sometimes data could be excluded after simply skimming a document. In other cases, the whole document had to be read before a decision on inclusion or exclusion could be made.

After identifying and screening the data, 192 sources were selected for a critical appraisal (CA) in the review process (Lubbe et al., 2020; Oermann & Knafl, 2021; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The final documents were thoroughly read, analysed and synthesised in the

thematic analysis of data⁶ proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). While reading through the selected papers, their findings, focus, conclusions and relevance of the chosen studies were analysed, coded and categorised into themes and categories using the ATLAS.ti 25 computer software program (see Addendum 6 for Google link of data bundles). The discussion and findings are presented in an analytical narrative, supported by references from the literature and other data sources, as suggested by Katelaris et al. (2021). The emerging topics provided the organisational framework for the IR and are presented visually in Figure 2.

Figure 2: What does the scholarly literature reveal about choir practices during COVID-19?



⁶ The thematic analysis of data involves six steps: familiarisation, coding, generation, reviewing, definition of topics and summarisation (writing up) (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Evidence from various data sources, including primary, secondary and other sources (e.g., social media posts, video interviews and documentaries), contributed to the trustworthiness of my IR (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Miles et al., 2018; Ridder, 2017; Yin, 2017). This process also produced a detailed description of available data. This means that the presentation of the findings is evidence-based and provides valid (accurate) and verifiable (reproducible) results. Ethical considerations required the use of trustworthy evidence from peer-reviewed articles, media posts by well-known specialists in choral practices, and papers and blogs from internationally acclaimed news sources. I also asked permission from the relevant authors to utilise appropriate unpublished letters or materials for review, adhering to general ethical procedures. The following section is a synthesis and analytical narrative of selected data for this IR chapter.

2.2 Emerging topics of the integrative review

After data collection and analysis of multiple sources of data, three topics emerged:

- research investigating COVID-19, transmission, and choral singing. This topic includes an overview of COVID-19 from a South African perspective, notable outbreaks after singing events, the transmission pathways of the SARS-CoV-2 virus during singing, and precautions to reduce infection;
- literature focusing on disruptions in choir activities, including actions to mitigate the cessation of live choir performances and rehearsals and adaptations in F2F choir practices; and
- the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-psychological well-being of choristers and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, including virtual and digital rehearsals, adapted in-person choir activities, and comparing virtual choir vs in-person choir experiences.

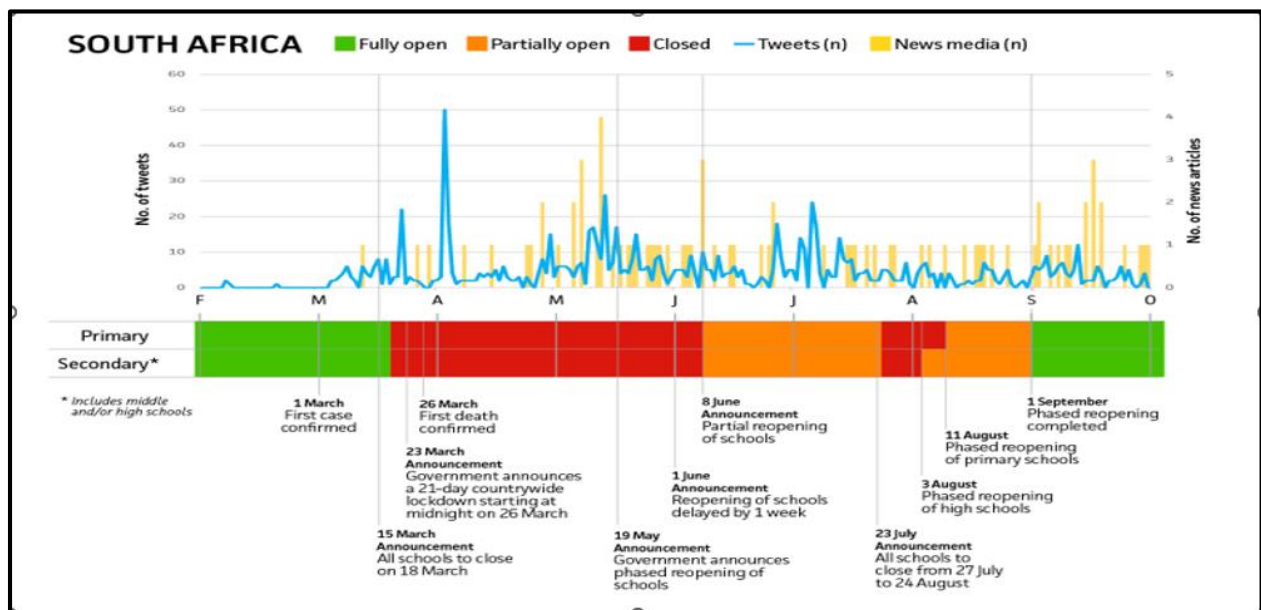
2.2.1 Overview of the COVID-19 pandemic: a South African perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic originated in Wuhan, China, with the first cluster of pneumonia cases reported in late December 2019 (National Institute for Communicable Diseases, 2020; World Health Organization, 2019, 2020a). The virus rapidly spread to other parts of China and eventually to other countries (BBC News, 2020; CNN, 2020; European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020), leading to the World Health

Organization declaring a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 (World Health Organization Organization, 2020b). The virus was named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) on 11 February 2020, and the disease it causes was called COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020c).

On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020d). In South Africa, a national state of disaster was announced on 15 March 2020 (Du Toit, 2020; South African Government, 2023), and the country went through several stages of lockdown. Choir rehearsals and other social events were suspended from 15 March to 30 April 2020 (South African Government, 2020). Figure 3 illustrates various stages and school lockdowns in South Africa alone from January to September 2020. Various phased lockdowns were also implemented in Spain and the USA.

Figure 3: Timeline of announcements and implementation of school closure and reopening in South Africa from January to September 2020 (Dudek et al., 2021)



After the December holidays, the reopening of schools was delayed for ten days until 27 January 2021. Another school closure was implemented starting at junior schools from Monday, 28 June 2021, to Sunday, 19 July 2021 (Gabara, 2021). After various alert levels and school disruptions, the national state of disaster in South Africa was lifted on 5 April

2022 (South African Government, 2022). Restrictions on public events, mask-wearing, border checks and vaccinations were lifted on 22 June 2022 (De Wet, 2022).

As of 2 May 2023, there were approximately 687 million confirmed COVID-19 cases, with around 680 million recoveries and over 6.87 million deaths reported (Statista, 2023). Vaccination initiatives involved almost 39 million vaccine doses (World Health Organization, 2023a). In South Africa, there were over 4,072,533 cumulative cases, more than 102,592 reported deaths, and 38,841,308 vaccinations administered (World Health Organization, 2023b).

On 5 May 2023, the WHO Emergency Committee on COVID-19 stated that the disease was no longer causing a global emergency and no longer fit the definition of a PHEIC. However, the pandemic was not over and a WHO review committee would continue to provide recommendations for managing COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2023a).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was much more significant than what is reflected in reported deaths, as many countries have found it challenging to accurately identify, report and monitor the number of deaths (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Excess mortality data indicate that more than 18.2 million people died globally from natural causes, with South Africa ranking tenth among all countries, with an estimated 302,000 deaths (Wang et al., 2022).

2.2.2 Reported outbreaks and transmission pathways of the SARS-CoV-2 virus during singing

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted researchers to study the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 during choir activities. Numerous outbreaks linked to group singing have underscored the need for preventative measures to ensure safety during choir rehearsals and performances. For my IR on the transmission pathways of SARS-CoV-2 during singing, I selected 67 sources, including 29 peer-reviewed articles, 14 reports and letters, six health department recommendation documents, 13 media articles or blogs, and five non-peer-reviewed articles.

2.2.2.1 *Notable outbreaks of COVID-19 after group singing*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, media and academic journals reported COVID-19 outbreaks linked to choral activities (Charlotte, 2020; Hamner et al., 2020; RFI, 2020;

Katellaris et al., 2021; Lamoureux, 2020; McKie, 2020; Miller et al., 2021; Read, 2020; Sang-Hun, 2020; Shah et al., 2021; Van der Lint, 2020; Waldstein, 2020; Williams, 2020). These outbreaks occurred after rehearsals and performances in February and March 2020. This raised concerns about the transmission and spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus during group singing activities. At that time, there was no scientific knowledge available on how to keep choristers safe and healthy (Ashley, 2020). The first preventative measure was to suspend all choral activities until a better understanding of the transmission and spreading of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was established. Investigations into the first notable outbreaks created opportunities to explore pathways of infection and precautionary measures that could be implemented.

One of the most cited incidents involving group singing and COVID-19⁷ is the outbreak at the Skagit Valley Chorale in Washington (Axon et al., 2023). According to a report (Hamner et al., 2020), 53 of 61 choristers who attended a rehearsal on 10 March 2020 became ill (33 confirmed and 20 probable cases⁸). Unfortunately, two choir members passed away, and three were hospitalised. At the time of the rehearsal, there were no known cases of COVID-19 in the local community. The first person to test positive (index case) on 13 March was a choir member who had cold-like symptoms three days before the rehearsal and attended the 10 March choir practice. Two others fell ill the next day. The initial report stated that 52 other attendees developed symptoms between one and twelve days after the practice at which the index case was present, with an average of 3

⁷ As of 14 October 2022, the paper by Hamner et al. (2020) had almost 618,000 views/downloads from journal websites, 772 citations in Google Scholar, and 348 citations in Web of Science (Axon et al., 2023)

⁸ Choir members were tested for SARS-CoV-2 between 13 and 26 March. Positive cases were confirmed by RT-PCR (Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction) testing – a fast and sensitive test detecting the presence of specific genetic materials which can be specific to bacteria and viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 or humans (Wierzbowski, 2021).

days after 10 March. The report excluded any additional index cases⁹ at the rehearsal. However, later investigations (Axon et al., 2023; Banik & Ulrich, 2020; Duval et al., 2022) questioned a single-point transmission explanation and argued that multiple asymptomatic choir members could transmit the virus since more than two choristers had symptoms on 11 March and that the incubation period for the SARS-CoV-2 virus is 6.4 days with the incubation period ranging from 2.1 to 11.1 days (Backer et al., 2020; Mizumoto et al., 2020), implying that more than one person had already been infected before 10 March (Axon et al., 2023). Despite attempts to prevent the spread of the virus, such as using hand sanitiser and avoiding physical contact, the choir members sang together in a zig-zag formation, spaced 15 to 25 cm apart, with no open windows or doors. The report concluded that the primary transmission mode was inhaling aerosols in an enclosed space with no ventilation for prolonged periods, resulting in widespread secondary transmission (Hamner et al., 2020).

After a choir practice in France on 12 March 2020 (Charlotte, 2020), 19 out of 27 choir members (between the ages of 35 and 86) were diagnosed with COVID-19 within twelve days after the rehearsal. The indoor rehearsal occurred in a non-ventilated space with no masking, and choir members appeared asymptomatic between 2 and 12 March. No index case was identified, and multiple asymptomatic¹⁰ transmission sources could be a strong possibility in this case. Seven were admitted to the hospital, and four were admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU). Members avoided touching but practised at distances of less than 2 metres apart. Findings reiterate that conductors should avoid choir practice during SARS-CoV-2 surging phases and that transmission from asymptomatic cases is a critical issue and challenge in effective COVID-19 control (Charlotte, 2020).

⁹ An 'index case' is the first reported case of the disease diagnosed by a clinician or epidemiologist in a community; a 'primary case' is the first person in the population who gets the disease from exposure and might not be the index case; 'case zero' is the first human infected by a disease (El-Gilany, 2021).

¹⁰ When a person does not present signs or symptoms of disease, infection, or illness (*Merriam-Webster*, n.d.).

In the Netherlands, several members of the Concertgebouw Choir fell ill after participating in a series of rehearsals between 25 February and 7 March 2020, as well as a performance on 8 March (McKie, 2020; O’Keeffe, 2020; Van der Lint, 2020). Out of the 130 members, 103 reported being sick. On 25 February, the entire choir rehearsed, just two days before the first case of COVID-19 was reported. During the dress rehearsal on 7 March, 15 members reported being sick and did not attend. Choir members were spaced out during the rehearsal, but they socialised and lined up closely during the coffee break. On the day of the performance, an additional 30 choristers fell ill and were unable to perform. Surprisingly, no audience members reported being sick after the concert, indicating no widespread transmission among the audience. Unfortunately, one choir member and three choristers' partners died later (O’Keeffe, 2020). Similarly, many members of the Voices of Yorkshire choir and 50 members of the Berlin Cathedral Choir contracted the virus after rehearsals in March (McKie, 2020).

A study investigating the circumstances at four church services over two consecutive days in Australia in July 2020 (Katelaris et al., 2021) found that twelve choristers among 508 attendees may have contracted the virus from a single chorister. During an hour-long service, the index source sang at least fifteen metres apart from other choristers. Findings suggest that it cannot be ruled out that transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus can occur over distances further than two metres.

After the suspension of choir practices in July 2020, they resumed in the Netherlands. A study investigating six choir events in September and October 2020 (Shah et al., 2021) found that choristers were infected in at least five of the six events, and a possible index case could be identified in four of the five outbreaks. Rehearsals took place in well-ventilated spaces, but wearing masks was not compulsory. Choristers were seated in a zig-zag formation, less than 1.5 metres apart. The investigation found that singing itself could increase the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission through airborne transmission (Shah et al., 2021) and that no specific transmission pathway could be identified as the source of transmission.

Media reports (Kim et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2020; Sang-Hun, 2020; Shin et al., 2020) described an interesting case in South Korea, in which members of the secretive Shincheonji Church of Jesus contracted the coronavirus after church meetings during the first weeks of February 2020. Worshippers sat packed together on the floor, wearing no masks or

safety glasses, singing and vocalising loudly, reiterating the preacher's message by shouting 'amen' loudly after every sentence uttered by the pastor. Followers were required to attend church even when ill. On Saturday, 15 February 2020, the number of cases soared to 346, and more than 1,250 church members reported potential symptoms (Sang-Hun, 2020). By Monday, 20 February 2020, more than 833 confirmed cases were connected to church members and reported cases doubled daily for the following weeks in South Korea (Kim et al., 2021; Kuhn, 2020; Shin et al., 2020). By 25 March 2020, more than 5,080 members tested positive (Shin et al., 2020). The virus spread to all the major cities in the country. In response, the government closed all public places, including schools, community centres, nursing homes and social events. Flights were limited, and people were advised to avoid schools and workplaces and to self-quarantine if they experienced respiratory symptoms. Following a thorough investigation, authorities determined that the index case may have been a woman who presented to a small hospital in Daegu on 7 February with a sore throat. The next day, she attended a service at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, where at least 1,000 members were in attendance. She only agreed to be tested on Tuesday, 11 February, and tested positive for COVID-19 on 18 February. Significantly, South Korea did not go into lockdown but focused on aggressively testing for COVID-19, contact tracing and testing, and encouraged self-isolation. In this scenario, the virus spread was contained more quickly than in other countries with stricter lockdown regulations.

Research conducted by Jeong et al. (2020) has revealed that South Korea has demonstrated superior outcomes in the containment and prevention of COVID-19 compared to the rest of the world. Instead of relying on traditional measures for infectious disease containment, the Korean government utilised knowledge gained from previous outbreaks of MERS and SARS-CoV-1, adopting proactive measures such as testing and case-finding, contact tracing, rapid isolation, risk communication, civil society mobilisation, and innovation. Contrary to many other countries, they did not implement widespread travel restrictions except for arrivals from Wuhan, China, in line with the International Health Regulations (IHR) of the WHO, which proved to be highly effective (Jeong et al., 2020).

In retrospect, the large scale of suspended choral activities worldwide could have been prevented if more information had been available on how to contain and prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus effectively (Axon et al., 2023; Jeong et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Transmission pathways for SARS-CoV-2 during singing

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, researchers found that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is mainly transmitted from person to person through large respiratory droplets, small respiratory droplets, aerosols, fomites, or contact transmission, as well as asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021; O’Keeffe, 2020). The viral load and measurable carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in rehearsal spaces can increase the risk of infection during choral and social activities.

2.2.3.1 *Transmission through large respiratory droplets*

The primary mode of transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is considered to be through respiratory droplets generated during sneezing, coughing or respiration, which primarily spread through prolonged close contact (within 1 metre) with an infectious person (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020; Moss, 2020; National Institutes of Health, 2023; World Health Organization, 2021). Available data (Bahl et al., 2021; Echternach et al., 2021) show that large respiratory droplets (particles larger than 5 microns–5 µm to 100 µm), possibly containing infectious droplets, fall to the ground within seconds, within a distance of about 1.5 m after dispersion (Bahl et al., 2020, 2021; Echternach et al., 2021; Naunheim et al., 2021). To contain respiratory droplets, effective measures include physical distancing, mask wearing, and covering coughs and sneezes. Recent research into the airflow during singing shows that the transmission range of droplets does not exceed 1.2 metres (Becher et al., 2021). Therefore, maintaining a distance of more than 1.2 metres while singing is considered safe to prevent the transmission of large droplets. Several studies concluded that the wearing of masks is effective in reducing droplet transmission rates during singing (Bahl et al., 2020; Echternach et al., 2021; Kniesburgs et al., 2021; Tupper et al., 2020; Westphalen et al., 2021). Transmission via expelled smaller particles and aerosols can be reduced by wearing tight-fitting masks, but Kniesburgs et al. (2021) found that masks are uncomfortable during singing and that effective ventilation could lower the risk of infection if singers sing without masks. Furthermore, a study examining the impact of wearing masks on six groups of five singers each from two German boys’ choirs aged 7-16 found that masks influenced audibility and that more experienced singers were the least affected by the distance from each other. However, experience, musical development,

and age had a greater impact on the quality of the performance than the distancing measures (Kirsch et al., 2026).

2.2.3.2 *Transmission via smaller droplets and aerosols during singing*

Several studies found that transmission via respiratory aerosols or smaller particles (smaller than 5 µm) produced by breathing, speaking, shouting or singing could be an important route of infection (Anderson et al., 2020; Anfinrud et al., 2020; Buonanno et al., 2020; Fears et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021; Morawska et al., 2020; Stadnytskyi et al., 2020; Van Doremalen et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that small aerosols can remain suspended in the air longer than larger droplets. This can lead to the transmission of infections over both short and long distances, particularly in enclosed spaces (Liu et al., 2017; Morawska et al., 2020). Studies have shown that SARS-CoV-2 can remain viable for several hours in crowded, enclosed and poorly ventilated spaces, thereby increasing the risk of infection during prolonged contact (Fears et al., 2020; Van Doremalen et al., 2020). To prevent the spread of infection, several studies recommend limiting interaction in smaller groups and holding choir rehearsals in well-ventilated spaces for shorter periods (Echternach et al., 2021; Fears et al., 2020; Kniesburges et al., 2021; Tupper et al., 2020; Van Doremalen et al., 2020).

2.2.3.3 *Indirect transmission of SARS-CoV-2 through contact with fomites (contaminated surfaces)*

Another potential mode of transmission can occur when touching one's eyes, mouth or nose after contact with droplets that contain the virus. These droplets can contaminate surfaces and hands, spreading the virus to others. To prevent fomite transmission, singers should refrain from sharing sheet music, microphones or touching surfaces frequently touched, such as door handles (Bahl et al., 2020; Echternach et al., 2021; Naunheim et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021). It is crucial to maintain good hygiene practices and regularly clean and disinfect surfaces to avoid contamination (Anderson et al., 2020; Miller & Srebric, 2022; Spede & Weaver, 2023; Van Doremalen et al., 2020).

2.2.3.4 *Asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission*

The primary pathways of transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus have been challenging to understand because of asymptomatic transmission, where the virus is transmitted by

a person showing no symptoms, and pre-symptomatic transmission, where the virus is transmitted during the incubation phase before a person shows symptoms (Gandhi et al., 2020; Heneghan et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2020; Rothe et al., 2020). The exact infection rate is unknown, but studies indicate that 5% to 80% of SARS-CoV-2 infections may be asymptomatic (Heneghan et al., 2020). A study by He et al. (2020) estimates that 44% of infections occurred while the index case was pre-symptomatic and that infection could occur 2 or 3 days before symptoms start. Furthermore, it has been discovered that not all cluster outbreaks of COVID-19 can be traced back to a single source of infection (Axon et al., 2023; Charlotte, 2020; Naunheim et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2021) and for example that there could have been more undetected infectious (asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic) transmitters present during the Skagit Valley outbreak (Axon et al., 2023) and the outbreak in France (Charlotte, 2020). Studies have shown that during the initial outbreak in China, more than 86% of all infections were undocumented before 23 January 2020 (Li et al., 2020). Furthermore, the transmission rate of undocumented infections was 55%, while undocumented infections were the source of 79% of documented cases, explaining the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 in China (Backer et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). To effectively control the spread of the disease, it is essential to implement measures such as testing, self-isolation for those who test positive, limiting group sizes, reducing social contacts, maintaining safe distances, and wearing masks in public places or during choir rehearsals (Manitoba Health, 2021; Minnesota Department of Health, 2021; O’Keeffe, 2020; Spede & Weaver, 2023).

2.2.3.5 *Higher emission rates during singing*

Higher aerosol emission rates could increase the risk of airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2. Several studies have analysed the emission rate of exhaled respiratory particles during singing and speech (Alsved et al., 2020; Bahl et al., 2021; Gregson et al., 2021; Mürbe et al., 2020, 2021; Richter et al., 2021; Schijven et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021). The research indicates that singing generates more respiratory aerosol particles and droplets than talking, and the number of exhaled particles increases with song volume (Alsved et al., 2020; Gregson et al., 2021; Mürbe et al., 2021). Singing in languages with louder consonants, such as German or Italian, or with explosive sounds, like rap-singing, leads to higher aerosol emissions (Craft, 2021; Richter et al., 2021), while the fine aerosols produced by singing or speech could have a higher SARS-CoV-2 viral load than droplets and could pose a greater risk for contamination (Coleman

et al., 2021). A recent study in Germany found that a higher percentage of singers contracted the virus while singing than orchestral players or the control group did, making choir activities a greater transmission risk than orchestral activities (Berghöfer et al., 2022). The studies primarily focus on data collected from adults. However, five related studies suggest that younger children and adolescents emit fewer aerosols while singing, thereby reducing the risk of infection during singing compared with adults (Good et al., 2021; Heavey et al., 2020; Mürbe et al., 2020, 2021; Riediker & Morawska, 2020).

Airborne transmission of small particles (less than 5 µm) containing the SARS-CoV-2 virus can occur over distances greater than 2 metres, and prolonged exposure to an infected person can still result in infection after 15 minutes or more. Singing activities are considered a higher risk because of the aggressive expelling of respiratory droplets and aerosols that can hang in the air for hours (Coleman et al., 2021; Gregson et al., 2021; Minnesota Department of Health, 2021; O’Keeffe, 2020).

Researchers found a strong correlation between aerosol emission and exhaled CO₂ levels in a room (Good et al., 2021; Schade et al., 2021), which can be a measurable and inexpensive indication of the possible contamination probability within a given space. The German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV) considers a CO₂ level of up to 1000 ppm (parts per million) to be safe for air quality. However, Nusseck (2020) recommends a CO₂ level of 800 ppm as the optimal level for safe choir rehearsals. Based on studies investigating the CO₂ levels in rehearsal rooms and concert halls, researchers recommended the following approaches to reduce the risk of infection:

- maintaining a safe distance of at least 2 metres during singing (Echternach et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2021);
- wearing well-fitting face masks (Echternach et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2020; Kniesburges et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021);
- rehearsing and performing in well-ventilated spaces, reducing rehearsal duration and the number of choristers to prevent CO₂ levels exceeding 800 ppm (Bauer et al., 2022; Hartmann et al., 2020).

2.2.3.6 *General precautions and recommendations for singers*

Choral activities can increase the risk of infection, especially when vocalists are unvaccinated or vaccination status is unknown. Specific recommendations can be

followed to prevent this. These include limiting the number of singers in rehearsals, maintaining a physical distance of more than 2 metres between singers, covering coughs and sneezes, using well-fitted face masks or coverings during rehearsals if possible, frequently washing or sanitising hands, avoiding social behaviour such as hugs or sharing equipment, using well-ventilated or outdoor rehearsal or performance spaces, and limiting rehearsal times to under 50 minutes (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020; Manitoba Health, 2021; Minnesota Department of Health, 2021; National Institutes of Health, 2023; Vance et al., 2023). Temperature screening can identify potential infections, encouraging prompt testing and isolation for positive cases (Vance et al., 2023). Keeping contact groups small and consistent (bubbling) can also be an effective precautionary measure (Tupper et al., 2020).

Research showed that vaccination rates among students participating in music programmes and choirs in the USA in 2021 remained low. Masking is the most common mitigation, but outdoor rehearsals are still considered the safest option (Miller & Srebric, 2022; Spede & Weaver, 2023). Physical distances of one metre were acceptable from 2022, and shorter rehearsals in indoor spaces are advised. With good ventilation, prolonged rehearsals of up to 50 minutes are possible (Miller & Srebric, 2022; Tupper et al., 2020; UK Government, 2022). However, mask-wearing is not mandatory. These precautions remained important after COVID-19 to minimise the risk of viral infections during choral activities (UK Government, 2022).

2.2.3.7 *Summary of where and how the SARS-CoV-2 virus is transmitted during singing*

Taking into account the risk of aerosolisation and droplet transmission while singing during the COVID-19 pandemic was important. However, this risk could be reduced by adhering to the necessary guidelines. These include conducting virtual rehearsals or performances if possible, wearing masks, reducing the size of choirs, performing outdoors, ensuring proper ventilation, maintaining social distancing, shortening rehearsal times, which can limit the viral load and CO₂ emissions in rehearsal spaces, regularly cleaning commonly touched surfaces, washing hands frequently, avoiding social contact with others, and conducting temperature screenings. Proactive measures such as prompt COVID-19 antigen testing, isolation, contact tracing, communication, and mobilisation could contain the virus's spread more effectively.

2.2.4 Disruptions in the functioning of choirs during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for choir conductors, disrupting in-person and online choir practices. Choirs worldwide faced restrictions on singing activities and performances, with many having to suspend rehearsals, transition to online activities during lockdowns, or adopt hybrid instruction, combining in-person and online choir practices (Cusworth, 2021; Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Price et al., 2021; Rieker & Apanovitch-Leites, 2021; Rossouw, 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020).

2.2.4.1 *Managing disruptions in in-person and hybrid choral activities during COVID-19*

After the first lockdowns, school choirs in Canada, the USA, Norway and Sweden could resume practising if they were able to adhere to strict health and safety measures (Ashley, 2020; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Spede & Weaver, 2023). In Canada, 91% of school choirs could not adapt to recommended restrictions and were unable to participate in singing activities, and consequently, 93% of performances were cancelled (Morin & Mahmud, 2021). Similarly, 33% of choirs in the USA stopped rehearsing up to August 2021 (Spede & Weaver, 2023), while school choirs in the UK, China, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, South Africa, Turkey and Latvia reverted to online choir practices during the first year of the pandemic (Akarsu, 2021; Alonderè, 2020; Cheng & Lam, 2021; Daubney & Fautley, 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Grushka et al., 2021; Martinec, 2021; Rossouw, 2021; Schiavio et al., 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2022). The main challenge was the inability to sing synchronously because of internet latency, resulting in a loss of ensemble cohesion, blend, balance, and real-time interaction (Martinec, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2022).

However, the academic literature on the way that choirs adapted is limited. Four media reports (Inside Croydon, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022) describe how the Croydon Philharmonic Choir managed the abrupt suspension of in-person rehearsals in May 2021 after the UK government changed choir restrictions. The choir had spent months preparing for the rehearsal, but the new restrictions made it impossible. It was not until September 2021 that the choir could return to their original rehearsal space and perform in-person in concerts from November 2021 (Inside Croydon, 2021b, 2022).

The Croydon Male Choir adapted to COVID-19 regulations by utilising a combination of online and adapted in-person rehearsals (hybrid approach) by conducting Zoom rehearsals in four separate voice groups and holding outdoor rehearsals in groups of six at a local pub's outdoor space. They also went on circular six-mile walks while singing, complying with safety regulations, in and around Croydon. As a result, the choir attracted more members and performed their first concert outdoors at the Oval Tavern in Croydon on 22 August 2021 (Inside Croydon, 2021c). Choirs in the UK were able to perform without restrictions only from 1 April 2022, and the two Croydon choirs collaborated for a festive two-hour-long concert on 18 June 2022, rendering uplifting choral pieces such as "You'll Never Walk Alone" and the "Hallelujah Chorus" (Inside Croydon, 2022).

During the pandemic, many teachers and conductors worldwide lacked financial support from their respective governments and did not always experience job security (Cheng & Lam, 2021; Daubney & Fautley, 2021; Lozano et al., 2023; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Spede & Weaver, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020). Choral associations in Europe encouraged choir management to support choir conductors to ensure the financial sustainability of choirs (Ashley, 2020). The Austrian government's funding of the Vienna Boys' Choir during and after the pandemic is a recent example of government support when the choir suffered a loss of income as a result of the many cancelled concerts (Associated Press, 2023). In Norway and Sweden, two boys' choirs were able to continue rehearsing in larger rented spaces, as they were supported by either the government or a church to comply with stricter rehearsal regulations, whilst other choirs could not rent additional rehearsal spaces (Ashley, 2020).

2.2.5 The development and management of the virtual choirs and rehearsals during COVID-19

Bendall (2020, p. 74) defines an online or virtual choir as "a multimodal creative product combining aspects of the methodology and form of choral music performance with the materialities of media creation". The virtual choir contrasts with the in-person choir, which is defined as synchronous singing in a group that shares the same physical time and space. It can be seen as simultaneously a singular unit and a "collective body of participants" (Bendall, 2020, p. 70). The development of virtual choirs, popularised by Eric Whitacre's virtual choir, initiated alternative digital choir productions and rehearsals during the pandemic (Friedman, 2020; Schultz, 2021; Spitfire Audio, 2018). However, the

techniques employed in Eric Whitacre's first extensive virtual-choir project, *Lux Arumque* (2009), were developed over an extended period. They incorporated the digitisation of music performance, performers' interest in new forms of music-making, and the active development of inclusive art practices and art therapy¹¹ (Cayari, 2020; Fu, 2023). The phenomenon of virtual projects evolved into hybrid projects that integrated remote performers or recordings with "live" choral performances (Daffern et al., 2018; Fu, 2023; Price et al., 2021; Rinn, 2023; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023).

Technological aspects of virtual choirs have been extensively studied, including creating a virtual choir and analysing technical means and software (Alonderè, 2020; Cusworth, 2021; Daffern et al., 2018; Dowson et al., 2021; Eren & Öztuğ, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Interkultur, 2021; Lamm, 2020; Mróz et al., 2022; Sublet, 2020), leading to a surge in virtual projects utilising various technical models. Most choirs utilised a combination of three technical models of the virtual choir, including multitrack recordings of individual solos merged into a general choral sound, live broadcasting where people are connected through social networks, and live teleconferences where singing and communicating happen in real-time using various programs ranging from Zoom to WhatsApp rehearsals with pre-recorded tracks (Daffern et al., 2018; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Price et al., 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023).

Numerous studies confirmed that the virtual choir provided an alternative to in-person choral activities, but identified technological difficulties with latency, loss in audio quality, connectivity, time constraints in maintaining transformative teaching, and digital fatigue barriers in implementing virtual and online choral activities (Akarsu, 2021; Cheng & Lam, 2021; Daubney & Fautley, 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Martinec, 2021; Milliren, 2022; Rossouw, 2021; Schiavio et al., 2021). Research further highlighted that inconsistent internet access, inadequate equipment, and varying levels of digital literacy reduced instructional effectiveness and increased the workload of teachers and students (Milliren, 2022; Yildiz et al., 2021). However, aside from the time-consuming technological

¹¹ The possibilities of virtual choirs were explored and incorporated in telehealth strategies where patients with medical conditions such as dementia, spinal injuries or depression could not attend in-person choirs before the COVID-19 pandemic.

preparations for virtual rehearsals and projects, the logistical benefits of virtual choirs included eliminating travel time to rehearsal venues and reducing resource use (e.g., paper) (Daffern et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021).

Online rehearsals could also not be used to learn and sing synchronously as a choir (Daffern et al., 2018; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Martinec, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2022; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023). Researchers also found that the aesthetic and artistic elements of live choral performances were difficult to realise in virtual projects (Fu, 2023; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Levstek et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2023; Price et al., 2021; Rinn, 2023; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020; Trycieckyj, 2022; Wardani & Suyajai, 2023). Furthermore, the inability to sing synchronously because of internet latency resulted in a loss of ensemble cohesion, blend, balance, and real-time interaction (Martinec, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2022). Various studies emphasised that virtual choirs were temporarily satisfactory but not a long-term solution for group singing (Cusworth, 2021; Daffern et al., 2021; Theorell et al., 2020; Trycieckyj, 2022; Wardani & Suyajai, 2023).

On the other hand, virtual choirs created temporary opportunities to engage choristers creatively (Alonderé, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021), foster collaboration (Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021), and develop personal and practical skills (Alonderé, 2020; Daffern et al., 2018; Dowson et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Rieker & Apanovitch-Leites, 2022; Rossouw, 2021; Skinner, 2023; Shaw & Mayo, 2022; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023; Trycieckyj, 2022). Choir singing is ultimately a social activity, as evidenced by research on the socio-psychological aspects of choir activities, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2.6 The well-being of conductors and choristers during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, choirs worldwide suspended their regular activities, which highlighted the importance of the social and psychological aspects of choral singing (Cusworth, 2021; Daffern et al., 2021; Theorell et al., 2020; Trycieckyj, 2022). Many music teachers with choirs reported experiencing digital fatigue, reduced motivation, and inefficient online lessons among students during the first lockdowns (Akarsu, 2021; Miksza et al., 2021; Yildiz et al., 2021). In Hong Kong, music teachers experienced anxiety and pressure to meet parents' expectations while adapting to online teaching

(Cheng & Lam, 2021). In the USA, music teachers had a lower sense of well-being and also felt that their tuition was inefficient during the pandemic (Miksza et al., 2021). A study in the Netherlands also found that students experienced learning loss during lockdowns (Engzell et al., 2021). Additionally, a comparative study of choirs in Norway and Sweden found that Norwegian choristers reported greater loss of social aspects of singing than their Swedish counterparts, who experienced greater loss of flow and aesthetic experiences, as well as of the physical exercise of singing (Theorell et al., 2020).

The literature shows that choristers experienced uncertainty, fear, and anxiety during the first lockdowns and were concerned that they might contract the virus, lose their jobs, and be unable to sustain choral singing, while elderly singers feared that they might not sing together again in their lifetime (Trycieckyj, 2022; Youngblood et al., 2021). Choristers experienced lower levels of well-being as a result of the isolation (Lozano et al., 2023; Youngblood et al., 2021) but as the pandemic progressed, they started to adapt to circumstances, utilising choral activities, including adapted, hybrid, virtual choir and balcony singing as coping mechanisms, improving their general well-being, creating a sense of cohesion and reducing loneliness (Corvo & De Caro, 2020; Ferreri et al., 2021; Foulkes, 2021; Granot et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2023; MacDonald & Zumbansen, 2023; MacDonald, 2021; Trycieckyj, 2022; Van der Merwe et al., 2021; Van der Sandt & Coppi, 2021).

After the first lockdowns, choirs resumed rehearsals with restrictions, but members often found them meaningless and unsatisfying because they could not engage with audiences, perform at concerts, or interact with each other during rehearsals. Therefore, they also experienced a loss of connection and belonging, which contributed to a loss of sense of meaning and joy (Cusworth, 2021; Lozano et al., 2023; Youngblood et al., 2021). Similarly, conductors of two boys' choirs in Norway and Sweden found that boys lost interest in choir singing when they could not actively engage during rehearsals and performances (Ashley, 2020). Similarly, research by Martinho et al. (2023) found that choristers experienced reduced interpersonal interaction under restrictive conditions.

Initially, choristers were encouraged to attend online rehearsals, which were an affordable and flexible alternative for choir continuity¹² (Daffern et al., 2018; Price et al., 2021; Trycieckyj, 2022; Wardani, 2022; Wardani & Suyajai, 2023). Conductors who moved rehearsals to online platforms aimed to combat isolation and fear of social isolation (Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Grushka et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023), creating a sense of normalcy and connectedness when F2F rehearsals stopped (Price et al., 2021; Trycieckyj, 2022). Choirs in Switzerland reverted to individual online lessons and virtual projects to keep choral activities going during lockdowns (T. Stüchelberger, personal communication, February 14, 2024). Conductors found it challenging to teach choristers an “empathetic ability”, including listening to each other to achieve blending and balance in the choir, an ability to interpret the conductors’ facial expressions and gestures, and experiencing collective energy (Wardani, 2022). Stüchelberger (personal communication, February 14, 2024) observed that choristers did not know how to engage with the audience and present themselves on stage when unrestricted performances resumed, since some of the new choir members never had an opportunity to perform ‘live’ to an audience.

Galván and Clauhs (2020) found that conductors needed to lower the standard of choral works to adapt to online learning, while singers in other choirs were encouraged to choose their own repertoire for virtual projects, gaining new technological skills in video editing and live broadcasting, contributing to a sense of autonomy, agency, personal growth and teamwork (Price et al., 2021). Problems with technology led to opportunities to improve adaptability and resilience, as well as improved management skills when choristers were determined to continue with choral-inspired activities (Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021; Rieker & Apanovitch-Leites, 2021; Rossouw, 2021).

Evidence that emerged suggested that virtual choirs unite and connect singers (Alonderé, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021; Fu, 2023; Granot et al., 2021; Paparo, 2022; Trycieckyj, 2022),

¹² Choir continuity refers to “any potential to maintain the choir as a social group and a group of musical activity” (Wardani, 2022, p. 108).

and that there are no boundaries in the geographical location of choir members (Alonderé, 2020; Dowson et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021; Wardani, 2022). Balcony singing also contributed to cohesion and connection through the use of social media (Corvo & De Caro, 2020; Ferreri et al., 2021; Fink et al., 2021; Granot et al., 2021; MacDonald, 2021; Van der Sandt & Coppi, 2021).

Literature comparing virtual choir practices with in-person choir practices conveyed the idea that singers in a virtual setting could feel less connected, since they experience no physical interaction, embodiment or synchronic movement (Draper & Dingle, 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Levstek et al., 2021). On the other hand, choirs with restricted social interaction and social distancing also felt disengaged (Ashley, 2020; Lozano et al., 2023; Youngblood et al., 2021). Singers also lacked a sense of ownership with the team and found it challenging to sing and record themselves individually without the support of other singers (Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Wardani, 2022). Emerging studies indicate that while virtual choirs can help maintain a sense of connection among participants, this connection is not as strong as what is experienced in in-person choral activities (Cusworth, 2021; Draper & Dingle, 2021; Levstek et al., 2021). Additionally, virtual choirs created safe spaces and new ways to foster connection, improve self-efficacy, build confidence and break down barriers, especially regarding patients struggling with anxiety, depression or other socially isolating health problems (Foulkes, 2021; MacDonald & Zumbansen, 2023; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023).

Numerous studies pointed out that singing skills improved with online projects and that shy singers or those with disabilities gained confidence since they did not need to rely on others, could practise their parts individually, and were not necessarily heard during online rehearsals (Dowson et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021; Trycieckyj, 2022; Wardani, 2022). Recording isolated performances also provided opportunities for reflection and self-assessment, and choristers continued assessing themselves when they returned to F2F rehearsals (MacDonald, 2021; MacDonald & Zumbansen, 2023; Trycieckyj, 2022).

Choristers experienced a significant reduction in stress because of a strong group dynamic and sense of belonging in F2F choral settings (Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022). Both F2F and virtual choirs contributed to an increase in positive mood (Draper & Dingle,

2021; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022), while members of virtual choirs gained new skills, experiencing positive growth and self-development (Fancourt & Steptoe, 2019; Foulkes, 2021; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Levstek et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021; Rossouw, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2022; Skinner, 2023; Wardani, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted choir practices globally, resulting in a range of adaptations—ranging from adhering to evolving health recommendations to managing financial sustainability and finding innovative ways to engage choir members during restrictions. Virtual choirs and rehearsals contributed to new rehearsal and performance practices and innovation, but could not replace the aesthetic experience and social connection of in-person choirs.

The next chapter discusses the research design, concentrating on the research approach and the strategies employed in the study.

Chapter 3: Research design

This chapter outlines the research design adopted to address the research question, highlighting the underlying philosophical assumptions and the selected research approach. It emphasises the role of the researcher, describes the study's context in detail, and introduces the participants.

Moreover, the chapter explains the case study as a research strategy, detailing the processes of data collection, analysis and presentation, as well as considerations of trustworthiness and the ethical implications. Additionally, it incorporates systems thinking as a complementary approach to analysing and interpreting the data. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of various elements of choir practices and how these relationships evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Research design

The research design guides and frames the study. It encompasses the entire process of inquiry: establishing the purpose of the project, defining the research problem, formulating the research question, selecting a strategy of inquiry, collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, and ultimately presenting the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). Qualitative research acknowledges the researcher's history, personal views as well as those of others, and takes into account ethical and political issues that are relevant to the inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In a constructivist paradigm, meaning is socially constructed by individuals in a real-life situation within a specific time and context, providing a comprehensive description and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Geertz, 1973; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Patton, 2014; Ridder, 2017).

I utilised an explanatory intrinsic case study since this study focused on a specific interesting case (Rule & John, 2011), the choir practices at DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, explanatory case studies aim to explain what happens or why it happens in a specific case, generating new theory: "This kind of study often tests existing theory or generates new theory" (Rule & John, 2011, p. 8). Therefore, this explanatory intrinsic case study aims to develop a theory explaining the dynamics of choir practices

during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question for this study is: How did choir staff at the DBCS experience choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic? This research question suggests that the inquiry is a qualitative study addressing a social or human problem during a specific real-life situation during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, the inquiry illuminated the meaning that participants ascribed to their experiences of choir practices in their naturalistic setting at the DBCS. This study aimed to provide detailed interpretations and descriptions of participants' social interactions related to choir practices, offering a comprehensive, particularistic description of the phenomenon. Reality thus emerged through the participants' perspectives and was reported accordingly. The following section describes the researcher's role, the setting, and the participants.

3.2 The role of the researcher

I have been an accompanist and music teacher at DBCS since July 2015. I was appointed as head of music in January 2023. While at the school, I witnessed the outbreak and spread of SARS-CoV-2. As explained in Chapter One, my colleagues and I were anxious as we followed the initial media reports and experienced immediate lockdowns, disruptions of school terms, and changing rules and regulations that came with the pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, we faced sudden lockdowns in a remote wilderness area, financial insecurity, and the need to create innovative online lessons and sustain a social presence. We also experienced disruptions and changes in choir practices as well as gaining a greater appreciation of the value of a close-knit community during the lockdown.

After restrictions were lifted, we observed the impact that social isolation and the disruption of social practices had. Some of my colleagues faced financial and personal difficulties. Choristers found it challenging to adapt to a new social environment at home, where they had to learn new technical skills for online lessons and had limited in-person social interaction with peers or teachers. Parents had to adjust their work schedules and routines frequently. When back at school, students had to adapt to a structured routine and stricter school rules. This disciplined school environment contrasted with the lack of rules at home for some choir members who had returned home during lockdowns.

I framed and conducted the qualitative inquiry. My experience and institutional knowledge helped me to conceptualise the study and determine the goals, research question, and strategy. I was the primary instrument in collecting data by conducting interviews, making observations, and examining the relevant documents and social media posts to inform the inquiry.

I acknowledged that my own values and biases might influence the study, which made self-reflexivity essential. Therefore, I invited participants with diverse functions and views to portray different perspectives, minimising potential bias arising from my dual role as researcher and member of the institution. I did not attempt to influence participants' views, and I sought to illuminate their various perspectives. Moreover, I discuss the values that shape the narrative, including my own and those of the participants. Using a constructivist inductive approach, I aimed to capture the richness of data without being limited by pre-existing theories. My research also shed light on some general aspects of choir practices that changed during the coronavirus outbreak. These elements may illuminate the role of group dynamics in choir practices, the benefits of face-to-face (F2F) rehearsals, the various ways of implementing performance practices, the impact of recruitment and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, and other related aspects.

3.2.1 Context of the case

The Drakensberg Boys Choir School (DBCS) is situated in the Champagne Valley, near Winterton, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. It lies on the border of the uKhahlamba World Heritage site. Established in 1967, the school has made significant contributions to the development of South African choral music under the leadership of various conductors. The institution aims to provide a holistic education that prepares boys for leadership and life, focusing on music, academics, sports and cultural enrichment within a Christian environment. Graduates of this institution have pursued careers in a variety of fields, including music (from professional opera singers and pianists to Grammy Award-winning composers and artists), the arts, engineering, medicine, education, law, architecture, computer technology, accounting and many others.

The DBCS relies on income from school fees, concerts, and performances as its primary sources of revenue. Many students receive sponsorship for their school fees from donors. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some parents were unable to pay school fees, resulting in a decline in chorister numbers. As a result of the country's financial

crisis, staff salaries were reduced from April 2020. It was not until November 2023 that staff salaries were fully restored to their pre-COVID levels. Furthermore, teachers did not receive any salary increments for four years since 2019. These financial strains led to the departure of more than 25 staff members from the DBCS between March 2020 and December 2023. The school had to fill some positions through new appointments, while the core of the existing staff who remained had to take on an additional workload.

The pandemic significantly impacted the number of students at the DBCS. Fifteen boys left in 2020, and between December 2021 and January 2022, twenty more boys left, resulting in an average annual loss of ten students. The school struggled to recruit new students due to the inability to give concerts or visit schools. The school had to find new strategies to survive financially without government aid. By the end of 2023, the number of boys had declined from 117 to 63, putting the school under financial strain.

3.2.2 Participants

For this intrinsic case study, I purposefully selected 15 participants who could offer diverse and revealing perspectives on their experiences of choir practices at the DBCS throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 12 were willing to share their experiences of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic with me and 3 were therefore excluded from the participant list. All the participants worked with the choir (choir staff), but played diverse roles within the choir's operations. Participants chose their own pseudonyms.

Table 1. List of participants

Pseudonym	Time at DBCS during COVID-19	Role	Study participation
Thomas	2020	Conductor/Director	Online interview
Werner	2021-2024	Conductor/Director	In-person interview
Amelia	2020-2021	New Boys Coordinator/Conductor	In-person interview
Jenny	2020	New Boys Coordinator/Educator	Online interview

Ashley	2020-2024	Accompanist	In-person interview
Freddie	2021-2024	Sound engineer/producer	In-person interview
Coach	2021-2024	Choreographer/boarding	In-person interview
Maureen	2021-2024	Recruitment and social media	In-person interview
Kevin	2021-2024	Executive Head	In-person interview
Zinzan	2020-2021	Executive Head	Email
Nina	2020-2024	Health officer	In-person interview
Marisa	2020-2024	Educator and tour leader	In-person interview

The names of choristers were changed when referred to in quotations of participants for ethical and confidentiality reasons. All parents gave consent in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA).

3.2.3 Research strategy of inquiry

This intrinsic case study was constructed around the goals of the inquiry and the questions of interest (Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). This design aimed to generate particularistic, context-sensitive and in-depth insights into choir practices at the DBCS and did not attempt to generalise the findings (Patton, 2014). The data were comprised of in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, supported by documents, social media posts (including photographs, videos and comments posted on WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram), and my own reflexive notes, which helped to develop

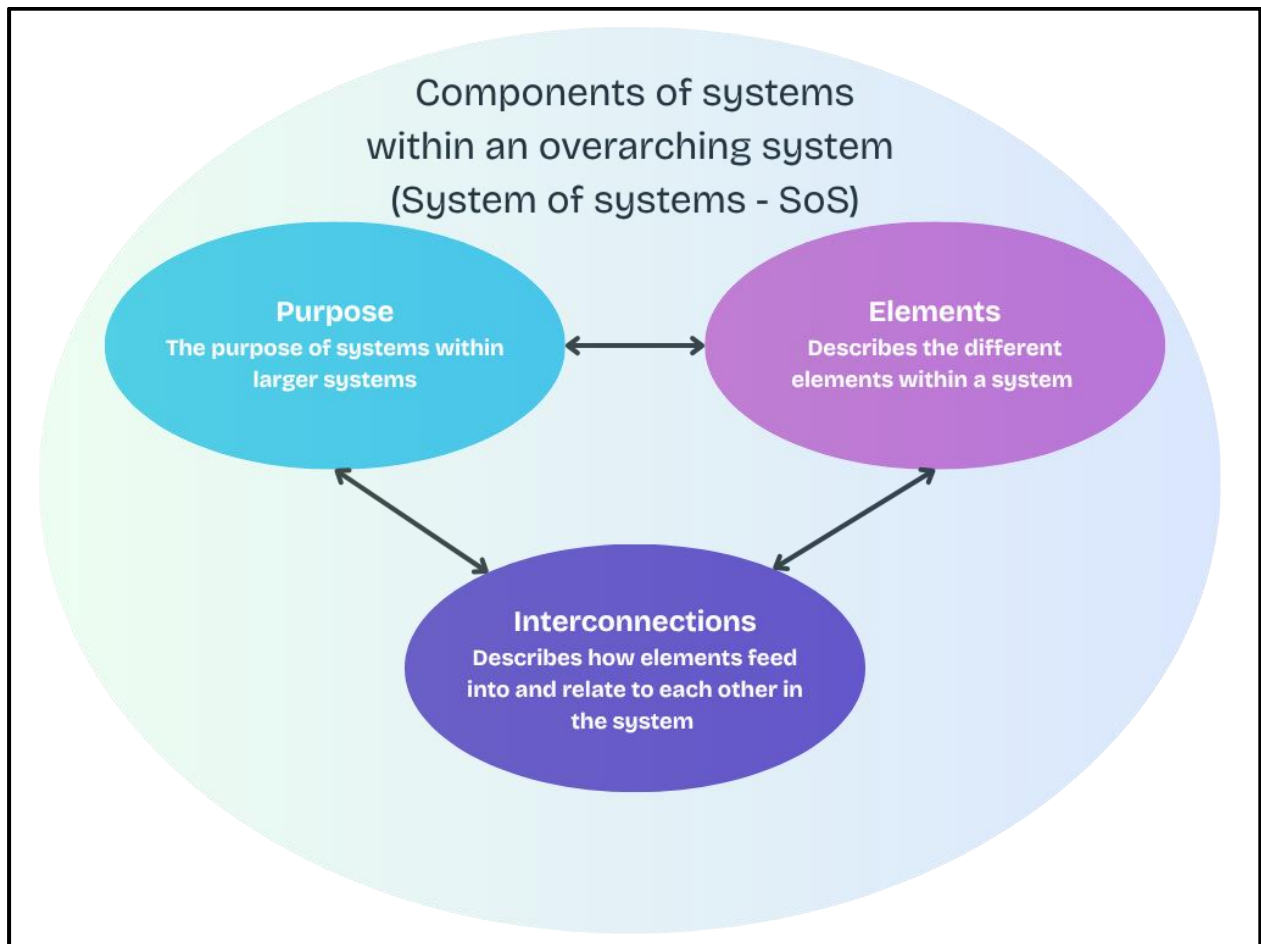
a better understanding of the case. In-depth interviews were conducted in person or via teleconferencing (primarily using Microsoft Teams), as many participants had left the school and were located elsewhere. One participant chose to answer the open-ended questions via email. I utilised the software program TurboScribe to transcribe my interviews from MP3 tracks. Interviews focused on, but were not limited to, the participants' experiences of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The case study focused on the choir staff's experiences of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The choir staff's experiences could include challenges faced by singers and choir staff, adjustments made during rehearsals and performances, teaching methods, choir management, tour protocols, and the way that empathy is expressed during adapted choir practices. The study took into account the timeline of the pandemic, encompassing the sudden lockdowns in 2020, the easing of restrictions in 2021-2022, and the complete lifting of restrictions after June 23 2022, until December 2023. The different periods had varying obstacles that had to be addressed and managed.

Transcribed interviews were analysed and interpreted during an inductive data-gathering and analysis process. This process included familiarising oneself with the data, formulating codes, identifying patterns and placing them into categories and themes, eliminating codes unrelated to the research question, and defining and summarising themes for conceptual clarity. This was followed by writing an analytical narrative that summarised the findings and compared the themes of the inquiry with those in the published literature, thereby developing a theory explaining the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic at the DBCS. To better understand the dynamics of choir practices in this case study, I utilised elements of Systems Theory as introduced by Meadows (2008; see also Dennis, 2017).

Richmond (2006) first introduced the term systems thinking theory (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Concepts in systems thinking theory are based on the principle that the different parts of a system are interrelated and that systems work within the context of other larger networks (Meadows, 2008; Richmond, 2006). Therefore, systems thinking incorporates three key components: elements, interconnections, and the purpose of the system (Arnold & Wade, 2015) in an overarching system (System of systems) as illustrated in Figure 4:

Figure 4: The three components of a system in Systems Thinking Theory, adapted from “The Systems Test” (Arnold & Wade, 2015, p. 3)

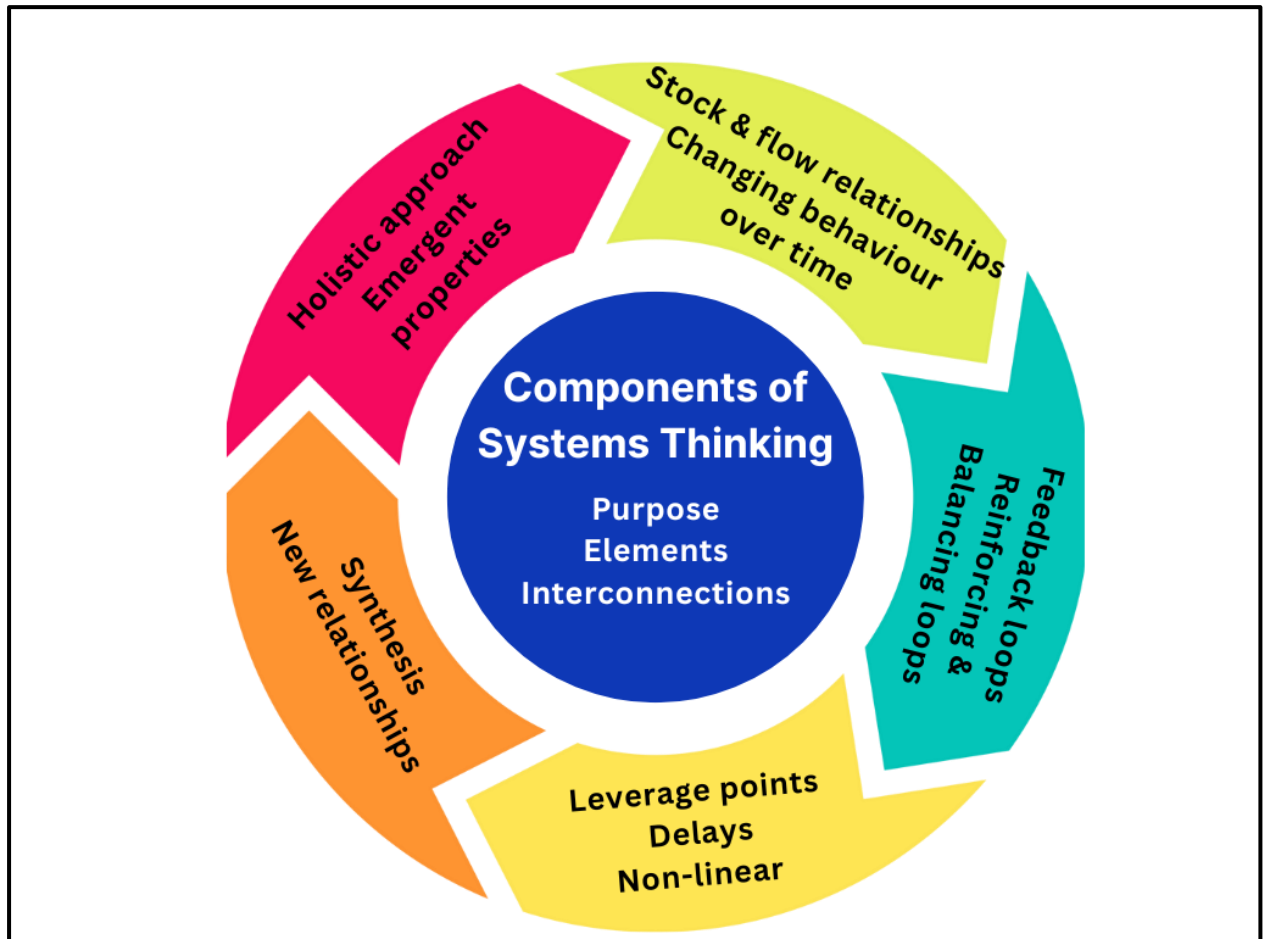


Meadows (2008) breaks down the elements of the system and then reconnects them, showing the interconnectedness between the different elements within the larger system, stating that “a system is more than the sum of its parts” (p. 12). The least visible part of the system is its function or purpose (Meadows, 2008). This approach relies on the changing dynamics among smaller systems within the overall system, which align with the purpose of my study to develop a theory that explains the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Choir practices as a system encompasses more than choir rehearsals and performances; it encompasses a network of relationships among various aspects of choral singing, including touring, recruitment, funding, marketing, social media, training, and social interactions.

Figure 5 illustrates the core concepts of systems thinking, including interconnectedness, elements or “stocks” (Meadows, 2008, p. 22), feedback loops, causality, leverage points and delays, synthesis, emergence, and holism. These relationships among the elements

will inform the development of a theory of choir practices based on staff members' experiences.

Figure 5: Core concepts of Systems Thinking as outlined by Arnold and Wade (2015) and Meadows (2008)



Interconnectedness refers to the interactions among all parts of a system, where each part affects and is affected by others, creating a network of relationships.

Meadows defines “stocks” as “an accumulation of material or information that has built up in a system over time” (Meadows, 2008, p. 188). Stocks represent the changing elements of a system over time, influenced by inflows or outflows that create feedback loops. These feedback loops are causal: they can either amplify changes, known as Positive or Negative Reinforcing Loops (RL), or counteract changes, known as Balancing Loops (BL). If growth is the trend, positive reinforcing loops accelerate it; if decline is the trend, they accelerate decline. Balancing Loops aim to return the system to stability or equilibrium by resisting deviations from a target state, whether such deviations are

constraining or beneficial. Systems Theory emphasises cause-and-effect relations, leading to new, often non-linear dynamics in which small changes in one element can significantly affect others, known as leverage points. Delays also play a crucial role, representing the time lag between a cause and its effect and influencing system behaviour. Synthesis involves the emergence of new relationships among elements, creating new dynamics and a holistic understanding (Abson et al., 2017; Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008). I plan to use visual mapping and flow diagrams in my study to illustrate the dynamics within choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 Trustworthiness

In my study I implemented six validation strategies, as suggested by various authors, to ensure the reliability of my research (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2017). These strategies included acknowledging my subjectivity as a researcher and the participants' multicultural subjectivity, declaring my positionality, triangulation through a multifaceted description of the case, and implementing member checking and peer review to ensure the accuracy and validity of my findings. Additionally, negative case analysis provided a broader perspective on the evidence.

3.3.1 Research ethics

I served as the primary researcher for this study, gathering, transcribing and analysing data while adhering to the protocols established by the NWU Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) (Ethics clearance reference number: NWU-01060-22-A7, see Addendum 3). I obtained written consent from the board, the DBCS management and the participants to conduct the inquiry. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, and their data were not shared with the DBCS, any third parties or the board. Participants' identities were concealed, and interview transcripts were accessible only to examiners. Participants were free to withdraw from the study or decline to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable or distressed, and they received no compensation for their participation.

Participants and the management team could review the findings before the study was submitted, and amendments were made accordingly. I had no authority over the participants, and the outcome of the inquiry did not affect their positions at school.

Participation in the investigation and publication of the findings provided closure for participants regarding their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following chapter highlights and explains the findings of the inquiry.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter addresses the research question: How did the choir staff experience the dynamics of choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys' Choir School (DBCS) during the COVID-19 pandemic? The analysis follows the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), Creswell and Poth (2016) and Miles et al. (2018). The findings explain the evolution and complexities of choral practices during and after the pandemic. The discussion briefly introduces the emerging themes, incorporating metaphorical elements that enhance understanding. This is followed by a detailed discussion of each theme, illustrating the transformation of choir practices at DBCS in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1 The power of metaphor in thematic analysis

Metaphors can make abstract experiences more relatable when identifying themes in a study (Nigbur & Chatfield, 2025; Smith et al., 2022). For this research, the “Dragon” metaphor represents choir practices, capturing its strength, discipline and resilience. Meanwhile, the “Beast” symbolises the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting its disruptive and overwhelming impact on choral activities.

The DBCS, located in South Africa's Drakensberg Mountains, derives its name from this iconic range. The school's emblem, shown in Figure 6, probably draws inspiration from European and Welsh heraldry, where dragons are depicted as winged, horned creatures capable of overcoming adversity. This imagery is deeply intertwined with the school's history, the surrounding cliffs, and its enduring legacy. In this study, the Dragon represents a noble dragon in combat with the COVID-19 virus, the Beast.

Figure 6: Emblem of the DBCS



At DBCS, choir members are affectionately called “**Drakies**” (Little Dragons), and their journey as choristers is known as the “**Drakie experience.**” In folklore, dragons have adversaries known as Ichneumons—creatures that slay dragons (Pfeilschiefter, n.d.). In this study, the metaphor of *the Beast* reflects the pandemic’s role as the Ichneumon, presenting challenges that transformed the dynamics of choir practices.

Through this metaphorical lens, the themes in this chapter cohesively illustrate how the pandemic reshaped choir rehearsals, performances and the sense of unity among staff and choristers. The evolution of these practices not only reflects adaptation at the school but also reinforces the choir community’s resilience.

4.2 Overview of the themes

Seven themes were generated from the data:

- 1: Stepping into the Dragon’s den
- 2: Living the life of a Dragon with the Beast lurking in the shadows (the Drakie experience)
- 3: The first blow of the Beast, stealing the Drakie experience
- 4: Into battle: adapt or die!
- 5: The fear factor: confronting the Beast
- 6: The Dragon’s den: a safe refuge in a chaotic world
- 7: The Beast’s retreat, the rising of the Dragon—battered but unbroken

The themes explored in this thesis are interconnected and reflect the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic and the evolution of choir practices at DBCS during key moments of the crisis. The theme titled 'Stepping into the Dragon's den' describes the environment in which choir practices are embedded at DBCS and provides an overview of the dynamics of choir practices at DBCS and the choir's interaction with the community. It lays the foundation for understanding how routines, rehearsal techniques and operational frameworks ensure the choir's optimal functioning.

'Living the life of a Dragon with the Beast lurking in the shadows'. Set in the days before the first lockdown in 2020, this theme explores the vitality of life at DBCS. Although world news hinted at the appearance of a mysterious flu in China, the choir boys remained engaged with the "Drakie" experience—learning new pieces, performing at concerts, attending conferences, and preparing for two international tours. The choir school was thriving as a vibrant hub balancing boarding life, academic lessons, sports, and music.

'The first blow of the Beast: stealing the Drakie experience'. This theme marks the turning point when COVID-19's presence disrupted the routines of everyday life. Following the first confirmed case in South Africa, all choir and school activities were halted. Crisis management became essential as all choristers returned to their homes across South Africa and Namibia, and the school swiftly transitioned into lockdown. Teachers prepared for online instruction, while choir management focused on digital engagement to maintain community continuity. Elements of choir practices derived from Themes 1 and 2 were adapted to support new strategies for rehearsals, performances, marketing, recruitment and retention.

'Into battle: adapt or die'. As lockdowns introduced "new rules of existence," this theme examines how choir staff adopted innovative strategies. Building on traditional techniques, choir practices evolved to include creativity, global awareness, and inventive, health-conscious rehearsal and performance methods when boys were back at the school and rehearsals were allowed again. This also paves the way for the findings in Theme 7, illustrating how lessons learned during the crisis shaped post-pandemic changes.

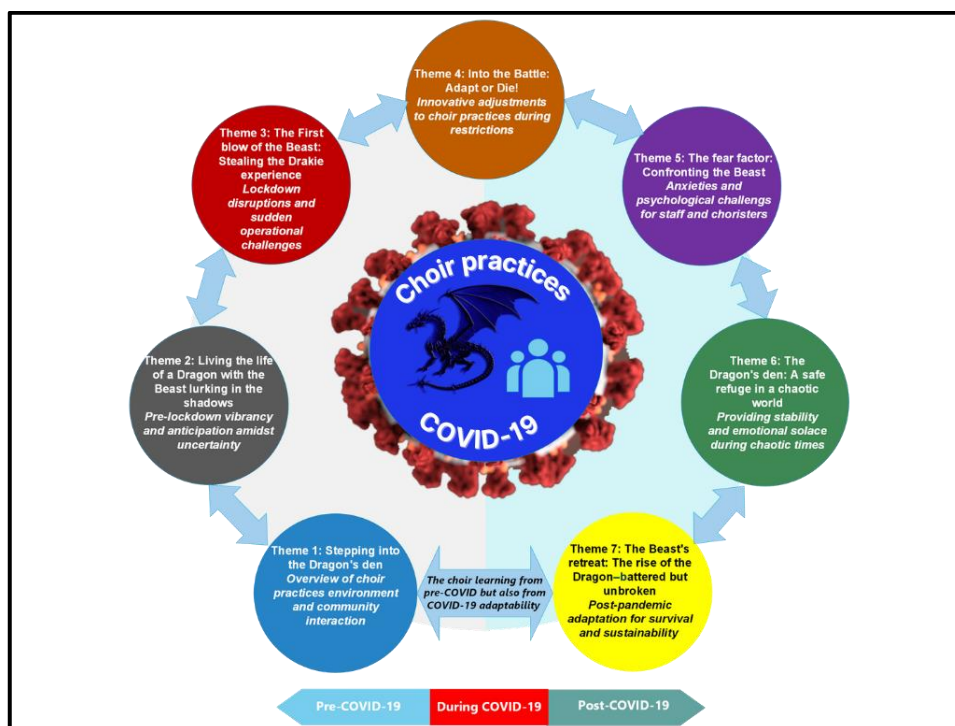
'The fear factor: confronting the Beast'. Fear emerged as a powerful force at the school, weaving its way through Themes 2 to 7. Choristers and staff faced existential concerns about the choir's sustainability, personal safety, isolation, well-being and uncertainty

regarding a return to choir practice routines. These anxieties underscored the fragile yet resilient nature of choir life during periods of global turmoil. The theme ‘The Dragon’s den: a safe refuge in a chaotic world’ draws its strength from elements in Theme 1 and underpins all the others. Despite external chaos, the choir environment provided emotional safety, stability and a sense of belonging. It became a refuge that fostered a sense of normalcy and connection.

Finally, ‘The Beast’s retreat: The rise of the Dragon—battered but unbroken’ captures the choir's resilience as restrictions eased. Faced with a transformed world, choir practices were restructured once more, adapting lessons from the pandemic to establish sustainable and responsive strategies in the ‘new normal’.

Not only do the themes reflect the pandemic timeline, but they also overlap and inform one another, weaving a rich tapestry of experience and transformation. Figure 7 illustrates these interrelationships, highlighting how each theme contributed to shaping the choir’s journey and response to an unprecedented global event.

Figure 7: (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1981): DBCS choir practices and the COVID-19 pandemic



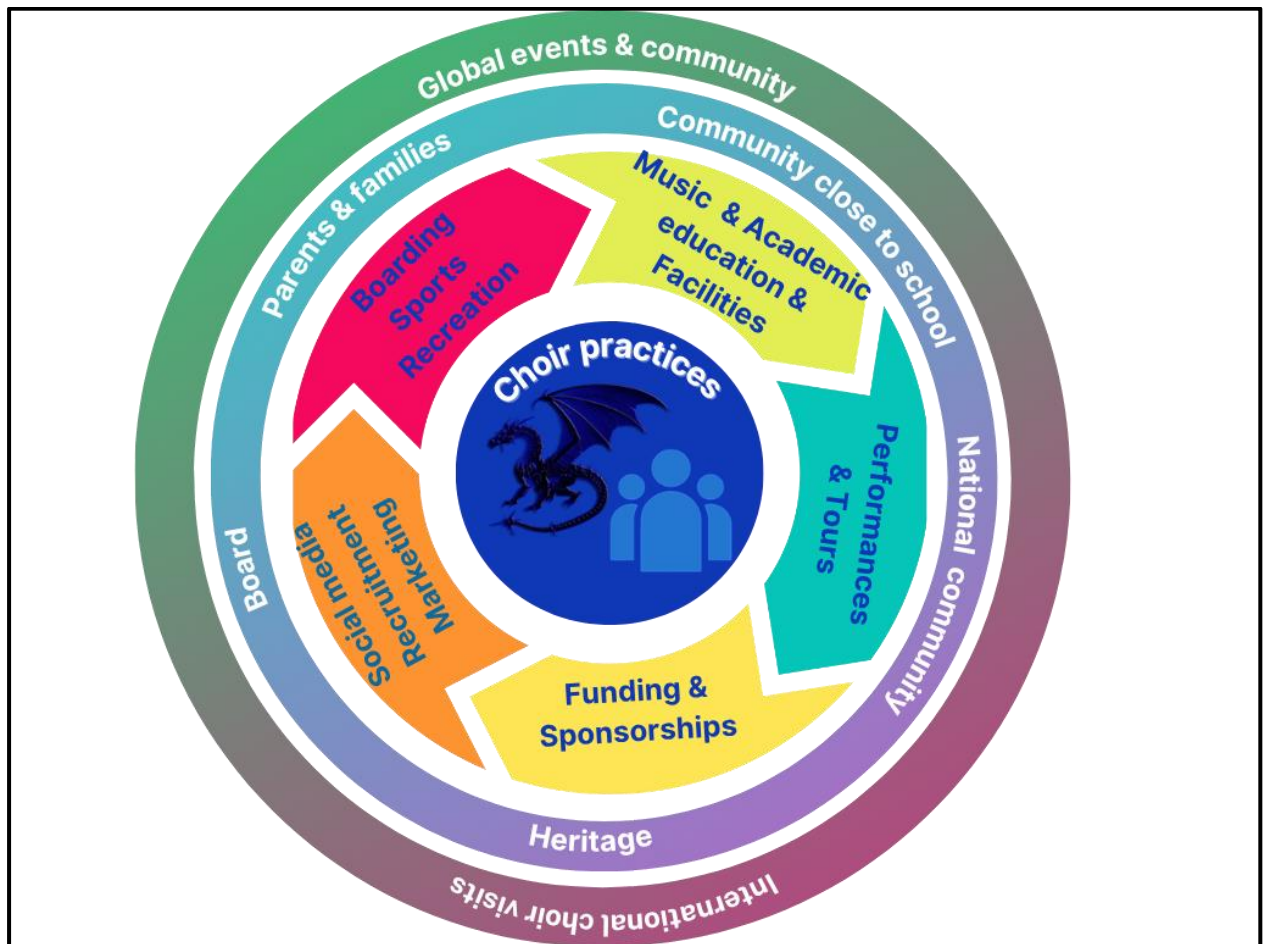
A discussion of the emerging themes follows in the next section.

4.3 Emergent themes

4.3.1 Theme 1: Stepping into the Dragon's den—choir practices at DBCS prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 8 illustrates the environment and community interactions at DBCS, focusing on the theme 'Stepping into the Dragon's Den,' which provides an overview of choir practices at the DBCS prior to the pandemic. I initially analysed the data using an inductive, iterative process, then incorporated elements of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1981) and systems thinking (Meadows, 2008) into the analysis. This integration demonstrated that systems are embedded within larger systems and are interconnected, each defined by its unique processes and workflows. Choir practices form the core of the model; the middle layer was comprised of supporting activities, including academics and boarding, facilities, performances and tours, funding and sponsorships, recruitment, marketing and social media. The two outer layers encompass direct external influences, such as parents and families, the wider community around the choir, the national community, and the board, as well as indirect influences, including global awareness and events, and connections with the international community.

Figure 8: ‘Stepping into the Dragon’s den’—choir practices at DBCS before COVID-19 (layered systems diagram)



4.3.1.1 Choir practices and the school's environment

Data analysis showed that the origins, existence and identity of the choir are rooted in the choir's locality in the Drakensberg:

The choir is the reason the school is here; it's the Drakensberg Boys Choir School.

And if it were not for the vision of a family, the Tungays, to start a choir school out

here in the mountains, the school wouldn't be here...they had this dream of having a choir school in the mountains. (Werner, 10:9¹³)

The Tungay family had envisioned a boys' choir in the mountains, which led to the founding of the choir in 1967.¹⁴ This initiative led to the establishment of a fully-fledged choir school in 1969. Choir practices at the DBCS differ significantly from those of most other school choirs, as the choir is central to the school's existence and is deeply embedded in its locality, history and the surrounding community.

At DBCS, choir participation is not optional; every boy sings in the choir, highlighting its fundamental role within the institution and contributing to the choir's unique identity. Thomas (8:78) notes that every boy aspires to "become a chorister or be part of this choir, this performing entity." Participants consistently express that choir practices are at the heart of the school's identity, describing DBCS as a "choir school, not a school with a choir" (Thomas, 8:1) or even as a "choir with a school" (Werner, 10:9). Many individuals

¹³ This reference specifies where the quote can be found in my ATLAS.ti. 25 documents, indicating the document and paragraph within the document.

¹⁴ The choir was founded in 1967 on the farm "Geduld" to provide choral training for boys. Initially, the plan was for the boys to receive their academic education at Winterton Primary, located 26 km away. However, this plan changed when John Tungay, the eldest son, persuaded his mother, "Ma" Tungay (Gwen Tungay), to become the school's first headmistress. In 1969, an extended two-story wing was constructed, which included five classrooms on the ground floor and a dormitory above. Since then, students have received both academic and choral training at the school. The institution experienced rapid growth, increasing from 20 boys in 1967 to over 54 in 1968 (DBCS, personal communication, 25 June, 2017). Over the past 58 years, the school has continued to develop, adding six staff houses, an academic block, an auditorium, a senior boarding house (Griffin), a dining hall and a kitchen. The number of choir members has fluctuated between 40 and 120, with 117 boys enrolled at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (DBCS, personal communication, 25 June 2017, DBCS, personal communication, 5 August, 2024).

emphasise the choir's central role, referring to it as "the cornerstone on which the school is built" (Freddie, 11:2) and "absolutely vital for this very iconic and unique place" (Werner, 10:96). Thus, the needs of the choir determine the functioning of the rest of the school, but also the choir school's identity, as some participants describe it as "the heartbeat ... it makes us tick, it's who we are" (Maureen, 3:4) or "the heart of the school...the reason the boys come ... because they want to sing in the choir" (Amelia, 4:8). Kevin (2:100) further emphasises that singing is "second nature ... it's part of our DNA as a school." These sentiments underscore the deep loyalty, passion, and affection that interviewees have for both the choir and the school, as Werner warmly explains the passion of the staff and choristers for the school: "That's very unique, because that also just showed us the passion and the drive that the boys and the staff have, and the parents for this wonderful school" (Werner, 10:34).

Figure 9 illustrates the essential relationship between the choir, the school and its locality, contributing to the choir's unique identity:

Figure 9: The relationship between the establishment of the choir and its locality, intertwined with its Identity



4.3.1.2 Choir practices: a network of interrelated activities

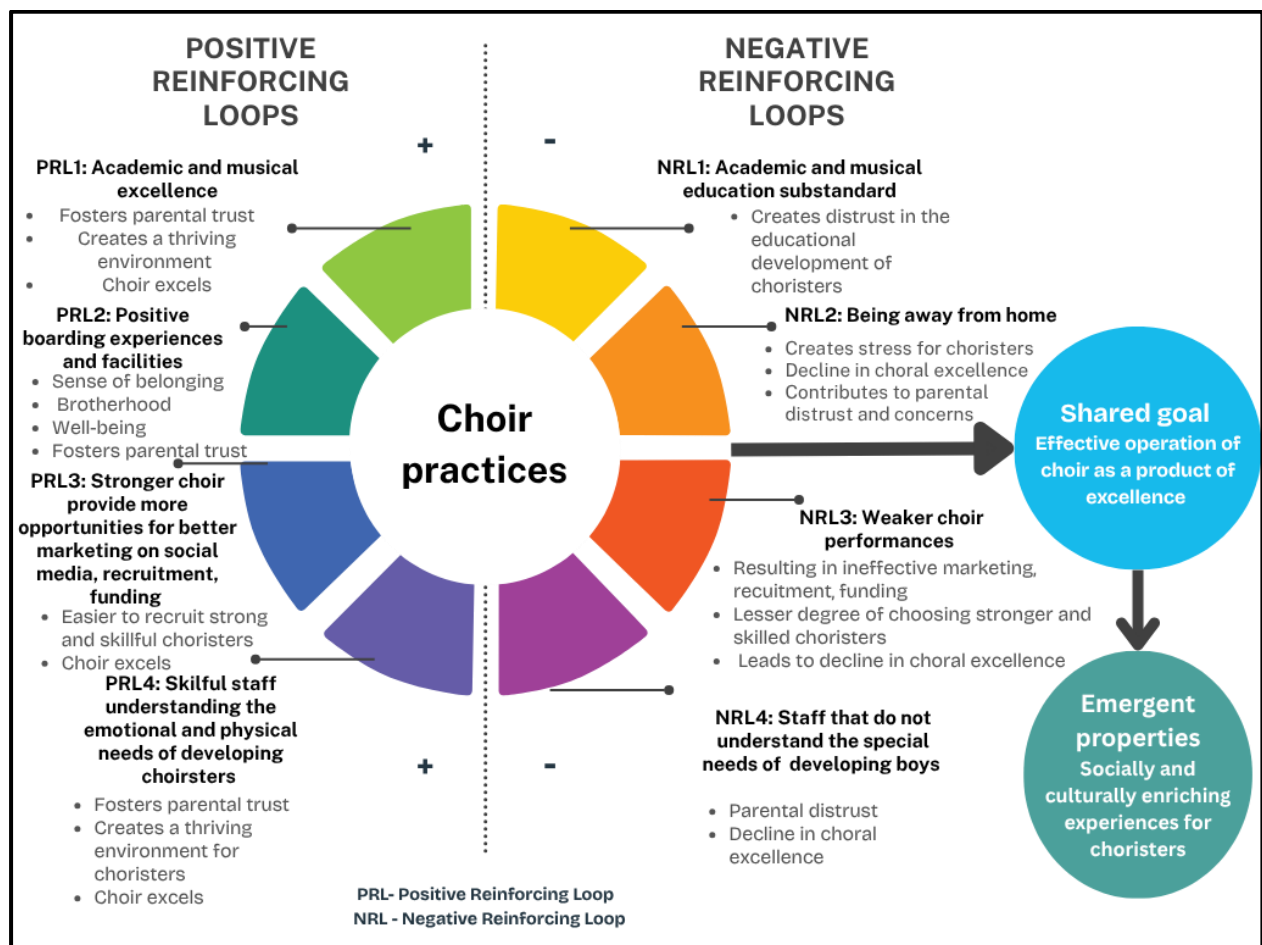
Furthermore, the data analysis revealed that choir practices at DBCS had expanded beyond traditional choral training and performances to include a network of interconnected activities designed to support the choir's success, as shown in Figure 8. Choir practices at DBCS included seemingly unrelated aspects of choral singing, such as academic education, boarding, sports, recruitment, funding and social media. As Marisa (6:11) points out, every aspect of school life is organised to enhance choral excellence: "The whole school system at DBCS is built around the choir as the product and the excellence of our school." Thomas (9:1) describes the institution as one where "everything that happens ... so from the academic curriculum, the sports curriculum, the boarding aspects, the pastoral care, the holistic education of the boys, everything revolves around the choir." This interconnected dynamic means that no component "can exist in isolation"

and that “everything has to work together” (Thomas, 8:3). Maureen (3:4) reinforces this view, noting that “everything else that we do kind of relates to the choir.”

Figure 10 highlights the dynamics between the different aspects of choral singing with Positive Reinforcing¹⁵ (PRL), and Negative Reinforcing (NRL) Loops, contributing to either an increase in choral excellence or a decline in choral standards, as evinced in systems thinking:

¹⁵ Positive reinforcing loops (PRL) lead to positive outcomes in systems thinking (growth), while negative reinforcing loops (NRL) have negative effects on an element (decline). (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008).

Figure 10: Positive Reinforcing (RL) and Negative Reinforcing (RL) Loops affecting choir practices



The data analysis has shown that choir practices at DBCS function as a complex system of interrelated components, a “performing entity” (Thomas: 178,6), working towards a shared goal, the effective operation of the choir as a “product of excellence” (Marisa, 6:11). This approach aligns with key principles of systems thinking,¹⁶ reflecting the delicate balance needed in relationships between several elements of choir practices to sustain excellence in choral pursuits (Positive and Negative Reinforcing Loops in Figure 10).

Primarily, the choir aims to deliver excellent performances at concerts, conferences and on tours, offering socially and culturally enriching musical experiences for young boys

¹⁶ The key factors in systems thinking include distinct elements, their purpose and the relationships between them (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008).

and contributing to the choir's identity. These activities are closely connected to musical training, which is part of the school's academic curriculum. As a result, choral training depends on high standards in both music and academic education (PRL1). Jenny (9:5) explains that academic tuition and music education complement each other, although the training of the choir is more prominent:

The music staff...we're in charge of everything to do with choir singing, the training of the boys, music theory and all the music lessons. And then the academic staff did normal school things, like normal teaching lessons. But the choir always got preference over academics. (9:5)

The data indicate that academic excellence fosters parental trust (PRL1), which influences the number of parents willing to send their young boys to a boarding school located in a remote area, far from city centres. A higher number of recruits leads to a wider selection of skilled choristers, ultimately resulting in a better choir, as noted by Thomas:

If the academics are subpar, then parents won't have faith in their children's academic development. And so then that will have an effect on the choir and who actually gets recruited and who performs in the choir. (Thomas, 8:81)

Effective choral practices are also enhanced by functional facilities offering sufficient space for musical training and performances, creating a positive reinforcing loop (PRL2), as Thomas (8:84) explains:

You need to have venues that lend themselves to what needs to be taught, what needs to be instructed, and also performance venues. So I think the Drakensberg Boys Choir School is lucky to have a very big auditorium where they can have concerts on campus. They don't need to hire a venue. There are classrooms that are equipped with pianos and where music tuition can happen. There are lesson studios. There are larger classrooms for group instruction. And then there are breakaway venues for different voice groups to have rehearsals.

If the facilities are insufficient to support the need for effective rehearsals and training, a negative reinforcing loop (NRL2) occurs, undermining effective rehearsals and training.

Data revealed that choir practices rely heavily on the availability of human resources and the expertise of the music staff, particularly in creating an environment that meets the specialised needs of young boys aged 10 to 16 (PRL4). If the music staff are unable to provide the necessary empathetic support, this creates a negative reinforcing loop (NRL4) that can lower the morale of the choristers. This, in turn, adversely affects the choir's overall standard, as Thomas comments:

The staff is also important. You need to have the right people working in the right positions so that you have professional people, but who also understand education and who also know how to work with this age group, because it could be, it can be quite a daunting or a difficult age group to work with. (8:82)

Boarding, sports and recreational activities help maintain balance and foster a sense of belonging and care within the choral environment, thereby strengthening parental trust and support. Support from boarding and other recreational activities also contributes to a sense of belonging, brotherhood, well-being and content choristers (PRL2). Thus, if boarding and recreational activities do not create a safe, happy environment for boys, choristers become stressed, leading to a decline in choral excellence (NRL2). Jenny comments that new boys only want to sing in the choir but need to understand how things work and require moral support, which is indirectly provided by boarding and other activities, fostering well-being:

It's a long process, and it's stressful for the boys because most of them are still very young and they have never done music before. So it's new things that they have to learn on top of being part of a new school away from home. And they don't see their parents often. So yeah, there's a, it's difficult to keep the morale up with the new boys and to assure them that they will also one day be on the stage. And most of them, all they want to do is be part of the concert choir, but they need to learn certain things before they can practise with the concert choir. (9:110)

During data analysis, it became clear that an essential aspect of choir practices at DBCS involved performances at concerts, corporate events, and tours, which served as a valuable marketing tool to raise national and international awareness and aid recruitment (PRL3). These performances are crucial for securing additional funding, as many boys need scholarships to attend the school. Jenny (9:96, 445-447) highlighted that the choir often performs at corporate events to support the institution financially, stating that “[the choir] often go perform at corporate events ... because we got paid for that...and the choir is very dependent...to make the school run and to make the school function...and many of the boys need scholarships.” Zinzan also emphasises that touring and performances are vital for three reasons: “to keep the choir front and centre in the minds of the public” (Zinzan, 13:23), “to recruit new boys, and to generate income” (13:23), which enable growth (PRL3). Freddie (11:15, 151) underlines that touring and performing are the main drivers of recruitment and awareness: “if people don’t see the choir, they won’t know about the choir, and if they don’t know about the choir, they won’t come to the choir,” creating negative reinforcing loops (NRL3). Marisa (6:12) emphasised that touring and marketing help increase global awareness: “We are more known in Europe than basically in our own country.” The relationship between these elements is crucial for the choir to operate seamlessly, creating either positive (growth) or negative (decline) reinforcing feedback loops.

4.3.1.3 *Direct and indirect influences on choir practices*

In addition to the inner layers of the support system, choir practices at the DBCS have an external support network, as illustrated in Figure 8. The outer layers include the boys' parents, families and friends, as well as their sponsors and the DBCS board, which governs the school by setting marketing strategies, appointing key staff members, and overseeing operations and sustainability. The DBCS's heritage is also rooted in the board, as many members are alumni or parents of alumni. Alumni played a more behind-the-scenes role before the COVID-19 pandemic, but continued to visit and support the school for many years. The immediate community around the school supports the DBCS by attending weekly concerts and sponsoring boys. The DBCS supports local producers and businesses, which in turn support the school. Additionally, the school strengthens the local community by attracting visitors to Champagne Valley, including parents and patrons who support the choir. The school choir is located within a World Heritage Site, attracting both international and national visitors to concerts, as Marisa (6:12) pointed out:

“to draw overseas patrons into our valley and all over South Africa to us.” Visiting patrons follow the choir and its activities on social media, broadening its support base to a broader international audience (based on personal experience and numerous posts on Facebook and Instagram). These relationships continue to contribute to thriving choir practices at DBCS within an extended community.

4.3.1.4 *The extended dynamics between the broader systems supporting choir practices*

These systems are closely interconnected, creating feedback loops that either continuously strengthen the choir (a positive cycle) or weaken it (a negative cycle). Data revealed that the processes involved in recruitment, marketing and social media involve the following: effective marketing initiatives raise public awareness, thereby attracting prospective students, interested supporters and parents. Additionally, social media posts showcase the choir's performances and highlight its excellence to potential recruits, thereby increasing enrolments and support. Moreover, successful recruitment enhances the choir's image and appeal, which in turn drives further marketing, awareness, and enrolment. As more choristers join, more parents contribute to school fees. Increased revenue from these fees, along with sponsorships and income from performances and tours, provides sustainable resources for staff and facilities, and encourages additional choristers to join DBCS.

Performance and touring are also vital components of the DBCS choir practices system. Choir excellence encourages audience engagement, boosts morale among choristers, and fosters pride among community members and parents attending events. Whether on tour or at the school, performances raise awareness, leading to more effective recruitment and social media marketing. This, in turn, opens doors to better opportunities for corporate engagement, invitations for international tours, sponsorships, funding, and increased enrolment. Multiple revenue streams ensure financial sustainability, providing the resources necessary to invest in staff, choristers, and facilities. This further elevates performance standards, engages choristers and garners local and global support. Financial stability also guarantees improved facilities and scholarships, strengthening recruitment efforts and, in turn, enhancing performance standards and marketing and recruitment strategies. Figure 11 illustrates a positive reinforcing feedback loop that drives excellent choir performances.

Figure 11: Excellent choir performance cycle and Positive Reinforcing Loop



On the other hand, if choir performance standards decline, a negative reinforcing feedback loop occurs, resulting in declines across all parts of the cycle. Therefore, if performance levels drop, effective recruitment also suffers as Thomas (8:79) states: “If the choir itself performs and it’s not up to standard and it’s not good enough, then recruitment will suffer.” All these relationships are interconnected: lowering performance standards reduces marketing and recruitment, which, in turn, impacts income, human resources, and facilities. This can lead to distrust among parents, resulting in choristers leaving the choir school, further weakening the choir and diminishing national and international support and engagement. Figure 12 shows how the decline in performance standards creates a Negative Reinforcing Loop (NRL).

Figure 12: Negative performance standards create a Negative Reinforcing Loop (NRL)



The data analysis of the first theme presents DBCS as a vibrant ecosystem, with choir practices at its core, driving recruitment, marketing, performance and the institution's sustainability. Each system, both internal and external, operates within a continuous feedback loop that helps preserve the choir's excellence and ensures the resources needed for its longevity. This layered approach illustrates how interconnected systems collaborate to uphold the high standards and legacy of the DBCS. Through robust recruitment efforts, strategic marketing and financial stability, the choir continues to thrive, enhancing its reputation as a world-class choral organisation founded on passion, discipline and community engagement. On the other hand, if negative reinforcing loops occur, choral standards will drop, in turn resulting in a weaker choir. The second theme highlights the changes in the ecosystem brought about by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Living the life of a Dragon with the Beast lurking in the shadows (the Drakie experience)

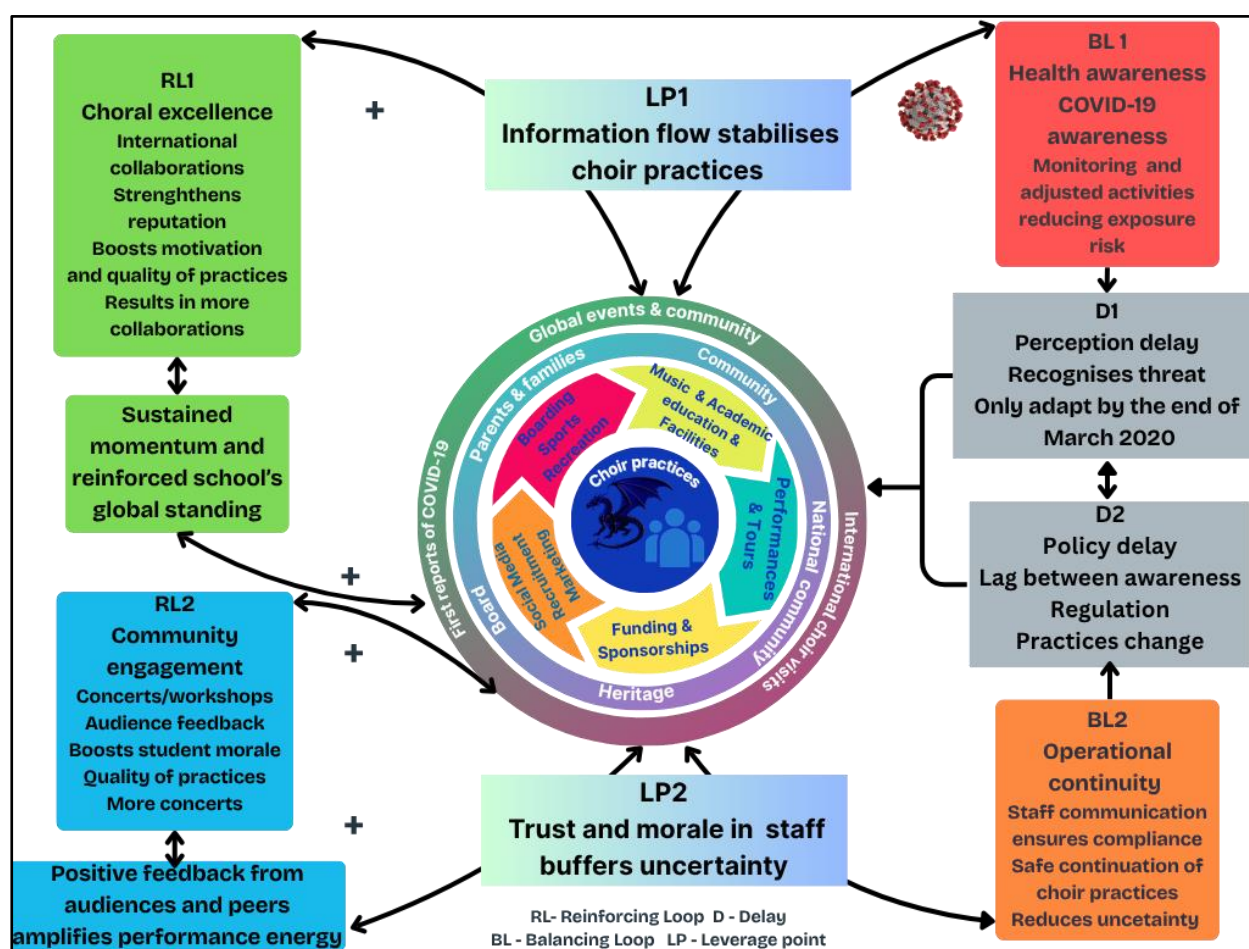
From December 2019 to 16 March 2020, choir practices at DBCS continued primarily as usual, maintaining effective operations as explained in Theme 1. The choir's core activities remained unaffected during this period. Figure 13 visually illustrates the dynamics of choir practice, showcasing the “Drakie experience” through participants’ perspectives. Activities in March 2020 were documented in the staff group's WhatsApp (Document 14) and outlined in Document 15 (ATLAS bundle or Addendum 5), which provided a weekend schedule for 13 to 15 March. Additionally, updates were shared on Facebook and other social media platforms.

Figure 13: Theme 2 The Drakie experience with the Beast lurking in the shadows



Figure 14 summarises choir practices through the lens of systems thinking theory in the months leading up to the first lockdown in March 2020.

Figure 14: Theme 2–Choir practices through the lens of Systems Thinking Theory in the months leading to the first lockdown



4.3.2.1 Reinforcing loops contributing to choral excellence and social community engagement in choir practices

Using systems thinking in the data analysis revealed two reinforcing loops that enhanced choir practices: choral excellence (RL1) and community engagement (RL2). Despite the growing global awareness of COVID-19, the choir continued with international collaborative concerts (RL1) and workshops (RL2), including hosting a visiting choir from Stockholm, Sweden, on 26 February 2020, during the first concert of the year (<https://web.facebook.com/reel/1495062790672956>). The weekend of 14-16 March marked the peak of choir activities, which included rehearsals (D 15:2,4,8,12, 14), a chamber choir performance at a conference (D 15:6), and Grade 9 boys visiting top private schools to apply for scholarships, a highly sought-after opportunity (WhatsApp D14:2; D15:5). New boys received further training in the boys' choir, alongside other boarding activities aimed at aiding their integration (D 15:2,9,10,13). Other concert choir

boys, not participating in the chamber choir, engaged in passing sessions¹⁷, ongoing training and rehearsals on new repertoire to ensure exceptional performances (D 15:8), complemented by fun activities and a sports event (D 15:7, 9). These activities showcased the school's reputation for choral excellence, fuelling motivation and strengthening choir practices and collaborations, which in turn reinforced the school's status on a global scale.

The performances, workshops, auditions and sports events created the community engagement loop (RL2), generating feedback from audiences and visiting choir members that fostered new opportunities for friendship amongst choristers. Additionally, scholarship applications served as another avenue for community engagement, as applicants connected with peers and music staff from the nation's top private schools. Positive feedback from audiences and peers amplified the performances' energy, enhancing the social aspects of choir practices.

4.3.2.2 *The emergence of leverage points and balancing loops*

However, as awareness of current events grew, the choir's operational focus began to shift toward adhering to national health regulations for group activities and schools. This led to the emergence of two balancing loops,¹⁸ the health awareness loop (BL1) and the operational continuity loop (BL2). Although choir activities seemed to be running smoothly, the Executive Head of the DBCS communicated a sense of impending uncertainty in a WhatsApp message on 16 January 2020, even while he was on sick leave (LP1). This information was a leverage point, preparing the staff for the unknown effects of the virus:

¹⁷ Boys are tested on concert repertoire, and if they know a song well enough, they have 'passed' it.

¹⁸ Balancing loops counteract change, stabilising the system around a goal (Meadows, 2008), while leverage points represent small changes within a complex system that can have a significant effect on other elements in the system (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 2008).

Good morning, everyone. As we loosen the mooring ropes and set sail on the good ship 2020, I wish you an outgoing tide and favourable winds to speed your journey ... I will be with you in spirit today as you leave port for the high seas, and wish you smooth sailing. (Zinzan, D14:7)

His words of encouragement not only conveyed his trust in the staff and appreciation for the choristers, but also served as a leverage point (LP2), providing a buffer against uncertainty and boosting staff morale in the prelude to the COVID-19 pandemic:

We have an excellent crew and a precious cargo, but our ship is sound and seaworthy. We have proven over the past two years that we have our sea legs and that we can navigate the stormiest oceans, but still keep our ship on course. With God as our compass and faith in each other to do what we have to do, our 2020 voyage will be a great one. (Zinzan, D14:7)

The operational continuity loop (BL2) focused on close communication with authorities to ensure policy compliance, facilitate the safe continuation of practices and reduce exposure risks. This loop stabilised operations amid external challenges and kept staff informed about the health and safety of choristers. As the school nurse, Nina, noted:

But frankly, the amount of research that I had, right from that January, was because I'd read the reports of this unidentified new bug that had come out in December. And we had a Chinese boy, Ethan, who'd been to China that December. And he had a cold when he got back, and I was watching him because he was on antibiotics. So even that first term, I was very aware. And through the lockdown, I did so much crazy research that I actually knew quite a bit more about the actual COVID and what was going on. I was reading every source. The daily statistics. The first thing I did every morning was check the world statistics, every country, all the graphs, all the charts. In America, I'd check every single state. I followed it closely. (Nina, 7:55)

The choreographer and house parent, Coach's comment illustrates the value of communication to staff members to buffer confusion and uncertainty:

Well, we had Sister Nina who would often get information, would often come back to us, you know, to the school, to the parents because she was not just responsible to the school on, you know, it's the staff, it's the kids that are at school, it's their parents away from the school who needed to know what was actually going on within the school and just outside of our boundaries. So, I think having a person like Nina within the school, it helped so much with lessening, you know, the impact that was already out there in terms of numbers actually spiking up, in terms of what information we needed to know or hear because information came in different levels. Some of it was, you know, false information, some of it was the truth. But if you didn't have much information, you wouldn't know what was actually the truth and what was actually false. So having a, staff member who constantly actually had access to doctors, access to, you know, government information, you know, it really actually helped them, and we also had board members who would actually offer the phone and check whether things were actually done correctly. (Coach, 12:49)

Furthermore, the data analysis showed that two delays¹⁹ affected the system of choir practices during this period: a perception delay (D1) and a policy delay (D2). The management, including Nina and Zinzan, quickly recognised the threat posed by COVID-19. However, choir practices did not adapt until March, when the first lockdown was implemented, and all activities at the choir school came to an instant halt (D1). Choir practices did not adjust to the emerging danger until the lockdown was imposed. The

¹⁹ Delays in a system cause time lags between a cause and its effect, which in turn influence system behaviour (Meadows, 2008).

delay in policy (D2) is evident in the way regulations lagged behind growing global awareness, allowing this lively hub of activity at the school to continue until the sudden announcement of the lockdown. While choir management could keep staff informed, no proactive measures were in place to prepare them for what would happen next. As Ashley (1:195) describes her experience:

The one day we were giving concerts. The boys had special activities. Some were doing sports activities. The younger boys were at the dorms playing games, while the rest of the boys were at concerts and performing at a conference. The next moment, lockdown was announced. And everybody had to go back home. (Ashley. 1:195)

The system of choir practices has internal boundaries, including students and staff, as well as established rehearsal and performance routines. These boundaries shaped the choir's functioning within the school system during the months leading up to the first lockdown. External boundaries included the global choral community, health authorities, parents, audiences, cultural expectations and the communities surrounding the school. However, COVID-19 created such a significant shock that the internal system was forced to adapt to the external constraints. Key leverage points²⁰ that impacted positively on the system of choir practices included the flow of information from Nina's research and the Executive Head's communication with both authorities and the choir community, which included staff and parents. This communication and trust in the staff made it possible to maintain the choir system by balancing loops of health awareness (BL1) and operational continuity (BL2), and reinforcing loops driving choir excellence (RL1) and community engagement (RL2).

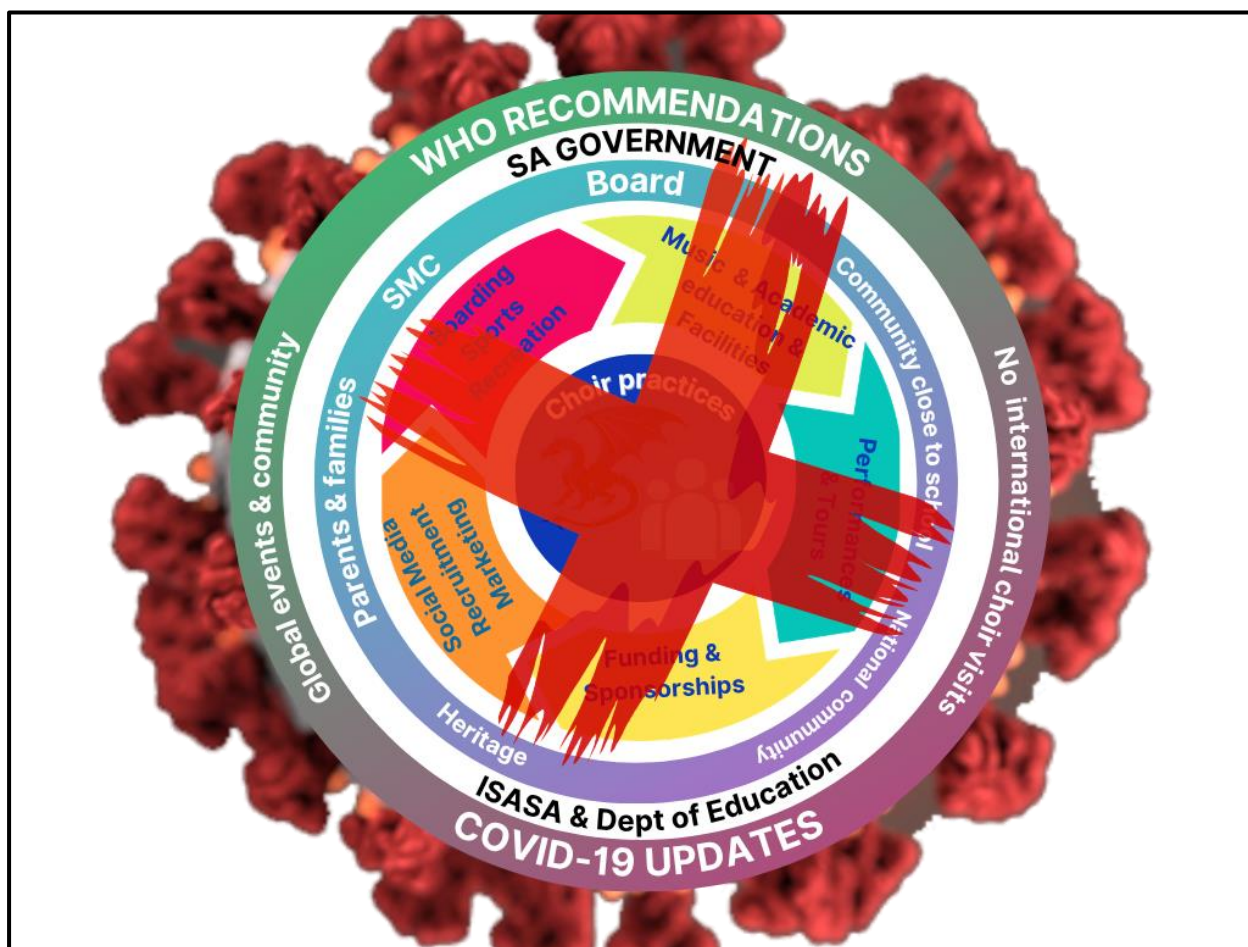
²⁰ Systems Theory is characterised by cause-and-effect relationships. Over time, new and unexpected relationships can evolve, often in a non-linear manner. A small change in one element can greatly amplify effects on other elements within the system, which are known as leverage points.

4.3.3 Theme 3: ‘First blow of the Beast’—stealing the Drakie experience

4.3.3.1 *External forces during the initial lockdowns that led to disruptions in choir practices*

This theme arose from the direct impact of significant global events and decisions made by the South African government on the functions of the choir and the school. While the first two themes celebrated the vibrant atmosphere of choir life, this third theme signifies a dramatic change in the operational dynamics of choir practices. The choir school suddenly had to comply with new health and safety regulations. This change inverted the existing system; previously, choir practices were at the core of the school, surrounded by external national and global trends. However, evolving national and international events forced choir practices into a subsidiary role. The classification of the COVID-19 outbreak as a worldwide pandemic, coupled with President Ramaphosa’s declaration of a national state of disaster on 15 March 2020, led to the closure of all schools on 18 March. This nationwide lockdown abruptly suspended choir practices, significantly diminishing the cherished “Drakie experience”. Figure 15 illustrates the devastating effect on choir practices.

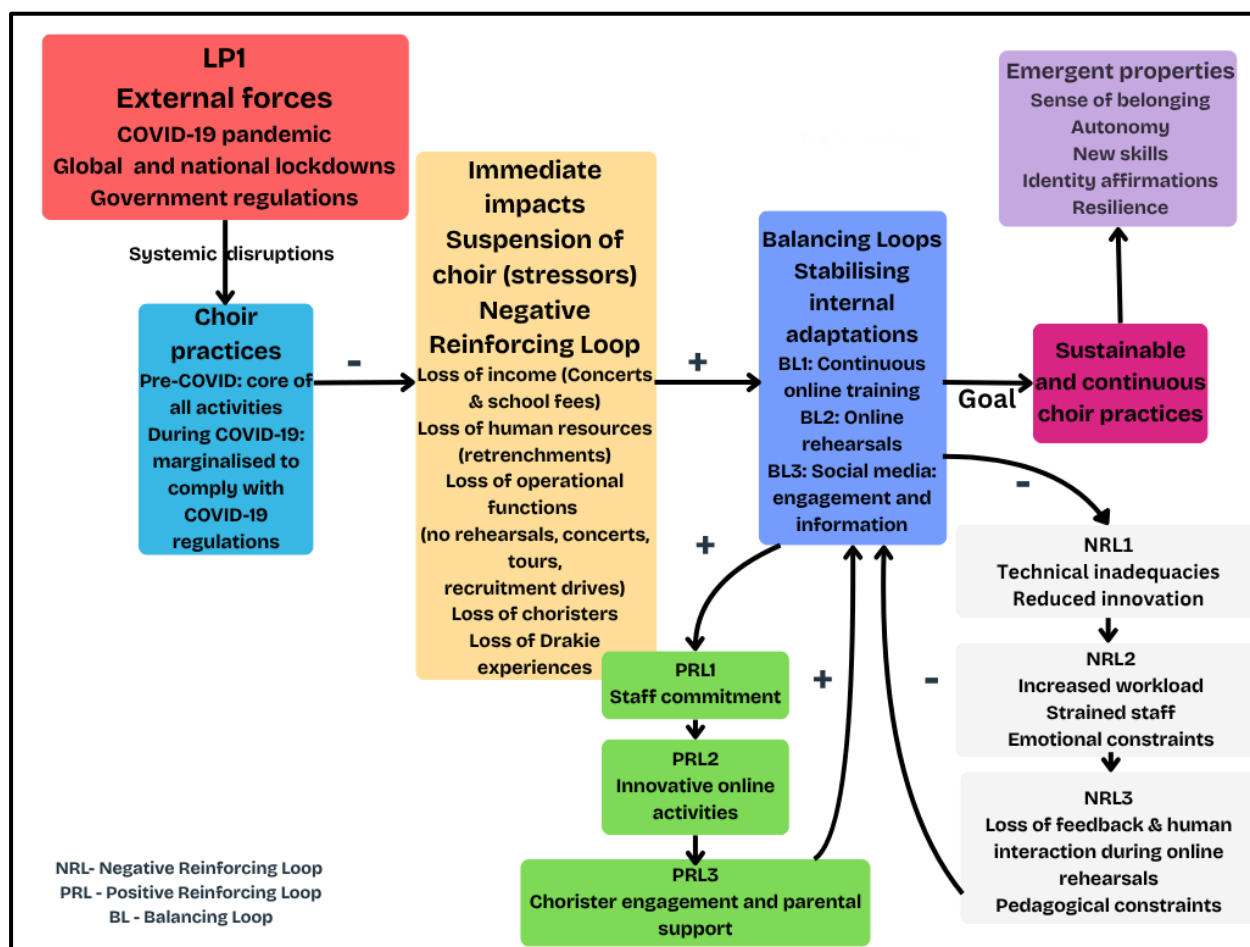
Figure 15: Theme 3–‘The first blow of the Beast: Stealing the Drakie experience’



4.3.3.2 External forces: the implementation of the first lockdown as a leverage point

Figure 16 illustrates how external forces disrupted choir practices during the initial lockdowns beginning on 22 March 2020.

Figure 16: Causal loop diagram capturing the external forces causing suspension of choir practices during the initial lockdowns at DBCS



The data analysis identified a leverage point (LP1) within the system of choir practices at the onset of the first lockdown, triggering systemic disruptions. This shift relegated choir practices, previously at the core of the school, to the periphery as compliance with health regulations took precedence. Consequently, all choir activities were immediately suspended, as Coach, who is a house parent and choreographer, recalls: “It came from the country. Everybody actually had to do what the country required. We could not refer to our own plans and try to do things differently from everyone else, because then it would have been a violation” (12:48). Similarly, Ashley noted: “At first, lockdowns were announced, all the choir activities were suspended, and boys were sent back home. That was the main concern: adhering to COVID restrictions and regulations” (Ashley,1:34).

On the other hand, Nina, the health officer, expressed that while she wasn’t overly worried, compliance was necessary: “I did all of that simply because those were the orders” (7:8), emphasising, “We did everything we had to do by law to comply” (7:11).

Although Nina, taking the boys' age group into account, felt the measures weren't necessary for their health, the school still had to follow national restrictions: "I don't think that any of those measures made our boys healthy. Our age group of boys, I was not worried about their safety" (Nina, 7:5). Thus, the suspension of choral activities was a strategic decision to minimise exposure risks, as Coach reinforced emphasised:

Well, it's making sure that you guide the boys as per the requirements of the country, because these requirements came directly from the government. It wasn't just, you know, coming from the school, the headmaster, or from the board. It came from the, you know, the statesman, which is the president. (Coach, 12:16)

Consequently, adherence to these restrictions had an immediate negative impact, putting choir practices under pressure as all choral activities ceased.

4.3.3.3 *The impact of the immediate suspension of choral activities*

The data indicated that the national lockdown resulted in the complete suspension of choir activities, creating a negative reinforcing loop (NRL; Figure 16). This loop led to unpredictable economic conditions for the school, financial instability for the choir, loss of human resources and disruptions to the choir school's operational functions, all of which contributed to the erosion of the 'Drakie experience'. These stressors within the negative reinforcing loop (NRL) significantly affected the choir's overall functioning. A former headmaster at DBCs recalled a board member predicting a long recovery shortly after the pandemic was announced in March: "I think it was the day of that last concert in March ... he said, it's going to take at least two years to recover from what's going to happen now. And it's probably going to be longer than that" (Kevin, 10:33). These interrelated factors collectively reinforced weaker choir practices.

Although the immediate financial implications for the choir were not evident, many choristers' families faced economic hardships over the following year. This created a snowball effect in both the national and global economies. Kevin reflected on this impact:

There were families impacted, some of our families, but they would have had family members or friends whose businesses closed or couldn't function and and all kinds

of ... so, I think the effect was not directly on what we, what the boys did in the auditorium itself, but a general mindset of saying, look, we're living through a tough time here. There's an international community, really there. (Kevin 2:55)

The overall unstable economic climate led to financial difficulties for some parents, which, in turn, caused boys to leave the school. Thomas reminisces with a sense of nostalgia and concern.

We did lose boys due to financial reasons, so parents were also struggling. So, just like the school was struggling, the parents all suffered from loss of income, and businesses were failing, and people went into business rescue, and so there were boys, if I remember correctly, that left the school. (Thomas, 8:51)

Consequently, the choir faced significant financial challenges as a result of a decrease in concert revenue and parents finding it increasingly difficult to pay school fees. This turmoil cast a shadow over the choir's future. Zinzan highlights the fragile balance between generating income from concerts and tours and ensuring financial stability when the school's vital income stream was interrupted the school was forced to rely on its reserves:

This came close to being a mortal blow for the school. Income from tours and performances was second only to income derived from school fees. Without this income stream, the school had to rely on reserves, which were quickly depleted. It was hugely stressful for the school. (Zinzan, 13:30)

Amelia further illustrated the impact of these struggles: “[Many boys had to leave], because now parents are losing their jobs and there is not the financial means for everyone to come back to school. We did lose those that didn't come back” (Amelia, 4:40).

The sudden halt in income from performances at concerts, tours and conferences, coupled with a growing inability of parents to pay school fees, led to unexpected salary cuts and layoffs by the end of April, which significantly affected staff morale. Even though the school prioritised musical and academic tuition, the first staff members to be laid off were those responsible for organising tours and events:

I mean, education would always have to go on. Even if we were forced to teach online for the next however long, we would have done it because kids need to be educated. But a point could have come where, for example, here, the board members said, well, and it sort of happened with [the tours and event manager]. There were no tours happening, so she was retrenched. (Kevin, 2:120)

The cherished 'Drakie Experience', a vibrant blend of music, community and tradition, was abruptly lost. Although the choir prepared for touring after the first lockdown, no tours could take place in 2020, thus stealing the Drakie experience from the choristers, as Kevin pointed out:

So the touring was interrupted. If you take 2020, no tour at all: 2021, three visits to schools, and I think they went to Piggly Wiggly, which was also an outdoor performance. So, four little performances, other than what we could do in the auditorium with small audiences. (Kevin, 2:177)

The cancellation of international tours during 2020 was demoralising and sad for choir staff:

I think some of the lowest points for me were the fact that we had two international tours scheduled for 2020. We were supposed to go to Singapore, and all the arrangements were in place, everything was done. We would have been there for a concert tour in Singapore, and I think Taiwan was going to get added to the programme. And we were going to Italy to perform in a music festival in the south of Italy. And both of those trips were cancelled. And it was just, sorry, tough. There's no consolation prize. There's no plan B. And I think for the boys, that was very tough and very sad, because I think part of the allure of the Drakensberg Boys Choir is this idea of travel and performance and touring. So, all of that stopped. And I think that was probably the lowest low for me. (Thomas, 8:33)

The traditional methods of recruitment, such as recruitment drives, concerts, and tours, were prohibited during this period. Consequently, recruitment efforts came to a standstill, since schools denied access to recruiters, and in many instances, classes were conducted online, resulting in no students being physically present on campus. Although the choir activities could resume later in 2020, they faced significant challenges because of the ongoing movement restrictions, as Thomas explained:

In terms of recruitment and in terms of getting boys to enrol at the school, I think that was a spanner in the works. COVID really complicated that process, because we still needed to get access to students in schools, and suddenly they weren't in school. Everyone was having online lessons, every school clamped down on visitors, and visitors were not allowed anymore, so the whole process of recruitment was really complicated. (8:39)

Furthermore, the data analysis highlighted that both financial reasons and the suspension of touring during the pandemic are the reasons for unsuccessful recruitment efforts, as Werner notes:

That is, that we still suffer from that at the school, the whole not touring thing, because touring is one of the main, it's one of the main ways that we do recruitment. That's where people attend concerts. That's where younger boys attend concerts and watch this choir, the boys choir, and say, I want to be there. So, the actual real touring, which didn't take place for sure, for nearly, I want to say, the normal thing for nearly two years, although we did do a bit ... but there was not a mega recruitment drive, because we couldn't ... Finance is a problem ... it really hit us hard, like many places in the world. So, and you could see it in the numbers as well, that we couldn't do aggressive recruitment, because we couldn't tour. (10:87)

The data also revealed that when movement and touring resumed in 2021, many boys wanted to enrol. However, their parents struggled to afford the school fees because they were dealing with financial constraints. As a result, funding from sponsors was essential to support parents, but the school was unable to secure such funding during the weakened economy created by the pandemic. This lack of financial support ultimately prevented boys from enrolling:

It's all about affordability, and it doesn't matter what video you put out there, it doesn't matter how, what wonderful concert you put out there, what production you put out there or concert, at the end of the day, it's about affordability. Can parents afford to send their boys to the Drakensberg Boys Choir School? Many can't. We've done many auditions in the year, whether we go visit the school or we have boys after concerts, but the school fees, that's the problem, because school fees can't be lowered, for this place to function properly, and it's not like we've got 800 boys in the school or that we want 800 boys in the school, because Drakensberg Boys Choir School has always been a hundred plus, if I say plus, not more than 120. That's very unique to the ethos of the school. (Werner, 10:98)

During the initial lockdown, the focus of social media shifted from being informative and supportive of all the school's activities before the pandemic to creating an online presence, showcasing the choir and academic activities, this was done to reassure parents of the school and to demonstrate the choir's commitment to continued training and engagement with choristers, as Jenny explains:

I think most of it was so that the choir could be visible online...and the board could see the school is still functioning, and the parents can see that we are still working and we are still trying to carry on as normal. (Jenny, 9:43)

The data indicated that the unexpected lockdown terminated conventional choir practices, placing the choir's operations under pressure.

4.3.3.4 *Adaptation: new strategies stabilising choir practices*

The national lockdown significantly affected DBCS's core activities, forcing the choir to adapt its operations. To address the challenges posed by the shutdown, the choir had to adopt new strategies to minimise the negative effects of having its in-person activities halted. The choir school's ability to survive and remain stable depended on continued online training and practices during the initial lockdown phase and on sustained social media engagement. This created a balancing effect (PRL1-3 in Figure 16) that helped counter the disruptions caused by the health-related restrictions on choir practices. The next section explains how online training helped to provide a sense of stability in choir practices during these uncertain times.

4.3.3.5 *Sustaining choir practices through continuous online training*

Continuous online training stabilised choir practices during the first lockdown, sustaining them and counteracting operational uncertainty. Staff commitment, adaptive online teaching and chorister engagement created positive reinforcing loops (PRL1-3–Figure 17) that strengthened engagement, growth and musical continuity, as one teacher reflected: “We couldn’t stop teaching. We had to carry on because the boys ... have a hectic program with a lot of academic and music work” (Ashley, 1:43).

Digital tools enabled remote tuition, but technical inadequacies and abrupt disruptions formed Negative Balancing Loops (NRL1-2). These included insufficient bandwidth, latency and limited facilities, as Werner explained: “If we had a network problem here, we didn’t have that class” (10:44). Slow internet speeds (limited bandwidth) made livestreaming difficult, as Thomas noted: “latency was a big problem” (8:20). Therefore, music staff created their own teaching materials and adapted to the challenges in the system where live streaming was not possible (PBL1 in Figure 17): Ashley “started experimenting to make music theory videos” (1:43), while Thomas recorded lessons with instructions where students submitted their work online:

But for us in the mountains, we couldn't do that. We didn't have enough data [bandwidth]. So we had to make plans, record little videos, send the videos through to the boys with instructions, get work from them. They submitted their work online, and we marked and we gave feedback. And I think that was the primary way in

which we taught and communicated. But that was the classroom teaching.

(Thomas, 8:6)

Various participants stated that the internet access for some boys “was very difficult” (Thomas, 8:20), and Ashley remembers that limited airtime and inconsistent network availability for students caused disruptions during online sessions (NBL2):

All boys did not have access to data [the internet]. And I've also found that sometimes four groups who were living close to each other would go to one person's house and they would work from that one person's house. But it costs a lot of money and data [online internet data bundles] for that parent. (1:50)

Therefore, parents were also committed to ensuring continuity (PRL3), as Kevin comments that the online teaching effort was “one unbelievable undertaking for parents” (2:23). Committed staff members bought airtime for students who could not afford to buy internet data bundles in attempts to “save” the “Drakie experience” when everything came to a halt, and ensure choir continuity:

I know of colleagues of mine who bought their kids [students] airtime on WhatsApp to actually assist them with online tuition, so it was that deep need, I think, at DBCS to assist our boys. To still keep that dream absolutely alive. (Marisa, 6:38)

There were also challenges, since staff had to learn new skills. The data analysis indicated that not all staff were digitally competent (NBL1). Kevin experienced online teaching as “something completely foreign” (2:39), which caused stress. However, a positive balancing loop (PBL1) occurs where other staff members were more skilful, had more “technological savvy” (Amelia, 4:54). However, despite the new online teaching strategies that could be challenging, the staff adapted to acquire the necessary digital competencies to maintain continuity:

When the boys were at home, they were doing their online learning. I think that was a challenge for the staff and the boys. It wasn't easy at all. I'm sure they don't remember that very fondly, neither the staff nor the boys, because it was a very

different world. Somebody like Sally was fine because they spend their life on social media and doing different videos and things. Older people had to learn those skills out of nowhere. Maybe they were grumpy when they were giving online lessons ... they had to be slightly out of the box to do something that they weren't familiar with. Maybe that was hard. I think we did the best that we could, and I think we did it well. (Maureen, 3:120)

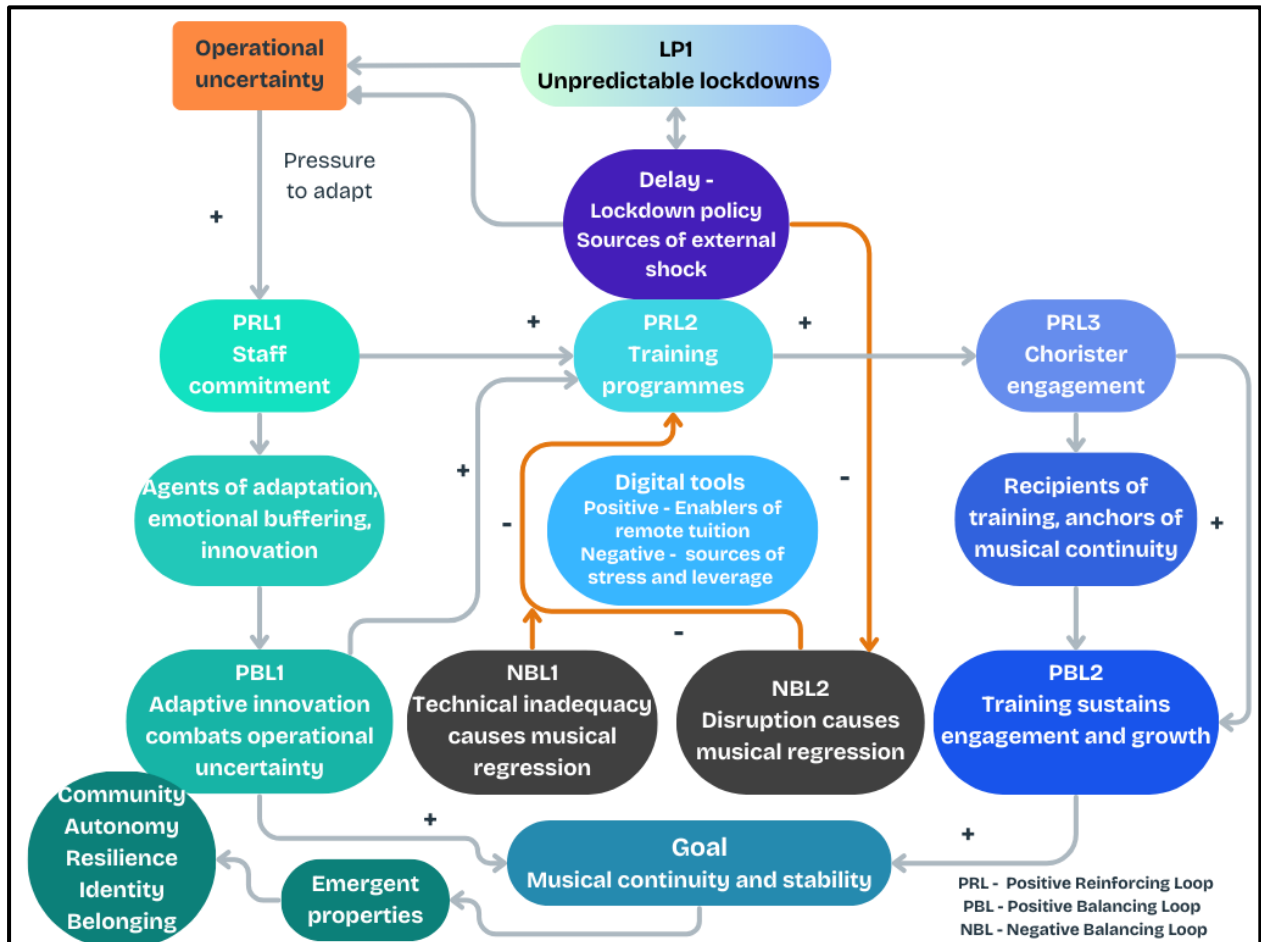
In an effort to maintain choral excellence, the conductor spent considerable time searching for the best solutions to ensure the choir's progress (PRL1 and 2), despite connectivity disruptions and inadequate bandwidth (NRL1):

I did a lot of research at the time into how to conduct online rehearsals. And there were, fortunately, because everybody on the globe, everyone on the planet, was in the same boat. So there were a lot of forums and communities where people were exchanging ideas, what worked, and how they did it. And so I spent a lot of time doing research on that and ended up using Zoom as a platform. And I think that was the common standard at the time was using Zoom because Zoom had a lot of features that lent itself to an online music rehearsal, such as Zoom was able to, you were able to select the type of sound processing. So with Google Meets and with Teams, you can't really manipulate the type of sound processing that takes place. But with Zoom, you were able to select the original sound. And original sound then meant that it took a lot more bandwidth. So it was a lot more internet-heavy, but the quality was much better. And so I used this original sound setting on my side. So with the boys on the other side, it didn't really matter too much because they were just hearing, and I wasn't getting a lot of feedback from their side. (Thomas, 8:12)

Therefore, continuous training sustained continuous engagement, learning and growth, stabilising choir practices.

Figure 17 illustrates how continuous online training stabilised choir practice during the first lockdown:

Figure 17: Continuous online training stabilised choir practices



4.3.3.6 The influence of unpredictable lockdowns

Unpredictable lockdown durations created temporal uncertainty, disrupting feedback cycles and planning structures. Sudden changes in government policy disrupted the rhythm of planning. The uncertainty of lockdown periods challenged operational functioning: “We were expecting the boys back within a week or two, but it was nine weeks, if I remember correctly, that the boys weren’t on campus” (Kevin, 2:2). The uncertainty led to a loss of job security for the music staff, which significantly affected staff morale. This situation resulted in an increased workload for those who remained. Kevin expresses this sentiment with a tone of hopelessness in his voice:

You know, it could have come to the point to say, well, if this lockdown, no rehearsing, no performing carries on for too long, then do we need all these music staff? So, I understand that. I think it would have had more effect on the music staff. (Kevin 2:120)

Moreover, the unpredictable lockdown announcements disrupted operations, which are numerous in a boarding school, making coordination of activities even more complex: arranging bus travel, adjusting schedules, accommodating parents who had to adapt to lockdown regulations, and ensuring boys returned at a later stage. The preparation of the boarding and the kitchen arrangements for the choristers became difficult. Food had to be transported to the school, etc. Online teaching began in mid-April, and by mid-May, the choir was expected to resume in-person classes. All choristers were allowed back at school on 2 June 2020 and the first concert was performed on 9 September.

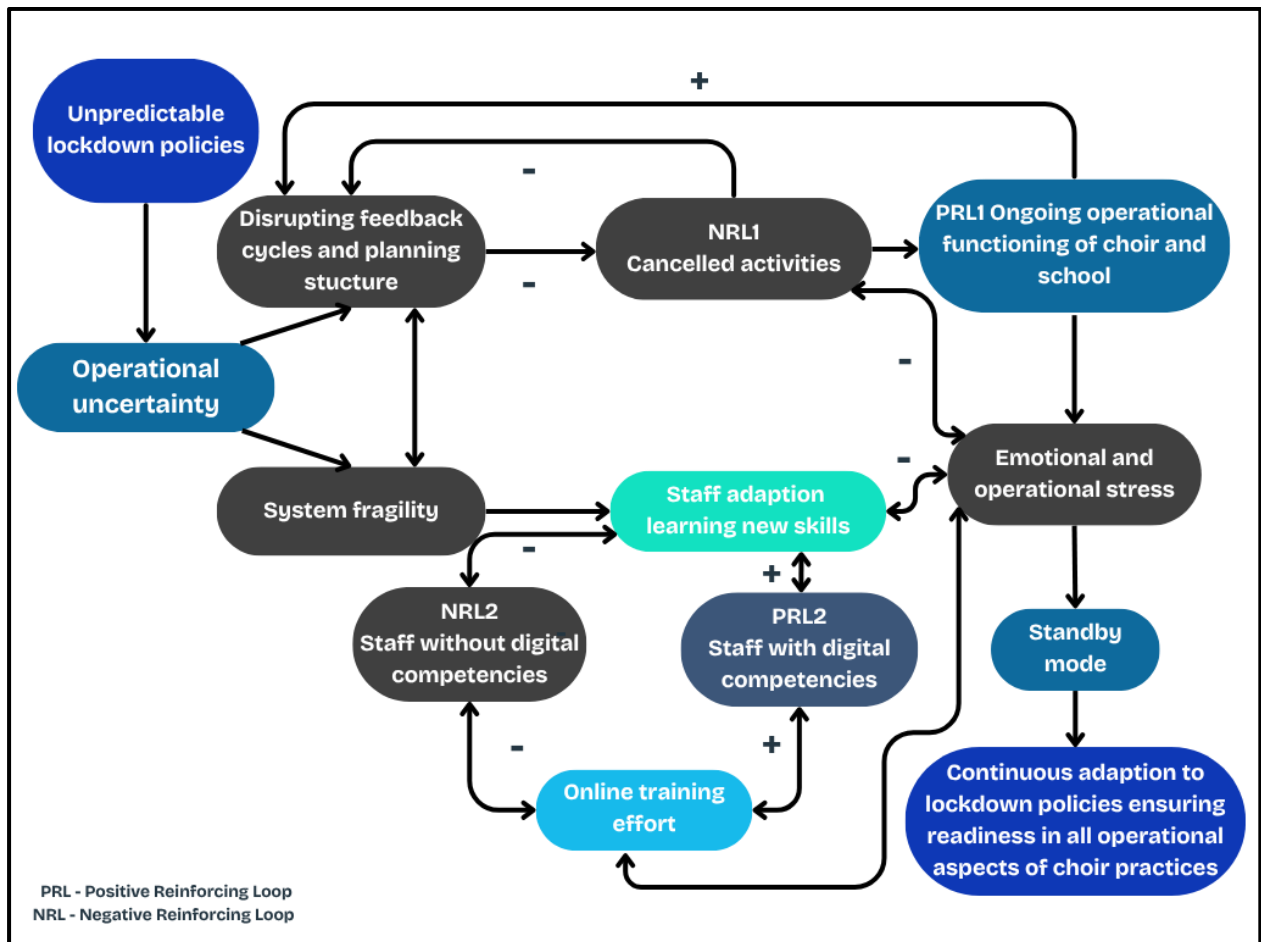
The unexpected lockdowns also led to the cancellation of planned engagements (NRL1) with external collaborators, which wasted time and resources, as Werner pointed out: “There was also one time where we had a production plan with external videographers. And a lockdown was announced with those people who got into their cars in Gauteng. And they had to be phoned immediately to cancel” (Werner, 10:112). This created a balancing loop that put the operational function under pressure, highlighting the fact that choir practices had to consistently adapt to uncertain conditions, causing emotional and operational stress.

Furthermore, the fact that fluid operational expectations were not met led to confusion and emotional strain during the first lockdown, revealing system fragility as a result of the lack of a sound digital infrastructure and readiness when all education and choral activities stopped: Amelia remembers:

Well, I think it was a shock to everyone, the lockdown that we had. In the beginning, it just felt like an extended holiday, because we didn't start immediately. And then when the online started...I remember there was a lot of upset and confusion, because not everyone was technologically savvy. So, even I remember I had a meeting down there in the academic block where people were very upset and talked about the new training and things. (4:54)

Figure 18 illustrates the influence of the unpredictable lockdowns on choir practices:

Figure 18: The influence of unpredictable lockdowns on choir practices during COVID-19

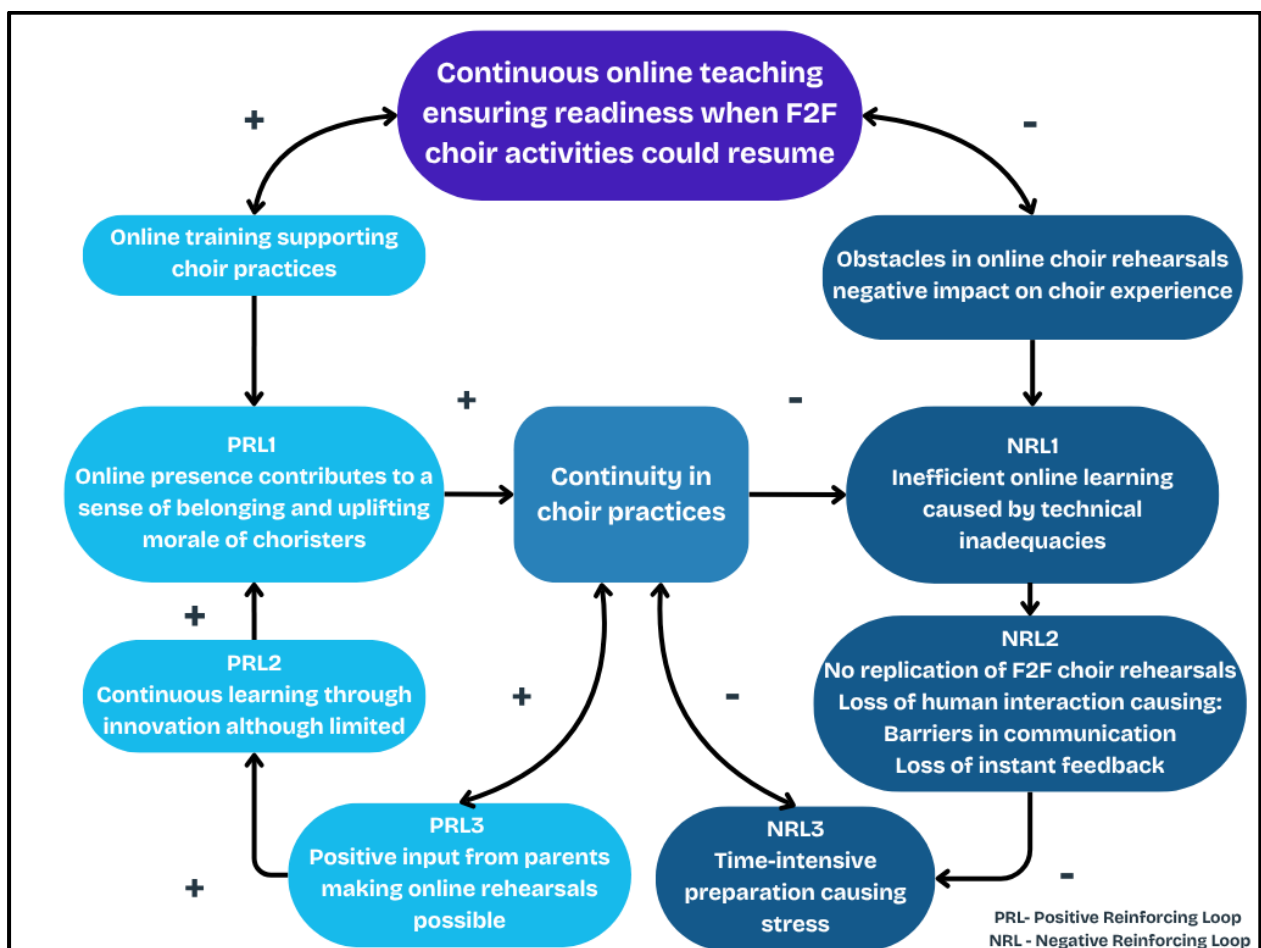


The unpredictability of lockdowns created a reactive culture, highlighting the need for adaptation, perseverance and resilience to ensure continuous training and operational continuity: “You felt like you were on standby with everything, and you’ve got to be ready at any time for plans to change. Because if there’s another address by the president, you don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow” (Werner, 10:112). Therefore, during data analysis, it became clear that choir practices operated under the conditional assumption that lockdowns could be lifted or reimposed at any moment, requiring readiness to revert to either in-person or online training and teaching without certainty. Despite operational uncertainties, the aim to remain prepared at all costs enabled the choir to continue functioning, albeit under difficult circumstances never experienced before (choir continuity).

4.3.3.7 Obstacles in online rehearsals

A strong subtheme that emerged indicates that online rehearsals provided continuity in choir practices and musical training, creating a reinforcing loop (PRL1). However, the music staff found that the effectiveness of group learning was limited, and individual tuition proved more successful. As a result, the choir conductor implemented group distance learning only during the first year when lockdowns were imposed (2020) in an attempt to sustain choir continuity and learning. Figure 19 illustrates the positive and negative reinforcing loops, which either strengthen or weaken continuity in choir practices. This made online rehearsals less effective than anticipated.

Figure 19: Positive and negative inputs into continuous choir practices during online rehearsals



Throughout the data analysis, it became clear that various challenges negatively impacted online rehearsals, creating negative reinforcing loops (NRL1-3), including technical inadequacies (NRL1) such as poor connectivity, latency, data bundle costs, and

inadequate internet availability for choristers. Another negative reinforcing loop (NRL2) emerged: online rehearsals could not replicate the same input and effect as live rehearsals, because of the communication barriers and the loss of instant feedback between the conductor and choristers. Despite its challenges, online rehearsals could enable continuous learning, though to a limited extent. Music staff found that individual online voice or instrumental lessons were more successful in continuous training, while group rehearsals were more challenging (NRL1-3), as Amelia explains: “I know that they [the staff] struggled...I was teaching singing and that was no problem” (Amelia, 4:11). The challenge was, however, with latency and connectivity in order to have everyone online available and to be able to sing together (BL1):

Doing one-on-one is fine with singing because you can stop and all of that. But when you have a big group, I know it was really difficult because of the delay with the connections. So, you never can get them all to sing together. (Amelia, 4:12)

Online rehearsals lacked the instantaneous communication and feedback essential to effective choir practices (NRL2). The rehearsal preparations were time-consuming, and the rehearsals were draining for the conductor, although he was innovative and determined to lead effective rehearsal sessions (NRL3). He had to be proactive in anticipating how the choristers would react and closely monitor the choristers' reactions to his instructions, which was a daunting task with more than 70 choristers facing him on multiple computer screens. The choristers had to mute their microphones to minimise latency and feedback issues. The only way he could feed off their reactions was by observing and analysing their faces and upper body language:

So, the rehearsal turned into a very much a one-way street. So, where a normal rehearsal would be constant feedback. So I would hear something, I react to it, and then I fix it. But with an online rehearsal process, and especially with the rehearsals we've had, sometimes there were 60, up to 60 or 70 boys in one rehearsal. Our choir at the time was about 110 boys, 115 boys in total, of which there were new boys of about 30, I suppose. And so there could easily be, if it were a full choir rehearsal, we would have about 70 boys in the rehearsal who all logged

in. And so that in itself was huge; bandwidth that was needed because there were 70 different individual connections. And so my rehearsals turned into an instruction, a live instruction video. And I would, as a conductor, have to anticipate what the boys would struggle with. So, I couldn't get instant feedback because I can't hear them. They all had to be on mute; [otherwise] we would have had huge feedback problems. So, the boys were all on mute, I couldn't hear them. I spoke, I gave them examples, we taught them the parts. I was playing on the piano. I had the music on the screen for them so they could follow what was happening as I was playing. And I used multiple computer screens. So I had one screen where the boys, where I could see that the boys were asking questions and I would be answering those questions, like the chat function, that was on a screen. Then I had another screen, which was the largest of my screens, was the actual faces of the boys. Because I also realised that boys being boys will always take chances and they will try and, you know, so I forced them to have their cameras on so that I could see them. And then I had this grid of faces in front of me and I would toggle, if it was more than 60 or 70 boys, the screen wasn't big enough to face all of them. So, I would constantly be shifting from one screen to the next screen, swiping left and right to make sure that I see that all the boys are actually sitting in front of the computer, that they are actively engaged, even though I couldn't hear them.

And so it was quite tough, because on the one hand, in a normal rehearsal, you would be giving an instruction and then the choir would respond, and they would be singing. But in this online setting, it was from start to finish, non-stop, I was talking, I was demonstrating, I was like, it was like a show that I had to put on that just never stopped. It was constant from the start of the rehearsal until the end of the rehearsal. (Thomas, 8:13)

Thomas also felt that music already learnt before the lockdown did improve with online rehearsals (PRL2), but that the learning of new repertoire was not as effective as he had hoped for (NRL2):

There's evidence that they learned music, that they learned their parts, that they improved. But once we came back and they returned to school, it was very clear to me that everything we had done online had to be redone in person. There was no progress on any of the new pieces. Older pieces, pieces that we had worked on in person up until March, when they all left, those pieces, they got better, where the boys already had the songs, they already had rehearsals on them. But anything we started fresh at the time, we had to redo. We had to basically start from scratch when the boys returned in person. Yeah, sure. So, yeah, it was discouraging. They came back, and you say you've spent so much time trying to make these rehearsals work, and they didn't really actually learn that much. (Thomas, 8:15)

Therefore, online rehearsals could facilitate some note learning. Still, they could not develop musicality, create aesthetic experiences, or ensure voice building or voice blending during online sessions (NRL2) and cannot be compared to virtual choir productions as Amelia pointed out:

But you can...only have one person unmuted at a time. Otherwise, it's a cacophony. So, like Eric Whitacre with his virtual choir and those things. It's not a real-time rehearsal. It's pre-recordings that he edits. So it's not the same. Or people think: Oh, but he does these virtual choirs, but it's not a virtual choir rehearsal. Other than if he maybe talks to them. And gives them instructions. And they record at home. In their own time. And send the recording. Then, as I said. You can only do note learning. You can send them the tracks that they need to learn...and definitely, you can't work on any musicality. Or anything. Anything of a choir. Any blending. Any voice building even. Or anything. As I said. It was a rehearsal. We

couldn't. We couldn't. So it's a thing that we had to completely let go...choir rehearsals. Then [after lockdown, we] came back. And had to struggle to get together again. (4:33)

Participants felt that choir practices are built on human interaction, which was sacrificed during online rehearsals (NRL2): "There's a human element in it ... we took out the human element in that music tuition. We tried visually you tried but it's still a screen" (Marisa, 6:52). The choristers also missed the in-person connection and communication with their friends:

The choristers, I think, their emotional well-being was connected to their social connection with their friends. And they did not have that in-person connection with their friends...But they missed their friends. They were perhaps more on social media, but they missed the connection, the personal connection with their friends, the personal connection of singing together, the personal connection of doing things together. That was very difficult for them. (Ashley, 1:133)

Online rehearsals could not replicate the social aspects of in-person choral singing, and it felt as if the choir rehearsals were not proper practice sessions, because of the loss of social communication and encouragement:

So, yes the social aspect of choir activities of being together and listening how things worked that was important to the boys but it was difficult to do a real choir rehearsal during the pandemic...what we learned and that the social aspect of choir singing was very important that you still need those encouragement of the boy next to you and your voice group and your peers in your grade...those things were lost when we were in lockdowns and during alternative performances and online rehearsals and things. (Ashley, 1:162)

Kevin states bluntly that online rehearsals were not effective, resulting in disruptions in choral training: “And then the attempt to rehearse remotely didn't work. So there was a serious interruption” (2:176).

During lockdowns, experiences of choir practices were reinforced primarily through continuous (PRL1 and PRL3) and innovative training (PRL2) but weakened by disruptions in choral training as a result of technical inadequacy (NRL1), the loss of human interaction during online rehearsals (NRL2) that restricted effective learning and the necessary time-intensive preparations for online rehearsals (NRL3), which was a strain on the choir staff. However, although online rehearsals were not as successful as anticipated, choir staff tried their best with limited resources (PRL2) to continue choir practices, as Ashley states: “I think we tried our best and we could have done things perhaps differently, but I had to work with the resources that I had in hand” (Ashley, 1:200). However, other emerging properties contributed to continuous learning, growth and stability.

4.3.3.8 *Chorister engagement and other emergent properties*

Chorister engagement played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown, as illustrated in Figure 19. The choir staff needed to keep the boys engaged and enable them to continue singing, as Ashley (1:99) points out: “[We] had to keep the choir boys engaged. And it was so important to keep them, to let them keep singing.” Amelia (4:41) didn't want the choristers “to stop singing for months”, while Jenny realises that disruptions in the training programme would prevent the boys from gaining concert status to go on tour by the end of 2020, should there be a tour:

But we wanted to carry on with the programme because, otherwise, if they came back after lockdown and we didn't do any training with them, then it meant that they were so far behind, and then it would just take them much longer to get into the concert choir. (Jenny 9:19)

Werner also experiences the need to continue teaching during lockdowns (PRL1 in Figure 20):

Challenges online were, having, you know, to keep the boys, so when they come back to school, that they're not behind. So, because we work with when it comes

to any class work here, other than the choir, because the boys do a lot, they're very busy. And then under normal circumstances, with our performing schedule and touring, they have got to be up to date with academic work and with the music subjects as well, like the theory. (Werner, 10:44)

Marisa also describes how the conductor continued choir rehearsals:

I know Thomas did absolutely everything to do things as far as he possibly could, still with the full-on choir. We worked with these children. We didn't stop teaching them. We had online tuition even with individual instruments. (Marisa, 6:38)

The choir staff and school had one goal: to continue teaching and training as if lockdowns could be lifted unexpectedly and life would resume normally (Figure 10). The choir had to be ready to continue as if no lockdowns had happened. Extended disruptions risked musical decline, as Zinzan stressed, threatening long-term viability, which was also reflected in Jenny's concern about concert readiness: "If a chorister fails to rehearse daily, he quickly loses interest in this pursuit, he forgets lessons he has already learned and musically, takes a significant step backwards" (Zinzan, 13:13).

Moreover, uncertainty prompted experimentation, e.g. music theory videos, WhatsApp tuition and Zoom online rehearsals, fostering resilience through innovation. Online teaching became the new normal. Unexpected benefits during the pandemic include increased tenacity, autonomy in acquiring new skills, and the formation of identity amid uncertainty. Although the conductors felt limited in their ability to teach new music effectively online, the choir remained engaged. A community of practice developed, reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared identity.

Ashley recalls a moment when alumni choristers from 2019 disrupted a Zoom rehearsal with Thomas. These boys did not have a continuous choir program at their respective schools during COVID-19. They found the link to the Zoom rehearsal and joined without invitation. Although the session was interrupted, the incident underscored the deep need for fellowship and connection among the boys, highlighting the enduring value of community and the importance of continuous learning during isolation. Kevin reflects: "We heard about boys who joined...they so-called illegally joined the rehearsal. I think that

was the biggest interruption for the choir [and alumni]...that they couldn't meaningfully rehearse" (2:29).

This anecdote illustrates the decisive role of community among choristers. The conductors came to recognise that the sense of belonging fostered through online rehearsals during COVID-19 was, in many ways, more impactful than the actual learning of notes: "I think there was a benefit to it. And the benefit was not so much a musical benefit, but it was the benefit of community" (Thomas, 8:15).

In hindsight, Thomas reflected on how online choir time could have been used to broaden the choristers' musical understanding through discussions, global connections and exposure to composers and choirs worldwide:

I would have taken the emphasis completely out of teaching them music parts and choral music and really focused rather on extension work...We should have used all these choir rehearsals to delve into the music, into the background of why the composers were composing these things ... Let's have a Zoom meeting with a choir in Australia and a choir in England and a choir in America, because we're all in the same boat...I'm quite sure if we sent an email to some hotshot like Gustavo Dudamel or Eric Whittaker ... People would have said yes. And without even thinking about payment or like every the whole of humanity was looking at how can we get through this together and what can we do to make it better. And knowing what I know now, I would have changed everything when we were busy with it at the time. (8:17)

This sentiment resonates with the approach of Mat Wright, musical director of the Barnsley Youth Choir, who maintained a blog during the pandemic focused on chorister well-being and global choral outreach (M. Wright, personal communication, 27 September 2024).

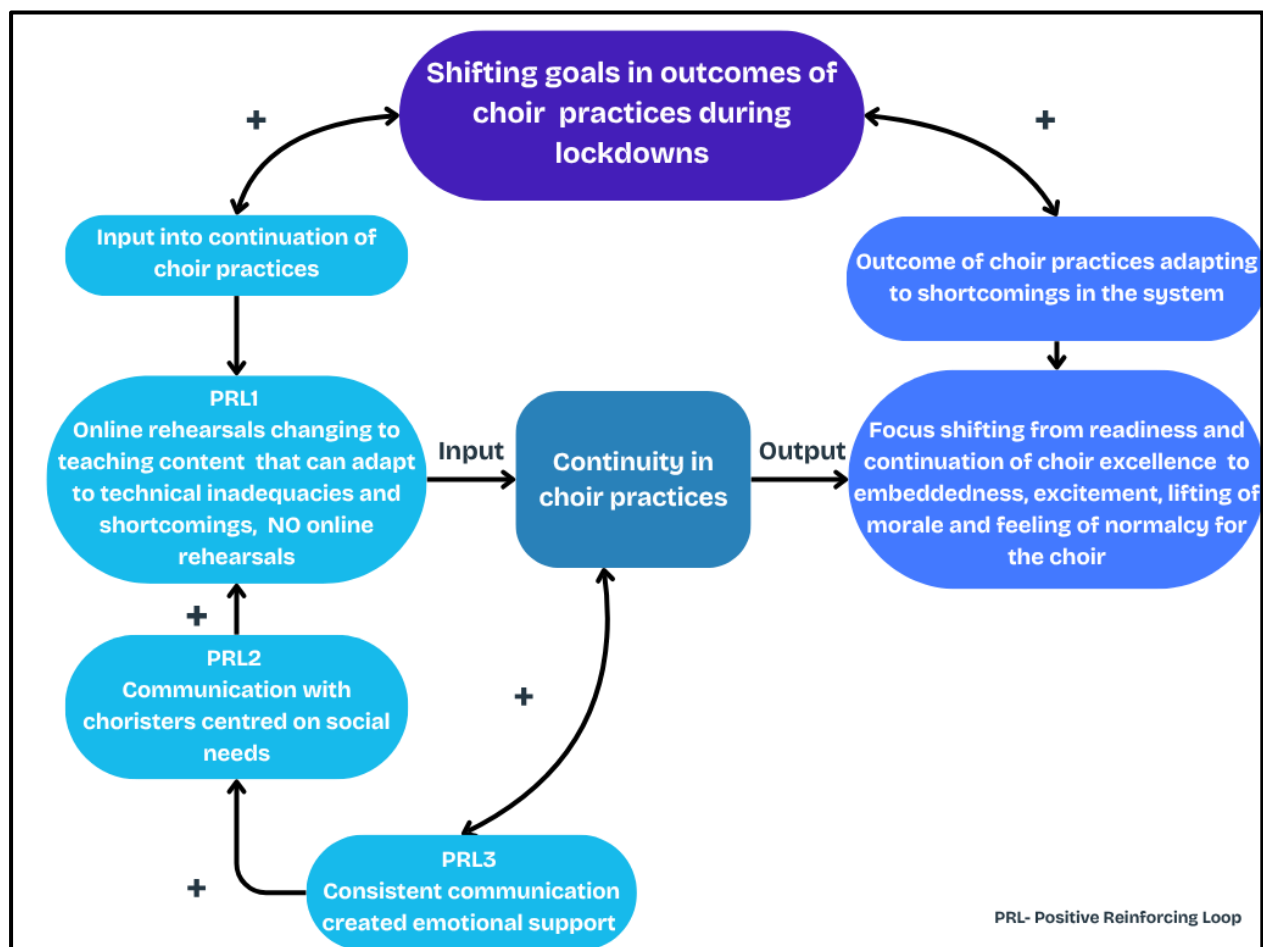
4.3.3.9 *A different approach to online activities during the later lockdowns*

The second year of the pandemic also started with renewed lockdowns and disruptions. The school responded with flexibility, postponing exams and adopting a more relaxed approach, accepting that exams would take place when possible. At the start of the 2021 lockdown, many choristers did not even have textbooks with them, as Kevin recalls: “I remember the late start to the year in January 2021 ... I don't think we did much online teaching. We just introduced ourselves because the boys didn't have books, nothing had been issued” (Kevin, 2:7).

Later, in July 2021, the return to school was delayed by two weeks following the KZN riots²¹. The boys returned immediately after the unrest and online learning resumed for a brief period. Mid-year exams were postponed until September as a result of the ongoing interruptions. During these later lockdowns, online choir activities shifted focus. Figure 20 shows the shift in goals during further lockdowns in 2021.

²¹ Socio-political unrest, also known as the “Zuma unrest” or the “July 2021 riots”, flared up in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng from 9-17 July 2021 after the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma for contempt of court. and was marked by protests, the looting of shops and businesses, vandalism of private properties and public facilities, resulting in over 350 deaths and more than 4000 arrests (Phungula, 2024).

Figure 20: Shifting goals in outcomes of choir practices during lockdowns



Rather than rehearsals, online choir sessions and music training became a tool for connection, engagement and emotional support (PRL1-3). Werner recalls using online platforms to boost the boys' morale and strengthen relationships, viewing his role as mentor, educator and even parental figure:

That contact, whether it was in the choir sense, or music theory sense, or even the academic classes, was just that wonderful contact from outside of their homes. And it was not just contact from anybody else, it was their teachers...And for many...we are mentors...parents...we are the educators.

(Werner, 10:43)

Daily interactions provided comfort and excitement, helping choristers cope with the global crisis (PRL3). Werner describes how even simple WhatsApp messages sparked enthusiasm:

We have a boys WhatsApp group for the choir ... And I would send through on WhatsApp to get them excited, to say, okay, to start working on something. Because that's what these boys do. They get new music and they're excited to get working and get going with it. We didn't really have online rehearsals, but we kept on going online. (Werner, 10:27)

These moments of contact created a sense of care, belonging and identity. The consistent communication with teachers “up in the mountains” gave the boys purpose and emotional stability (PRL2):

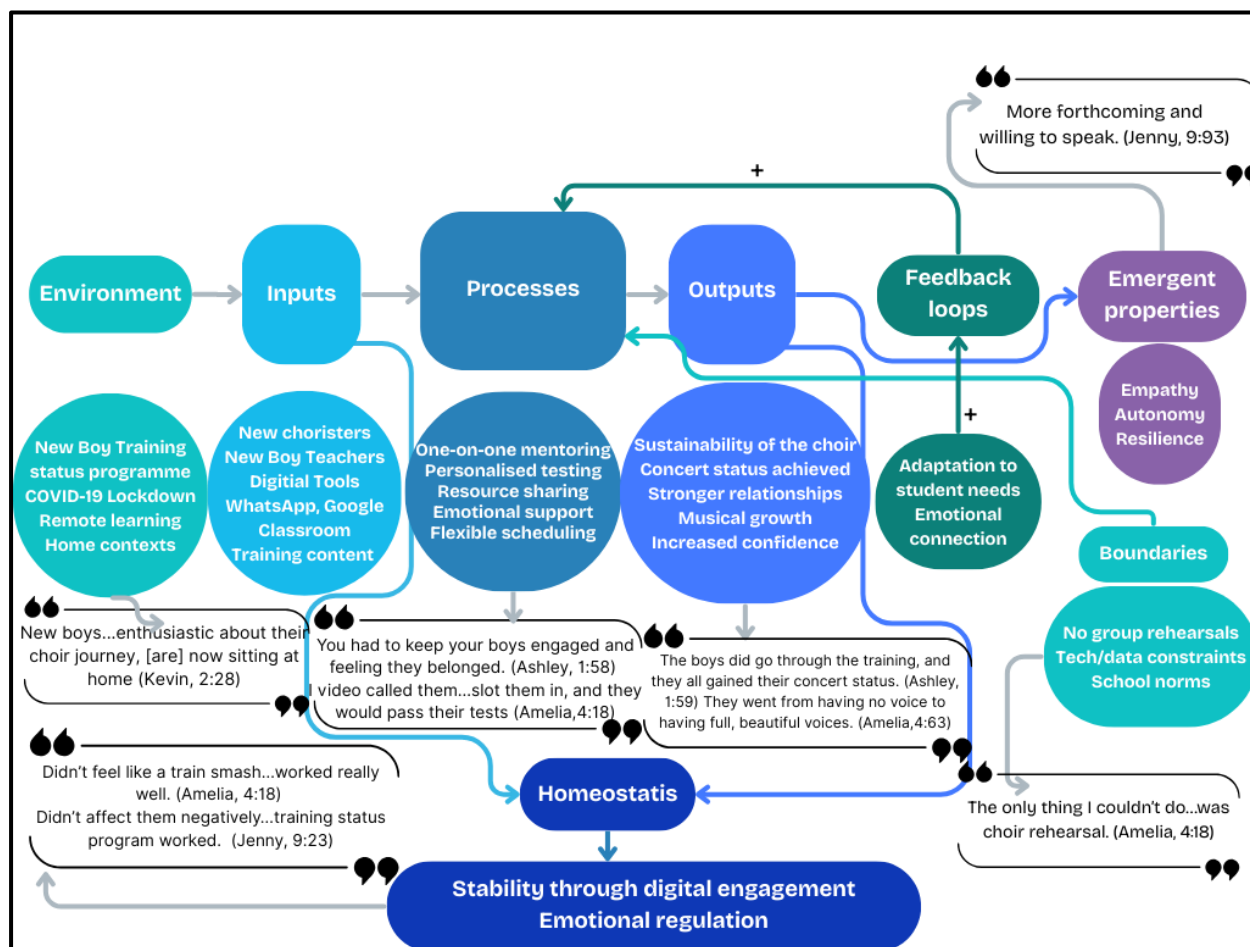
At some stage, [they had] more daily contact with their staff. Yeah, up in the mountains. I know that there was excitement as well with that. Because if you posted a message on the group like that, they replied very quickly, you know, and that showed me that they are happy about this. (Werner, 10:43)

Zinzan also believes that active engagement gives the boys “a strong sense of purpose” (13:11). Therefore, the sense of community and emotional support were central to online engagement in choir practices at DBCS during the pandemic.

4.3.3.10 *Online new boy training created a safe space for continuous growth and a sense of belonging*

Figure 21 shows the new boy training system during the various lockdowns from March 2020.

Figure 21: Online New Boy training during the first lockdowns



Data analysis revealed that the training of new boys is an essential part of choir practices at the DBCS, ensuring the choir's continuity and sustainability. As indicated, the COVID-19 lockdown created a disruptive external force. New choristers were isolated from the school environment, which traditionally fosters a sense of belonging and musical growth. Kevin notes that it must have been hard for new boys to be robbed of the characteristic “Drakie experience” that they signed up for: “The new boys who have just joined the school, enthusiastic about their choir journey, [are] now sitting at home” (Kevin, 2:28).

Despite the disruption caused by COVID-19, the system received key inputs: enthusiastic new boys, committed staff, digital tools and structured training content. Ashley explains that the boys’ initial experiences at the school play a crucial role in creating relationships that will last throughout the new choristers’ time at Drakies: “You had to keep encouraging them because they didn't have an idea of what the school was about. So, you had to keep your boys engaged and interested and feeling that they really belonged to the school” (Ashley, 1:58).

Werner can remember that the training status boys were “keen to carry on with their training programme ... because they have to achieve concert status” (Werner, 10:30). The system, which was adapted by shifting to one-on-one mentoring and emotional support, became central to maintaining engagement through video/audio calls, as well as distributing digital resources via WhatsApp and Google Classroom. It also included flexible scheduling and feedback loops, where teachers assessed progress and adjusted support based on each boy’s needs and context. In this way they could establish a personal bond with the new boy, through teaching and assessing the boys simultaneously, as Jenny (9:24) reminisces: “And I felt as if we connected actually a lot more with the boys because we could spend time with them”. Jenny further explains:

I think we actually, we got a better relationship with many of the boys because we could connect with them more than we could when they were at school, because we could see another side of them that they were a lot more forthcoming and willing to speak over the phone than if they had been at school with all their friends around them ... it felt like I got to know many of them a lot better during lockdown ... and then I understood where many of them came from. (Jenny, 9:93)

Positive feedback loops were created since teachers could adjust to student needs and their home contexts, as explained by Jenny:

You can see many of them, you could see where they practise and you could see the support that they get at home and how their home life is, where they come from. So that gave me a better understanding of many of the boys and how their parents, how involved the parents are actually in their lives and how, or how little influence the parents have in their lives. That we could see a lot more with the online testing. (Jenny, 9:93)

Audio-only calls reduced anxiety and increased participation, showing how feedback shaped the system:

And for many boys, I think it was less daunting for them to do it over the phone because we often didn't have a video on WhatsApp. We just had sound because it was more expensive than if they didn't have, because many of them also didn't have Wi-Fi at home necessarily. So they had to go on data [using airtime on their cellphones], which then meant that often it was just an audio call. And I think that also helped many of them because then they don't have to see your face and then you don't see them, but you hear what they are doing and you can hear if they are doing it correctly. So, I think that also contributed a lot to helping them get through the things quicker because they were more eager to make appointments and to pass the test because they weren't actually in front of their friends and they were alone. They could do it alone in their room and no one could see them and they couldn't see me sometimes. Yeah. So I think that also helped in that regard.

(Jenny, 9:28)

The system operated within the constraints of the COVID-19 restrictions: no group rehearsals were possible, and many new boys had limited airtime as described in the previous quotation. Amelia describes the process, pointing out that she could continue with all the needed training online, except for the new boy choir rehearsals:

We had slots. I video called them ... Usually, we would have slots during the rehearsal time that we have. You would see a boy come for their tests with you in their slots in the two hours. So we just made that an online version. I would have the time set out. I would slot them in, and they would pass their tests for me. I would work with them. That didn't feel difficult, I must say. It didn't feel like it was a train smash to work with them online, with the new boys. Because it was still one-on-one time, it was a bit different in the sense that I'm not sitting with them, showing the notes with them. But I could show it on the screen and follow with the screen. And because, as I said, like with the singing, because it's one-on-one, then it

works. The only thing that I couldn't do with the new boys was choir rehearsal, which is a part of the new boys ... so that had to [be put on] hold for a bit. But they could still go on with their concert status training. (4:18)

Technological tools such as WhatsApp video calls, a WhatsApp group, and a Google Classroom group where the boys received teaching materials were effective. The staff recorded videos which the students could practise on their phones or computers:

We had one-on-one training with the boys on over WhatsApp, which worked really well. So what we did is I made screen recordings of the sight-reading exercises that they have to practise. So I put the music on the screen, and then I recorded all the little sight-singing exercises and rhythm exercises that they have to practise, while having a cursor on the screen so they can see what to do. And then we posted that for them in their WhatsApp group. We had a new boys WhatsApp group and a Google Classroom, I think, which they could then access all the little recordings on their own Wi-Fi or on their phones. Most of them did it on their phones. And then they could practise and they could still book a time slot with me and the other teacher. And then we just made WhatsApp calls with them, and they could still carry on passing tests and carrying on with the training programme as normal. We also did the other tests with them that were not music tests, like little things that they learn how to tie a tie and touring protocol. All those things we could still carry on doing because they could do it one-on-one ... So, I think the new boys could still carry on musically perfectly. (Jenny, 9:23)

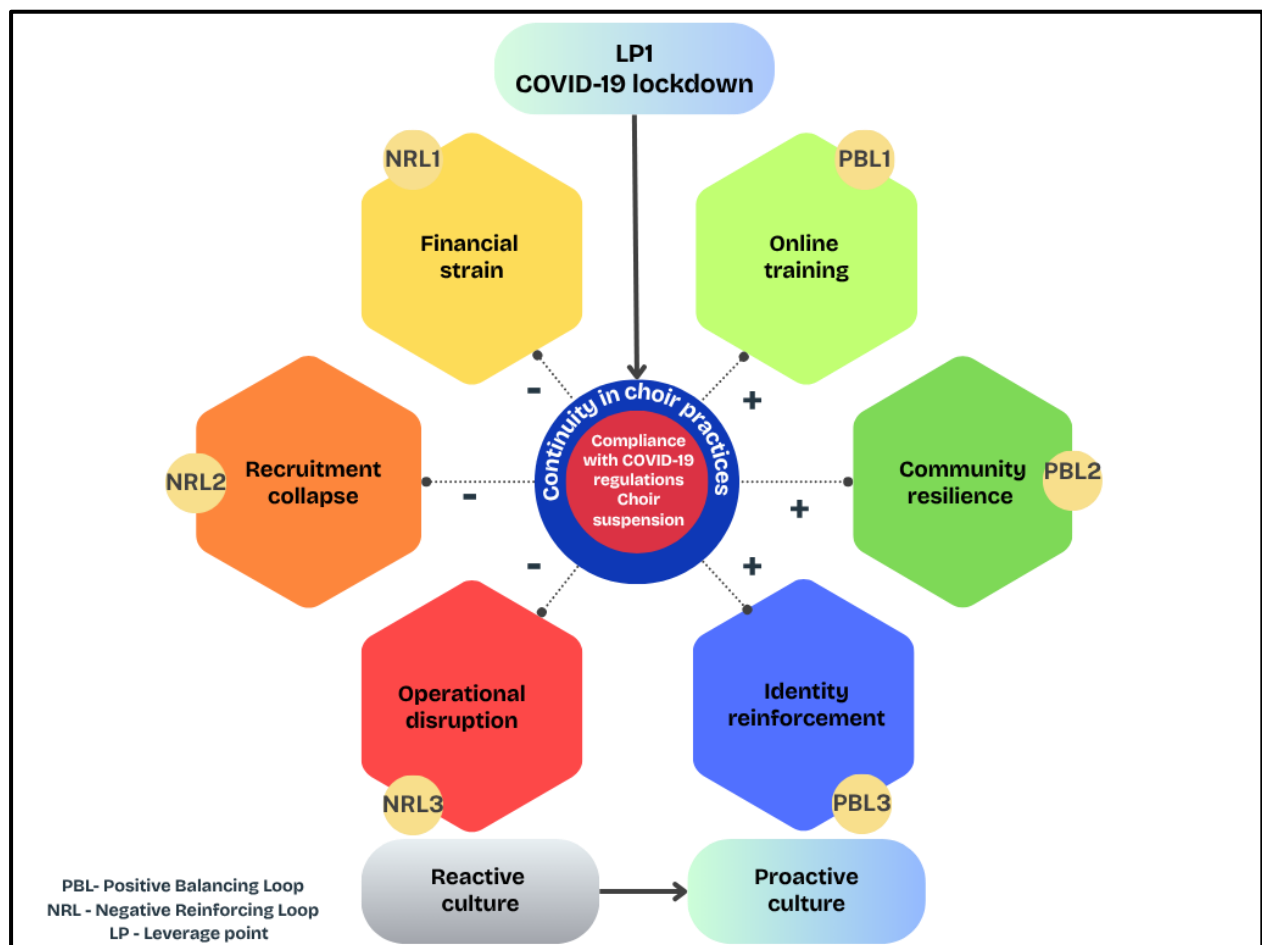
The new boy teachers were aware of the needs of every new chorister, and even had more time available than when they were at school, as Amelia comments, to help boys who struggled to pass tests: “You have the ones that only passed very few exercises. And with those boys ... I could spend a lot more time with” (4:23).

The system achieved its goals: all boys reached concert status, relationships deepened, and musical development continued, even remotely. Ashley admits that the online training programme was “highly time-consuming, but the boys did go through the training, and they all gained their concert status by the end of the year” (1:59). Furthermore, choristers had to manage their time, “practise on their own” (Ashley, 1:58), and then were tested when they were ready. Even though Amelia did not focus on online voice-building exercises, she experienced that boys “went from having no voice to having full, beautiful voices just from lockdown teaching” (4:63).

Werner admits that it was more “challenging pulling them [the new boys] together” (10:13). However, the new boy teachers felt that they could overcome the challenges with online teaching, and as explained earlier, could spend more time with the choristers, building sound relationships with them, and achieving success with their training, as Amelia (4:58) remarks: “I didn't feel that it [online training] had a bad effect on the new boys training”. The kindness and patience of the staff also contributed to the success of the programme, as Jenny explains: “Amelia is very kind and calm. She also connected really well with the boys and they were really comfortable to ask us for help” (9:27). Jenny further said: “It didn't affect them negatively to not be at school during COVID with regards to the training status programme. Yeah, that worked really well” (9:23).

Figure 22 summarises how external shocks inverted system priorities in theme 3.

Figure 22: How an external shock inverted system priorities examined through the lens of Systems Thinking Theory



Before lockdown, choir practices were at the centre of the system, surrounded by external influences such as concerts, tours, recruitment and finances. After the lockdown, external factors such as the global pandemic, government regulations and economic stresses became the primary influences on choir practices, pushing it to the periphery. The national lockdown (LP1) had an immediate impact, halting all choir activities. This was because compliance with the lockdown was non-negotiable, overriding the choir's autonomy. As a result, this situation significantly affected the financial, educational, operational and cultural aspects of choir practices.

The data analysis indicated several balancing loops that impacted negatively on choir practices. Financial strain (NRL1) resulted from loss of income from concerts and tours, as well as from parents struggling to pay school fees, which all prompted staff retrenchments. This situation led to a decline in morale among the music staff. With no tours or school visits, recruitment collapsed (NRL2), meaning fewer new enrolments.

Disruptions in operations (NRL3) further strained choral activities, creating negative reinforcing loops that hindered growth and jeopardised the survival of the system of choir practices.

Adaptive responses (positive balancing loops) that stabilised and supported choir practices included online training (PBL1), where staff developed digital tools to ensure continuity in music education and choral training. Additionally, community resilience (PBL2) was demonstrated as staff and parents invested in resources, such as airtime, data and emotional support, to maintain engagement. Furthermore, identity reinforcement (PBL3) helped preserve the Drakie ethos of belonging and excellence through creative adaptation. These positive balancing loops counteracted the negative impacts of negative reinforcing loops, ultimately stabilising the system.

The system's fragility stemmed from a weak infrastructure, driven by technical shortcomings such as insufficient bandwidth, latency issues and limited digital skills. However, as the system adapted to stress, new qualities emerged, such as resilience, autonomy, a sense of belonging and identity. This duality illustrates how the pandemic exposed both vulnerabilities and hidden strengths in choir practices.

The data analysis revealed several patterns of behaviour, known as system archetypes. It showed that external factors constrained both recruitment growth and financial sustainability. While the reliance on online training provided short-term stability, it could not fully replicate the experience of live rehearsals.

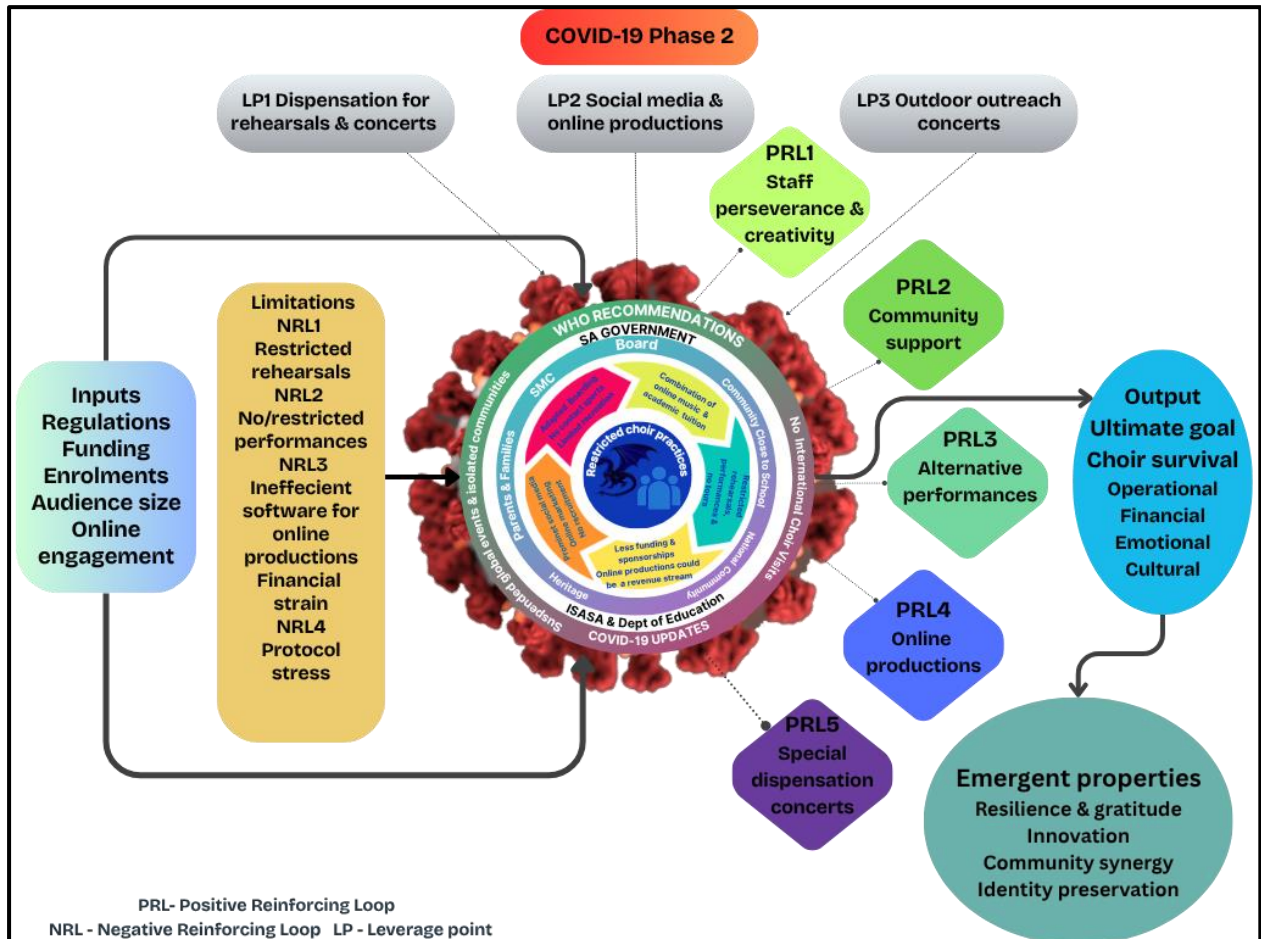
Theme 4 posed new challenges when boys returned to school after the first lockdowns.

4.3.4 Theme 4: 'Into battle: Adapt or die!'

Theme 4 explores the second phase of the pandemic at DBCS, where survival became the overarching goal. Choir practices had to constantly adapt to shifting regulations, finding a balance between restrictions and creative problem-solving. The system evolved under pressure, with reinforcing loops sustaining choir continuity and balancing loops limiting growth. Figure 23 provides an overview of restricted choir practices during this phase of the pandemic, which was still heavily influenced by global events and local conditions in South Africa. As mentioned in Theme 3, the entire country remained on high alert. The board, School Management Committee (SMC) and choir school staff

consistently responded swiftly to changing circumstances, as activities that were allowed one day could be restricted the next day.

Figure 23: Theme 4: 'Into the battle: Adapt or die!' Choir practices through the lens of Systems Theory



The core elements of choir practice, namely training and rehearsals, performances, concerts and tours, funding, recruitment and a social media presence supported by boarding activities remained consistent during the months leading up to the first lockdowns (Theme 2). When the lockdowns began, online teaching and virtual choir rehearsals (Theme 3) were introduced to maintain choir practices and education, and to engage choristers. Additionally, online productions and social media gained greater prominence and significance, alongside restricted rehearsals and concerts, contributing to the choir's sustainability and survival in Theme 4. As social media became more prominent, it transformed the purpose and connections within various aspects of choir activities. It emerged as the primary public medium for communication and sharing information among parents, choristers and global supporters, helping to convey and

affirm the choir's presence in the digital world. These social media posts also fostered a sense of solidarity during the pandemic and the riots in KZN.

Consequently, factors influencing choir practices included adherence to regulations, the need for funding and enrolment, as well as income, all of which were impacted by audience size when concerts resumed, and by online productions.

4.3.4.1 Adherence to regulations restricted choir practices

A strong theme that emerged from the data is the adherence to regulations restricting choir practices. Choir rehearsals and all activities had to comply with health regulations and restrictions, leading to new ways of conducting choir rehearsals. Posts on social media did not show choir rehearsals with social distancing protocols applied. However, videos on Instagram confirm that safety protocols were being adhered to at the school (https://www.instagram.com/p/CBa3fwwHE7a/?img_index=1). Not all the choristers were allowed back at the school, and choir rehearsals and learning became a 'hybrid' form of tuition, combining live F2F and online activities. The first boys to return to the school were the Grade 7s. By 15 June almost all the boys were back at school and welcomed on the school's Instagram page (Image 1). However, some boys from Namibia and Zimbabwe arrived back only on 26 July in compliance with the rules and regulations of their respective countries (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDG5UtanHjs/>).

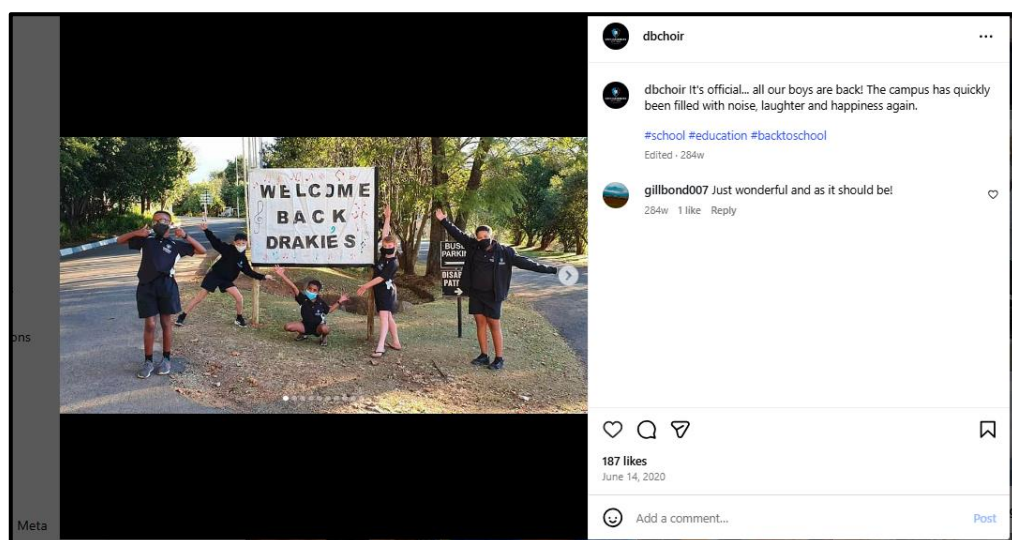


*Image 1: Welcoming of boys back at the school after the first lockdown in March 2020
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CBc_L2Qn6cy/)*

Because of the COVID-19 regulations, no choir rehearsals were permitted initially. However, after negotiations with the KZN Department of Education, special dispensation was given and F2F rehearsals and concerts were subsequently allowed. This special allowance served as a leverage point (LP1), changing the direction the school was heading, making it possible for the choir to survive. Firstly, in-person rehearsals (PRL1) were more productive than online rehearsals, and secondly, the choir was enabled to perform during Lockdown Level 2, when regulations permitted larger gatherings (PRL3 and PRL5), as illustrated by Image 2.

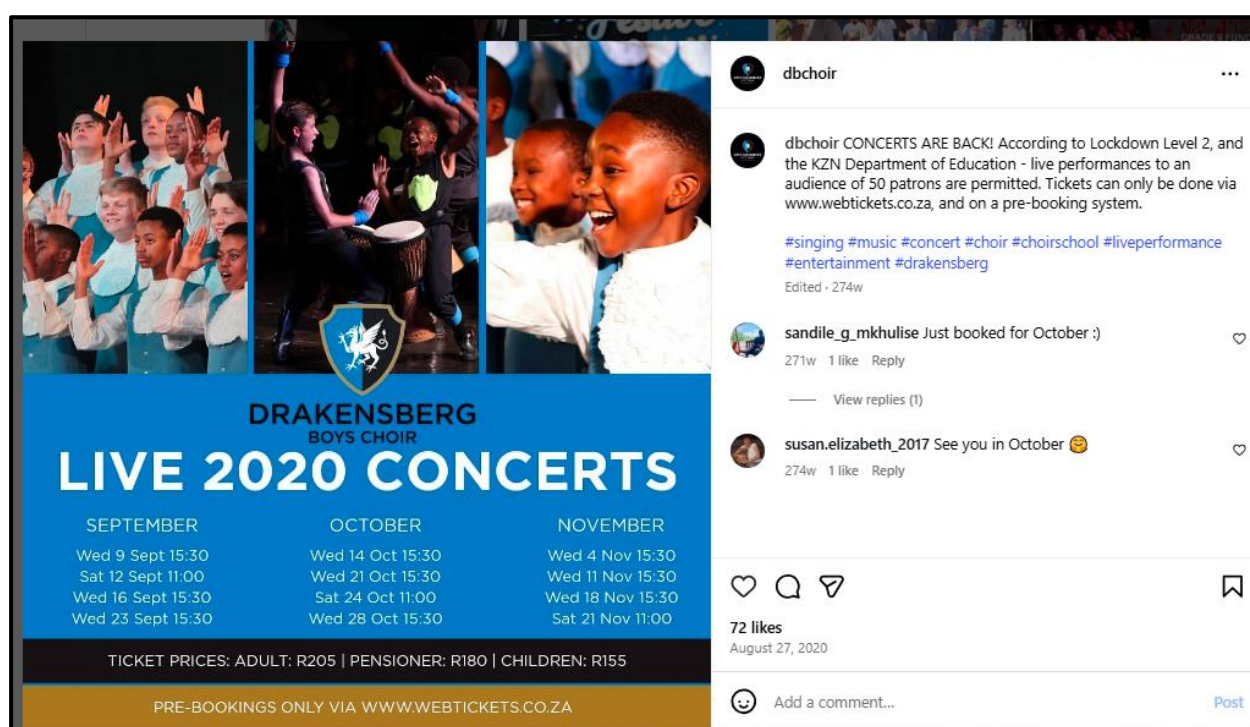


Image 2: Advertisement for the first 'legal' concert on 9 September 2020. Note the confirmation of compliance with Lockdown Level 2, the number of audience members allowed, and clear instructions for buying tickets online (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEZV1ppnbqj/>)

This had a positive impact on all aspects of choir practices, as Nina explained: "And the biggest impact was obviously on the choir's ability to perform" (Nina, 7:9). However, Kevin realised that the school would not survive without the special performance dispensation, negotiated with the KZN Department of Education:

I think we did it well ... and credit to Zinzan, because without that letter – somewhere, I know it used to be displayed up on the screen, so that people knew that we had consent to do so—I don't think we could have done a whole lot of things differently on the choir front. (Kevin, 2:139)

4.3.4.2 *In-person choir rehearsals: limiting and reinforcing aspects of restricted choir rehearsals*

The data analysis shows that in-person restricted rehearsals limited the effectiveness of choir practices (NRL1). Zinzan, as the head of the school, was responsible for the safety of the choristers and was concerned about the health and safety of the choristers: “To begin with, practices were challenging. The school was unsure about how lenient we could be with COVID protocols regarding the proximity of one chorister to another” (Zinzan, 13:2). Furthermore, the music staff experienced social distancing, mask-wearing, the loss of peer mentoring and reduced chorister communication as obstacles in choir rehearsals (RL1). Ashley remembers the social distancing and placement of choristers in the auditorium, which was the only rehearsal space large enough to comply with COVID-19 regulations:

But when the boys came back, they had to rehearse in the auditorium with open windows. They were seated more than a meter apart. They were seated in a zigzag alignment. There was a row open between them. They had to sing with masks, and they could not warm up as a group. Later on, they could do that. (1:16)

Furthermore, other protocols had to be followed: “they had to use their own music” (Ashley, 1:19) to prevent cross-contamination, as well as all other safety protocols, including the sanitisation of surfaces and hands. Rehearsals with social distancing and restricted movements limited social interactions for new boys joining the concert choir. This made it difficult for them to integrate, as they could not rely on more experienced choristers nearby for help and assistance, as explained by Werner:

The most challenging was actually more the social distancing in the choir. Boys don't, anyway, as a rule, stand too close to one another. But now we had to start

moving them further apart. One of the things that, and it's like a passed-down thing at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School, is for choristers to help and assist one another in a choir situation. Really, to do it in such a way that it's not disruptive to the rest of the rehearsal. And having the boys far apart, there was none of that. So, they couldn't assist one another. We've got choir leaders in place, like the voice group leaders, who could not do their job properly. And all those boys do their job in such a way that it helps the conductor, and it helps the choir staff. Because they're the experienced boys and all of that. So, they could not move around freely and listen ... That was a challenge for every boy, really having to cope on their own and to utilise their own space. ... Now, all of a sudden, in the choir rehearsal, there's no help. So the younger boys didn't have those mentors who could help them in the choir rehearsal itself. And I'm thankful that, by the time the majority of the new boys had got their concert status, coming into the choir, it had changed a bit. Because they especially need that leadership. Need that ... guidance from the older boys. So that was challenging. I could not say to a leader, I hear a problem there, just go try and find what it is. With this specific piece and those notes and all of that. So, that for me, was the most challenging with this mega social distancing that we had to have. (10:18)

Not only did the conductor experience a loss of communication between himself and the singers, but choristers also missed the experience of group singing ('singing together'), feeling isolated during rehearsals, since they could not see each other, as Kevin comments:

They couldn't see each other. They weren't standing in the choir lines. They weren't, you know, as the sopranos, altos, or whatever voice group they were a part of. They just weren't there experiencing the auditorium, which is where it all happens for them. (2:30)

Eye contact, and therefore, two-way communication between the conductor and his choristers (NRL1) was lost, since choristers were spread out in the auditorium, and the conductor's back was consequently turned to some boys.

In the tiered seating of the audience, as well, when we had rehearsals. Which made it difficult for a conductor, because as a conductor, if you work with any of the choir staff, you like to be able to have face contact with everybody. Now if my back is turned to one half there, it makes it challenging, it makes it difficult. We can only do that sort of thing if there's a special effect we want to create with a certain piece of music. But all of a sudden, I was forced to, every rehearsal, have my back turned to many boys. (10:18)

During data analysis, it became clear that the wearing of masks also complicated communication and feedback from the conductor to the choir and vice versa, since he could not see the choristers' facial expressions or hear how they were singing, and the choristers could not hear or see the conductor's face or those of their peers:

Those beginning days were challenging because of the mask situation. You know, a lot of the time, new boys learn visually. So when you're hid behind a mask and you're trying to demonstrate, it's a challenge. But in terms of the way that we run it and stuff, it was business as usual with these other COVID restrictions in place. (Freddie, 11:4)

Jenny also notes that mask-wearing during new boy choir rehearsals (NRL1) limited her ability to see the singers' mouths and facial expressions. Furthermore, while wearing masks, singers found it challenging to connect with the music, which is essential to making music together (musicking). However, in the end, they learned to cope with unsatisfactory circumstances (PRL1), and learning continued:

Well, there were many negatives. I think there were more negatives than positives because it was really difficult for the boys, because we always had to have masks

on when we rehearsed. There was always some kind of restriction between the boys and the singing ... we couldn't see their mouths, we couldn't see their faces and we couldn't really make a connection like that you should be able to do with music and that's so essential to making music so I think that, but I think later on we actually coped with it really well. (Jenny, 9:47)

Werner echoes Jenny's comment that masks hampered the conductor's ability to read the singers' facial expressions and body language, and react to those subtle behaviours of the choir which conductors rely on (NRL1):

Yes, so the challenges with the masks. Obviously, the face is the window to the outside. And the eyes and things like that. Luckily, they didn't have to cover their eyes. But you can't see, like for instance, if a boy had a bad day and he didn't want to sing. You couldn't really see if he was really singing or not. So that was definitely challenging. (Werner, 10:17)

After the first restrictions, regulations were eased, restoring communication between fellow choristers and the conductor. This created a feeling of 'singing together again' since they were no longer isolated on separate chairs. This change made rehearsals easier and more effective, which reinforced choir practices, as Ashley mentions:

It was wonderful when we could phase out some of the restrictions, that we did not need masks anymore. And that we could practice on a stage together and not be isolated in chairs, where you sang on your own. That was amazing. (1:104)

Werner mentions that the boys could remove their masks because they were isolated at the school. However, social distancing was maintained: "Luckily, in a way, because we are isolated, we could remove the masks ... and stand a bit further apart" (10:19). On the other hand, Amelia found it challenging to keep the boys apart:

So, they weren't in masks in the rehearsals. But we tried the distancing thing. It had a lot of conflict because we had the whole time try to keep them back in the

distance. But it was difficult to keep them distanced. But we were fortunate that there wasn't a COVID outbreak at the school. (4:21)

After the first lockdown, Jenny was concerned that the boys could get sick, but they did not since everybody tried to prevent contamination:

So, I was concerned that after the boys came back from lockdown that we might get sick, that they would come back and we would get COVID, but we never did and I don't know if it was because we were just, we had really good COVID measures in place at the school, but I think there were still concerns that someone might get sick and that it would spread really quickly, because we were as a whole group together a lot in a room or outside and the boys all slept together and ate together and so there was actually a very high risk at the choir school because of the boys spending so much time together and it was winter, yeah ... it was almost the end of winter, so it was still cold, they couldn't really still be outside and they are little boys, so they'd not really, they don't really know how to social distance and to not play on top of each other and to have that responsibility of not being too close to someone. So, yeah, that was my biggest concern. (9:45)

Contrary to popular belief, the choristers did not experience a higher incidence of COVID-19 compared to the general population while rehearsing together. The choir implemented safety measures by rehearsing in well-ventilated spaces, keeping windows open to ensure good airflow, and maintaining a minimum distance of one meter between members. This consistent interaction among the choir members may have fostered a level of herd immunity, potentially increasing their resistance to the virus. As Ashley explains, these factors contributed to the choir's ability to continue practising safely:

What we did differently from other choirs was keep rehearsing, and as a group, we didn't get sicker than other people in other places. So we have done something differently, but it was not like the rest of the country. (1:175)

Nina, the health officer, believed that the virus was transmitted through aerosols long before the WHO released its findings. Therefore, she emphasised that the boys should rehearse at a safe distance, with open windows and adequate airflow in the auditorium:

What I did push for is more outdoor rehearsals and, when we started performing, outdoor performances. Because I believed long before the World Health Organization that it was spread by aerosol. When they were saying it's only droplets and touch. But I suspected right from the beginning: windows open, stay outdoors as much as possible. So that affected the choir, because they did some performances out there, which weren't great in terms of conditions. And it was also to social distance the audience. (Nina, 7:13)

However, she also knew that everyone could still contract the virus from group singing:

What I did know is that as a little school community, we are an absolute fishbowl when it comes to incubating germs. So, I knew that if it did come, because it was so contagious, although none of them would be really sick, it would spread through the whole school. And I was aware that choir singing without masks would have been one of the major areas of transmission. (Nina, 7:12)

As a result of the “fishbowl” (Nina, 7:12) effect, the choir community functioned in an isolated setting, where group immunity began to develop among the choristers and staff. The choir community contracted the virus only after leaving their safe bubble. Therefore, choral training could be maintained, as Ashley notes:

But I think the importance of creating a bubble or herd immunity was an important factor why we could carry on with our work, because we didn't get that sick when we were together. When we moved out of our safe space, then people got sick. (1:172)

The commitment of the music staff and singers during restricted rehearsals created a feeling of gratitude and appreciation towards the choir and staff who made rehearsals work, as is evident in Werner's comment (PRL1): "As I say, the boys are so in this that they, and with the staff, together with the staff, we got through it. And we're thankful that we could get through those challenges as well" (Werner, 10:20).

Moreover, the tenacity, perseverance, creativity and patience displayed by the music staff were valuable and vital elements of choir practices during the pandemic, as the staff bore the main burden of the responsibility of ensuring the continuation and excellence of choral activities, as Zinzan points out:

I was impressed with the tenacity of the choir staff and the majority of the boys to overcome these obstacles to rehearsing, and particularly, the patience shown by the choir staff in trying to get young boys to adapt to a remarkably different way of rehearsing. Once the boys returned to school, rehearsals included singing with masks in place and standing in formation, 1 metre apart. With perseverance and some creativity, we overcame all challenges and still managed to maintain exceptional standards. (Zinzan, 13:6)

4.3.4.3 The threat of COVID-19 outbreaks

However, although the choir developed a form of herd immunity, choir practices took place under the threat that, if a COVID-19 outbreak occurred, all choir and other activities would be halted and the boys would be sent back home. However, the boys could not adhere to the rules and found it quite stressful not to be in close contact with each other (NRL1), as Nina comments:

I think it was stressful for them. Like I say, it's possibly easier for adults to handle those kinds of restrictions, because children and teenagers are more spontaneous. So they would have had to constantly interrupt their own behaviour, say, oh, don't go too close, oh no, don't come to my cubicle. (Nina, 7:42)

Adherence to regulations caused stress to the boys, as Ashley also noted that the boys struggled to navigate the health restrictions successfully: “Not daily scholars, but with living in with boarding and choristers, those things didn't really work in the dorms and in their social life when it was out of the public's eye” (Ashley, 1:171). The remarks on an Instagram post (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBAyFOynSp9/?>) confirm Nina’s comment where Grade 7 boys who were the only boys back at school gave their impressions of living under health restrictions after the first lockdown: they all had to adapt to wearing masks, masks were uncomfortable and boys found it difficult not to making physical contact (Nqubeko: “It feels strange wearing the mask all the time. It is hard to keep social distancing ‘cos not all of us are used to it”). Luke said: “This is way better than Lockdown at home. I’ve missed my friends”. Michael reiterates that “it’s a little different. It’s hard to get used to staying apart. The masks are very uncomfortable”.

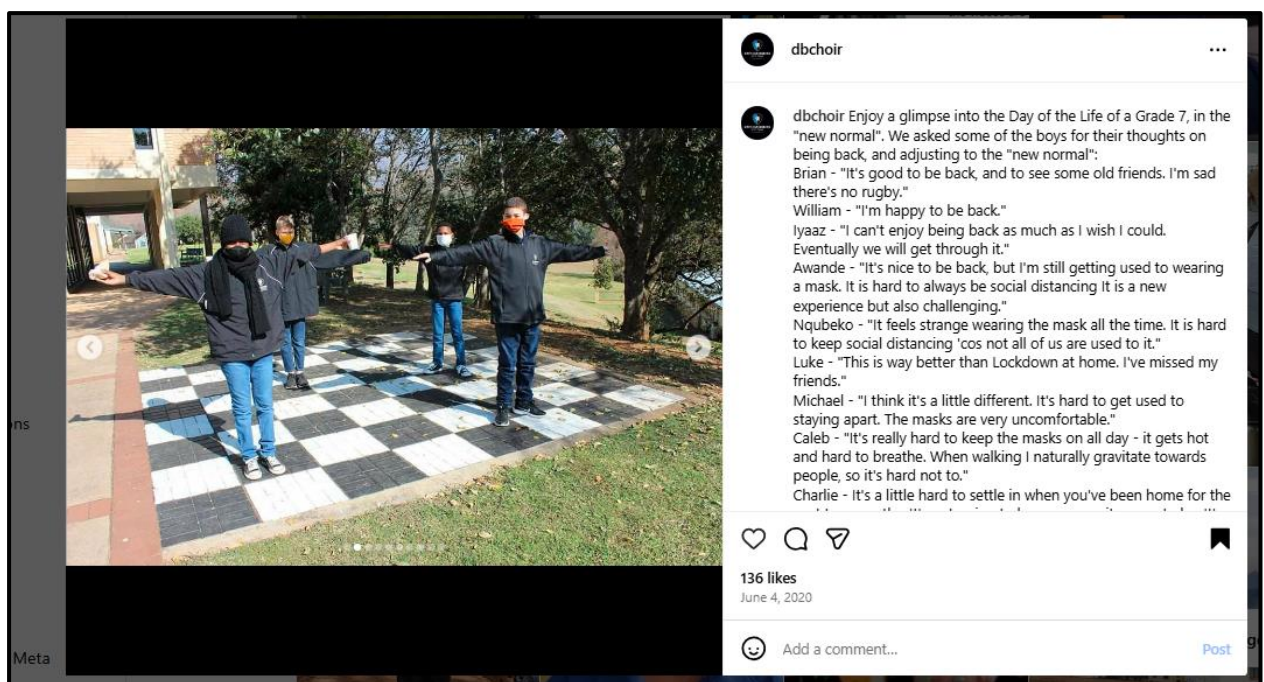


Image 3: Boys demonstrating social distancing rules
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CBAyFOynSp9/?img_index=2)

The attempts to comply with the rules also created opportunities for the older boys to abuse their seniority and power over younger boys, as Nina states:

I found it very tiresome having to apply all those rules to young children who are spontaneous and want to play, and rough and tumble, and hang out like teenagers, and they were constantly being screamed at, stay apart, you're too close. The Grade 9s were actually having a party, applying all those rules and dishing out demerits if someone was caught without a mask. So, there was a bit of abuse of power, perhaps. (7:9)

Zinzan is also of the opinion that all the safety precautions were unnecessary since a chorister was not infectious after having COVID-19: “On an isolated campus and once the infection period has passed, the boys should have been allowed to rehearse without masks or social distancing” (13:39).

Despite all precautions, the school had two outbreaks and all operations of the choir school were immediately suspended; parents had to fetch boys by car since flights were also suspended at that time, as Nina explains:

Yes, we had two outbreaks of COVID. As hard as the Doctor and I tried to avoid testing, because we knew soon there were positives, we'd have to close. And what happened was, Lesi²² had flu. Then his parents came to fetch him to come home, and they tested him at home, and it was positive. So that was our first outbreak. So then I immediately had to say to the boys, anyone who remotely suspects that they've got it, any symptoms whatsoever, I need to test you. So then we tested, 25 came back positive. I still have all the files. Yeah, so at that point, we had to move and send everybody home, which was a heck of a nightmare for the parents, because they couldn't put them on aeroplanes. So, for example, Danny from Cape Town, his parents were livid that we'd closed down, and they had to drive all the

²² Choristers' names were altered for ethical reasons.

way here to fetch him. Why didn't we just carry on? Whereas obviously there were other parents who were saying, no, my boy was coming home, and didn't let them go back to school until six months later. (7:35)

As with the first lockdown, all protocols had to be followed, threatening the continuity of choir and academic tuition. Academic teaching reverted to online lessons:

For a good while. So, yeah, I mean, it's had a massive impact across the board. I mean, even academics, because during lockdown it had a big impact on academics having to now learn to work online and all this new stuff, and the different time structures, and boys who were compliant on their end. So, it obviously messed with academics as well. It messed with everything, which was an absolute nightmare this period. (Nina, 7:50)

Consequently, the school went into a three-week lockdown, reopening for a school term that extended to thirteen weeks, resulting in fatigue and the lowering of morale amongst staff and choristers:

So there was a lockdown announced just after we closed our school, but we kept the school closed for about three weeks. That was longer than the normal September holiday. And then boys came back. As soon as the term started, we started with online classes again. (Ashley, 1: 118)

Teachers and boys were tired since the school had a 13-week term after reopening after the last outbreak:

The same happened with me from the 10th to the 17th of August. The day that I returned to school, we closed the school that afternoon for that forced break because of the number of boys who had COVID. And it was going to be a one-week break. It became a two-week break. And then what happened to the year, the structure of the year is that we started on the 6th of September, our final term,

and we went right through to the 8th, 9th, or 10th of December. So it was an exceptionally long term. It was a 13-week term. That final term without a mid-term break. I remember that. [Speaker 2] And yeah, so it would definitely have an effect on the boys as well. (Kevin 2:12)

Then, of course we had the, what did we call it, breakout, whatever, in August 2021. I mean that was a full year down the line, I don't know which wave of COVID that was. So the boys, I'm trying to think how many of them were really, really sick with COVID. I don't think they were all, but it was at that outbreak, I think Nina said about 18 tested positive and then we stopped for a while. So, up until then, I know a boy came back later than some of the boys because his mom was concerned. I still remember sending him some of his stuff. (Kevin, 2:31)

As with previous lockdowns, the school could adapt more easily because it had learned from experience. Online rehearsals did not continue during these lockdowns, and only F2F rehearsals resumed afterwards, as explained in Theme 3.

4.3.4.4 *The influence on social interaction of choir rehearsals without performance*

The data indicated that the choir was allowed to rehearse but not perform during Lockdown Level 3 when choristers were back at school from June 2020. Since performance experiences are socially interconnected, the loss of performance opportunities resulted in feelings of anguish and unfulfillment. Choristers began to question their purpose (NRL2). Ferdi explains that it was difficult for the choir not to perform, as the choristers began to wonder why they were there. The choir's ethos is deeply rooted in regular weekly performances for patrons from all over the world, which create a sense of purpose, excitement, motivation, inspiration, happiness and joy. Freddie's comment also highlights that the choristers view performing as the pinnacle of their choral experience. Without performances, they experienced lack of direction and a decline in morale, which he found difficult to address:

You know, it's very challenging, like what are you rehearsing for, so to keep that morale up is difficult, because what's the point? Why are you here? You're here to perform; you're not here to rehearse; you're here to perform. Rehearsal is what you do to get to the performance, so for me that was, you know, seeing that like kind of uncertainty was quite, you know, was quite challenging, you know, to have to work through that. (11:42)

Additionally, the data indicated that the choristers were inspired by audiences and they lose energy and motivation without the goal that performances provide. Ashley echoed Freddie's comment on this:

The rehearsals ... were so restricted when the boys came back, and they were allowed to have the rehearsals; they could not perform. And I found that the boys started to become weary because they didn't have a real goal to practice for. (Ashley, 1:65)

The choristers also missed the social aspect of the energising connection with the audience: "I think it was just the social aspect of the performances that we missed, that you could really react to the audience and get energy from the audience" (Ashley, 1:71).

Kevin also observed that the boys had to adapt to many changes and unknown challenges after the lockdowns, but the choristers must have had feelings of despair and hopelessness when they could not perform:

It wasn't good, no, because there was too much unknown. They'd come back to school, they now, they'd had online for nine weeks, they're now back at school, all kinds of different things in place in different, two sittings at mealtimes, and whatever, but with no certainty about, it definitely affected them, I think so, and I can't remember too many conversations with the boys, but I think some of them were saying well, geez, I'm at the choir school here and it's not anyone's fault,

other than the pandemic, but I can't do what I really love doing. It would have affected them, I believe it. (2:137)

Choir rehearsals that do not lead to performances dampen communication, interaction, and the sharing of musical experiences between the audience and the performers. This situation led to a feeling that the choristers' hard work went unnoticed, preventing them from sharing their accomplishments, as Maureen realises:

And it was nice from that perspective but when our boys did come back and they had to obviously rehearse without performing, that was heartbreaking because they were working hard, but they weren't able to actually show anybody physically what was happening. (3:92)

4.3.4.5 *The influence of social interaction on choir practices during restricted performances*

The moment when restrictions made it possible for the choir to perform, whether at official concerts (PRL5) or during other opportunities for performances (PRL3), a new dynamic became apparent. Thomas points out that this special allowance (LP1) had a positive influence on the choristers, creating a sense of purpose and lifting their morale, underscoring its importance as a leverage point:

So, I think in that respect, Drakensberg Boys Choir was an anomaly. It was the fact that we could get that special dispensation to continue our performances and concerts that changed everything for the school and the choir, because at least the boys could then have some sense of purpose again. And where all other choirs literally just went deeper and deeper down a downward spiral, at least the Drakensberg Boys Choir could maintain its essence. (Thomas, 8:27)

The Instagram post (Image 4: [instagram.com/p/CEZV1ppnbqj/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CEZV1ppnbqj/)) advertised that the choir could legally perform for an audience of 50 patrons on 9 September 2020, and the comments reflect supporters' excitement about experiencing live concerts again.

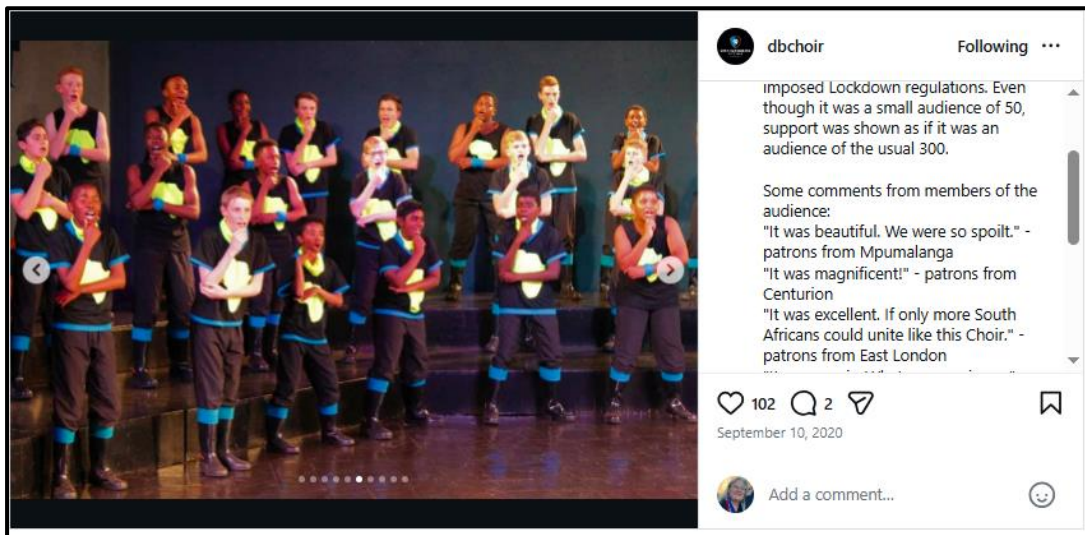


*Image 4: Posts on Instagram after the first concert after lockdown on 9 September 2020
(https://www.instagram.com/p/CE8wNiLnF2N/?img_index=6)*

The reports made it clear that the first performance after 182 days of no concerts brought joy and happiness to the choristers and ‘magic’ to the audience as reflected in the comments on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/p/CE8wNiLnF2N/?img_index=6). The moment the choir was allowed to perform, whether at official concerts or not, a new positive dynamic became apparent in choir practices, as Maureen observed: “They were missing that interaction with the audience a lot, I think. And I think when they suddenly had it again, it was fantastic” (Maureen, 3:65).

Furthermore, concerts are social experiences, and Image 5 illustrates the ‘explosion of happiness’ in the boys’ faces as a patron shared her experience on the choir’s Instagram page after one of the first concerts after lockdown in October 2020:

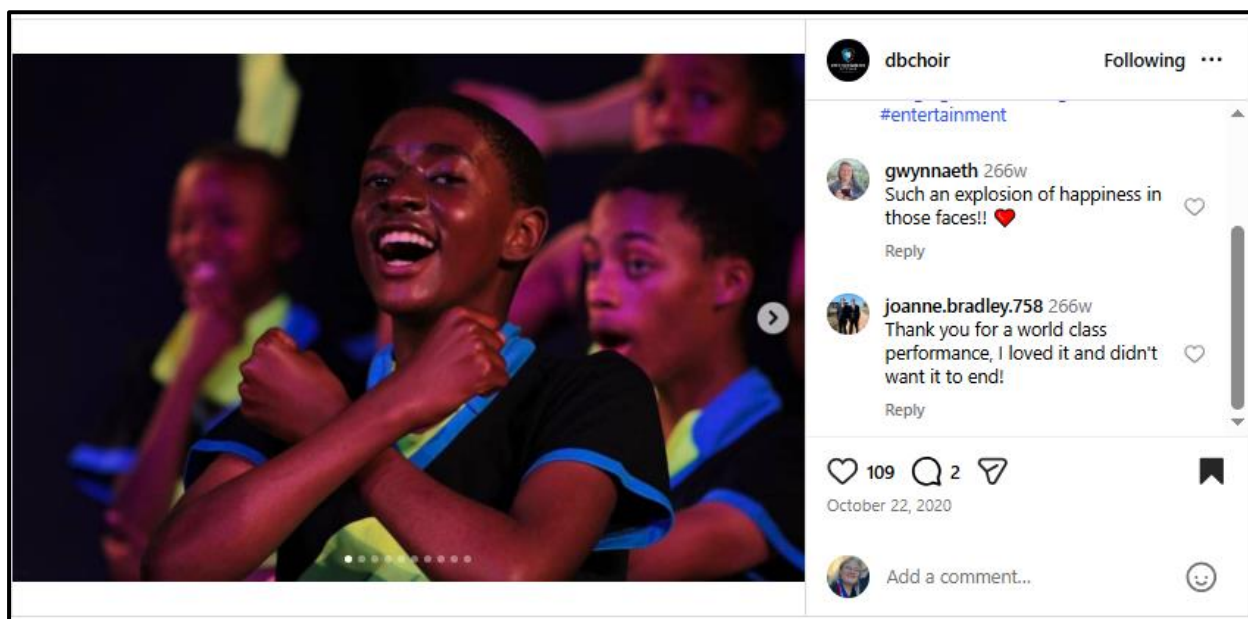


Image 5: Joy and happiness to perform again after a special dispensation to perform was granted (https://www.instagram.com/p/CGpAj0CHVUK/?img_index=1)

The second comment on the above Instagram post reflects the choir's continuous striving for excellence: "Thank you for a world-class performance, I loved it and didn't want it to end!" (joanne.bradley.758); it also reflects the choir's continuous striving for excellence (motivation) but also its ability to uplift audiences (inspiration).

Choristers also thrived on feedback from the audience as Maureen noted:

It was so nice to be doing it again, and for the boys to actually have someone watching them instead of just being in their own little rehearsal thing and not having any of what they got so used to having, all that applause and adoration. And, yeah, feeling the feedback, you know? Because you can do a recording of yourself singing, but if you don't know how people are reacting or feel it or hear it, then it's not the same. (Maureen, 3:64)

Even before restricted performances were allowed, the headmaster and music staff created opportunities to bring joy, excitement and purpose through the sharing of musical experiences (PRL3). These performances were a turning point for the choristers (LP3) and music staff members, as Ashley reminisces about one of her best experiences during the pandemic:

The best choir experience was actually when we sang for a wedding party. I was not even there, but to see [the influence of] that experience on the boys and to experience the joy that the boys had after going and singing four African songs for an unexpected party, a wedding party, that was amazing. I will cherish that moment always. (Ashley, 1:87).

Furthermore, these opportunities were small interventions with amplified effects on morale, awareness, recruitment and community connections (LP3). Thus, through community involvement, the headmaster created opportunities to perform at schools, churches and tea gardens to establish feelings of normalcy and positivity, and to perform outside the school's auditorium since touring was not allowed, as Kevin pointed out:

Some schools said, well, come and perform here. There's a little school in Greytown ... where we had an outdoor performance. So, just an opportunity for the boys to get on a bus, and they ended up performing in front of some people. (Kevin, 2:69)

Maureen's comment below highlights how the interaction between the audience and the choir provided an uplifting experience for both choristers and audience members, even though they had to adhere to restrictive regulations. It also created a sense of 'mini' touring and offered an escape from the strict campus routine. She likened the experience to being at a pivotal event.

We weren't able to tour, obviously, for reasons of the restrictions. But when we did eventually get on the road, we did a road trip, like a little day outing. We went down to the Midlands, and we went into a couple of schools there. And we performed. But when we arrived there, we had to go through all the protocols for COVID and sign all these lists. And the boys weren't allowed any contact with the children that they were going to be performing in front of. We went to Cowen House. We went to St. Anne's. And yeah, I mean, just the St. Anne's scenario, it was an outside

performance where our boys did a little bit of African. And it felt like we were at home. They just were so, so desperate to have that performance or just have the boys come and do what they do so well. And then, yeah, they went mad, those girls. It was so weird, that one. I remember they were just sitting all out on the lawns, and it was such a beautiful day. And it was like, sure, life is normal a little bit today. (Maureen, 3:21)

Images 6 and 7 illustrate the interaction between the choir and audience at St Anne's Diocesan School.



Image 6: DBC performing outside at St Anne's Diocesan School, note the distance between the audience and the choir



Image 7: Girls having a picnic while boys perform for them at St Anne's Diocesan School, creating a festive atmosphere

Werner also mentioned that besides the boys' renewed excitement, it also changed their attitude and led to a better headspace:

And we did as well, just to get the boys into the buses with the wheels turning and to go and perform in other places. Because up to that point, they could only perform in the auditorium with strict rules and regulations COVID-related. [Speaker 2] So, it did help to change kind of the attitude of the boys at that stage? [Werner] Absolutely. Absolutely. And in a positive way. (Werner, 10:8)

The choir mainly performed primarily outside to comply with COVID-19 regulations, as all the images demonstrate (Images 6 to 8). However, neither the discomfort of performing in extreme heat nor performing under a humble tree could dampen their spirits:

So, we started off with those little performances outside the school where we went to other schools and outside on their sports field would perform. But then we also had performances at, if you go through Midlands, you find little, little shops and

little, nice little places where people go over weekends and so on. So, we even performed under a tree there for people who were around. I mean, it wasn't as such really advertised concerts. Whoever was there could stop and watch just to get the boys out to perform because they loved it. Boys come to the school for that side of things, you know, to go on all the different tours and so on. Perform in different places and, and, and all of that. But that's the only thing we could do.

(Werner, 10:53)



Image 8: Boys performing at Piggly Wiggly under trees in scorching heat

(https://www.instagram.com/p/CMccs6Uqxpc/?img_index=8)

Zinzan explains that these impromptu drives also created awareness and unexpected recruitment opportunities when schools did not allow the choir to do recruitment since they were afraid that the choir could infect their scholars and they also lost students because of COVID-19 and were not willing to open up opportunities to join DBCS:

Once restrictions were eased, we began open-air performances at schools in the KZN Midlands ... We also performed at tea gardens (Piggly-Wiggly) and elsewhere. At these performances, we encouraged boys to audition. (13:24)



Image 9: Members of the audience attending an outreach concert at a church in Greytown (https://www.instagram.com/p/CO5EfB-qwvU/?img_index=10)



Image 10: The boys in full form during their performance in a church at Greyton (https://www.instagram.com/p/CO5EfB-qwvU/?img_index=6)

These informal performances held at schools and tourism centres served to remind people of the choir's existence and helped “pull people together” during difficult times (Nina, 7:80). This is illustrated by Images 4 to 10, which showcase the choir's connection to the surrounding community. The choir depends on the community to sustain itself, and the community, in turn, relies on the choir for upliftment. None of these events involved

ticket sales; instead, they reinforced community ties and raised awareness about the choir.

Images 11 and 12 feature Instagram posts promoting the choir and showcasing their performance at an open-air festival near the school, which attracted over 400 attendees. The wording of both posts highlights the relationship between the choir and its community, emphasising the ultimate goal of uplifting both the choir and the audience through shared musical experiences.



Image 11: Instagram advertisement of a community-based festival during the COVID-19 pandemic (instagram.com/p/CN21jbsKWc6/)

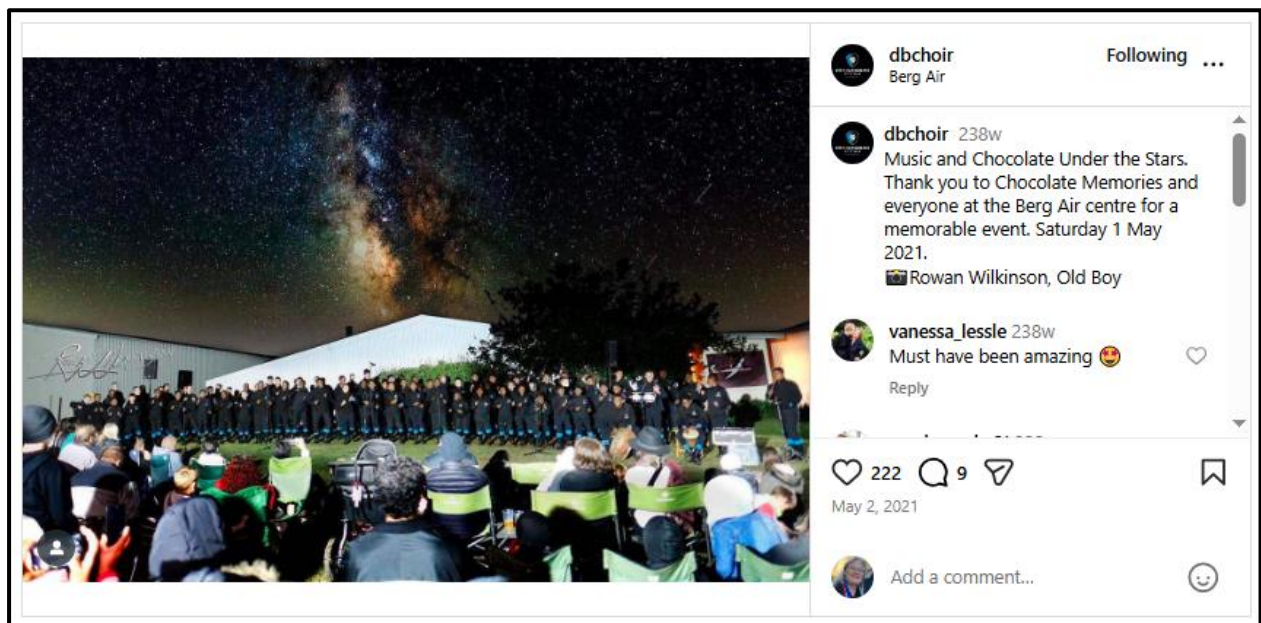


*Image 12: Outdoor performance at the Chocolate under the Stars Concert
(<https://www.instagram.com/p/COXS5NFno9k>)*

The data analysis highlighted that restrictions inhibited social interactions when attending concerts, as noted by Amelia:

That whole social aspect that you usually have when you have a music performance. It's not just about the performance, it's also a nice outing for the people that come to watch. They don't have that experience at all. Because there was no coffee and tea. You can't mingle. And form connections. It takes away a big aspect of music performances. Why people enjoy coming. It's like going to a sports event. But you can't talk to each other. So that was different. Not mingling. Spaces in between. So you can't chat to the person next to you. And slowly we could fill the auditorium more and more. (4:27)

Social interactions among audience members during intermissions, listening to music together in a confined space, and conversations with neighbours were all lost during the pandemic (NRL2). Additionally, both Amelia and Coach noted that a lack of energy and applause from the smaller audiences inhibited the choir's output in energy:

Oh yes, because they feed from the audience, they enjoy that audience cheering and giving them. And now it's just a couple of people sitting there...and it's quiet. And it feels awkward. It doesn't give them that motivation. And that boost that makes them perform with more energy. Yes, definitely. (Amelia, 4:28)

Freddie also describes how smaller audiences generated less energy and feedback, but the choir needed the same amount of effort for every performance. Through these experiences, choristers had the opportunity to grow and persevere through difficult circumstances:

Yeah, I think it's a challenge. Performers obviously like to perform and they like to perform to audiences. And I think it was a growth for a lot of the boys in learning that whether the audience is 50 people or 500 people, they've still got to put that effort in. They've still got to perform to the highest level, to the best of their ability. So, I think it was growing a lot of the choristers. (11:6)

The data analysis indicates that all operational aspects of choir practices were governed by health and safety protocols. Consequently, the special permission granted by the KZN Department of Education to perform in public (LP1) allowed the choir to survive during the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did the concerts provide essential financial support for survival, but they also played a significant role in the operational, emotional and cultural continuity of the system of choir practices. Key contributions to this concert system included adherence to health regulations, financial support from concert proceeds or funding from supporters who attended, and potential enrolments as boys were able to attend concerts and open weekends, which allowed prospective choristers to experience the remnants of the “Drakie experience,” and engagement from live audiences.

4.3.4.6 *Adherence to health and safety protocols created challenges for special dispensation concerts*

Compliance with health regulations included standard health and safety protocols such as mask-wearing, social distancing, sanitising, contact tracing and temperature

screening. These measures were part of the normal operations before the concerts began. Additionally, to ensure safety, two rows of front seats in the auditorium were removed to create a greater distance between patrons and choristers. The singers could move closer to one another without wearing masks during events held under Lockdown Level 2, since the choir had demonstrated that they did not experience illness from singing together at closer distances:

So, it wasn't a concert where we had to stand in like one and a half meters apart in social distance, because we separated ourselves from the audience. And so there was no contact between the boys and the audience, but the boys on stage, they were like a bubble, and within the bubble. (Thomas, 8:29)

Jenny also remembers that choristers did not have to wear masks: "No, we didn't do any concerts with masks" (9:38), which preserved some form of communication with the audience and enhanced sound quality during concerts.

The choir's geographical location meant that the choir and community were situated some way away from other events and places. The community continued to support the choir during these times. There was also enough space in the auditorium to allow audiences to remain socially distanced in accordance with regulations. Coach's comment also reflects the ever-changing number of audience members allowed to attend concerts, contributing to fluidity in operations and crisis management:

It's when we actually applied to actually have audience members come in to visit us and we're given permission, first time around it's 50 people, the second time around it's 200 people. But I think the demarcation of the school actually played a role because on its nature it is away from everything else that actually happens around. It's right up, you know, the mountain away from so many people. And, and because of that, that sort of played a role that we can be in this huge space so we can afford, you know, to actually have these numbers. I think that is just about the only thing that was sort of, you know, unique with our environment where we're

actually placed. But we could not actually do things or plan otherwise because the regulations did not actually come from within the school. (Coach, 12:47)

Data showed that audience capacities were directly influenced by changing regulations to which choir practices had to adapt, resulting in restrictions on income from ticket sales. Coach noted that the choir could accommodate a certain percentage of the venue's capacity during higher levels of lockdown. Thus, the space at the choir school could allow for 50 attendees. However, in smaller venues with an audience capacity of 50 or less, only 10 attendees would be permitted, making it financially unviable:

So when we started, we remember the numbers were, in fact, we're not actually allowed to perform at all to have an audience. Later on, I think, 2021, these regulations were actually relaxed a bit, and I think we could only have 50 audience members. I think also the 50 depended on how big your venue was. Our auditorium is about 500 seats plus, so we could actually host 50 members at a time, but other places where if 50 was, you know, the capacity, you could only do 10, you know, and with that much, you could not actually run the theatres, the places, the halls, you know, much because you were pretty much running at a loss. So when we actually started, we could only perform at all, so we're teaching boys all this music and all these movements, but it just ended there. You could not actually perform it in front of everybody else. (12:11)

Therefore, regulations on audience size, based on venue capacity, directly impacted choir practices. It was not practical for the choir to perform in small venues, so fewer performances were held at other venues. This decrease occurred because ticket sales could not cover the costs of performances. On the other hand, the choir needed income from concerts, but with smaller-capacity audiences, the income decreased, leading to the choir presenting two concerts per week at the school.

The two performances a week for small audiences were exhausting but did at least generate extra income, however small it might be:

We basically performed Wednesdays and Saturdays for the smallest of audiences. I think it was approximately 50 that was allowed in the auditorium, and we were one of the only choirs in South Africa that was allowed to perform during COVID, so we had this special, yeah, consent that we could perform, but it was still for a very, very small audience, and financially it had a huge impact on us. (Marisa, 6:9)

As a result, the choristers felt unfulfilled because they had learned both music and choreography but were unable to showcase their hard work to larger audiences. The choristers and staff also became fatigued, as the same level of energy and dedication was required for each concert, regardless of the audience size. Preparing for performances complicated learning new music, as the concert schedule was time-consuming and involved sound checks and a different setup from rehearsals. Therefore, it was debatable whether all the effort that went into those two concerts per week was worthwhile. Eventually, after restrictions were lifted and the financial crisis eased, choir practices returned to a more regular schedule, consisting of approximately one concert per week on Wednesdays, along with a few weekend performances at special events, such as open weekends or during tours, as Werner pointed out:

So now we have occasional Saturday performances, but it's not the pressure that we had in the 2021 year, where we had to, basically, it was a board instruction of the school to have the two performances per week to try and make up for the year before. Which was very taxing. It was very demanding. And it's, even though we love doing it, but you know, it's only so much. (10:52)

4.3.4.7 *An illustration of the complex web of activities involved with events under fluid COVID-19 regulations*

The announcement of the changes to regulations significantly affected choir operations. A small change in audience numbers had a huge impact on the network of interactions needed to host a concert that complies with all the health requirements. The following account describes how changes in regulations affected two consecutive events. The choir would host both a Saturday concert and an open weekend, during which prospective new

boys would arrive from locations such as Pretoria and Cape Town on the Friday, stay over, and then attend workshops and a concert the following day. Before the announcement, 200 spectators were allowed. The concert showcased the choir for prospective recruits and was also open to the public. After the announcement, only 100 members were allowed outdoors, and 50 indoors. The choir had already sold 150 tickets. Werner's comment describes how the changing restrictions changed the performance protocols, and that the SMC had to make quick decisions and try alternative ways to comply with unexpected changes in health and safety restrictions, while still making it possible to have concerts:

That's the call we made with that one concert, which we did outside. We moved everything because we had to have an emergency meeting that night and decide how we're going to handle the situation. So, every concert we could, we tried to make it carry on because that's what we love doing ... I don't actually know how they coped and dealt with it in the year before I came back. Because there was a stretch of time where there were no concerts. (10:113)

Therefore, hosting performances outside could enable a larger audience to attend concerts. Through creativity, the choir could utilise two adjacent venues: an open pavilion called Freedom Square and an enclosed venue next to the square, known as the Shark Tank, with sliding doors that could open up the whole space to comply with regulations. Thus, this setup could accommodate two audiences for a concert featuring a performance choir. Zinzan explains:

At this time, audience numbers were restricted to 50 patrons inside the auditorium and 100 patrons at an open-air venue. This prompted the school to move concerts outdoors, where we were able to accommodate 150 patrons thanks to some skilful engineering of seating spaces. (13:4)

Alternative venues had to be utilised while preparing the school's outdoor pavilion for a concert. These changes enabled the choir to perform under changing COVID-19

restrictions (PRL5), illustrating the staff's ability to adapt, innovate and persevere under changing circumstances (PRL1).

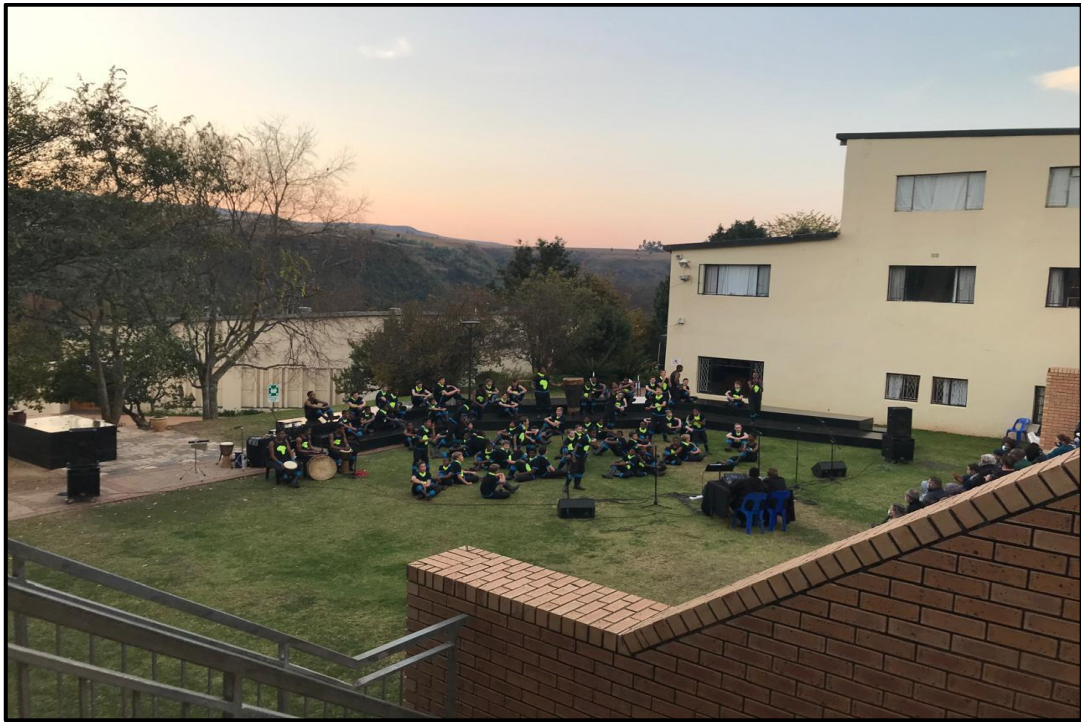


Image 13: An overview of the set-up for the concert in Freedom Square, with the audience seated on the pavilion on the right side of the picture

It was a massive undertaking to set up a stage without any protection from the elements. All sound equipment and lights had to be carried outside to the lawn area in front of the pavilion. Everything had to be broken down after the concert since the weather is unpredictable in the mountains. The community supported the school by attending concerts and supporting the choir (PRL2):

First of all, we obviously weren't allowed to perform indoors. And that was one of the big challenges, I suppose, for the music department to kind of make it possible for us to have the boys performing in the open air. Obviously, all kinds of aspects about that would have been affected, like the sound and the lighting and the weather and all those challenges that you kind of don't think of when it happens inside the auditorium, that's already set up. I mean, the boys had to move the wooden benches that they perform on; we call them 'bankies' [platforms] outside,

and that should then be stored away and accessed quite easily. And every week, all of those things had to be put in place. And they performed outside with audiences sitting on our grandstand, which is not quite as comfortable as being inside the auditorium. And a lot of our patrons are quite elderly. So it was really special to see that they still came out and watched the boys perform. And even though those groups were a lot smaller than what they would have been if we hadn't had COVID happen to us, I suppose. Yeah, sure. So I think I can hear that you already said that the lockdown measures and the restrictions changed the choir activities. (Maureen, 3:6)

Media posts were an integral part of the school's marketing system, keeping audiences updated on the latest news and performance protocols. The media post on Instagram (Image 14) illustrates the choir's quick response to advertise the upcoming concert under new COVID-19 restrictions. The choir also had an open weekend planned. All arrangements had to be adapted to accommodate prospective parents, choristers and the supportive audience and communicated through social media.

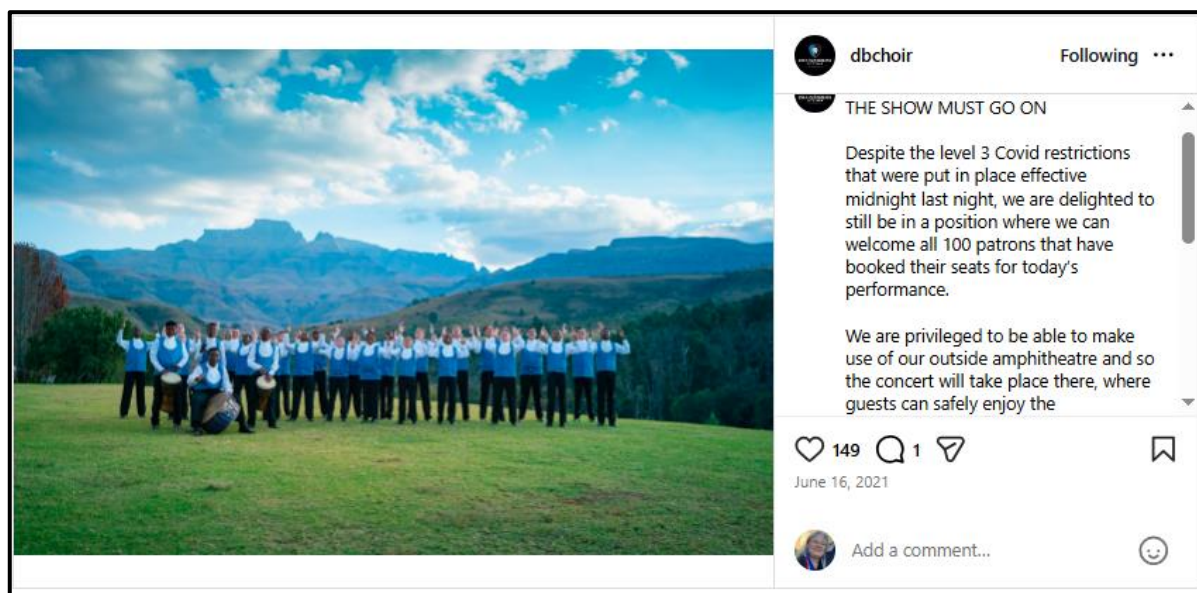


*Image 14: Instagram post announcing changed concert venue
(<https://www.instagram.com/p/CQK6kCfKP54/>)*

Images 13, 15 to 18 show the set-up outside during the outdoor performance on 19 June 2021.



Image 15: Socially distanced audience at the outdoor concert on 19 June 2021
(<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4481239825242119&set=pcb.4481249578574477>)

Audience members were seated in a socially distanced manner (Image 15). Some attendees wore masks featuring the DBCS logo, contributing to the school's income through the sale of branded merchandise, including these masks. A nearby hotel donated blankets and outdoor pillows for spectators to use during these outdoor concerts, practically supporting the choir in practical ways.

Logistically, all electronic equipment, such as keyboards, microphones, speakers, and sound equipment, had to be moved outside (Image 15). Since it was winter, one of the accompanists wore a jacket, while the boys performed in their usual thin shirts, blue waistcoats, and jabots. In other images, they can be seen wearing their short-sleeved 'African' uniforms.



Image 16: Outside performance 19 June 2021: All equipment had to be carried out to the school's pavilion, Freedom Square
 (<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4481232518576183&set=pcb.4481249578574477>)



Image 17: Engagement during the 'African' part of the programme at the outdoor concert 19 June 2021
 (<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4481244148575020&set=pcb.4481249578574477>)



Image 18: Prospective new boys dancing “Shosholoza” with the choir at the end of the concert (facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4481249038574531&set=pcb.4481249578574477)

Three boys who attended the open weekend joined the school in 2022 and have since become prominent soloists. This event showcases the adaptability, tenacity, perseverance, and creativity of the staff and choristers as they worked together in challenging circumstances. It also reflects community involvement, with local hotels sponsoring blankets for spectators during the chilly afternoons. Additionally, hotels and guesthouses advertised the school’s concerts, as the choir has become one of the main attractions to visit in the area.

These performances were strenuous, but the boys and staff persevered. The outdoor performances were physically demanding since all the equipment had to be carried outside and back into the auditorium between concerts:

I think of the concert we did outside. There was a lot of excitement, and the boys carried all those heavy, heavy equipment from the auditorium. You know, there was no problem with that. It was really, we tried to do things in a way to make just for that for it to feel normal. Which the Drakensberg Boys Choir School has been doing up to then for 50 plus years, 53, 58 years. (Werner, 10:9)

Furthermore, the choir had to adapt to extreme weather conditions when performing outdoors during winter. Concerts were initially held twice a week, but outdoor performances on Friday nights became too cold for the boys. As a result, the choir moved these concerts to Saturday mornings, allowing more patrons to attend. Furthermore, many visitors to the Drakensberg tended to stay at home on Friday nights after travelling for the weekend. Despite these challenges, the boys continued to give their best, regardless of audience size, cold temperatures, or moving sound equipment around:

And gradually we could start doing the things. I mean, traditionally, the schools got Wednesday concerts, which had been going since 1969. All of a sudden, we had to put in Friday night concerts, which we did, up to the middle of 2021. And then we changed those Friday night concerts to Saturday mornings because the winter nights were very cold. And we thought we could get a bit more people in on the Saturday. I mean, these boys would still perform their hearts out in that COVID time. On a Friday night, sometimes, there would be like 24 people watching. That was literally because people were not aware of the Friday night concerts because Wednesdays are well attended. And for the amount of [paying] people, we were allowed to have in our audiences on a Wednesday, it was horrible because when it comes to a hundred tickets, we were sold out because we're only allowed to have a hundred, but we've got over 400 seats open. But they, again, the boys didn't look into the open seats. I think they looked more to the seats that was occupied by people and fans and audiences and they performed their hearts out. It wasn't a lesser, better performance because there were only 24 people in the audience.

(Werner, 10:51)

Choristers and staff took ownership of the choir and continued to perform two-hour concerts twice a week, on Wednesdays and then on Fridays or Saturdays, demonstrating their loyalty to the school and their love for singing, while at the same time, attending all academic school activities and participating in outdoor sports activities:

Okay. What stood out for me was to see these boys carrying on as if nearly normal. Uh, no, no, no, as normal, not nearly normal. Wanting to achieve, wanting to carry on and wanting to have a world-class product on stage. Doesn't matter how many people are on the audience. That for me stood out and our, our staff is that no complaints, no, even with the two concerts per week, I cannot remember hearing any boy or staff member complaining, you know, or, and I'm specifically talking about the boys because they're young and it's hard work for them. You know, that's, these are our careers, but they, they boys with the two concerts, I never heard them complain about, Oh, another concert. Oh, another, they went for it. And that for me stood out is the, attitude and the positive attitude that kept on going through that very, very hard time and difficult time. (Werner, 10:101)

Kevin's description also illustrates the challenging circumstances during COVID-19 performances. This includes managing long school days with Friday concerts, adhering to demanding school and concert routines, and performing for small audiences in bitterly cold conditions at times:

But the feedback from the audience was different just because they were fewer. And what I do remember, and this is something that is so clear in my mind, that in, and we were talking about 2021, the fact that essentially there was an instruction that we needed to have two concerts a week to make up for their lost income. So until mid-year of 2021, and you'll remember this, the boys performed on a Wednesday to a small audience, whatever the restrictions allowed at the time. And then it was a Friday evening performance, which was after a full school day. In those six months of the year, from the time the concert started, the boys got up at normal time six, they had a full school day, no lessons missed, the school day wasn't shortened. They then had lunch, a sound check, sleep, and a concert routine. And the concert ran from 6.30 till about 8.30. And the first time they could

do anything relaxing was at 9 o'clock at night. I remember that so distinctly. I really do. And I remember as the winter set in, and I still remember the one day in particular, it had snowed on the mountain, and Phil²³, I remember Mike telling me the story that he couldn't get warm. Phil could not undo his shoelaces at interval. That's how cold he got, standing in his blue jabot, waiting to go into the concert, and then standing there for 40 minutes in an ice-cold auditorium. His fingers couldn't actually undo his shoelaces. And I remember that. It was June of 2021. There was probably one more week of term, maybe two more weeks of term. So I think that took a lot out of the boys and the staff. And sometimes those concerts were to as few as 40, 50, 60, 80 people maybe, whatever the restrictions were at the time. I think that must have taken a lot, I don't know, sucked quite a lot of life out of the boys. I really do. And I mean, you all remember accompanying and you look up there and you see, you know, a handful of people there. (Kevin, 2:43)

Adaptability, innovation, perseverance, tenacity, creativity, loyalty and pride contributed to the choir's sustainability during challenging, restricted performances (RL1, RL3 and RL5).

4.3.4.8 *Social media, productions and touring at DBCS during Phase 2 of the COVID-19 pandemic*

4.3.4.8.1 *The influence of COVID-19 on recruitment and marketing*

The data analysis revealed that the lockdowns brought to a halt all recruitment, in-person marketing and touring, as Werner comments:

²³ Not the choristers' real names.

So, the actual real touring ... didn't take place for nearly two years, although we did do a bit ... there was not a mega recruitment drive, because we couldn't ... because of the school, basically, as a choir school came to a standstill when it comes to recruitment, touring, and all of that. Staff were let go as well. (Werner, 10:59)

Additionally, recruitment depended significantly on concerts, tours and roadshows. However, these activities were not possible during lockdown and could only resume once movement restrictions were eased, allowing the choir to make road trips, as Maureen notes:

I think we lost a little bit of traction when we weren't able to get our boys up doing the actual performances at the little roadshows that we do. And, you know, it was, sure, it's hard to actually know. It almost felt like the recruitment kind of stopped until we could, you know, get back out on the road. (Maureen, 3:26)

As a result, boys became less invested when they could not perform; some boys left the school, in some cases for financial reasons, and recruitment was on hold. The choir was in a downward spiral. The management had to find new strategies, as Werner noted: "So we actually now try and find other ways" (10:60). Therefore, social media became a strategy that could create interest for recruitment purposes and the promotion of the school as Ashley (1:83) explained: "We had to try and have a strong social media presence in order to try and recruit boys". Therefore, restricted concerts and tours led to fewer recruits, resulting in greater financial losses as the income stream from school fees shrank. Choir practices were directly affected, since fewer new boys meant a smaller choir. A smaller choir poses sustainability challenges, leading parents and supporters to question the viability and purpose of a boys' choir, which in turn lowers staff and choristers' morale and prompts staff to leave the school:

Financially, it was massively disruptive, even in the long term, as we all know. For example, the recruitment, just because we couldn't recruit for a few years, doesn't

mean that now, even if we do start recruiting hard, if we used to average maybe 20 new boys a year, we're not suddenly going to get 50 boys a year. (Nina, 7:23)

Thus, choir practices were challenged by reduced recruitment, declining morale among the boys who were missing touring, and financial disruption, limited by shrinking enrolment and affordability. Therefore, the role of social media became increasingly prominent, serving as a primary marketing and recruitment tool to maintain visibility and attract and recruit boys, while also raising funds through platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, etc.

4.3.4.8.2 *Introduction to online productions*

In response to global trends, the music staff began producing video productions using free downloadable software and their own equipment, applying their newly acquired skills to make sure the school remained visible to the public (PRL1 and PRL5). Social media served as a leverage point (LP2 and PRL4):

Well, it was what was happening, because artists globally couldn't perform, so they were all finding alternate means of getting their material out there. So that was happening, and I think Thomas and Chris were just monitoring what was happening globally and internationally. I was quite impressed. I didn't even know, like I said, it was going on until we would see the video in the end. (Nina, 7:29)

Music productions showcased the choir to remain relevant in the virtual world, as Ashley noted:

We had to keep on being part of the choir world...they had to stay in front of what's going on in the world of choir singing...We had to be active on our social media. And it was not just about what the choir[s] did. We had to try and keep our choir activities to showcase what we've done throughout COVID. (1:92)

Not only did the productions promote the choir, but they also added a fun and youthful element on social media, portraying hope and positivity during difficult times: “No, they were fun. In those times, I think they were perfectly up to standard” (Nina, 7:29).

Some video examples showcasing the choir include “Geronimo”, which showed the choir in a youthful and fun manner

[<https://www.facebook.com/reel/4554978274571448>]; “Kiss the girl”, a video made before Valentine’s Day [<https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ1O2iBLDjG/>] 11 February 2022; “Butter” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjJb6iVZ_SE]-July 2022; and a lively dance video, “Water fountain” was produced during the first lockdown [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3-cJeSKVvI&list=RDT3-cJeSKVvI&start_radio=1].

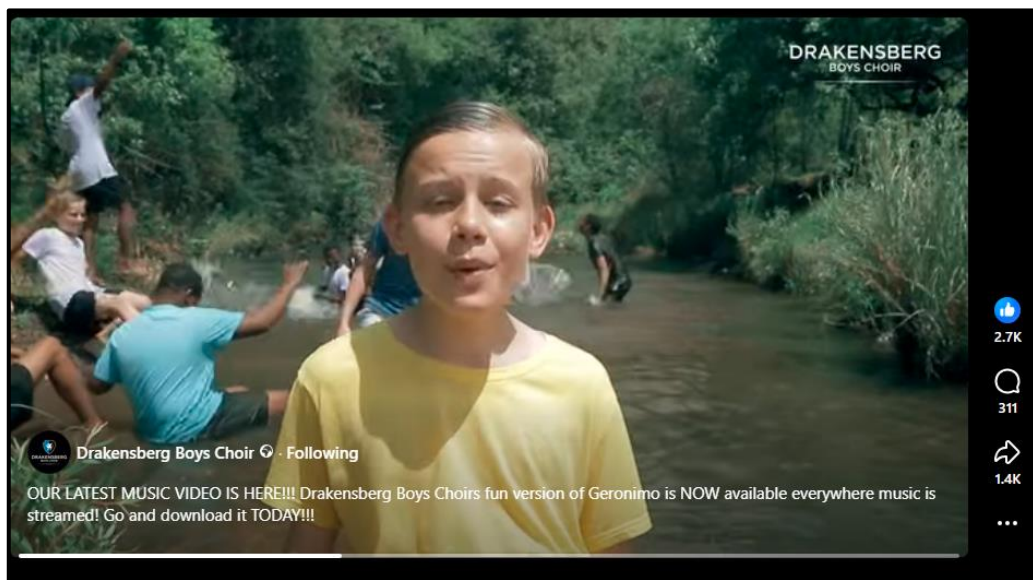


*Image 19: Facebook Geronimo, displaying youthful fun, energy and positivity
(<https://www.facebook.com/reel/4554978274571448>)*

The data has shown that video productions offered healing and solidarity to the world with productions such as: “Smile”–29 May 2020, “capturing the spirit of our human response to the pandemic, full of melancholy, yet extremely hopeful and positive”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tV13a5vaFw&list=RD6tV13a5vaFw&start_radio=1) and “You are the champions”–October 2021, thanking health workers around the world https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B6QibLrQZ8&list=RD_B6QibLrQZ8&start_radio=1)

Choir practices also entailed seeking opportunities to create meaningful content that utilised the choir's medium to contribute to a society under siege, showing solidarity with

the victims of the KZN riots in July 2021: “Ndikhokhele Bawo” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3P6tXo6ocF8&list=RD3P6tXo6ocF8&start_radio=1) Maureen still remembers:

We did the video of the riots. Remember those riots we had in Durban? And the boys had to send their little recordings to Freddie, and then we put together the Bawo video. That was during COVID [lockdown], because it was all done remotely. That's the biggest sort of project that we did, in terms of recording all the boys and bringing them. So it was a bit like that one that Thomas did with the Water Fountain, where the boys came in like that. So, I think that was it, and I remember talking in the marketing meeting and saying to Freddie, you know, couldn't we do something, even though the boys aren't here? And then he said, yeah, we'll do that prayer, that Bawo prayer, when they were cleaning up the streets after all those people had ransacked the different places. (3:14)

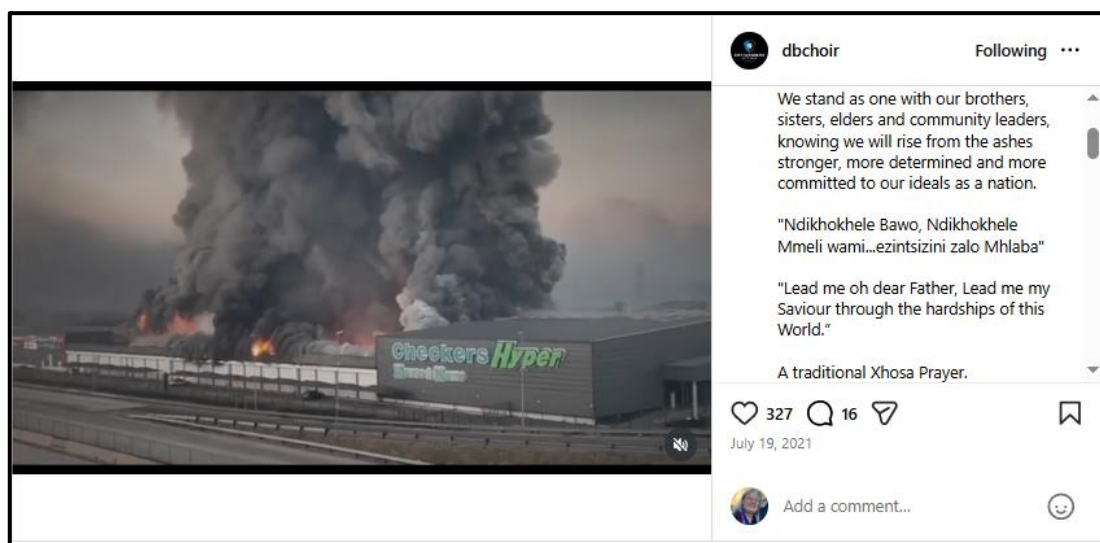


Image 20: Instagram post of Ndikhokhele Bawo (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CRf-UP4qvWC/>)

The Instagram post explained that the song is a traditional Xhosa prayer, asking for guidance through difficult times. Productions aimed to connect people during difficult times and instilled hope during the pandemic and tumultuous times when riots destroyed

many households in KZN. The video sparked hope, solidarity and goodwill, and many participants remember the production since it was close to the hearts of many boys whose parents were trapped in those circumstances:

But that Bawo one, it just came at a time where there was a lot of disruption in people, certainly in KZN, to have such devastation in our home province as a school. So, that one, I think, was very special because of that. (Kevin, 2:62)

This post shared on Instagram illustrates the impact these videos had on viewers:

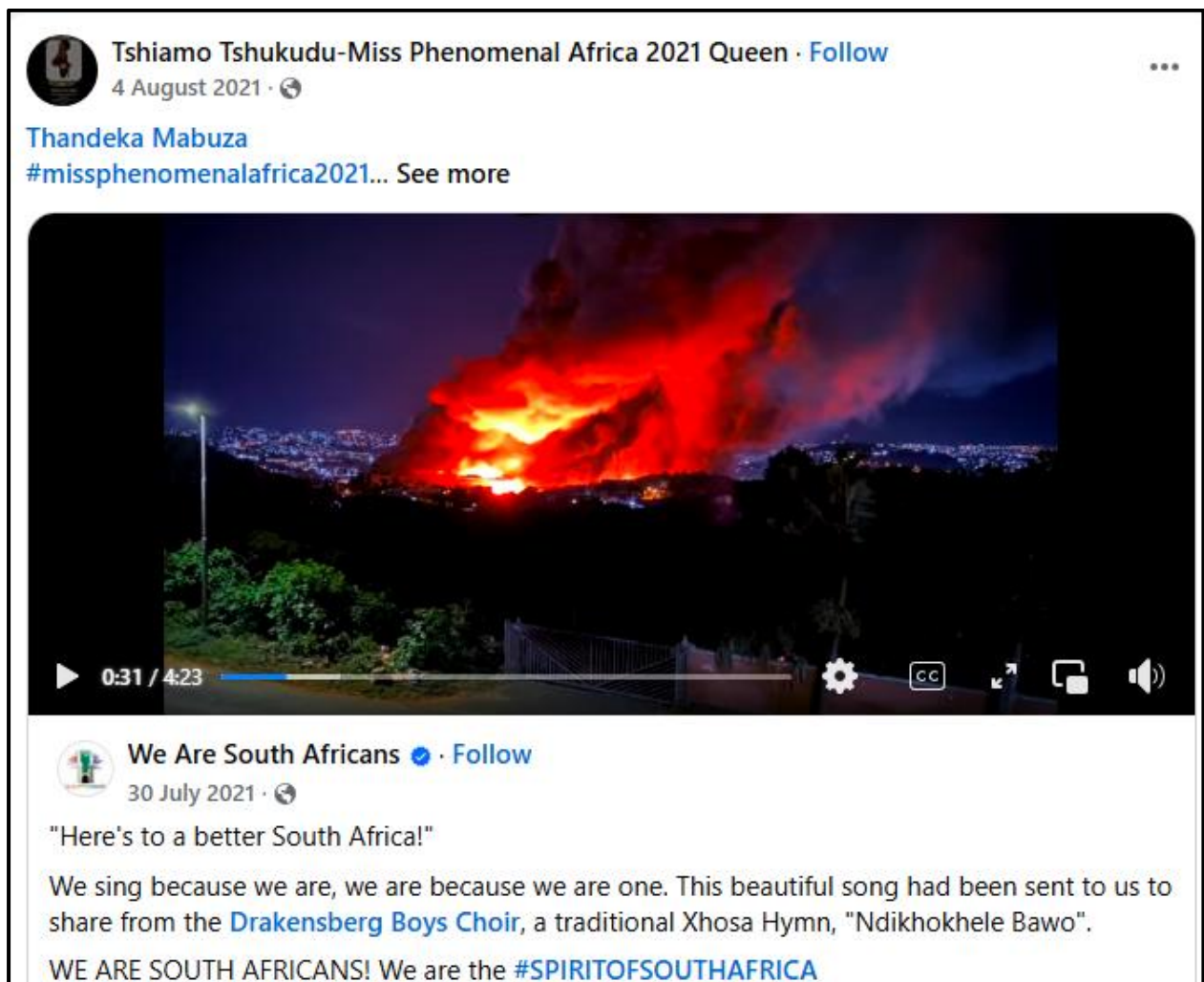


*Image 21: A post shared on Instagram supporting the Bawo video
(<https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ77MI3K-ID/>)*

Thandeka Mabusa's sharing of "Bawo" suggested that the video served as a means of healing for South Africa. The boys' contribution to the video also helped them cope with the difficult circumstances they faced during the riots in KZN. It kept them musically

engaged and provided a sense of purpose during lockdown. Werner also recalls that during a phone call with a boy, gunfire could be heard in the background, indicating that they were directly affected by these events but were also contributing to a larger narrative:

But then the other one was during the middle of the year with all the riots, there were boys who left because they had to be at home and who were stuck in these areas where all this craziness was going on. I mean, I remember speaking to a boy over the phone and you sort of like hear gunshots in the background. I mean, and for a child that is, for anybody that is very traumatic. And they were stuck in those situations. They were stuck in those situations in their homes. And that's how wonderful it was that those boys were involved. But then all the other boys in the safe areas where this craziness wasn't happening got stuck in with their buddies and did this together. (Werner, 10:42)

The social media posts also shared the school's condolences with families and musicians who suffered during COVID-19 as a video paid homage to public figures who passed away during the pandemic, such as King Goodwill Zweletini (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CMUwl-IKowJ/>). The video "Memories" paid tribute to loved ones lost during COVID-19, as Maureen explains (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=birma1tbOag&list=RDbirma1tbOag&start_radio=1):

I think people were really wanting that sort of thing, you know, to actually see children enjoying themselves and doing what they love. And I mean, music is just the most incredible vehicle to heal. And I think we all needed that time of healing in that COVID period. So, I think we imparted something really positive to the public, which they needed. And it was good for us as well to be able to do that. (3:30)

The data showed that music productions could showcase some of the choir's work for supporters to enjoy online, as an alternative to live performances, reminding loyal patrons who had supported the choir over many years that the school was still performing²⁴:

But in the same breath, still, we've got people who attend our concerts and who support us ... it wasn't their fault, it wasn't our fault, but we could still put something out there so they can still see the boys doing what they're doing and what they're doing, what they love. (Werner, 10:35)

Coach also said that Facebook posts created an awareness of the choir, which encouraged people to come and listen to live performances:

So, yeah, they helped out quite a lot. And also putting our videos, because we actually started making videos and performed for a year and set them on Facebook for people to watch. And people were happy to actually see that online, because people were confined. They couldn't actually go out to theatres, couldn't visit any public spaces. So by us actually giving them a little of what we were allowed to actually still do with our 50, you know, last audience members, those, you know, that actually made its way to Facebook, people actually appreciated it and said, you know, we needed to actually see this. You know, people would say, I can't wait

²⁴ Duduz'umoya wami

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RWLLNWor1U&list=RD6RWLLNWor1U&start_radio=1); Afterglow (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtXzKmSDN-0&list=RDUtXzKmSDN-0&start_radio=1); RMB Starlight Classics - 'Viva la Vida' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufMBb7jLI9o&list=RDufMBb7jLI9o&start_radio=1).

to actually come and, you know, and experience it in life. So, yeah, that actually helped out. (12:29)

4.3.4.8.3 Collaborations and advocacy

The music productions expanded the choir's audience to a global audience, as the choir was invited to participate in a few international productions,²⁵ creating more collaborative opportunities and connections globally. These collaborative projects created a larger audience and support network:

So, I think those sorts of opportunities, yes, and then opportunity to reach so many more people across the world. So, those are the, I think, the great opportunities that we got from, so we can't, even in a normal year, can't reach as many people as what we can on social media, in our good and positive contributions in the ways that we would like to do it in one go. (Werner, 10:75)

The choir also participated in the LightSared campaign advocating and creating awareness of the need to support of artists in South Africa (https://www.instagram.com/pCDhDklUH3MK/?img_index=2) as the choir made a plea in the following post on Instagram:

The Drakensberg Boys' Choir realises the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic and the devastation it has caused worldwide. We have done everything asked of us as performers and entertainers to curb the spread of the virus and have applied strict lockdown regulations on our campus since mid-March. We have also voiced

²⁵ "Umculo'mnandi" as part of the project "See me: a global concert in association with the World Economic Forum (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C521O4XHO_I&list=RDC521O4XHO_I&start_radio=1); "Elephant Charge" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNGWeg5US_Y&list=RDzNGWeg5US_Y&start_radio=1), creating awareness of orphaned elephants by Game Rangers International; "We are one" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1oegbmxQFU&list=RDX1oegbmxQFU&start_radio=1), supporting Wildlife ACT Vultures.

*and continue to voice support for our President, as he deals with the unenviable task of keeping all our citizens safe during this time. Our choristers come to our school to sing and perform, and they have been impacted as emerging young musicians by the restrictions imposed on the entertainment industry. Our support of the #LightSARed campaign is not to make a political statement but to draw awareness to the effects of the virus, not only on our choir, but other musicians, actors, comedians, and support personnel, all of whom just want to perform live...sometime soon.*Please note that all Covid-19 safety precautions and regulations were adhered to, in the making of this video.*

Not only did the choir support advocacy campaigns, but it also collaborated with young friends and choirs to showcase the choir and reach younger viewers (<https://www.facebook.com/reel/270887727315258>). The choir's sustainability relied heavily on social media.

Kevin shows appreciation for the music staff who could manage to combine their online teaching efforts with producing social media content (RL1), which paid off; a boy from Zimbabwe saw the videos of the choir, did an online audition and was accepted at the school:

It must have been a nightmare. I mean, it was bad enough trying to learn how to teach online, but to actually now keep the unique product offering, being the choral singing and training, at the level it was, I think was remarkable. There's Bradley Dube, there's a solo audition from Zimbabwe. I mean, who else would have pulled that off? I mean, that's huge. Yeah, sure. (2:141)

4.3.5 New strategies to save the choir

Data revealed that the marketing team invested heavily in TikTok and Instagram to engage younger audiences while also reaching older supporters on Facebook, YouTube and Spotify. This shift led to a change in the choir's marketing strategy. Over the years,

the choir boys promoted the choir effectively, utilising short video clips featuring the choristers to advertise concerts and other school activities, as noted by Maureen:

The boys are the best marketers of the school. So then, yeah, this was actually, it was more like, almost like a digital production. So were there were other digital productions as well, little things that, like, information, teasers. (Maureen, 10:28)

More than 1,500 posts were made since registration in 2020, indicating that the marketing team had invested significant time and effort in raising awareness of the choir on social media. Maureen pointed out that short videos playfully created awareness of the choir as teasers before concerts: “Yes, I remember having those, like, peep-in, video clips. It’s like he was in his blue and jabbot, the concert was about to start, and there was like this anticipation, you know, I think that’s really cool” (Maureen, 3:12). (https://www.tiktok.com/@dbchoir/video/7031951159485074689?_r=1&_t=ZM-91pirJSbxJE; https://www.instagram.com/p/CHPXnWxnJ8k/?img_index=1; [instagram.com/p/CUW8Vhrt1s_/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CUW8Vhrt1s_/); [instagram.com/p/CUMIQs0KcZV/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CUMIQs0KcZV/)).

Image 22 illustrates the post advertising the concert that Maureen refers to in the above comment:

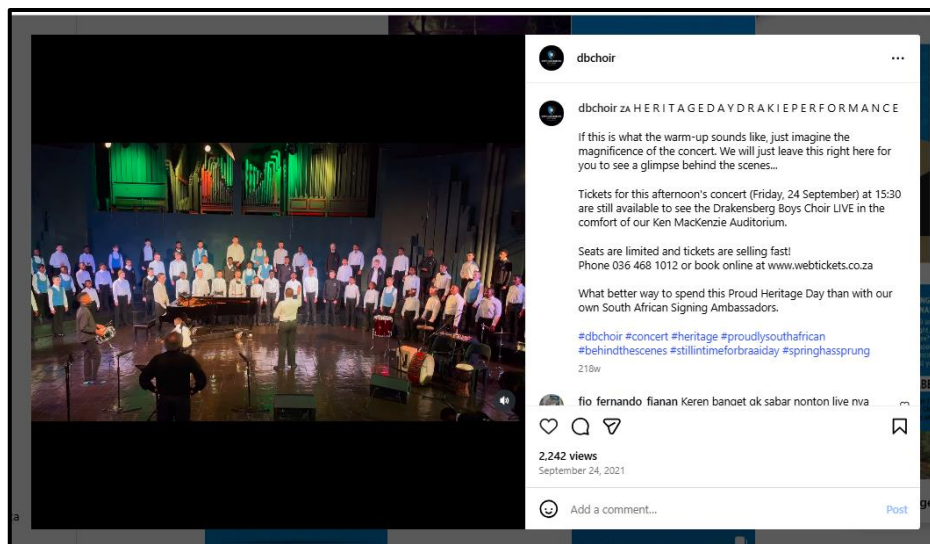


Image 22: A teaser on Instagram advertising a Heritage Day concert on 24 September 2021 ([instagram.com/p/CUMIQs0KcZV/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CUMIQs0KcZV/))

Therefore, productions balanced entertainment with social commentary, as in “Ndikhokhele Bawo”, keeping audiences engaged and connected. Social media also

promoted the choir for recruitment purposes (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEjIVMJHUSv/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEEkHKEHMwe/>), announced information, such as new concert dates and cancellations ([instagram.com/p/CRo0gqHK2pt/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CRo0gqHK2pt/)), promoted alternative online options ([instagram.com/p/CSeP4mTKWIP/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CSeP4mTKWIP/)), and engaged and encouraged choristers (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ77MI3K-ID//>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAha4KxnLDO/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAUjID9Ha4k/>).

The choir received recognition for their standard of video productions when they received an Osama Award for their Stimela production. This award instilled pride in what the choir and music team achieved during COVID. It is also a silent reminder of and monument to the choir's tenacity, perseverance and resilience during challenging times:

With the Stimela album it was back to business as usual, back in studio in a controlled environment. We made it like professionally as we did. Memories was recorded either in a little room, four by three metre room or four by five metre room. And the fact that Memories also got nominated for an Osama in itself is ... We're proud of because of the challenges that we faced recording that album. (Freddie, 11:22)

4.3.5.1.1 Criticism and the challenges of strategic shifts

The analysis revealed a debate around the board's vision and its emphasis on upbeat pop productions, which many felt undermined the choir's longstanding tradition of choral excellence. Some staff members expressed concern that a new vision that was focused on popular music would not save the school, arguing that the choir had much more to offer than just superficiality and mainstream hits. Rather than revitalising the school, this approach ultimately had a detrimental effect on the choir's image, which was built on years of heritage and diversity. Consequently, the music productions only showcased a limited aspect of the choir's true potential and capabilities, as Amelia's perspective on online productions highlights:

No, I was actually very surprised. How do people even know we are here? Because it's not being marketed that way. It's all built on this trust that we've existed all these years ago, so people know us. But I don't know how they think people should know about us. Because you don't hear about ... Oh, I think they thought of the YouTube videos that they recorded, that that would be a wonderful way of attracting people. But that didn't work at all, because it didn't go viral. Also, a viral thing comes and goes very quickly. It's not feasible for people that will actually now send their children 500 kilometres away to be raised by strangers just because of a viral YouTube video. That's not how parents or any sane parents would manage the education of their children. So I think that was their main strategy. It was viral YouTube videos, this vision that the board had. But I don't know how they want people to know about it, because they used to go to schools in the past. Obviously, it wasn't allowed during the high peak of COVID, but it would have been allowed soon thereafter. So I don't know if that has returned or not.

(Amelia, 4:49)

Marisa further explained that, despite productions featuring popular music, there remained a need to showcase and share serious choral music with the choir's support network. Her remarks also suggest that the choir should continue to maintain a serious choral repertoire alongside popular music:

I just think it's vitally important that I sometimes wonder if the vision that the board has for us as a directive is making deep enough sense. And I think that might be sometimes muddy because my take on things is I'm a classical person, so I would stand for I love pop and I love African and I'm talking about that kind of showcasing African repertoire. But I believe in a deeper essence. I believe there's the importance of masses; there's the importance of executing what you possibly can in that sphere. Keep that your route and work around the other. (6:74)

Additionally, other schools focused on establishing a presence in the virtual choral world by showcasing high standards of choral singing and building global networks. This might explain why parents were hesitant to enrol their sons in the choir, which adversely affected recruitment efforts. As a result, many boys left the choir:

And I think at times, I wonder, with this dual idea of production, and showcasing show choirs, like we currently are doing in our African repertoire, that is enjoyable too, but the sustainability, for me, of that, for me, there is a slight question in that, you know, how far should you go to the showcasing of choirs, that is the norm out there today. Because I think what's very important right now is that we are competing with every single school out there that is now taking choir and the choir music world to another level. They compete in choir games, they are open to challenges, they want to sing with other choirs. We've got a good relationship with Kearsney Choir, and if you watch them closely, you will see they do not sit still. They invite youth choirs, they make themselves available on a platform of international competition. And luckily, we are very lucky that we have our name
(Marisa, 6:73)

On the other hand, Freddie believed that, despite the interest generated by videos, high school fees limited recruitment. No matter what concerts or videos the choir presented, the school fees were too high:

But at the end of the day, don't, know, with the productions. Look, we've got a lot of interest of boys who would like to come to the school. It's all about affordability. And it doesn't matter what video you put out there. It doesn't matter how, what wonderful concert you put out there, what production you put out there, or concert. At the end of the day, it's about affordability. Can parents afford to send their boys to the Drakensberg Boys Choir School? And many can't. We've done, we do many auditions in the year, whether we go visit the school, or we have boys after

concerts. But the school fees, that's the problem. Because the school fees can't be lowered. It's a place really to, you know, it's for this place to function properly. And it's not like we've got 800 boys in the school, or that we want 800 boys in the school. Because Drakensberg Boys Choir School has always been 100 plus. If I say plus, not more than 120. And that's very unique to the ethos of the school.
(Freddie, 10:68)

The production manager was under pressure to consistently produce quality content. He also experienced other challenges and difficulties since he worked with children and not professional adults (NRL1), making consistent quality difficult to sustain:

So you need to constantly be producing quality content. The differences, the weaknesses are, that you're dealing with boys between the ages of 10 and 15 years old. They're not necessarily ... I mean, they're amazing, they're incredible choristers, but they're not adults. So following direction, being able to put an entire choir together, like recording a piece digitally, watching a video of Werner conducting, you know, that comes with its own challenges. That's one of the weaknesses. But, you know, something that we had to get through. (Freddie, 11:12)

The debate emphasised the need to balance modern productions with traditional choral excellence, along with affordable school fees, to ensure the choir's survival.

4.3.5.1.2 First touring opportunities

The lost opportunities for touring led to a decline in the boys' morale, as touring is one of the most attractive recruitment attractions for choristers. Furthermore, the choir could not hold any festivals, which are joyous celebrations for supporters, parents, siblings and families, creating a buzz of activity and well-being. The absence of these festivals also contributed to feelings of hopelessness:

So, the experiences of touring, we couldn't tour in the first year of COVID-19 and that was very sad, because boys usually come to the school to actually get that special exposure through touring and they couldn't do that in that first year. And I think it had a negative impact on the overall mood of the boys because they felt they were rehearsing and they were giving later on in the year, they were giving concerts twice a week, but they could not actually do any festival. Boys during the first year never had the opportunity to have a festival during April and I think the festival in December, there was not actually a festival, or it was only for parents, so it was not really a festival where you get a lot of people. (Ashley, 1:77)

Data analysis showed that online productions could not replicate live performances because of the isolation, lack of social interactions, and the absence of live touring, resulting in a decline in morale. No tours took place during 2020, and the fact is that the connection between touring and being a Drakie is nearly inseparable. As a result, the absence of tours led to a decline in morale and motivation, as some boys could not experience this essential aspect of Drakie life because of COVID-19, as Kevin notes:

Yeah, I think because rehearsing twice a day was the norm for boys in the auditorium, seeing their friends and bustling around and standing with their voice group and then suddenly in your own lounge or your bedroom trying to link on a device, I think it was ineffective. I think more on morale rather than the singing ability. I mean the boys, one or two of those, definitely Smile and Bawo, those videos where boys had to record themselves and submit them to Freddie and Chris. Yeah, so I think they missed the interaction of being the Drakensberg Boys Choir on stage and the social interaction. (2:58)

In response, Thomas decided to organise a tour at the end of 2020, following the school closure. This initiative acknowledged the experiences that COVID-19 had taken away

from the choir members. It also expressed gratitude for the boys' perseverance and loyalty, highlighting the special bond between the conductor and the choir:

The only tour in that first year was the Great Nines, who went on a private tour with the artistic director, but that was not even supported financially by the school, so it was actually very sad because that was the final year where they usually make a lot of memories. Boys have a lot of responsibilities in that year, but they also feel very much a bond with the school and that didn't happen and they didn't go on a tour. (Ashley, 1:78)

By the end of 2021, limited movement between countries was allowed, and the choir could gradually start to tour to Namibia in 2021, then to Zambia in 2022, when restrictions were lifted, and in 2023 to Mauritius, as Werner points out:

The next tour after the Namibian tour, we could go to Zambia, then the restrictions were lifted and we go on tour, but we still had to have all our COVID vaccinations in place and that was much easier, but we had to go on a tour that was close to South Africa, that didn't cost a lot of money because they were still not open venues at that moment and so it was difficult for tours, but eventually it started opening up and in 2023, we could go to Mauritius and then all the restrictions were almost lifted, although we still had to state that we were healthy and could enter the country. (Ashley, 1:82)

The Namibian tour was a feat in perseverance, resilience, creativity and an urgent need to make touring possible since the choir needed that exposure, as Werner describes:

But then what we did, we pushed very, very hard towards the end of that year in 2021 to do an international tour. Because national touring is one thing, but the boys in the school's history, the choirs performed internationally at least once a year. And we then decided to put together and push for an international tour so that we

again can do the auditioning process, and when the boys get excited to audition for, we call it the international choir. (Werner, 10:54)

Firstly, the adherence to protocols made touring very stressful (NRL1):

The tour to Namibia was very, really stressful for the touring operator, the manager, who was a teacher, because there were regulations that had to be adhered to, nobody had to be sick, there had to be tests done beforehand, so the first tour was really very, very stressful. (Ashley, 1:80)

The data analysis showed that many touring opportunities were supported by alumni parents, their community, and friends during the pandemic, as reflected in Instagram and Facebook posts (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CUfTOKrqrEj/>). Therefore, to make the Namibian tour possible, many unseen relationships came into play. The urgent need for touring prompted one of the teachers to engage alumni parents to help organise a trip to Namibia. South Africa and its residents were still under financial strain, so they had to plan as economically as possible. The alumni parents in Namibia leveraged their contacts, including a company that manages exclusive resorts, to provide accommodation for the choir at these luxurious lodges. In exchange for the lodging, the choir performed at these venues, bringing the magic of live music to a world still recovering from the impacts of COVID-19. Therefore, community and alumni support proved vital for resilience and sustainability. These concerts generated joyful experiences for both the audiences and the choristers, forging valuable connections between communities. The boys had unforgettable experiences that enriched their holistic education, and their parents were supportive and extremely proud of them as they served as worthy ambassadors for both the school and the country. Marisa's comment describes the significance of being able to tour after two years of no touring:

It's a privilege because I promise you, I think you must be a Roger Federer on a tennis court to be able to see that kind of hype. And I think with the deepest of struggles through COVID, we managed to to keep that that special bubble going. So then, especially then that Namibian tour. It was the first tour in almost two years.

To tour and to go to a world that's been in a lockdown for quite a long time. I'm just extremely grateful that we could think out of the box and we made use of Godwana, which is the touring gurus in Namibia. They own all the outside lodges like the Sand Desert Lodge, which is actually overseas patrons in Namibia coming to visit Namibia. What we basically did there is ... we managed to be on a platform where basically every evening we could perform for 200 people because at that point in time the government just opened it up for 200 patrons We traveled 1800 kilometres that week. We were so blessed. We stayed in five star places um, because of my negotiations we could perform for the lodges' intake of overseas patrons. We bring the product and you can let your lodge people enjoy a performance basically for free and we gain the opportunity to feel our product is showcased out there. So it was a it was a nice relationship.

Interesting in Swakopmund we were in the dome. And I will never forget, we could only perform for 200 people there. And it's like a high building with it's a hotel kind of industry but they could have sold out another two concerts of 200 patrons that evening for that need of people in COVID time to just I think that enjoyment in music and what music brings to hear. And for us to be performing and showcasing us, you know our hard work and art. We brought that to the table. But to bring that happiness to people in COVID time. To be able to sit in an audience and believe in the dream of um performing on stage. You know and and feel just the human element of it. You know, it's still there. It's still there. (6:60)

However, there was a downside: not all the boys could go on tour. This situation created negativity among some of the boys, especially those in their final year, who saw this as their last chance to tour with the choir. But the need for a balanced division of voice groups ultimately meant some the boys could not go on tour, leaving them feeling conflicted.

4.3.5.1.3 Human resources—a valuable asset during the COVID-19 pandemic

The data analysis conveyed that staff and choristers transformed constraints into opportunities, maintaining excellence under pressure by staying positive, being creative and adaptable, generating positive energy and a belief in the future, as Ashley remarked: “And so yes, and then we had to, we had to stay positive. And we had to, as staff, we still had to generate positive energy and a belief in the future” (Ashley, 1:105). Kevin echoed that the passion of the boys and the expertise and love of the staff for the school made it possible to persevere through the pandemic:

And I think because we know the boys' passion, their ability, and I'm going to say it, Thomas's expertise, not only as a conductor, but the fact that he was able to navigate that and still keep boys motivated somehow. I mean, and I'll refer back to that small video, I know that came later, there was another one, it was “Water Fountain” that year as well. Yes, “Water Fountain”. When we had all those, I think it was remarkable that he did that. I really do. And I mean, it's his expertise, his love for the school, and I know Drakies is a hard school for anybody in different ways. It's just the nature of the school. (Kevin, 2:104)

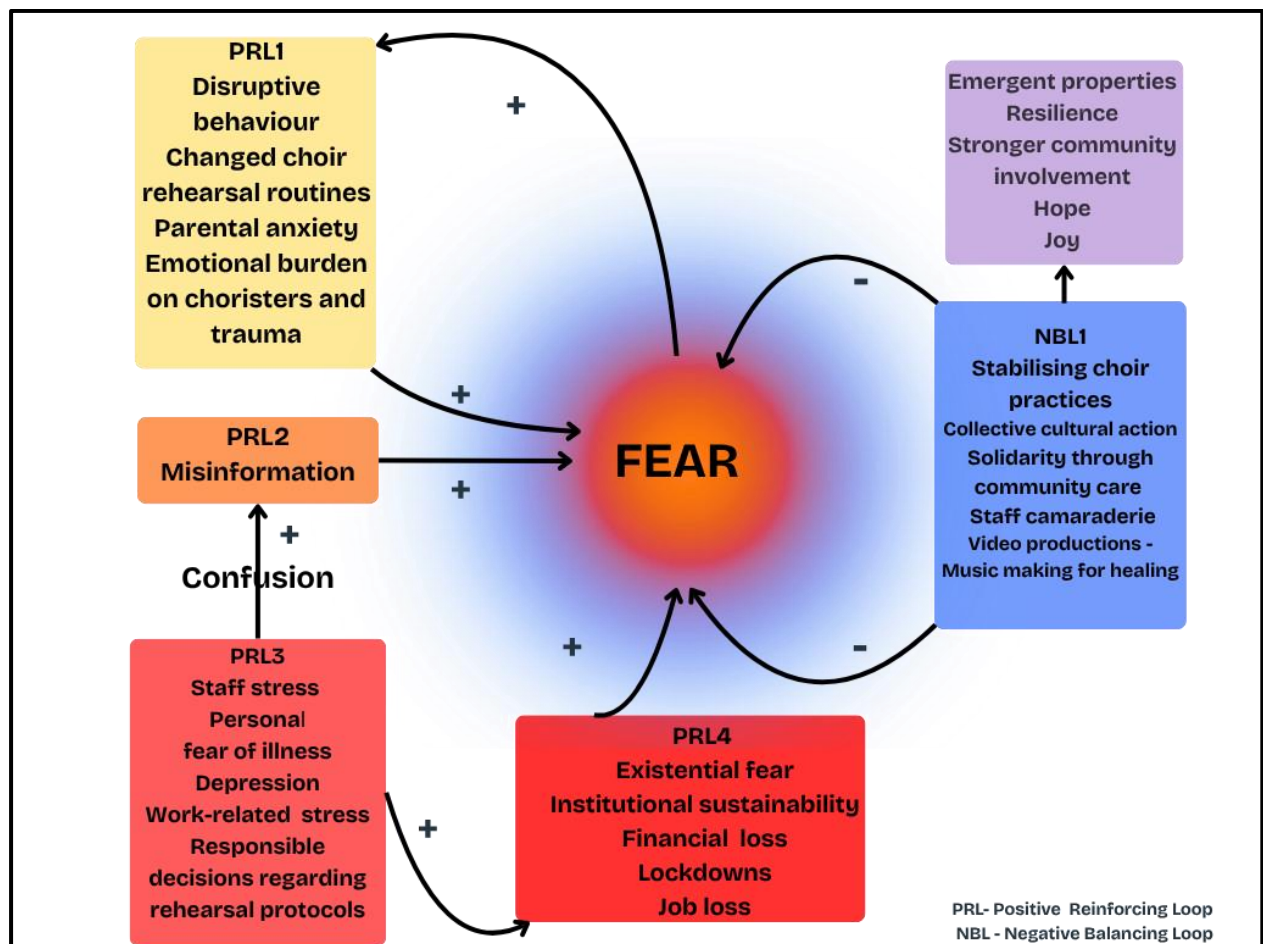
Thus, the choir could survive, since it had a vision, structure and functioned well with the choir staff: “Outside of COVID, the choir functioned exceptionally well. There choir was structure, vision, excellence in execution, and there was good leadership” (Zinzan, 13:1).

4.3.6 Theme 5: ‘The fear factor’: Confronting the Beast

Theme 5 examines how fear, as a systemic force, influenced choir practices of the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through adopting a systems thinking approach, fear is analysed as a series of reinforcing and feedback loops that disrupted normal routines, strained relationships, and changed the educational environment. Comments from staff highlight how fear infiltrated the system, having an impact on both the micro-level of daily rehearsals and the macro-level of institutional sustainability. Factors contributing to generating fear were therefore Positive Reinforcing Loops (PRF1-4), while elements stabilising the choir system (Negative Balancing Loop—NBL1) counteract fear. Figure 24

illustrates the positive reinforcing loops (PRL1-4) feeding fear and the negative balancing loop (NBL1) counteracting fear during COVID-19.

Figure 24: Reinforcing and Balancing Loops amplifying and counteracting fear



4.3.6.1 Fear as a Positive Reinforcing Loop (PRL1) causing disruption

The data analysis indicated that fear infiltrated everyday activities, destabilising routines and rationality:

So, it made everybody, you know, panicking every single time. I mean, even going to a shop, you did not know whether, you know, it was even safe to do so, but people needed to eat. Lines were just, queues were long, and it was just pandemonium. (Coach 12:10)

Some people were terrified, as Nina describes: “There were the complete paranoid people like DG who sanitised every single item he ever touched or bought from the shop and left his groceries outside in the sun and was neurotic about it” (Nina, 7:82).

Fear contributed to feelings of hopelessness and despair, as noted by Coach:

Covertly, it messed up our thinking. I know it messed a lot with my thinking because I got sick at one point when I was at school. I had flu. I had normal, simple flu. But even I could not even trust that it was the flu. Because nobody knew anything. It happened at the time when doctors were also told not to test anyone alone. They should just keep out the medication. So even if you wanted to go and test, you could not even get tested. Because the orders that the doctors were afraid to give were, don't test, just give. Write the medicine, the medication they needed. They must just isolate. So, in order to isolate, they didn't take medication. So I went to a chemist and told him that I'm coughing and I was given medication. I was told to isolate. So, I isolated within a school, not knowing what I was afraid, even with a simple cough, or whether I was, you know, covertly infected. So, it drove everybody else mad. So, I don't think maybe there is one single teacher who would say, you know, they actually functioned pretty normally. Because the situation was not normal. Yeah. The situation was not normal. Even the door handles, you could not actually just grab any door handle and open it up. Yeah. Sofa or a rail down the staircase, you could not actually touch it. You know, a kettle that we normally use in a staff or for tea, we could not actually just go in and touch it without actually having to sanitise it. We had to. So there was nothing normal about this whole thing. It was just total madness. So, yeah, it just made everybody, you know, think, you know, panic, and a sense of, you know, of despair, because there wasn't much hope coming from anywhere. (12:42)

The psychological toll on participants is reflected in Ashley's experience: "I got sick, and I stayed in bed ... I think I was depressed and I stayed at home doing nothing for a week" (Ashley, 1:54). Participants were also worried about their family members who were not with them on campus:

We were sometimes worried. We were also worried about our families who were not with us. Like my whole family was far from me. They were in Cape Town, the Free State, at least 400 to 600 kilometres from us. We were restricted also to move between provinces. So, it was not that easy if you had to move. (Ashley, 1:126)

The choir school, as a distinct "closed" system, posed challenges for staff members' families, particularly for younger family members. They often did not understand that the staff and their families needed to be responsible and follow strict rules to maintain system safety.

Our emotional well-being was affected by the pandemic. We had to deal with a lot of things. We had to deal with personal concerns. We had, our own families, we were, my own daughter had to come abruptly from university. She had to come and stay with us. She had to adhere to strict rules of the school that you cannot go out in time and have, and visit your friends. She had to adhere to rules and regulations that she didn't understand or didn't want to understand. For her, it seemed as if we were quite paranoid. And we had to tell her, but we have a responsibility to other people. We cannot just go and visit people the way we would like to, because we have a responsibility. We have a health responsibility to keep each other healthy. And that's why we had to stay on the school premises. So, that was difficult. (Ashley, 1:123)

Fear led to isolation from the rest of the choir, causing stress. Werner and Freddie came in contact with a staff member who tested positive for COVID-19 and had to isolate,

although they were not feeling sick. Werner experienced the isolation as the worst experience during the pandemic, hearing the choir practice, but not being able to join them:

There was one staff member, we had a staff meeting and he got tested COVID positive. And the few, some staff members who sat near to him in that specific staff meeting, we had to be isolated. And I was one of them. And now I had to stay at home. But I didn't feel sick. It's just purely because I sat next to him in the staff meeting. So now we had to isolate. The worst thing was that we had to go for tests. Now we're waiting for the test results, because we were told we can't come near the school, not near the boys, not near the staff. There was one staff member who dropped food off for me, but before I opened the door, she was gone. The worst for me was to sit at home on my veranda and hear the choir sing in the auditorium where the rehearsal went on. And I was not there. Other staff went on. I didn't feel sick. And I love doing what I do. The worst was that I was forced to stay home. And I can't go. I can't even come and watch. So, we could at least have coffee together, because we live close to each other, all the staff. So, we were having coffee one afternoon, and it was halfway into the choir rehearsal, the late afternoon choir rehearsal, when both our phones pinged, and it was the message coming through. We tested negative. We left the coffee and ran down to school to get into that choir rehearsal. We were so super excited. And when we went into the auditorium, all the boys applauded and cheered. And so that, for me personally, that was the worst, is having to stay at home, not having a choice, because I was close to somebody with COVID, and I could not be in the choir rehearsals with everybody else. (10:104)

Freddie also experienced isolation as stressful (PRL3): “I generally like to be around my people, so it was a challenging time. I think it was like that in the world, you know, so yeah” (11:38).

The choir had to adhere to the restrictions and comply with all rules. Not only was it stressful for the boys, but also for the staff. After two staff members tested positive, the conductor and production manager had to isolate in fear of not complying with the rules, as Werner described, causing stress for him. On the other hand, Nina was afraid that she could be caught for not applying the protocols, but when the regulations were eased she could convince the authorities that the choir was an isolated community, which was relatively safe:

The boys were often in the huddle. Yes, we tried to apply all the rules. Literally, there was a big sense of fear of being caught breaking rules. Yes. For example, when one or two staff members had tested positive, I had a whole team of medical people coming from Emmaus Hospital to check on me. I had to isolate them and who they had contact with ... It happened twice. They were following every single case ... when it came to the second lockdown, I managed to convince Zinzan that we were in a bubble. The advice was to lock down in your bubble and I said, we are our bubble. They don't have to go home. We're all in close contact. They sing together, eat together, play together, shower together. That was a reasonably stable period, except I can't remember what stages we were allowed to perform. It went up and down and up and backwards and forwards between the various stages. (7:18)

Thomas was overwhelmed with fear. As the Director of Music responsible for all decisions regarding choir rehearsal protocols, he was worried that choral singing could put his choristers at risk PRL3-4):

And all over the world, we kept hearing how dangerous choral singing is. It was probably one of the most dangerous activities you could undertake during the

pandemic was singing in a choir. And that was terrifying to me because something that you grew up with as the kindest, friendliest, most human, soft, sensitive activity becomes like a weapon almost. It was horrible for me to deal with the fact that something that we do that is so loving and so unthreatening could be so scary.
(Thomas, 8:23)

Recruitment was also negatively affected, since hosting schools were afraid that the DBCS would recruit boys, and schools were fearful of getting infected, as Jenny remembers:

We did go with small group of boys but not too many schools. Not many schools want to have the boys there and there are fewer and perform at the school because they are scared they're going to poach them. So it was difficult to recruit I think during COVID. Everything was difficult because everyone was scared to have performances and to have boys in a hall, but I think we did do quite a few with a small group of boys. I think so. (9:66)

After COVID-19, many families reevaluated their children's education choices, posing challenges for recruitment efforts. This shift in perspective made it more difficult to attract new students: "I firmly believe the normal family scenario has changed globally. The take on education, the take on where you send your child to school. So, there is an internal shift in the consumers in the world out there" (Marisa, 6:63).

The above comments illustrate a reinforcing loop of fear that disrupts rationality (PRL1), sometimes leading to changes in behaviour and further increases in fear.

However, sometimes participants wondered why they were so afraid, as Thomas observed:

I remember that 2020 folklore programme as an absolute highlight of celebration of South Africanness and celebration of South African human spirit. And to be able to perform that during a pandemic, when people were dying, and people were

getting infected, and the numbers were just climbing and rising. And for us to go through that, and we relatively had no record who got COVID during that time. Nobody. Nobody on our campus that I can remember. I think maybe one or two staff members. Later on, really towards the end of the year, we had people who tested positive. But for us to go through that whole experience, and we were still performing, and we were still, the boys were at school, we were working, and nobody got sick. Nobody at the school. Then you start wondering, is this real? Do we need to be this afraid? Is it really this bad? Because we carried on. And I think that was, for me, the most positive or the most memorable fact. (Thomas, 8:34)

4.3.6.2 *Confusion and contradictory information as a Positive Reinforcing Loop (PRL2)*

Throughout the pandemic, misleading media reports and conflicting expert advice amplified uncertainty (PRL2). Nina points out that media reports instilled fear, which was counterproductive: “I find it a great pity that the whole COVID thing, that the media, the main thing the media put across was fear, which isn't good for society” (Nina, 7:48). Thomas found it difficult to discern between truth and misinformation, as he notes:

And then there was so much misinformation all the time. There was conflicting opinions. Then you read an article that says it's not so bad, people are overreacting. Then you need to read another article and you listen to a news report that says there was a choir that had a practice and now there are 55 infections. After one rehearsal, there are 55 infections. And then you read from doctors talking about the aerosols and how the aerosols will spread this disease. Then you hear from other people who are saying this disease is a hoax and it's not even real. It was so difficult to navigate what was going on and nobody knew who to trust. There was no authoritative council or entity. People in America did not trust the World Health Organization and their own CDC. They didn't trust Dr Fauci in America.

Everyone else takes their cue from America. Everywhere in the world, in every country, there was mistrust in the governments. There was mistrust in the national health organizations. People who were full of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, they kept making more and more videos and more and more posts online. And the more posts that were circulated, the more freaked out everyone else became. And the governments just didn't respond to any of that because they knew or they thought this is all just conspiracy, no one will believe this, this is nonsense. But they just didn't keep up with keeping people informed, I think. And so I think that the misinformation was really a strong part of why we ended up in this lockdown for so long. And for such, it was a traumatic time for a choir because like an athlete who stops training, you become weak as an athlete. (8:24)

As Thomas described, conflicting reports created systemic noise, making it difficult to establish consistent rehearsal protocols (PRL2-4). For this reason, Coach found it challenging to teach choreography: “You’d use a mask for a dance lesson... then you hear a scientist say it is pointless... and then your politicians would be saying everybody wears a mask, no matter what” (Coach, 12:9).

Coach underscored the fact that accessible, unverified information led to confusion (PRL2):

So, you had all of these theories that actually played on social media, which were untested, but they actually played a role in social media, and because it was during, you know, the pandemic, and people did not know exactly what is going on, and governments were not actually talking. If they were talking, it was just minimal. And also, you know, people would be confused by all of this other information, and then one person would just spread fake news, and then it would be all over the place. So, there were good and bad on social media, spreading the fake news, false news, you know, and nobody knew much. Even if there was, you

know, something that was positive and helpful, nobody could actually tell for sure, you know, if it helped. (Coach, 12:29)

Data analysis revealed that staff struggled to reassure choristers about their safety when they themselves did not fully understand the situation (PRL3). As Maureen admitted, “We didn’t really understand what was going on. How can you reassure young children when you don’t even understand yourself?” (3:43).

Furthermore, conflicting media reports lead to staff and parents having different perspectives on COVID-19 (PRL2), finding it challenging to accommodate everyone in an isolated choir and school system: “Once again, it’s back to the social dynamics. There were the DGs who were terrified, and there were the Andy’s who were denialists. So it was the full spectrum” (Nina, 7:53).

Staff members feared dying because of the unpredictability of the pandemic. They struggled to make sense of contradictory information, particularly since older individuals were at a higher risk of becoming seriously ill, as Maureen experienced.

During COVID. I think you're not going to die of COVID. And my cousin's daughter just died. And there were times where it was like bizarre, you know. And I think some of us did struggle, you know. And we also felt fearful because you're now dealing with boys and they've got snotty noses. And you are now 50-odd and you think, well, flip if I'm gonna get COVID, I'm going to die. So, I'm sure it did. And we had to obviously wear masks. And it was weird ... we were frightened anyway, a little bit, you know. Because we didn't know where it was going. (3:43)

As a result, a pattern of escalating behaviour emerged, leading to conflicting narratives that further confused staff and left them uncertain about whether their actions were protective or pointless.

4.3.7 Parental anxiety (PRL1)

Data indicated that some parents experienced heightened anxiety during the pandemic, primarily because they were geographically separated from their sons. Rising COVID-19

case numbers contributed to parental panic, prompting frequent contact with staff. This created stress and heightened perceptions of risk, which in turn sparked further panic. Coach recalls parents' concerns during this time:

It was very stressful, and parents would actually phone every single time if there was a spike somewhere in Gauteng, a spike in KZN. We have parents from KZN, we have parents from all over the country. So, if they had kids in the school, the moment numbers actually spiked in KZN, you definitely literally have phone calls, even at night when you're sleeping. How are my boys? I hear the numbers are actually going up in KZN? How far are you from the kids? Because other parents know just KZN to be sort of like a, you know, one province, and they probably think it's a tight space. (12:10)

Some parents were afraid of leaving their boys at school and kept them at home, receiving online lessons, as Nina noted:

There were other parents who were saying, no, my boy was coming home and didn't let them go back to school until six months later ... His mother kept him off school for six months at home, because she was scared of getting sick. (7:36)

On the other hand, when a lockdown was announced after a COVID-19 outbreak, some parents felt that the school could just carry on: "So for example, Danny from Cape Town, his parents were livid that we'd closed down, and they had to drive all the way here to fetch him. Why didn't we just carry on?" (Nina, 7:36).

Parental fear also made it difficult to recruit boys, as Maureen recalled: "People were afraid ... they didn't want to send their children away ... everyone just wanted to keep their children close" (Maureen, 3:35). Marisa echoes this sentiment:

And I think if you go into depth there, even in education, there is a reason why people hold on to their families, sort of, in COVID, after COVID. And it definitely had an impact on our numbers, parents sending kids off to boarding school. (6:15)

Jenny also stated that “parents are hesitant to send their boys away ... parents, they are scared” (Jenny, 9:68).

This loop demonstrates that parental fears became internalised, adding pressure to choir practices, diverting staff energy away from pedagogy toward reassurance during the crisis.

4.3.7.1 *Emotional burden on the choristers (PRL1)*

During data analysis, it became clear that fear and anxiety also affected boys, as Nina pointed out: “So once again, it was trying to balance all the opposing pressures. Because I was very worried about the boys' psycho-social sense of fear and anxiety, pervasive anxiety, because it was just this big fear thing about COVID” (Nina, 7:38). Boys were scared of getting sick and were stressed about their parents' safety at home. They also went through trauma as they lost family members and friends during the pandemic. Consequently, these traumatic experiences must have had an impact on the boys while being in the choir or doing other school activities:

There was also lots of anxiety, I think, around for the boys. Will they get sick? They also had lots of, they're stressed about their parents and their friends at home, so they also had that to worry about. Many of them had lost family members and that I remember we had many boys who lost grandparents and family and, yeah, so that they also had to deal with that on top of learning repertoire and performing and doing school. So, I think it was a much bigger burden on them than it was on a normal schoolboy, who could still go home every afternoon. (Jenny, 9:49)

Boys were aware of what was happening with family members and were informed about global events that had an effect on them, as Kevin pointed out:

I think the general mindset of where things were internationally, globally about COVID. I think that that was a bug because boys were hearing of family members very ill. And if not dying, I think there were a couple of deaths of family members of our boys, not immediate family. So, I think that there was an effect

psychologically. The Drake boys being in their own local scene, when they got in that auditorium to rehearse, they did it like they always did. That's how I would call it. I think more psychologically, I think, of what was going on in their own family circles or hearing of other families that had been affected. And yeah, and then internationally, I mean, just to hear of stuff and the economic impact of, and there were families impacted, some of our families. (2:51)

When boys got sick, they were uncertain if they had COVID-19. The school was hesitant to conduct tests, as identifying an outbreak would necessitate closing down (PRL4), as Nina explains:

But I obviously didn't want an outbreak, because we didn't want to have to close...That is why we were reluctant to test. And when we did test, that first outbreak, and sent everyone home, and people like Reeve Vanketesan's mom phoning me and wanting to see the results, because she couldn't believe that he's positive, he's not sick at all. But Dumi²⁶, his mother says he was very sick, but he was here with me when he had it and wasn't sick. Anyway, interesting times. (Nina, 7:40)

However, despite the feelings of the parents, boys were stressed out when they got sick: "Then when kids get sick, they were obviously stressed, do I have COVID, do I have COVID or not, that definitely stressed them out" (Amelia, 4:77). Coach also remembers how boys would wake him up being scared that they might have contracted the virus:

We also had boys that were actually panicking who would maybe choke up at night sleeping and then they'll think they're sick and then wake up and knock at the doors 2 am in the morning I can't sleep I think I may be fully you know reinfected and a

²⁶ Not the chorister's real name.'

simple cough. A boy would simply cough you know because they're choking from either thinking a lot. (Coach, 12:42)

The school invited a doctor to answer questions and provide information to help alleviate stress among the boys and staff. Nina notes, "I thought that would be a good way to talk to the boys. It's just trying to take a bit of the fear factor away. We wanted to explain things and answer questions because there was so much unknown" (7:54). Additionally, some boys continued to feel anxious about contamination even after mask-wearing became non-compulsory: "There were some boys who continued to wear masks, even when they were no longer required" (Nina, 7:61). Although both parents and boys were fearful of dying, Nina believed: "We felt that these boys were not at risk. That's why we didn't want to make a big deal out of it" (Nina, 7:43). Nevertheless, the school also prompted boys to stay safe when going back to parents over holidays or during lockdowns which reflects the abnormality of the situation in society and the continuous stress the boys endured during the COVID-crisis:

I think it was stressful for them. Like I say, it's possibly easier for adults to handle those kinds of restrictions, because children and teenagers are more spontaneous. So they would have had to constantly interrupt their own behaviour, say, oh, don't go too close, oh no, don't come to my cubicle. Yeah, and when we did have lockdown, obviously they didn't see their families for quite a long time as well. It was just a weirdly abnormal world, because even when they went home for holidays or whatever, they were given strict instructions, don't go to malls, don't go out, stay at home. Now for a child to stay at home for its whole holiday and not go out, is not the way the world's supposed to work. (Nina, 7:42)

The 2021 riots in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng also contributed to fear and worries about parents' safety: "2020 was its own beast ... but the effects of those riots ... affected some of the boys and their families ... here, we were quite safe, but their parents ... maybe there was a little bit of uncertainty about what could still happen" (Kevin, 2:19). Some boys got stuck in the riots with their parents which was traumatic as Amelia remembers:

For the boys ... the looting was really the traumatic experience ...one boy showed me the guns they have ready ... another pulled out his knife ... for a nine-year-old to think about these things ... many of them didn't know anybody that passed away from COVID or anything, but they knew their parents were on patrol at 2 am in the morning outside trying to protect them from criminals and things and they're going with them on patrol, so I think that had a very big emotional thing on the children at the time. (Amelia, 4:74)

Disruptions in academic lessons and choir rehearsals led to some parents putting pressure on boys to perform well, which put an extra burden on the boys:

And there is a difference for me in a deeper sense of the expectation of parents of their kids. There's also a stronger hold onto what kids need to do, need to execute. And I think there's a lot of stress on our children today, because of COVID. (Marisa, 6:16)

Staff found that boys struggled to remain motivated because of the anxiety and distractions. Jenny noted that choristers often needed reassurance and guidance to keep them motivated:

They were often not motivated and, yeah, we had to put in lots more work to get them to stay on track and to keep motivated and to not become anxious and to how to cope with everything that was happening outside of the school as well at their homes and with their family. Yeah, so I think some boys coped really well, but most of the boys needed lots of reassurance that everything is okay and they needed lots more assistance and guidance to, yeah, to keep on doing what they were supposed to be doing. (9:92)

For learners, choir practices became layered with worry, disrupting concentration, since their emotional bandwidth was constrained by external trauma, limiting their capacity to fully engage.

4.3.7.2 *Solidarity as a Negative Balancing Loop (NBL1) stabilising choir practices*

Despite the reinforcing dynamics of increasing fear, collective cultural action provided balance (NBL1). Although the online production of “Ndikhokhele Bawo” was discussed under online productions, the choice of music for productions demonstrated solidarity and contributed to hope and healing in the country:

And we made it clear from the start that we want to do this for the country. Because the country, our nation and the world actually, you know, this COVID had such an effect emotionally on people. So that already a huge, big emotional effect, but then the rioting and all this chaos just added on to that. And for us to, through that video actually is to give hope to the South Africans, not just in these areas. A lot of the footage in the area shows how the cleaning up's being done, the aftermath of all of that. But is to say that, you know, it doesn't matter what, nobody can silence us, but we will stand together. But through the video also, dedication to all the people in those areas, in that chaos, but then in the rest of the country, because we had the traumatic chaos of the riots, but then COVID was chaos. It felt like it just threw chaos out everywhere, towards every person. (Werner, 10:42)

Coach also added that: “We released the video Ndikhokhele Bawo to show solidarity with the victims of these riots” (12:10). Some boys experienced the riots while they were in lockdown with their parents as Kevin notes: “Mike would have started two weeks earlier, and Mike’s dad said they nearly got stuck in their complex, because a lot of the violence was very close to the Cotswold complex where they lived” (2:32). Boys who were in the affected areas could help with the production of the video, helping them to cope with the situation as Werner noted:

And we did that video. We did that recording for the boys to do something again, because they were stuck at home. But then also to from our side to try and take their minds off this craziness. And that's how wonderful it was that those boys were involved. (10:42)

Other boys who were not directly involved, showed solidarity with their friends: “But then all the other boys in the safe areas where this craziness wasn't happening, got stuck in with their buddies and did this together” (Werner, 10:43). During the pandemic, music staff supported each other, showing solidarity with each other, as Amelia remarks: “So, there was I think a lot of camaraderie between the staff members, because we had to stand together to survive” (4:81).

However, staff were sometimes overwhelmed:

So, sometimes we felt depressed and other times we felt determined that we will make things work and we will go through the pandemic. And we knew that we had to hang in there. So, our emotional well-being was not, we were not always at a good space. (Ashley. 1:25)

Therefore, in this balancing loop, solidarity restored hope and reduced despair, stabilising morale and helping to counteract fear. Thus, music and, therefore, choir practices themselves became a systemic intervention, reinforcing resilience and re-establishing meaning in practices.

4.3.7.3 *Institutional fear for the sustainability of choir practices (PRL4)*

Since the first announcement of lockdowns, economic instability threatened the continuity of choir practices, instilled fear, and was the driving force discussed in Themes 3 and 4. The school's financial survival is interwoven through all aspects of choir. Thomas's first thoughts centred around the sustainability and survival of the choir:

My only stress was, what are we going to do with the school? What are we going to do with the choir? What will we do with the boys? How will we keep things afloat?

Obviously, we were all stressed financially. Financially, I was worried. But I also knew that we were okay because we had food. We were surviving at the time and there was money coming in. There was a pay cut, and then we got those grants from the government that came through. We were okay. (8:64)

He also felt that there were structures in place that protected the staff, while many other musicians lost their income:

And so, we can't forget that there are so many colleagues and friends of mine whose rehearsals just stopped, and they immediately stopped getting an income as well. And so that was quite traumatic. And I think that's the benefit of working at an institution where structures were in place for us to still get an income. (Thomas, 8:62)

Furthermore, the greatest fear for Nina was that the school would close if boys tested positive for COVID-19, as Nina commented:

And my biggest fear was that we would have to close down, because first we had that first lockdown, and then when that all came back, I knew that as soon as we got a positive case, that we would have to go home. (7:4)

Throughout the pandemic, choir conductors feared the loss of rehearsal time, since this would have a devastating effect on maintaining choral standards (PRL4). Thomas's remark explains the impact of COVID-19 on choirs globally:

As soon as you stop training, if you skip a day, you can recover. If you skip a week, it's going to take you a week to recover. If you skip a month, it will take a month before you are back up to where you were. And we took 18 months of choir music was just gone. And so it's no wonder that some choirs never returned. Some choirs just could never get back to where they were. Even when I started at Kearsney, there was no choir here for 18 months. And I'm now at the point, and it's now 2024.

So literally three and a half years later, I feel like things are back to normal. But it took three and a half years to get back to normal. And I think most choirs, most choirs on the planet took over a year, two years, it took two years. And people are still complaining in the World Choir Council, where I meet and talk to people. They are still, everybody is still suffering from COVID in some way or another, not physically, but the damage, the damage that was done in the choral landscape is, was, was, it was devastating. (8:25)

The fear of losing choristers prompted (PRF3-4) the choir staff to work harder, even though they were in lockdown, to maintain continuity: “We were at the school being isolated, but we worked twice as hard as we did under normal circumstances” (Ashley, 1:156)

Jenny echoes: “Yeah, it was just very stressful for everyone that time” (9:59). The fear about survival, working with no training and insufficient resources, made it impossible to function properly, also contributing to feelings of worthlessness:

How difficult it was for us to do that, and how it's already very straining to do that when there are no restrictions and then to have to do that all online with no training and with no resources. Yeah. So, I felt like we had to work really, really hard. I didn't feel very worthy during that time. I don't. Yeah. I didn't feel like that. I felt like everyone just thought it was the same as teaching an academic lesson. And it wasn't because we couldn't do that. It was just impossible to function properly during that time. It was very, very difficult. So yeah, we tried our best, and we did everything we could within the parameters of what we had available to us at the school. (Jenny, 9:89) <https://go.atlasti.com/8761d40f-861d-4fac-97c1-a368357da982/documents/8ed8969f-18fa-43ed-8193-964a11ec2aae/quotations/135dd460-fa14-4d31-baba-48726fc455a6>

Zinzan concurs with Jenny that staff members questioned themselves and their ability to adapt, since the pandemic was a demanding period: “I think all staff members questioned themselves, their ability and their resourcefulness constantly during the pandemic. It was a hugely taxing and frustrating time” (13:33).

Work-related stress and fear of unexpected lockdowns also resulted in feelings of depression (PRL3-4): “So, it did influence me otherwise I could overcome my fears and my worries and my depression and I could take on life again but it was difficult because we always had to prepare for new unexpected lockdowns and we had a lot of work on our plate” (Ashley, 1:55).

Ashley realised that the school was under financial strain: “The most difficult thing was to manage the finances of the school” (1:185). Despite understanding the financial challenges, staff felt that they were not always valued:

We had cuts in our salaries, immediate cuts in our salaries, because the school wouldn't survive if we didn't do that. And so we were sometimes feeling that we were not looked after well, but we also knew that we had to survive and the school had to survive ... In another sense, one was sometimes questioning your self-worth because you felt that the school was perhaps not really supporting us all the way, especially not financially. But it was very difficult to measure your feelings of self-worth if it was weighed up against your financial stability that you could have.
(Ashley, 1:124)

Coach, the choreographer feared losing his job (PRL3-4) since regulations prohibited movements in enclosed spaces at the time, leading to depression:

At some point it made me feel it made me feel like you know I wasn't really sure about the future of my work you know because I wasn't working most of the time and I at some point the thought of being asked to leave or step down to fully played you know on my on my head for quite some time [because] I'm doing nothing. I go through the dining hall in the morning and get my breakfast and go lock myself into

a you know flat for the whole day we're going to do much. Yeah it felt it felt that way I thought maybe perhaps I would be let go to say we cannot afford to because you know and it was not it would not have been financial, it would have been we're paying you actually. We cannot actually use you. So, it played in my mind, and thankfully that never happened. (Coach, 12:39)

Furthermore, the choir's financial survival motivated alumni to show their support (NBL1). They became actively involved in helping the school through these challenging times by not only providing financial assistance to the choir, but also aiding with maintenance and recruitment efforts. As Werner notes:

I think that the role the old boys played during COVID and even now is their support, is their absolute support for the school, which they love so dearly, and which has meant so much to them. It didn't mean a lot to them back then, but it still does; that means a lot to them now. And that support and the encouragement that they've played is that, and what we've seen, because we, at the moment, not in the best financial situation, that I know and I'm positive it's gonna, it's gonna, the ship's steering to the right direction, that that can come right ... So, we financially, we've had a lot of challenges. The old boys have come on board, not all old boys can just yank out, take a lump sum of money and give it to the school, but in every individual way where they could assist, and still can, they would assist the school to help out with certain things, you know, from furniture to, there's a lot, there's actually so much. And also, like, for instance, auditioning for us boys in this different centres that we actually got a boy here from, from town in another province, because he was auditioned by an old boy. So, they, their support, I think, they really supported us a lot through this very, very difficult period that we've been through. And it's a support that I think, because of, of the hardship that, or the difficult time that we've gone through, which the support will just continue, even if

it goes better and better and better. Yeah, I think that COVID has, has really pulled communities together in, in wonderful ways, where you wouldn't have thought it would, because it kept everybody apart. (10:78)

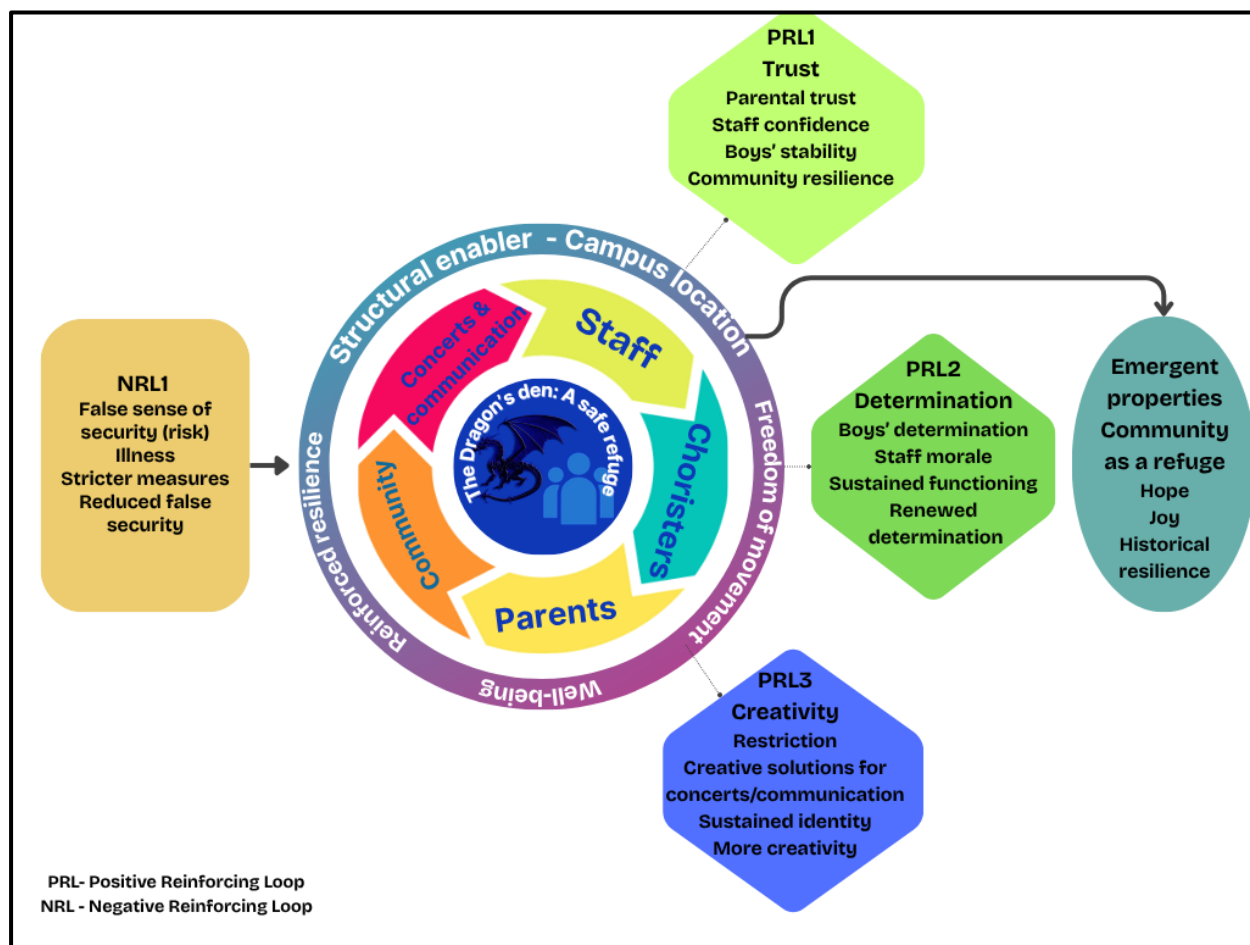
As already discussed in Themes 3 and 4, job losses increased fear among the participants that affected various aspects of choir sustainability; when parents lost jobs, they struggled to pay school fees, which led to worries about losing choristers. This anxiety fuelled concerns about the decline of the choir school and decreased enrolment numbers. As a result, the viability of choir practices became closely linked to the wider weakened economic landscape (PRL4).

The data clearly showed that fear had a significant impact on choir practices, creating various reinforcing cycles. These included disruptions in education and functionality, anxiety among parents, the emotional strain on the choir members (PRL1-4) and existential fears (PRL3-4). However, a sense of solidarity between staff, choristers, parents and the community stabilised choir practices (NBL1). By adopting a systems thinking approach, it became clear that the main challenge went beyond merely managing fear; the entire system evolved to reduce panic, enhance resilience, hope and joy. Despite the considerable influence of fear on the staff and choristers, they found strength in their musical traditions and the close connections within their community.

4.3.8 Theme 6: The Dragon's den: A safe refuge in a chaotic world

During the data analysis, it became evident that the choir, its geographical location, and its surrounding community served as a safe refuge during COVID-19. It functioned as a socio-cultural system where staff, boys, parents and the wider community engaged with one another, creating positive and negative reinforcing feedback loops. By applying systems thinking, we can see how resilience, adaptation and a sense of joy and hope emerged from these interconnections. Figure 25 illustrates how these elements interact with each other:

Figure 25: The Dragon's den: A safe refuge in a chaotic world



Werner's remark explains how the system worked together in an isolated space to create a safe "bubble" for the choir community:

Where here, I'm not saying it wasn't controlled, but we were isolated. And I could become part of this community or be part of this community during very, very tough times. During times when we got isolated. I think for me that is the thing that stands out. And then to work with the staff and to work with the boys. The music, to have that every day in my life. To have the concerts, except for those two days when I was isolated, but I could still hear them. So, I would say for me that the most wonderful thing that stands out is to have been part of this community and to see how this huge, big machine ... If I say big machine, it's an engine going. How this engine keeps on going, and nothing is going to stop this engine from running. And

to have all the people around me here who have inspired me so much, the boys, the staff, that for me will forever stand out because during that period, except for the first year of COVID, the second year of COVID, which was just as challenging, I was here. And I could see the expression on the faces of people in the audiences who went through all of this with us, even if they were sitting apart. But I could see that if they didn't have a mask on, but you could see their eyes as well. (10:117)

Werner's comment explains how the choir school functioned as a closed system ("bubble") consisting of the staff, boys, and parents forming a community. Moreover, internal relationships buffered external shocks caused by the pandemic: "Because we were living in our own bubble here" (Kevin, 2:50).

4.3.8.1 *The reinforcing loop of trust (PRL1)*

The data analysis has shown that the parents put their trust in the staff, which reinforced staff morale, since boys were separated from their parents, resulting in a stable environment in which the boys could thrive, creating a loop of resilience:

I think the resilience that the school actually had. The resilience from the boys and the support from the parents was, I must say the parents, parents actually had every right to actually pull their boys, sorry, out because of this pandemic ... So, for them to actually trust what we were doing as a staff, far away from, you know, their comfort zone, I think that actually gave, gave me a sense of, of trust from the parents, that they trust we actually do the right thing, they believed in us, they trusted us with their kids, and ... if we actually had any issues, problems, they would phone because obviously they're concerned, but they would not actually give us grief, partly because of, you know, a boy actually got sick at school, you know, they would just actually phone, be concerned, be supportive, and just to make sure that we are taking the necessary measures to that, so I think that resilience and support for me, it actually helped quite a lot, because there was just

no way we could have actually been able to continue with this, had they actually pulled out, imagine if maybe 10 or 20 parents said, no way, I'm taking my kid away, because they could have actually have done that, and rightfully so, you know, but they stayed with us, you know, they kept their boys there, they, they took them away for, for holidays and brought them back, you know, while COVID was still out there and, and taking out families, so I think that the resilience of the school, the parents, the kids, the staff, for me that was, was the support that I needed to see and hear in order to believe that this thing can be, we can win over it. (Coach, 12:50)

Maureen also made the point that parents trusted the staff: “Parents were also very supportive in knowing that their boys were in good hands. They were just happy that their boys were safe and in a lovely environment where they could still get exercise and eat well” (Maureen, 3:27).

Parents supported the staff in creating a circle of trust that supported choir practices, since parents had the right to take their boys out of the school:

But I think generally parents also understood the situation and so they generally were quite sympathetic to the school; they understood that we were in trouble they understood that we were under the regulations like we had to abide by them. So, I think everyone kind of stuck with us in good faith and so but I think it yeah it would have been very easy for someone to say sorry like I'm done like I'm just going to homeschool my son somewhere else. (Thomas, 8:53)

The trusting environment created an atmosphere in which choristers were happy and could thrive, as Maureen notes:

And initially, the whole thing [lockdown] was very nice. But a month in, they could not wait to come back to school. They were like, please just mom drop me right

here. Because we are happier right here. So, it was interesting. And that I can say about eighty percent of our boys, they looked forward to be back on campus with us. (Marisa, 6:114)

As a marketing staff member, Maureen's natural tendency to connect with parents and boys created a nurturing environment for boys, but she also kept parents informed, strengthening relations with parents and instilling trust in the choir system:

I think probably one of my, it's not a quality or a strength. But maybe it's a universal thing with people that are public relations people, that you connect with the people and you try and make them, like when the new boys come in, you try and make the parents understand what's happening with their children and what they're up to and if there's a bad day or whatever ... But it does, I think they naturally will come and open up, and he'll talk because I think you don't have to discipline him. I can just be friendly and tell him how brilliant they are because they are. And I don't have to really deal negatively with him very often. So, I think it's easy, they'll pop in and come and chat or stop you on the corridor. And I love that. That's the best part of my job. Or when you can solve a problem for a parent. That for me is what feeds my soul, you know. To make it easier so that, because it must be hard. I mean, I know now with son away, I don't see him every day. And he can tell you, I know everything's fine, but you want to actually know that for sure. And for perhaps someone else to say, oh, I saw Mitch and he's having a good day. That makes my whole day. You know what I mean? So, if you can do that to one or two parents every couple of days, I think it's good. And the boys that they, but I mean, every staff member, the well-being of these boys is a high priority. And I think that we all try to look out for them. Not, no, it's not a unique to me, surely not. It's what we all do. (Maureen, 3:11)

The well-being of the choristers was a high priority for staff, as Marisa emphasised: “But it was always a heartbeat, the understanding for our boys. It’s always about the boys. It’s always about the well-being of our boys” (6:8). Therefore, staff tried to also provide emotional support to the boys: “But I think emotionally we looked after them. They could be normal in a very un-normal world at the time” (Maureen, 3:41).

The boys therefore received support from both their parents and the staff, which created stability for them and contributed to community resilience:

And I think being the school community we are, I think there was huge all-around support for the boys, who at times were struggling, okay, with their own, maybe if they had COVID, but also just trying to come to terms with what was happening globally and in some of their families. I think there was huge support, I really do. From all fronts, parents, I really think that parents were cooperative, boys were slack as they were allowed to be, if we’re really honest. But they were supportive, I really believe that. (Kevin, 2:144)

The staff cared for the boys, but also created feelings of togetherness and connectedness through challenging times, as Amelia points out: “Oh, I love them very much. You do definitely have a very special relationship with them ... But it does feel like we’ve been through very deep waters” (Amelia, 4:69).

Therefore, the community feeling also contributed to feelings of solidarity in making it through the difficult times together. Furthermore, choir members were not only happy, but they also cared for and supported each other:

I don't know how we got it right. I really don't know. But I firmly believe we kept our kids happy. I think in that time, we actually functioned really well as a little family. We tried. There was a lot of concern for one another. I picked up the boys were also very concerned for one another. So, those are all the little positive things that I think came with the COVID thing. (Marisa, 6:109)

4.3.8.2 *The determination loop (PRL2)*

The determination of the boys to return to the school energised the parents and the staff as Zinzan recalls that the boys wanted to come back to the school after the first lockdown: “Largely through the determination of the boys to return to school and through wonderful support from the parent community” (13:27). The determination of the staff, parents, and choristers made survival through the pandemic possible, because the “family unity made us survive through this. I think we became more involved with one another, and more, it was the whole different way of doing things” (Marisa, 6:104).

The boys’ determination uplifted the staff’s morale and amplified the collective survival effort to sustain the system of choir practices: “As I say, the boys are so in this that they, and with the staff, together with the staff, we got through it. And we’re thankful that we could get through those challenges as well” (Werner, 10:20).

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked diligence, solidarity, and teamwork through the choir’s collective sense of purpose:

It's like anything in life, you know, [if] there's not a crisis, we're all happy and it's fine. It's, you see it in politics, you see it in churches, you see it in other communities, you know. I'm fine, I'm okay, I'm not going to worry about that, but as soon as there's something like this, and this is with the current boys, the same thing as well, the current boys of then, we will pull together and we will make this work, and we will support this, and we will not be silenced by a pandemic like this, where other, many choirs have been silenced, luckily they started singing again. But I think there are choirs who never got going again because of COVID, and with the new boys as well, seeing this very special place going through a difficult period and difficult time, and no touring, no recruitment, no all of that, how we jump into it, help and pull together, and that's exactly what happened. (Werner, 10:38)

Thomas confirmed that the boys were determined and resilient, illustrating character and the strength of solidarity:

I think boys are very resilient. I've seen that many times over. If you throw boys into a really uncomfortable, really annoying position, and if you make them suffer, even if sometimes it's intentional and sometimes it's unintentional and sometimes it's out of your control, but if a group of boys, and especially these choristers that I always work with, they deal with suffering very well. They are adaptable. They just get on with it. If they don't get food on time, they'll complain, but they'll be okay, and then when the food comes, they'll eat. If they don't have hot water to shower, they'll complain and they'll be upset about it, but no one dies. Some take a cold shower, and others wait for the water to come back, and then they have a hot shower. Boys are really resilient. I don't know if all boys are resilient, but certainly boys at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School are resilient, and I see the same resilience in the boys in the Kearsney College Choir. I think boys by themselves, if they are on their own, they are not so resilient because they are much too creature-comfort orientated, and they like to have things easily. They like to get things without having to put in any effort, individually speaking, but in a group setting, boys are tough. They have ways of motivating each other, and I also think it's a bit of competition between them, so if the going gets tough, there's always one boy or two boys who will take the lead and motivate the rest, or they will carry on as if it's not so bad, and then the other boys who would, in a normal circumstance, just fall to pieces, see that as an example, and then they get inner strength from that, so that they then also are able to survive or able to cope. And I think it's all because they don't want to look weak. I think everything boys do comes to, like they want to look and be perceived as the strongest in everything they do, and I think that's a good thing for boys, and that's why I love working with boys. (8:60)

The staff's determination to retain boys by creating the first tour to Namibia made it possible to share musical experiences with audiences, including experiences of pride, hope, joy, communication and solidarity, as Marisa described her experiences:

I think there's a lot to say. It's not actually about just that touring it's not it's um there's um I think there's a deeper essence in standing proud when you guys execute what you are busy with on stage, you know. You, that's an outsider, you become part of that living organism and that feel of the choir and um the fact that we want to reach people's hearts with music, I think that's the other thing, um, travelling the world. What impact it had on an audience member and I think many a time uh, we have to remind ourselves who are we performing for? Because in the audience, there's the people that stop believing in in life, people dying of cancer. And to see that happy faces after every concert on tour, you know people smiling and talking in the foyer and that hype that comes with it. (6:59)

4.3.8.3 The creativity loop (PRL3)

Restrictions could have led to the choir's closure. Therefore, adaptation, creativity, and proactive actions from the staff enabled choir practices to continue during COVID-19. Thomas realised the danger of not keeping the boys musically engaged, but he also knew he had to take the lead, be proactive and make a plan to ensure continuity in choir practices:

I realised that if I didn't do something, nothing would happen. I realised that it was largely up to me to take charge and give people direction and say, This is what we're going to do now, and this is where we're going, and this is how we will cope with the fact that we are not together, and that we need to have these online rehearsals. This is what we will do. So, it was a lot of stress on my part. (8:57)

Maureen described the interrelations of creativity, teamwork, and perseverance to make restricted concert performances possible:

I know that even though we were performing outside, we were still restricted to numbers, and we had to think quite creatively about how we could have more people, so we weren't basically crossing the line from a legal perspective. And I remember going to Zinzan's house the one night, and we were talking about how we're going to do this. And we decided that, well, if we're only allowed to have a certain amount of people outside on the grandstands, then we would use the Shark Tank, because we were allowed to have another group of people inside. And it was like this light bulb moment, so that's when we used the Shark Tank as an undercover venue or inside venue, and then we could have our other patrons sitting outside. So that was super exciting. And just to see the choir and the boys and the music staff and, I mean, we all work on a concert day, but just things that happen differently, and just how the team kind of pulled alongside, including the boys. The boys are very much part of our team, and I think setting up sound outside and, you know, just the whole kind of structure of how we were going to do it from a performance perspective with the bunkies and all those things was a massive job. And we just kind of took it on, and it was really positive, I think. You know, while it was a negative scenario, I think it was actually quite fun. (3:11)

Furthermore, community involvement made concerts and performances more comfortable during the wintertime:

So yeah, it was a good experience in terms of seeing the schoolwork together as a whole, and including our parents. They also helped as much as they could. You know, I mean, Champagne Sports, I remember they lent us those like outside cushions you sit on when you go to a sports thing. You take your little squishy cushion, and they gave us blankets for our patrons because we think we started just as winter was happening, if we could perform. So yeah, even the community

was amazing to make Drakies be able to get out there and do what they do.

(Maureen, 3:11)

The management was proactive and creative when they made an appeal to the Department of Education for special permission to continue all choir activities within health and safety protocols, which sustained the choir's functioning and identity and kept its community of practice alive:

I realised how privileged we were to get back to rehearsing so quickly. We could have the boys here. We did take a lot of liberties. But we don't go against the law. Just for the record. But we were able to restore our singing properly. Things which weren't allowed at other schools or other choirs. So it did have a big effect. (Amelia, 4:13)

Even remote communication was reframed as continuity, keeping the choir visible through the joint effort of boys, families and staff:

Yeah, I think it was basically keeping things ticking over so that people didn't forget about us, and that we were still out there, and although we weren't all together, we were still together, you know what I mean? I think that was the message we were trying to get across, that we were still operating, even though it had to be remotely. And I think that also sort of spoke to the community of Drakies a lot, that parents made it possible for us to do those things that helped to record. I remember, Mitch, in this little room here, doing his take about 14 times for his sister because she wasn't happy with it. And he was like, yeah, I could speak as a parent as well.

(Maureen, 3:16)

Thus, restrictions sparked creative solutions which were admired by colleagues, resulting in sustainability and visibility, as Maureen remarked: "I must say, I think I admire this from the staff. Yeah, I mean, yes, these people, they're not scared. They all come together

when needed. (Maureen, 3:32); Zinzan echoes her comment: “I was pleased that the choir staff had arrived at innovative solutions to the challenges faced by the choir” (13:15).

4.3.8.4 *Balancing risk and safety (NRL1)*

The closed environment created a sense of safety, as Maureen pointed out: “but I think we were quite sheltered” (3:132). Thomas feared that the boys would get sick when they returned after the lockdown but realised that the choir had formed its own bubble and that choir activities could carry on. He was aware of the risk and tried to apply rules and reprimanded choristers when necessary, but the choir was able to maintain its normal activities:

I think once we realised that we are in a bubble, and once we went through the first two or three weeks of, let's all be together here and let's see if anyone gets sick, and nobody got sick after the first three weeks, then I think the boundaries that we initially had kind of started disappearing, and for me, apart from the masks that were a real nuisance, and I didn't enjoy wearing masks all the time, and the boys were very bad at wearing masks, so they constantly had to be reprimanded, and they constantly had to be given consequences for not wearing them properly, but apart from that, I think it was normal. I felt normal with the boys. They all would come and bundle up against me and talk, and they would do the same to each other, and they still played sports. We still had the same interactions we would have had if it were not COVID, and I think that's also part of keeping it as normal as possible. One of the things that we could keep normal was the way in which we just went about our daily lives. Because we were away from the city, we were not in direct contact with large groups of people ever, and I almost felt like we just carried on as normal, but maybe I'm not remembering everything correctly, but that's my impression. That's what I tend to remember: is masks. (Thomas, 8:62)

Younger staff members did not get COVID-19 during the pandemic and were relatively safe. Jenny describes that she could practise outside with the new boys and had the space to keep everyone safe:

We just practised social distancing, but it was easy to do because we had a huge room to practise in and we could also go outside to practise, which we did a lot. And then most of the training we could also go and do outside. So it was actually, we had lots of space there in the mountains to do it. And yeah, I think we just carried on. We carried on with the rehearsals and none of us ever got COVID. None of the staff ever got COVID. That was so amazing working there. It was the best place to be during COVID at the choir school, except for the Wi-Fi that wasn't always wonderful. But I think it was the best place to be there, isolated in the mountains. (9:35)

On the other hand, in retrospect, Kevin was of the opinion that the choir had perhaps a false sense of security since boys did get sick at times:

I think we had a little bit of a false sense of security that we were in this bubble here but some of the boys got very sick and I'm not sure if we dealt with it as effectively as we could have. (2:134)

However, when outbreaks occurred, the system adapted quickly and the school went into lockdown, or sick choristers or staff were isolated, since real risk weighed more than a false sense of security. Nina, as the health officer, felt that she did as much as she could to ensure the safety of the staff and choristers:

I think we did everything by the rules as far as we possibly could, as far as was practical. I mean, there were times there were grey areas with little things that we shouldn't be doing, but there was no other way around it. Yeah, I think we did everything that we could according to what was going down at the time. (7:76)

Amelia also never felt that boys were very sick, and when illness disrupted the illusion of safety, stricter measures were applied, and boys were isolated or sent home. However, except for lockdown periods, choir rehearsals were never disrupted:

Well, I think because we are so secluded, there wasn't really a physical struggle with our health at the time. I think here and there, a boy became sick for a little bit, but then they were quickly isolated or sent back home. There was a time when there was a bit more, and I remember they were scared: was COVID here? Was COVID here? As it started to spread everywhere. But I wouldn't say that physically any boy was incapacitated more than you have at any school. Or even staff members here or there, maybe a person got sick and then they had to isolate. But I wouldn't say that actually the physical health that we had as staff members or boys affected the rehearsals in the end. I don't think so. (4:72).

4.3.8.5 Structural enablers, creating a safe haven

The choir school's location served as a structural subsystem that enabled resilience. All participants agreed that the beautiful, isolated location in the mountains made freedom of movement possible, and social connections could be strengthened, contributing to feelings of well-being and content, as Kevin noted:

And I think that made a big difference to us, to our well-being here. I mean, we still had to observe all the restrictions of shopping and not alcohol or whatever, whatever. But I think we were more fortunate than other people in other communities because of our location. (2:167)

Social gatherings made the situation around COVID-19 more bearable, as Maureen remembered:

And I'm grateful for that, that life could be a little bit, without so many restrictions, we could be a little bit freer here. In terms of the way we had our day-to-day,

whereas other people living in cities or in different places might have had it very differently and not been able to interact with each other like we did. Because I think we still had a couple of get-togethers, braais and things. It was normal. I'm in a very unusual time. It wasn't all bad. (3:13)

Nina experienced the lockdowns as a “happy time,” spending time with neighbours and having meals together and sometimes enjoying some homemade brews:

So yeah, for me, actually lockdown was quite a happy time. We didn't suffer socially because I'm not a wildly social person and we had very nice neighbours and we could safely stand a metre and a half away from each other and have our soup. Oh, I made pineapple beer. That's what I'd do when going to the market. (7:78)

Thomas also experienced lockdowns as a “magical time” when staff could bond and his children could roam freely, in contrast to the global trend of imposed isolation:

So I think for us as a staff, the lockdown was magical. I think it was a really interesting time. We bonded a lot. We had a lot of social gatherings. I came to your house. We were there often. We just made the most of that campus and living in that environment where we were free. We were able to roam. My children went to the river and they were riding their bicycles. And very few people can say that during lockdown. People went nuts, and they became crazy. They got cabin fever. But we didn't, because we were on that campus. And I think that was very fortunate. (8:556)

Contrary to general global experiences, the choir staff were very positive about their way of life since they had a structural environment that enabled social connectedness and well-being, as Thomas reminisced fondly:

I enjoyed the cooking and the baking and the illegal wine sales. The adventure of it all, for me, was really exciting. I'm glad I could experience that. I'm glad that I lived through this because, for me, it was just a really exciting thing to live through. But I appreciate and I understand that, for other people, it was horrific and it was traumatic. I think we, or me at least, we were just lucky and fortunate. (8:65)

Compared to other schools, the boys could resume social relations. Their physical environment ensured normality by providing a safe place to live. At first, they could not perform, but later, concerts and performances were possible, creating a feeling of contentment and fulfilment:

I think for the most part, if you had to compare them to other schools, I think they had a much easier COVID time because we were allowed to come back. They could, in their own little kind of safe environment, still operate fairly normally apart from performing to live audiences. They could still function in what they always knew and see each other and socialise. It wasn't like they were completely isolated from each other. They were actually together probably more than other young children in the world were, because we brought them all back. (Maureen, 3:40)

The choir boys had the same freedom as the staff and their children:

I just think they were so happy to be in this beautiful environment where they could go for a walk, when you can walk around here, a good 3 or 4 or 5 kms, whereas at home they possibly couldn't do that. I think it was less destructive or negative than probably for most children to be able to still see one another. (Maureen, 3:122)

The freedom of having a campus made it possible for staff to develop deep spiritual connections with boys; Amelia could share her faith and her love with the boys, being more than just a new boy teacher, but bringing joy and hope through simple actions and rituals by waking the boys up with her dog, creating a home away from home for them:

When I was still here, I mean, at one point, a third of the choir was getting singing lessons from me, so you get to know each of them individually so thoroughly, and you really become like a parent to them because you also do boarding duty. If you're on campus, you are, sometimes you put them to bed, you pray for them at night, you read, I always used to first read them a passage, and then pray, or have one of them pray for all of us, and in the morning, waking them up. That's also, there's lots of freedom. I used to always take my dog with, and we would wake them up in the morning, and it would just be so sweet. You really feel like parents to them. They become your boys, and you're so close with them. You really love them, you really love them. So, there's that side as well. You know, everything just together. I think it's definitely not just one thing. (4:99)

It is evident that the choir community served as a safe and supportive space, offering more freedom than other environments, as Maureen also expressed Kevin's sentiment:

I just think as a Drakie community we were probably less affected than some other people have been. And I'm grateful for that, that life could be a little bit, without so many restrictions, we could be a little bit freer here. In terms of the way we had our day-to-day, whereas other people living in cities or in different places might have had it very differently and not been able to interact with each other like we did. Because I think we still had a couple of get-togethers, braai's and things. It was normal. I'm in a very unusual time. It wasn't all bad. (Maureen, 3:131)

The triad of intensified bonds between the staff, boys and parents formed a loop of care, trust and belonging, in which the well-being of the choristers was central:

Like we had to fight a lot of battles together and that the boys obviously doesn't know about. They just come and they just sing and they just enjoy. But maybe also I would say our relationship with the boys...is probably very special because of

having battled through a pandemic together. Because even up to now, all the boys that were with us during that time, we do all have a very special relationship. And I don't know if that is because of COVID or it's just the way of the school, that it's just such a special little place where you form these really special connections with the boys. (Amelia, 4:69)

4.3.8.6 Emergent properties

The choir, as a community, offered stability, but it could not always guarantee job security, leading some staff members to leave. Nevertheless, for those involved, the choir school remained a source of hope, joy and a safe refuge during difficult times:

The music staff members, and the academic staff members, we tried to support each other. We have a small campus here, so we visited each other a lot. If you think of small town syndrome, it's much more than small town syndrome. We really are neighbors that are always without appointments at each other's doors. We supported each other emotionally, but from the managerial side, we felt very left in the dark. I guess that is probably the best way I could word it. (Amelia, 4:91)

Even though Thomas left the choir during the pandemic and still misses the choir to this day, the community of practice created fond memories of shared musical experiences of beauty, joy, hope, excellence, solidarity and care:

On the one hand, I will always miss the choir, and I still miss that choir, especially that 2020 choir, because I think we ended up, that choir was brilliant. They had this most beautiful sound, and they had these boys who went through this pandemic together, and just grew from it, and they are all compassionate, and they were all looking out for each other, and protecting each other, and you could hear that on stage, in the music. And so that 2020 choir, I will always remember, and I

will always think of as, you know, that was mad, that was a magical time, musically.

(Thomas, 8:73)

Werner echoed many of these sentiments:

And then, obviously, to be out here in the mountains, in the fresh air, and to play around here outside. So, I think really, it's a whole, the ethos of the school, which is, and that the fact that we're such a caring community, because as I say, we're here all the time, all together with each other. And I think for them, it's like they're normal, and they feel home here. Nothing wrong with their homes outside there, but it's this: there is, because I'm an old boy of the school myself, and this is a very special community. And it's actually, with all the hard work, and yeah, there are some times where it's a bit too much, and this one gets sad, or whatever, but it's a very secure environment, and a very happy environment. And I think that is what the boys, because you just speak to old boys who leave the school, and basically those are the things they will tell you, is why they actually, what they miss, and why they actually stayed here. Because being here sometimes is not the easiest. If you miss mom and dad, you miss your parents, you get homesick. But if you stick it out, you're happy about that. If you finish the journey here, yeah, and the boys, you support one another. (Werner, 10:94)

The choir and its environment buffer external shocks and sustain its identity, instilling hope for the future since the choir continues to produce boys who make a difference in the world and the music industry:

Very special for me, yeah, was the privilege to have seen a colleague growing up on this campus and finishing off his studies and attain the excellence of standing in front of the choir and to see the outcome of that, yeah. So the choir actually gave an opportunity to develop and mould youngsters to live their dream. And even in

COVID, we still have the outcome of kids through that time that make us proud today in the music industry, yeah. And really so, yeah. And I think to never stop believing in the dream. (Marisa, 6:90)

Deepened bonds between staff, boys and parents ensured long-term cohesion, contributing to the resilience of the choir as a community:

Coming here to the Drakensberg, it did me very good .It did me very, very well. So, I won't say that COVID affected me here negatively. I think here, being in this area, being in this environment, this school. Yes, with the lockdowns that we've had, the boys couldn't come back. Those frustrations, it was more frustrations for me. But emotionally, I think it did me well. It did me good to be back here in the Drakensberg. With the staff here and with the boys here. Even in those times where they weren't allowed to be here or we had to lock our gates. But I felt relief, I gained more relief from being here. (Werner, 10:109)

The interplay of all the different aspects of choir practices and being a community created a historic period of continuity and cohesion in the face of global disruption:

So, things like that, that stands out for me, that we could still bring some hope and joy to people in a very, very difficult time. Same with our live concerts, our productions and all of that. And we as a community did it and we're still going. And I'd say to the boys that they've been through the most difficult time in the school's history, but it's honestly one of the most historic times because we weren't silenced by this pandemic whatsoever. (Werner, 10:117)

The analysis of data revealed that, in the unique mountain environment, choir practices could adapt, sustain and strengthen through a sense of community, nurturing resilience through interconnectedness and care.

4.3.9 Theme 7: ‘The Beast’s retreat, the rising of the Dragon–battered but unbroken’

This theme emerged when the COVID-19 pandemic was officially over. That moment when all restrictions were lifted acted as a leverage point, having an impact on all aspects of choir practices, and became imprinted in Kevin’s memory:

I can still remember: we were at Jo’burg when the restrictions were lifted. At midnight of the evening of the first performance. Yes. So we had one performance where the theatre was as full as it was allowed to be. Half the tickets were sold (50%). And then that midnight, that night, restrictions were lifted. And then, if I remember correctly, about another 350 tickets were sold. Sure. So, we had, I seem to remember, Helen was saying 850 in the audience the second night. So, that was when officially the COVID restrictions were lifted. Yes. 22nd, midnight, 22nd of June. I seem to remember that. (Kevin, 2:37)

Kevin’s comment reflects optimism while acknowledging the significant challenges the choir had faced during the COVID-19 restrictions. Audience attendance suffered greatly: only 350 tickets were sold because of the restrictions, while 850 tickets were sold the following night after the restrictions were lifted. Although the choir lost income as a result of the restrictions, the potential for larger audiences to generate higher income was then greater.

Creative strategies enabled the choir to comply with health regulations and adapt its routines. This adaptability enabled them to maintain the training and continue performances and tours. The support of the parents made it possible for the choir to tour and contributed to marketing efforts to sell tickets, working towards a shared goal. For example, during this brief tour in Johannesburg, the choir boys were hosted by local parents, which helped cut costs and strengthen social bonds and connectedness. Moreover, parental support and effective social media marketing enabled the sale of 500 additional tickets within 20 hours. This response from the choir and parents is indicative of the choir’s determination to recover from the challenges of the pandemic.

Inductive data analysis indicates that the successful continuation of choir practices at DBCS during and after the pandemic relied on three key elements: staff, choristers, and the broader community, including parents, alumni, and supporters. This collaboration among these three groups, as illustrated in Figure 26, was essential in sustaining the choir's operations during the pandemic and became even more significant after COVID.

Figure 26: The interrelationships between the three key elements of choir practices

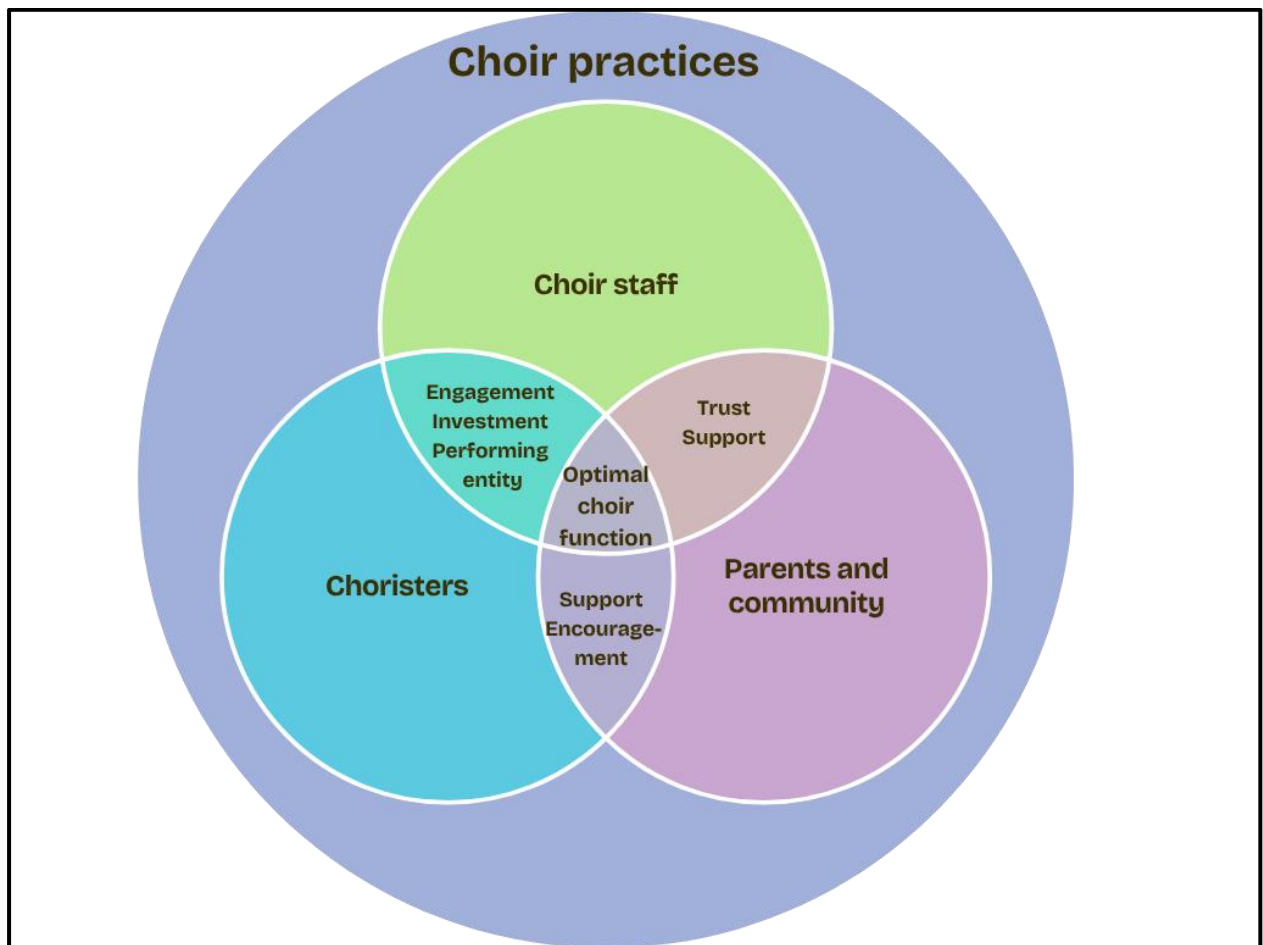
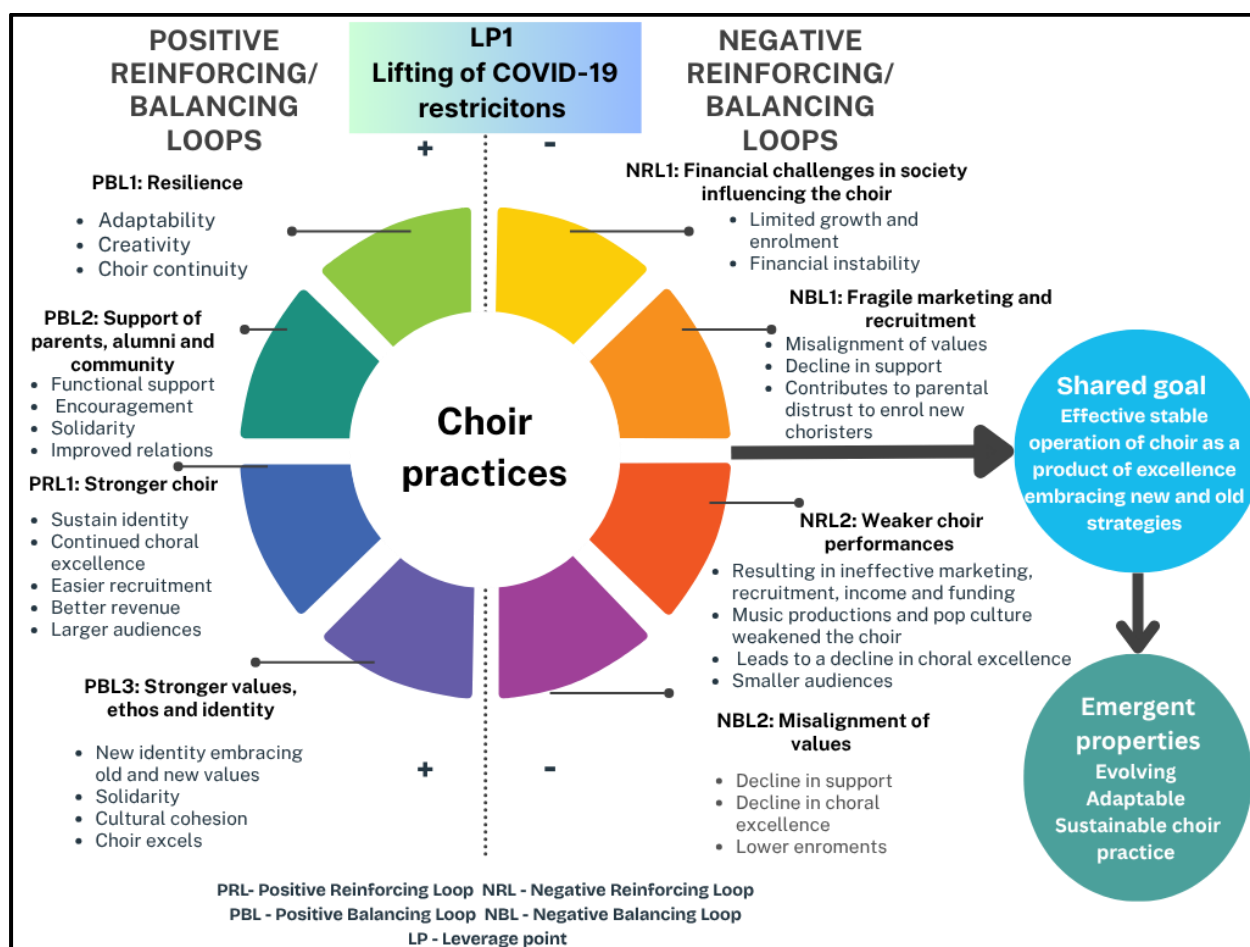


Figure 27 illustrates the interconnected nature of the various aspects of choir practices after the COVID-19 pandemic. There are subtle changes which addressed the changes in society and in choir activities which contributed to the choir's continued adaptation to address the challenges of the time after the pandemic was lifted. These changes strengthened the choir and made it possible to thrive and flourish.

Figure 27: Choir practices as evolving entity after COVID-19



The following discussion explains how choir practices were stabilised and sustained after the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Resilience was the first element that created stability in the system of choir practices.

4.3.9.1 Resilience as a stabilising factor (PBL1)

The data revealed that resilience served as a stabilising factor for choir practices at DBCS during the pandemic. After the restrictions were lifted, staff, choristers, and the community (parents, alumni, and the wider community) were able to function as reinforcing and balancing feedback loops, enabling, maintaining and stabilising the choir's activities. The staff's adaptability enabled continued learning and performance, even amid financial instability. Meanwhile, the choir's strong commitment to regular training, rehearsals and performances prepared them to face challenges in the post-COVID-19 environment.

The stabilising factor through this recovery phase was deeply seated in the adaptability and resilience of the staff (PBL1), as reflected in Marisa's words:

And I think what we have done to keep this ship afloat. I wonder, you know, we had many staff on this campus saying, we've been here a long time. But I think if you've been there through COVID, you've got a different story to tell. Really, I believe that. And I believe we are a number of people that's left. But our story is uniquely different from the people around us. Even a Bunny Ashley- Botha, that's been the conductor of the Drakies. You will never tell the story. We tell the story of COVID. And it had massive, massive impact. (6:116)

The resilience in the system was maintained through interconnected and interchangeable roles of staff members (staff adaptability) that emerged during the pandemic. Excellence and continuity were the driving forces, but embedded in a nurturing environment. This resilience made it possible for the choristers to thrive, strengthening the choir and providing a supportive network for the choristers, boosting their morale. Therefore, the staff actively invested in the choristers' holistic development:

We had to show that we still have excellence in academics and we have still excellence in our training of the boys and we care. We have a caring environment where teachers are aware of boys' emotional state. We know what their strong points are, what their weaknesses are and we address that and we encourage talent and we try and develop boys to their full potential. Those were the things that were pulling us through the COVID pandemic. (Ashley, 1:182)

Once COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, live concerts once again became the main focus of musical performances. However, during the pandemic, online music productions played a significant role in maintaining choir practices, helping choristers remain engaged and motivated. Although these virtual performances were not perfect and could not replace in-person choral experiences, they offered stability and ensured that both performance and learning could continue seamlessly when the restrictions were eased.

The choir's resilience and adaptability during this challenging period proved to be their most significant achievement. By continuing to rehearse and perform, they not only preserved their artistic endeavour, but also produced high-quality content. This content became an effective alternative for raising awareness and creating marketing opportunities, effectively bridging the gap between the pandemic and the post-COVID landscape:

I would say that for me the most important were the productions. So, we could not function as a normal choir, but we actually did productions, new productions, new recordings, new filming, to put out there onto social media and just to basically from our side say to the world, not even COVID can silence the Drakensberg Boys Choir School. So, there was new, although it was not very often and very regular as what we under normal circumstances would be, but at least there were things that went out there, new things, fresh. (Werner, 10:32)

Although the board's primary goal was to generate content and videos during the period of restrictions on performances and tours, Freddie faced challenges as a producer. After the pandemic, he needed to be creative and adapt to the board's requests. During the pandemic, the board decided that the content of the music productions had to be more 'youthful' to attract choristers and viewers. After the pandemic, the choir had to reflect and re-evaluate this approach as it was not as successful as anticipated. As a result, the choir adapted this strategy by combining repertoire drawn from the choir's rich cultural heritage with the more 'modern and popular' choices of songs. Therefore, he found it increasingly difficult to consistently produce content that deviated from the repertoire the choir performed in concerts and to work with boys who preferred performing live to producing videos. This struggle is evident in his notes on the situation:

We had to resort to social media, and video content, but it's always difficult when you, especially when you have a group of boys that come to Drakies to perform, to tour, to sing, to entertain. It's stressful. Because at the moment, you know, it's

like, you know, you cannot, your main product, you're not allowed to produce, manufacture, sell, which is performance. So, it is very stressful. You know, and it's, I think a lot of people struggle to find relevance because all of a sudden, you're, you sell ice, but you can't make ice. You're not allowed to produce it, you know?
(11:26)

The dedication of DBCS staff members to facilitating tours aimed at retaining choristers and sustaining the “Drakie experience,” especially after the limitations imposed during the first two years of COVID, highlights their remarkable tenacity and resilience, which helped stabilise choir practices. After the pandemic and the tour to Namibia, various staff members took the initiative to organise tours to Zambia, Mauritius, and the UK despite the absence of tour managers. Their creativity and commitment played an important role in making it possible for the school to recover, while building valuable networks, Marisa’s comment explains why she went to great lengths to enable touring when no tours were possible during COVID:

That was part of the need for me to do that Namibian tour, was the retainment, because I firmly believe if I did not do that Namibian tour after two years for these kids, are you with me? What could we have said the following year, three years down the line, are you with me? So retainment has to do with, are the product giving enough, in the sense of, is our boys happy here? (Marisa, 6:69)

Innovation in marketing and social media continued during the recovery phase after COVID-19, and choir practices still benefited from the techniques and skills learned during those restrictive years, continuing to contribute to the choir’s adaptability and ability to thrive because of responses to adversity:

I think it was more, you know, I think the strategies were more in social media, which is anyway the thing these days to do. And I think a lot of the social media things is what we learned in COVID, and we had to adapt to that, are still things

we're using today. I think it's changed the world in such a way that there are some good things that did come out of it. (Werner, 10:65)

Other skills learned and implemented after COVID-19 were the effective use of online teaching when the school did not have a specialist on an instrument available, expanding services to the choristers, and extending opportunities for choristers, resulting in the growth of the choir. Since the choir is in a remote location, online communication became the norm, upskilling the system in the use of digital platforms, fostering parental trust, as Werner reflects:

Like I say, online lessons, it's not the ideal, but at least we can basically offer any instrument at the school now, where years back they couldn't. And the marketing thing as well, you can now create groups, you can go on Facebook, you can, and what all of that is that it's become a real two meetings. Sometimes it would be a bit of a burden for me, because now you can have a meeting just about anytime because of Zoom and Teams and all of that. So marketing has just fallen in with that, where the online things, that's the tool, or actually the vehicle that's used. (10:96)

Participants experienced feelings of self-worth and growing autonomy through their perseverance which benefitted the choir, as Ashley pointed out:

I felt I could adapt to the pandemic. I could learn a lot of new skills. I could take on a lot of challenges ... I learned that one can adapt and that one can make things work, and I could make things work. So, I felt in a certain sense good about myself ... But yes, we went through that, and we could survive (1:128)

The data indicated that many participants experienced changes in their responsibilities during and after the pandemic. The following excerpt highlights Maureen's views. She was appointed as a secretary to follow up on recruitment enquiries, but took on the role of marketing and recruitment officer. Despite feeling anxious about these new

responsibilities, she was determined to adapt and learn new skills to meet the demands of her role. Her perseverance allowed her to overcome the challenges she faced during this transition, conveying her resilience and tenacity:

And then they would bring contacts back, and we would contact the parents and the boys, and pretty much like what I do now, follow up on any inquiries and that sort of thing too. That would have been my role to do that. I mean, I picked up the other duties because there wasn't anybody there to do it...I used to get very anxious for those because I didn't quite know how to implement it. They were all great ideas and I felt maybe I didn't, in that particular COVID time, it wasn't a realm that I was very familiar with to start with. I didn't know I was going to be doing that job. It wasn't what I signed up for. But then I did. (Maureen, 3:79)

Marisa is an academic teacher and organised the tour to Namibia. She states with a sense of accomplishment at what she was able to achieve: “And there was not necessarily somebody that did the tours and ops role. So I then stepped in, and we made it happen” (6:5).

The data suggested that the music staff played an important role in maintaining the continuity of choir practices throughout all stages of the pandemic. When Thomas looked back on his contributions from 2020, he recognised that his efforts were meaningful. Even after he left the choir school, his legacy helped ensure the choir's survival and ongoing activities:

So I think when I was still there in 2020 we were in survival mode, we were not in in a position I think to to grow, we were not in a position to progress, we were surviving at the time in 2020. So, if anything happened in 2021 resulting from COVID, the only thing that it could be would be that people saw our performances in 2020 and were touched by them and that gave way to opportunities so people could have contacted us in 2021 and invited and get performance invitations and corporate bookings and things like that that could have happened although I wasn't

there in 2021 anymore. So, I don't know if that happened but that's almost the only thing that I think could have been a positive thing that could have had an impact on something in the future. You clearly did manage to get some new boys in 2021, because the school is still there, you still have a school so, yeah, something happened. And it means during the pandemic in 2020, we did do recruitment and we did do auditions, and we did attract boys to the school. So something happened, but that's literally the only thing that I can think is through our performances opportunities arose and through the recruitment process at the time got boys enrolled but other than that we were in survival mode at the school, everyone was just trying to keep the ship afloat, I think also some of the videos that we made during COVID and during 2020 were very good and they were well received and they had, we had, we had a lot of hits and views on some of those videos and I think that could have positive spun out and I think any publicity is probably good publicity and if we could get the name of the choir and get the name of the school out there to more people I think that that was. (8:46)

Marisa's account of how the pandemic affected her and her colleagues highlights the trauma they experienced, the challenges they faced in adapting to rapidly changing circumstances, and the need for creativity in overcoming obstacles. It also underscores the importance of resilience and sometimes strong-headedness in navigating these difficult times to ensure survival.

Now, people will not run over us anymore. You don't push over us. We will say something as it is. We will tell you straight what we think. We've learned to adapt in COVID times; to become out-of-the-box thinkers, out of the box, you know, how can we just do things. But for us who stayed here all this time, I think it had an emotional impact on us. I definitely think so. Yeah, I definitely think so. When I shared this with you, it was very raw. (6:121)

The staff's adaptability and resilience ensured the choir continued to function as if the pandemic had never occurred. Their dedication to maintaining the choir and being prepared for any eventuality proved to be invaluable. Throughout this period the staff acquired new skills that significantly improved choir practices, making the transition back to normalcy nearly effortless, as Kevin mentioned with pride:

But just to think back to that and we realise what we did, I mean that in itself, and I'm saying in particular, the academic staff had to learn a whole new skill set, the music staff had to learn a whole new skill set, and then when they had the opportunity to, to actually just pick up where they left off. (2:160)

Therefore, staff resilience lifted student morale, which, in turn, sustained performance quality and the choir's functioning. This loop counteracted disruption despite external shocks (economic instability and declining enrolments). Staff also experienced an increase in their self-worth, the meaningfulness of what they were doing and a sense of accomplishment, which further stabilised choir practices and the viability of the choir school.

4.3.9.2 *Parents, alumni and the surrounding community as stabilisers* **(PBL2)**

After the COVID-19 pandemic, its impacts became more evident. The school faced significant financial challenges as a result of fewer enrolments, a smaller income stream from the remaining small audiences, and a decline in sponsorships related to the economic instability caused by the pandemic. However, the choir's surrounding community, consisting of parents, alumni, and the broader choir community, played a significant role in overcoming these difficulties. Parents played a more prominent role in organising tours, marketing, fundraising and providing support. All the posts on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok were supported by parents. Interviews with the choir on radio and television stations, as well as the choir's website, are examples of the parents' invaluable input into the choir's sustainability, which helped stabilise and grow the choir. An example is the advert for the concerts at the Mandela Theatre in Johannesburg when the pandemic ended.

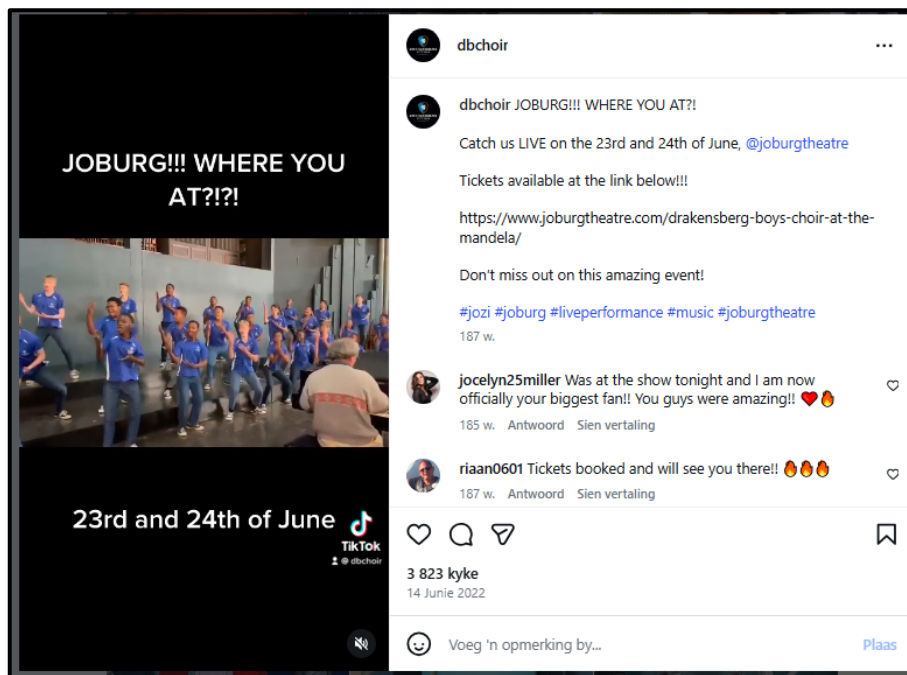


Image 23: The input of parents into social media advertising a concert just before the pandemic ended (<https://www.instagram.com/p/CeyBCN2qrTR/?hl=af>)

Alumni did not always support the choir before COVID-19, but they became more supportive during COVID and after, showing their solidarity and finding their voice again within the culture of Drakies:

Yeah, I think the old boys, I think it's been a rocky road for the old boys in the history of the school, to be honest. And I think it's only really been in the last two years that they actually started almost finding a place, finding their voice within the culture of Drakies again. So, I wouldn't say they had been great supports in terms of what the old boys did, in terms of getting content out and getting what they did for the choir, because I don't think that they necessarily felt welcome to do that.
(Freddie, 11:50)

Alumni started to show their solidarity with staff members, also with staff who worked in the kitchens and on the estate, encouraging them with their positivity:

I know old boys, actually, that actually supported us. You know, there were times where we were supported by old boys. They would actually either send an email,

or I still remember one old boy or two actually came to the school, and they actually came and went to see the staff members at the staffroom, because they brought with them masks ... And they may have actually done more than that. I remember a couple of them, I think two of them were at the school at one time, and they knew Mandla, they knew Beauty, they knew quite a number of the staff that were actually still there. And for them to actually come down just to give them hope and positivity around all of this, that actually sort of was uplifting. And I think when these regulations were being softened up, they actually came to the school just to see what performances were there. I still remember they spoke about it, telling the history of the school, telling the audience members that would attract how the school actually had been hampered by these regulations. We couldn't teach more than usual. We couldn't actually go out and perform more than usual. We could not actually go to our recruitments as usual. So, all of that that we do with the outside world, we could not afford to do much. But to have old boys actually coming and being in support of that and making sure that they will help us to do whatever they can to help us to get back on track. That was uplifting. (Coach 12:35)

The ongoing support and contributions of the alumni stabilised choir functioning by supplying scarce resources (masks, financial support and skills) and reinforcing cultural continuity, preventing collapse under external constraints, as Werner comments: "I think that the role the old boys played during COVID and even now is their support, is their absolute support for the school" (10:76).

4.3.9.3 *Excellence, the core of choir practices*

Despite systemic turbulence, the choir's excellence remained a central stabilising force, sustaining identity and external reputation. The choir staff had to re-evaluate the values of the choir, learn and implement positive and innovative practices from COVID-19, but also draw from its history of choral excellence:

But what's so beautiful in art is it doesn't matter if the whole ship went down. In art, you will always attain that excellence in the unique form. So, it doesn't necessarily take away the sound of the choir, or the execution of a phenomenal piece that gives us goosebumps, or it didn't. It was still the same children. It was still the same sound. It was still the same choir. It was just all the other factors that had a vast amount of impact on what we stand for. (Marisa, 6: 118)

Some participants believed that the choir's excellence is rooted in its diverse repertoire and not only in popular music, which was a stabilising survival strategy during the pandemic implemented by the board during the pandemic:

It is just, I don't think you can compete [as a choir] in the pop genre, especially as a choir, boys choir school in Africa. I think rather than focus on African repertoire, but proper African genres, not so much modernised, things like, I'm now thinking of, oh man, the legend that we all know that we sing a lot of light-hearted things. There's a place for it. But I think there is a lot of neighbouring countries, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia, there is so many African stuff that we can actually delve into and make that music alive, being the only [boys choir school] on South Africa's continent. And I think that's where we should lean with our focus. And not just Johnny Clegg, you know what I'm saying. (Marisa, 6:4)

Ashley emphasises that the stabilising factor during and after the pandemic was not the alternative image of the choir itself, but rather the diverse range of musical genres that the choir could present:

I don't think that that image worked, and in the end, the values of the school actually pulled the school through this pandemic and through this crisis because we had to fall back on the values that we as a school had, like having a diverse selection of music that the choir did. (1:181)

The drive for excellence is a motivator for the choir staff and choir to create awareness, but is also a way of showcasing and sharing musical experiences, creating joy and a sense of pride and accomplishment when tours became possible:

So that's a way of getting the school's name out there because many people don't come to the Berg to watch a concert. So the only time when they can see the choir is if they go to their town or to a concert somewhere. And also overseas because we are such a professional choir. It's a professional group and they need to go overseas. They can't just tour in the country. They have to go overseas so that other people can see this wonderful product of South Africa. (Jenny, 9:63)

Excellence functioned as a stabilising attractor in the system, ensuring that despite external shocks, the choir's identity remained intact and recognisable.

4.3.10 Marketing and recruitment as fragile subsystems (NRL2)

The school's marketing approach changed significantly, with a new focus on social media. However, this shift revealed weaknesses and a lack of alignment with the choir school's overall ethos, leading to negative reinforcing loops (NRF2). In the aftermath of COVID-19, the school recognised the necessity for a permanent marketer, especially after the marketing and tours manager had been laid off, which disrupted continuity. Once the financial situation stabilised, the school appointed a marketing manager whose primary focus was on social media. Zinzan shares his thoughts on this strategy:

The school employed its own marketing manager during this time. There was a determination to post only on social media at the expense of other more traditional methods of marketing. This was a weakness in our strategy. Once we were able to conduct our first Noël tour (to Mpumalanga and Gauteng), insufficient work was done to promote/advertise the tour in the public domain, other than via Facebook and Instagram. In Nelspruit, this cost us dearly in terms of audience size and the concomitant loss of much-needed income. (13:28)

After COVID, the choir faced challenges in communicating its image effectively as a result of the loss of the marketing and tours manager. In response, parents and alumni offered their professional expertise to support the choir. However, doubts arose among staff members, including Marisa, as to whether the insights from these external business professionals would accurately reflect the school's authentic identity:

And what I did see with COVID is that we lost, at that point in time, people that was in office for quite a number of years. So, that there was a lot of rotation that took place in admin because of the financial constraints of the school. And was that good for the marketing scenario? I don't think so, because every person brings in a different perspective or a different take on things. So, we are lucky in the last couple of years, we had a board directive, an executive take on marketing being outsourced. And now we have professional people in the business sector that basically are taking on their role at DBCS for the larger component of marketing. I think marketing still will always need work. (6:81)

The board envisioned that the videos would resonate better with younger audiences, which turned out to be true, as Maureen explains:

Yeah, I think it was nice for young people to see our boys doing something fun, fresh and different. Yeah, I do. I think there are still the stalwart choral people who don't want to mess with that thing too much. I mean that was a broad strategy move to make it like that and to say okay, we're going to put out some different stuff and more kind of appeal to the younger people. And I think then the TikTok thing and the Instagram and all of those sort of social media things started being part of what we do. I mean if we ask boys, I'm sure there's a few of them that have been here because they've seen what was happening online, YouTube videos and all that kind of thing but I don't know, maybe it's a difficult one. I don't know. It's better that we were doing that and not nothing at all, I think. You know what I

mean? At least we were making, I think we've done some beautiful things, but I think it is a slightly different message to what people kind of had maybe expected us to do. So, maybe we surprised them a little bit, which is not bad. (3:77)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media played a stabilising role in raising awareness of the choir. However, it sparked a debate about its effectiveness over the long term²⁷:

I remember our executive headmaster one day telling us in the general staff meeting, we should all download TikTok. Up until now, I've never had TikTok on my phone. My family has it, but I never downloaded TikTok because that's just not me. Even though I've seen a lot that laughed with people and my kids send me something funny, but how relevant is these things? Because I think a lot of sales are happening on all social media platforms. And now in 2024, it's even more so. But there was a definite shift to be more out there, I think, on social media platforms. (Marisa, 6:90)

Some staff members felt that social media did not accurately convey the school's essence, which might have contributed to a decline in the number of boys joining the choir. They expressed the view that the choir has “to stay to its core essence, and the depth must be there in music, the depth, the depth must be there” (Marisa, 6:72).

Others critiqued the board's focus on popular music, and wondered if the productions and posts on social media reached the intended viewers. The target market did not engage with the choir school's social media strategies. The reliance on platforms like Facebook and Instagram failed to resonate with traditional supporters and attract new, large

²⁷ The choir's Facebook account grew to over 80 000 subscribers, but Instagram and TikTok could not accumulate more than 7000 followers per platform since the accounts were registered during COVID-19.-

audiences, leading to disappointing turnout and possible revenue loss. This highlighted a disconnect between the choir's efforts and the audience's preferences: "It was viral YouTube videos, this vision that the board had ... but I don't know how they want people to know about it" (Amelia, 4:52). Maureen notes the limitations of video productions in attracting boys to the choir:

I'm not sure if finances was limiting then or what, but some of them we could obviously try and roll out and I think the whole getting the videos going and getting a full-time production person, our whole ship changed in terms of, my understanding was that the videos are going to bring the boys and that was why we got a production person to kind of start that and also the music that we were doing then and not all of it, but some of it was a very, it wasn't only choral music, it was also pop songs and things like that which was a different, what do you call it, not a different message but a different look and feel [for the] Drakies. Whereas before, it was all quite blue and jabbot and things. We changed up and the boys did that first one, was it with the Sharks ended up doing with us and we did that "Kiss the Girl". (3:76)

Many participants expressed concerns that the board's survival strategy was not always successful. Additionally, it appeared that their plan had not been thoroughly thought through or researched, and was not aligned with the choir's heritage, identity and ethos. Furthermore, YouTube posts did not generate the anticipated income.

When marketing and social media failed to convey the choir's identity, the consequence was that recruitment and audience size declined as well. The situation was more complex than initially anticipated, as COVID-19 had a much broader impact on both society and the economy. Additionally, Thomas was struggling to determine whether fewer enrolments was caused by the pandemic or if other factors were also at play:

And I don't know, I still don't know if the school got that right. I don't feel like there was anything that was successful in that regard, and I think they might still be

struggling now. I don't know if COVID is directly responsible for the recruitment challenges, but it certainly played a part in the recruitment challenges. (8:40)

After COVID, it became more difficult for parents to send their children away so far from home:

It's not feasible for people that will actually now send their children 500 kilometres away to be raised by strangers just because of a viral YouTube video. That's not how parents or any sane parents would manage the education of their children. So, I think that was their main strategy, this vision that the board had. (Amelia, 4:50)

Furthermore, another contributing factor could be that the pandemic changed society, and that parents were no longer willing to send their boys to a boarding school:

I firmly believe the normal family scenario has changed globally. The take on education the take on where you send your child to school. So there is an internal shift in the consumers in the world out there, especially in recruitment. (Marisa, 6:63)

While online recruitment strategies proved effective in attracting boys during the COVID restrictions, Freddie believes that face-to-face engagement remains the most successful method for encouraging boys to join the choir:

But at the end of the day, we have found, especially in the Drakensberg Boys Choir, that you have to, you have to be face to face with people to show them the product, to sell them the product. (11:17)

Furthermore, the school had to re-evaluate the image it wanted parents to accept, creating trust: "I think they will. I just think it's crucial. It's crucial to sell ourselves for the right reasons, for who we are" (Marisa, 6:82).

The choir gradually regained its strength, and it became increasingly evident that the number of choristers joining the school was rising. This positive growth coincided with the lifting of restrictions, allowing schools to be visited for recruitment drives:

And then second half of 2022, when Linda joined us, there were visits to schools, and I mean, Matty, JD, and Andy²⁸ were a result of those visits to Gauteng, Pretoria, Johannesburg schools. So, some fruit. So, essentially, from July 2022, the opportunity to go to schools was there without restrictions, without COVID restrictions. (Kevin, 2:90)

The lifting of restrictions served as a significant turning point, enabling the revival of the traditional activities associated with choir practices. As Maureen notes, “That was great because, suddenly, things were on the go again” (3:34). Initially, after the pandemic, social media continued to contribute to the awareness and visibility of the choir, but could not convey the choir's significance and identity. This imbalance led to a decline in student numbers and audience sizes, but the choir gradually adapted to changing needs in a transformed post-COVID society.

4.3.10.1 *The ethos and identity of the choir are intertwined with audience dynamics*

Post-COVID audience sizes remained smaller, indicating that the recovery of external subsystems (audience demand) lagged behind internal resilience. Maureen expressed her concern that audience numbers did not recover after COVID-19, as anticipated:

I don't think we even now have got right back to jam-packed audiences. I mean our foreigners are coming back and that sort of thing and schools are coming in and booking for group sort of things like that. But I remember in Mitch's first year whenever I went to a concert, it felt like there were thousands of people there. We

²⁸ Not the real names of choristers.

haven't quite got back to that like thing. Or maybe there are just times in the valley where it's quieter. And it happens every year like that and maybe I just didn't attend one then. You know what I mean? It just wanted to be like busloads of people coming in and the boys shouldn't have to perform to little audiences. It should always be a full audience. That's what I think. (3:96)

Audience demand acted as either positive or negative reinforcing feedback loops. While internal resilience was strong, external recovery was slower, limiting financial and reputational recovery. Various factors might have contributed to smaller audience sizes: financial instability, high ticket prices, and the school's remote location. Audience members must have the financial means to travel and attend a concert. Furthermore, the choir's shift towards more popular music to attract a larger audience was enthusiastically received during concerts but did not translate into increased audience attendance or the choir's sustainability.

It's very important that the real production the right idea must be sold to the world out there so not necessarily. Can I make use of examples here? So you don't necessarily want to sell the idea of um Bob Marley No woman, no cry. I think where we at times had to go through waters to learn where we made mistakes. Ourselves, even the school, we had to learn. What work and what doesn't work because if you if you think you can go more to one genre, it might come back as a nothingness and something that you might thought like a classical piece that is recorded. That classical part could play an enormous role out there where people visually could watch that as we both are aware...I think we learned a few deep lessons in this time as well and I'm not actually answering your question yet, but we've learned I hope we've learned what work and what doesn't necessarily work and I think there's still places where we can improve. (6:58)

After COVID-19, the choir staff faced the challenge of balancing effective strategies established during the pandemic with those from the pre-COVID era. The staff's goal was to create a new, adapted identity for the choir that embraced both strategies (PBL3). Marisa emphasised the necessity of preserving the choir's "essence," insisting that the music must possess emotional depth: "the depth must be there in music; the depth, the depth must be there" (6:72). Correspondingly, Amelia raises concerns that integrating elements of pop culture could compromise the school's ethos and identity, potentially having a negative impact on the boys involved in the choir:

That is also why we as a music staff didn't like when they had this whole vision [that], they need to become these dancing monkeys, because that's not what makes this place special. That's not who we want. (4:100)

Marisa's remark underscores that values provided stability, ensuring that short-term adaptations (online productions, social media) did not erode long-term identity and ensured cultural cohesion:

We are the choir and we should stay that choir and we should fight to be that choir of excellence every day of our lives. We should always set the next example and we should try to do the next best thing to stand out uniquely so. And I think we've done that. I really believe every day of our lives, it was investment from the music staff to try and do that. (6:83)

Throughout the data analysis, it became clear that choir practices at DBCS could brace the choir against the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic through reinforcing loops of resilience (staff-chorister synergy) and balancing loops of parents, community and alumni support and values. Adaptability, resilience, and creativity, aimed at maintaining training and performance, became the driving forces when the pandemic restrictions were lifted.

In contrast to many other choirs in South Africa and around the world, the choir could bounce back and quickly adapt to a world no longer regulated by health-oriented restrictions. Furthermore, the whole DBCS system was sustained through strong social bonds and connectivity, strengthened by solidarity:

You know what, going through that, yes, you would always like to be able to perform, to be able to, you know, not be restricted, not have lockdowns, and very difficult to think about what it could have been had COVID not been, but it was, and we had to live with that, and we had to make peace with that. So for me, like I am leaving at the end of the year, but I leave with cherished memories, regardless of, I think, I think the fact that we were locked down, we were secure, we were, gave me an opportunity to get to know my colleagues better, gave me an opportunity to get to know the boys better. So, for me, you know, relationally, I don't think it was bad. I leave with cherished memories, regardless of whether the pandemic was there or not, you know. I have no regrets, and I'm grateful, you know, to be a part of the story. (Freddie, 11:45)

To Kevin, the COVID-19 pandemic began to seem distant and only with hindsight did he realise what the choir had gone through and what they had done: *"Yeah, it's interesting to think about it because it's such a distant thing, but it's now suddenly, now we're talking about it, and you realise what we actually did" (2:8).*

Kevin further reflects that, during the pandemic, when the restrictions were lifted, the choir had to continue its quest for survival, almost as if it had almost forgotten what it had gone through. So much so that it began to feel as if it never happened:

But I think we got back to life and then almost forgot about what came before. That's certainly how I experienced it. Because when I sit now and think about what we did and had to do and couldn't do during COVID, it seems like it was almost surreal that it actually, that it happened. And we know that. (2:21)

Furthermore, the enclosed, secure environment and community of practice and collective goal to continue regardless of the challenges enabled the choir to lead an almost normal life:

But so I think as this community, because life was reasonably close to normal, because we lived in a bubble here. It wasn't totally normal because we didn't have full audiences and that kind of thing. But I think we just got on with life and just put it behind us, and then when they had the opportunity, to actually just pick up where they left off. In my head, that's how it feels. It really does. (Kevin, 2:21)

The data indicated that the choir functioned like a living organism, continuously adapting during and after one of the most turbulent periods in recent history. By the end of 2024, this dynamic system continued to evolve, illustrating within the framework of systems thinking theory, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, with interrelated elements influencing one another and changing behaviours over time. Choir practices involve a network of relationships between various aspects of all choir activities, with stable, effective choir practices as the shared goal. Emergent properties were evolving, ensuring adaptable, sustainable and viable choir practices in a changing world.

4.3.11 Summary of the findings in light of the seven themes

The analysis of the theme “Stepping into the Dragon’s den” highlighted that before the pandemic, choir practices at DBCS were an integral part of the school’s identity and daily functioning. The findings of Theme 1 explained choir practices prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a systems-thinking lens, it became clear that both positive and negative feedback loops significantly influenced the choir's performance, which in turn, affected various aspects of the school, including academic outcomes, boarding, recruitment, marketing, human resources, facilities, and financial sustainability, as illustrated in Figure 10.

The choir's excellence relied on a careful balance of internal systems, such as training, including new boy and concert choir rehearsals, performances, staff expertise, pastoral care, marketing efforts, funding and external systems involving parents, the community, and national and international networks. Before COVID-19, this interconnected ecosystem operated at peak capacity, delivering a vibrant, culturally enriched “Drakie experience” for all involved.

The second theme, “Living the life of a Dragon,” illuminated the interconnected elements of choir practices discussed in Theme 1 (Figures 13 and 14). It highlighted the positive reinforcing loops that contribute to choral excellence and community engagement, thereby boosting morale and strengthening social cohesion. However, continuous information and communication related to COVID-19 heightened health awareness, and the introduction of balancing loops helped stabilise the choir's functioning. Despite rising uncertainty, the choir continued to operate smoothly and effectively until the abrupt announcement of a national lockdown. This situation illustrated how the delays in perception and policy enabled optimal choir performance until external forces disrupted the established system.

Theme 3, titled “The first blow of the Beast—stealing the Drakie experience,” conveyed how the national lockdown served as a significant external shock that destabilised the entire system of interrelated choral activities (Figure 15). The immediate suspension of choral activities created negative reinforcing loops: disrupted established routines, which led to a decline in recruitment, financial instability and a temporary weakening of the overall choral experience. In response to these challenges, adaptive strategies emerged, including online academic and music training, WhatsApp-based mentoring and digital engagement initiatives, all of which helped to counteract the systemic decline. As a result, new qualities emerged, such as resilience, innovation, a strengthened sense of identity, and improved relationships between staff and choristers.

“Into battle—adapt or die!”, the fourth theme, illustrated how the choir successfully negotiated special permissions with the authorities, enabling them to rehearse and perform legally when most choirs faced restrictions (Figure 23). This arrangement allowed a return to choir practices under strict regulations, which evolved into a blend of online performances and socially distanced rehearsals, often masked and fragmented.

The analysis highlighted the importance of social interaction during choir rehearsals, showing that both traditional and online sessions were constrained by social distancing measures. This lack of interaction led to a decrease in peer mentoring and hindered communication between the conductor, his choristers and fellow members. In this challenging context, creative innovations emerged, preserving the choir's ethos, mission, identity and continuity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when live performances were prohibited. Some positive changes included spontaneous outreach

concerts, outdoor events, dual-venue setups, intimate performances for small audiences, and digital productions, which restored the choir's sense of purpose and energy through performance.

Despite these creative efforts, the choir faced challenges such as fatigue, challenges in the functioning of the choir, and the absence of touring, which contributed to feelings of depression and loss of goals and purpose among the boys as well as the staff. Ultimately, the defining strengths during this period were adaptability, perseverance, and a strong commitment from the staff, choristers and the wider community.

The fifth theme, “The fear factor—confronting the Beast”, indicated that as a result of the pandemic, fear became a dominant systemic force, shaping behaviour, decision-making, morale and emotional well-being. Figure 24 illustrates how fear manifested through multiple positive reinforcing loops affecting choir practices, including staff anxiety, fear of illness and death, parental panic, misinformation and confusion, boys' emotional burden and trauma, fear of institutional and financial collapse, and fear of losing the choir's legacy. The solidarity loop emerged and stabilised the functioning of the choir, which included community care, staff camaraderie, parent support, shared suffering and music-making for national healing. Therefore, fear destabilised the choir system, but solidarity restored hope and provided stability.

In theme 6, “The Dragon's den—a safe refuge in a chaotic world”, the DBCS became a protective bubble, characterised by trust, care and collective resilience (Figure 25). The choir's isolated mountain setting enabled a unique ‘overarching system’ in which the staff, boys and parents formed a strong community of belonging. Reinforcing loops of trust, determination and creativity enabled the system to continue functioning. This environment allowed choristers to experience relative normalcy, joy and emotional safety, even as the outside world was in crisis.

The final ‘theme, “The Beast's retreat, the rising of the Dragon—battered but unbroken”, conveyed lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic that shaped post-COVID-19 choir practices (Figure 27). Choral activities could be sustained through digital tools, improved adaptability among staff, choristers and parents, a greater focus on marketing and online visibility, strengthened community networks, and a renewed commitment to choral excellence and the choir school's ethos and identity. Therefore, after the restrictions were lifted, the choir could resume rehearsals as if nothing had happened;

however, the recovery process was complicated, with income from audiences, enrolments and various funding sources not comparable to pre-COVID-19 levels. The system has adapted and evolved, emerging as more resilient, viable and oriented toward the future. Nevertheless, the three pillars on which the network of choral activities rested and that enabled its sustained continuation through the pandemic and afterwards have remained the music staff, the choristers, and their support systems: families, the community, and alumni (Figure 26).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, choir practices depended on the choir staff's ability to assess the situation and respond to rapidly changing circumstances. They took the initiative and adapted, using creative methods not only to keep the choir active but also to continue choir activities. The pandemic highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of choir practices at DBCS. It revealed the choir as a dynamic, interconnected system that could withstand significant disruptions and challenges during and after the pandemic. This period was marked by resilience, as the choir drew strength from its cultural heritage, core identity, adaptability, creativity and the strong relationships within the DBCS choral community to overcome challenges together and evolve, grow and flourish.

Chapter 5 will discuss the findings in the context of recent scholarly literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the findings

This final chapter of my inquiry explains the dynamics of choir practices at DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a member of the music staff, I witnessed firsthand, along with other colleagues, how choir practices evolved and were adapted during this unsettling time. Through data analysis, I realised that the relationships between the various aspects of choir activities at DBCS were continually shifting, primarily in response to significant events during the pandemic that directly shaped its evolution. The first reports of the newly discovered virus in China announced an unknown threat to the world in December 2019. When the COVID-19 outbreak was officially declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020, and South Africa followed suit on 15 March 2020, life as we knew it changed, causing unanticipated disruptions to all systems of society, including choir practices. After two years and three months, on 23 June 2022, COVID-19 was no longer classified as a global pandemic. However, life did not simply return to pre-COVID norms and practices; rather, it marked the beginning of a transitional period, which is also explored in this inquiry. The data analysis and my interpretation illustrate that meaningful change often involves phases of reflection, re-evaluation and adaptation.

This qualitative, intrinsic case study aimed to develop a theory to explain the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the qualitative findings of this study are specific to the DBCS and cannot be generalised (Jensen, 2008), the interactive system-thinking nature of the inquiry can contribute to the transferability of concepts (Jensen, 2008; Stalmeijer et al., 2024) to other systems of choir practices facing challenges and uncertainty.

The findings of the inquiry discussed in Chapter 4 informed the basic structure of the theory of the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The construction of a theory of choir practices during the COVID-19 crisis fills a gap in the scholarly literature. It contributes to expanding knowledge of choir practices as a system of interrelated relationships during times of crisis. The study is valuable because it highlights the processes the choir staff implemented during the pandemic to ensure the continuity and sustainability of choir practices, despite this social activity being frequently disrupted and suspended. This inquiry also underscores the importance of social relationships, the ability to adapt and innovate, and ways of creating meaningful musical experiences through adaptive choir practices during unsettling times.

The data showing choir practices as a multilayered dynamic system confirmed my view that no single component of choir activities can be isolated and that it is also related to all other activities connected to choir performances and rehearsals. Therefore, choir practices can be defined as a multilayered dynamic system comprising the choristers, choir staff, the choir's support system, choir rehearsals, performances and all related activities, including recruitment, funding, human resources, boarding, recreation, and social and emotional well-being. The music staff's experiences of the dynamics of choir practices, which were presented in Chapter 4, will also be discussed in relation to the relevant scholarly literature. This study can accordingly be situated within the broader context of choir practices during periods of uncertainty. The findings, which were presented in Chapter 4, answered the primary research question of the inquiry:

How did the choir staff experience the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to generate a theory that explains the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two sub-questions were formulated as “process questions” (Creswell & Poth, 2013, pp. 139–141) and are related to the primary research question to generate a theory of the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first research sub-question that guided the study and the integrative literature review in Chapter 2 is:

What does the scholarly literature reveal about choir practices during COVID-19?
(Integrative literature review—Chapter 2)

The second research sub-question is:

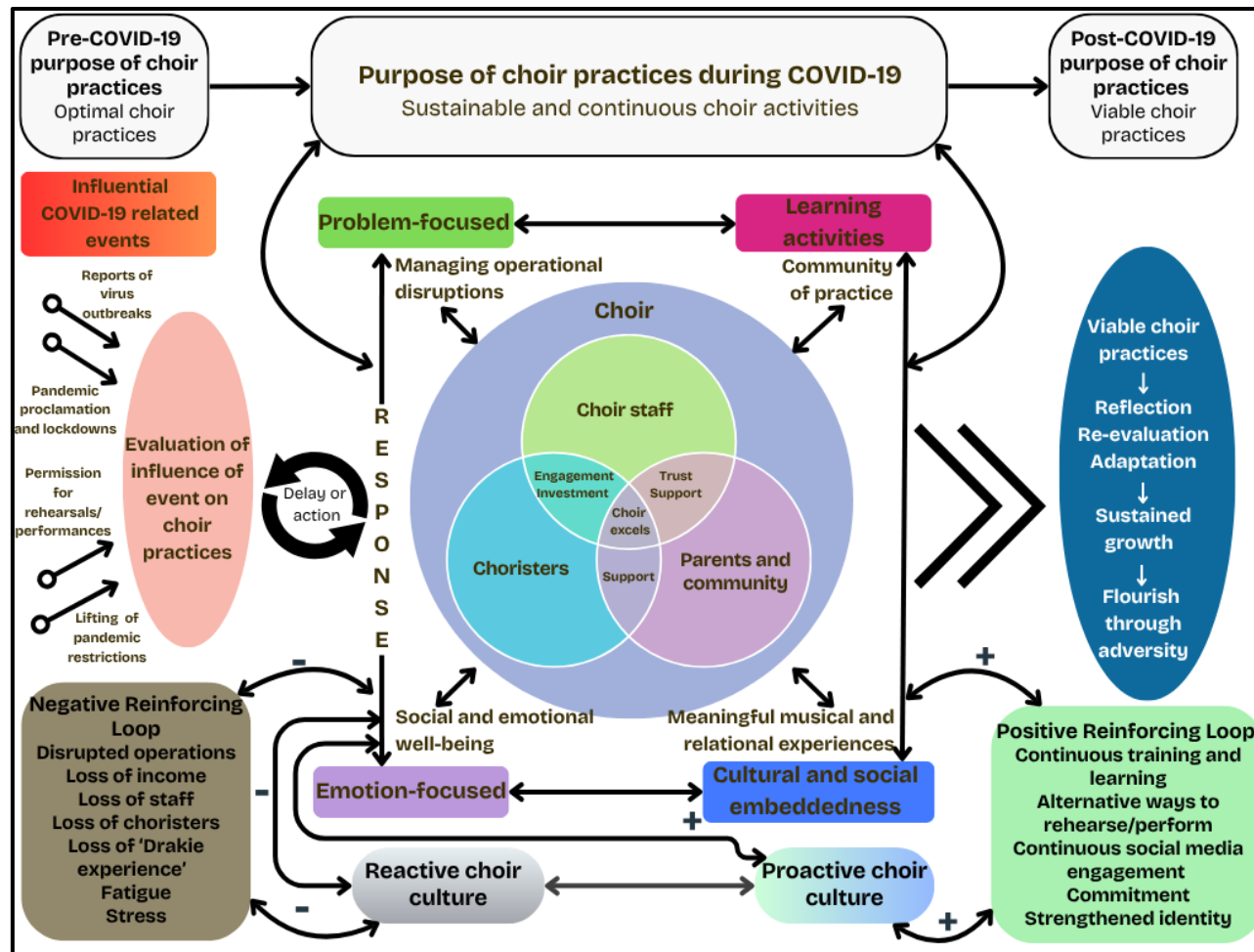
What theory explains the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic when interpreting the data in the context of the scholarly literature?
(Discussion—Chapter 5)

Figure 28 outlines the theory that explains the dynamics of choir practices during COVID-19 in interpreting the findings that emerged from the data in the context of the scholarly literature.

5.1 A theory of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic was built on the findings of the inquiry

Figure 28 outlines the theory that explains the dynamics of choir practice during COVID-19 in interpreting the findings of the data:

Figure 28: A theory of choir practices during COVID-19 derived from the findings of the inquiry



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, choir practices at the DBCS consisted of a balanced network of activities ensuring optimal choir functioning, as demonstrated by Figures 8 and 10 in Chapter 4. The relationships were non-linear and dynamic. The light grey square (see top left “Pre-COVID-19 purpose of choir practices” in Figure 28) suggests that there were similarities in the DBCS choir practices before and during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the purpose of choir practices was optimal choir functioning and all its activities were in balance, whereas during the crisis, choir practice was destabilised and the purpose of achieving optimal choir practice shifted toward ensuring sustainable, continuous choir practices (see the grey square “Purpose of choir practices during COVID-19” in Figure 28). Post-COVID choir practices evolved into maintaining viable choir practices (see the blue oval “Viable choir practices” in Figure 28), which resulted in growth and flourishing through adversity. The inner circle in Figure 28 represents the three pillars on which choir practices rested during the pandemic: the choir staff and choristers remained in the centre, while the support of parents and the community was more on the outer ring of community support (as in Figure 8 in Chapter 4), but became more prominent and shifted to the centre of the circle during the pandemic. This core was in a dynamic, interactive relationship with all the supporting activities around the choir (the large square around the choir in the centre of Figure 28). Before COVID-19, all supporting activities were focused on the choir to ensure its seamless functioning, including the management of all operations (rehearsals, performances, tours, boarding, training, funding, marketing, recruitment, engaging staff and parents) (that could relate to the block below the green rectangle “Problem-focus” and “Managing operational disruptions” in Figure 28). Additionally, the academic and musical training of the choristers was an integral part of choir practices (related to the pink rectangle “Learning activities” in Figure 28), while choir rehearsals, performances and tours played a significant role in providing meaningful musical and cultural social experiences for the choir (related to “Meaningful musical and relational experiences” above the blue rectangle “Cultural and social embeddedness” in Figure 28). All these activities were grounded in practices that contributed to the choir’s social and emotional well-being (see the purple rectangle labelled “Emotion-focused” and “Social and emotional well-being” in Figure 28).

Four events had a significant influence on choir practices in the months before the pandemic, during and after the pandemic (see below the red rectangle “Influential COVID-

19 related events” in Figure 28) and triggered various responses to these events. The events prompted the choir management to evaluate the influence of their significance and decide whether to respond immediately or delay in order not only to enable the choir to sustain and continue choir practices during the crisis, but also to regain its strength and grow stronger and flourish through the volatility brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as after the pandemic (see the pink and blue ovals and dynamic square around the circle in the centre in Figure 28).

The first significant event or series of events was the reports of an unidentified virus spreading rapidly, leading to high mortality rates. Choir practices did not change significantly as a delayed response to these reports, as awareness of the possible threat grew. The second event was the official announcement of the pandemic, leading to imposed lockdowns that triggered the immediate suspension of choral activities. The third influential event was the special dispensations for the choir to rehearse and perform, but with strict adherence to safety regulations that triggered various adaptive responses, which ensured sustainable and continued choir practices. Fourthly, the lifting of the pandemic regulations, which triggered responses of reflection, re-evaluation and adaptation after the pandemic. Responses could either be problem-focused (see the green rectangle “Problem-focused” in Figure 28), or emotion-focused (see the pink “Emotion-focused” rectangle in Figure 28), or a combination of both.

The suspension of choral activities strained choir practices as the brown (“Negative Reinforcing Loop”) and grey blocks (“Reactive choir culture”) in Figure 28 indicate. The suspension and restrictions of choir activities led to severe disruptions to operations (all choir activities, including rehearsals, performances, tours, recruitment and marketing), leading to losses in terms of income, staff, choristers and the “Drakie experience”, which put the music staff under stress. Furthermore, online activities caused fatigue since they were so time-consuming. This Negative Reinforcing Loop was created by health regulations, leading to “Managing operational disruptions” (see the left corner of the green square under “Problem-focused” responses in Figure 28). The choir managed these disruptions proactively through commitment, determination, innovation and by tapping into support for the choir, including from parents, alumni and the community. Proactive responses (see the blue/green rectangle “Proactive choir culture” and the green block

“Positive Reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28) included reverting to online and later a combination of F2F and online formats of teaching and learning to ensure continuous training and learning, where choir staff, boys and the community were involved in learning new skills, collaborating and investing in each other, implementing different formats of musicking (Small, 1998). This entailed alternative ways to rehearse and perform, including virtual choir productions, which were an alternative form of musicking, adapting to different formats of performing during concerts with restrictions, including outdoor performances, as well as innovative impromptu concerts to create collective effervescence and the lifting of morale. The choir’s focus shifted from focusing on excellence in rehearsals to creating meaningful musical experiences when it could only rehearse but not perform, emphasising the value of performance and interaction rituals (Collins, 2004) during the pandemic. Online productions conveyed meaningful messages of solidarity, encouragement, hope and also a sense of fun and youthful energy to audiences across all digital platforms and later to restricted live audiences. The value of communication between the conductor, choristers and the audience became evident when choristers lost their sense of purpose and energy when they could not perform or were performing for audiences seated in social-distancing arrangements wearing masks, which inhibited communication and collective energy. Additionally, these alternative performance formats created opportunities for the choir to resume musical interactions, which were also embedded in the school’s cultural heritage of having weekly performances.

Both the continuation of learning and musicking contributed to the building of morale, continuous engagement and social and emotional well-being of the choir and staff. The continuous social media posts contributed to alternative forms of marketing, recruitment and raising awareness of the choir. The commitment, innovation and problem-solving skills of the choir staff, supported by the community, were able to sustain choir practices during COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic created uncertainty and fear, but the school’s isolated location created a “bubble” of care and safety for the choristers and a sense of normalcy, although staff had existential fears for the sustainability of the choir, and both staff and choristers had to cope with anxiety and fear for the health of family members and friends. All

activities focused on the choir and its three pillars on which it rested; the in the centre square (Figure 28) involved non-linear, interconnected relationships that strengthened the choir's core identity, cohesion and sense of belonging, thereby contributing to the choir's sustainability during the pandemic years.

After the pandemic, when all restrictions were lifted, the choir had to re-adapt through a process of reflection, re-evaluation and adaptation to grow and flourish. But this was not an easy process, since the strategies implemented during COVID-19 were not as successful as had been anticipated, while some of those that were successful did not work post-COVID. Therefore, the choir had to re-evaluate which strategies worked and which did not, building on their experiences during the pandemic, but also on the choir's heritage before the pandemic. They also sometimes developed new innovations in order to contribute to viable choir practices at DBCS in which the choir could grow and thrive (see the blue oval in Figure 28).

Choir practices adapted consistently to changing situations during the pandemic. Saldaña (2014) encouraged qualitative researchers to think about cause-and-effect relationships by using "if-then" statements, helping them to explore explanations rather than merely listing data. I have utilised this approach to explain my findings. If the reports of a threat had given early warning signs of looming danger, the choir nevertheless responded with a delayed reaction, continuing its activities while at the same time researching viral infections more closely. When the lockdowns were imposed, the choir reverted to online teaching and rehearsals, as well as online productions, and utilised social media for marketing, recruitment and sustaining connections with the choristers and for building an online support base. If the staff and choristers lacked the skills for online teaching, they learned from each other and from online networks to enable continuous learning. If more sophisticated software was not accessible to all choristers, the choir staff adapted by resorting to WhatsApp calls that used less bandwidth and did not require software to operate effectively. If choristers did not have airtime, the music staff bought data bundles for choristers to continue online lessons and teaching. If online rehearsals proved to be ineffective, the choir staff used them alternatively to check in on the choristers and encourage them, rather than expecting them to learn challenging music. If the choir staff did not know how to produce digital content, they learned from each other and online,

utilising their own equipment or borrowing from friends. If the choir staff realised that online teaching and productions were not as effective as hoped, they negotiated with the KZN Department of Education to bring back all the choristers at the same time and to start F2F rehearsals. When the choir could not perform, morale dropped. The management negotiated again with the KZN Department of Education to enable the choir to perform, arguing that performance techniques are part of the choir school's curriculum. The request was granted and the choir could resume performances, creating meaningful musicking experiences and generating a collective energy. If small audiences were not viable under COVID-19 restrictions, the choir utilised two venues simultaneously to accommodate larger audiences. If the choir could not visit schools for recruitment, the choir would sing at community events to raise awareness. If the choir lost the “Drakie experience” of touring, the choir would arrange mini tours to schools to experience meaningful shared musical experiences and collective effervescence, building the morale of choristers. If the choir lost staff, the remaining staff stepped into new roles and learned marketing and recruitment skills as well as organising tours without the luxury of touring managers. If the choir could not afford to tour, they sang for free at venues in exchange for free accommodation. If the choir could tour but lacked all the necessary resources itself, then parents and the community of alumni and friends helped organise tours to Zambia, Mauritius and the UK after restrictions were lifted. If the choir realised there were not enough enrolments, they re-evaluated their marketing strategies, reverted to strategies that worked before the pandemic, and maintained an online presence, combining old and new strategies. If the productions did not generate the anticipated income, the choir reverted to the school's proven ethos, identity and cultural heritage and created opportunities to generate income through sponsorships and additional concerts. If certain online strategies worked, the choir continued to utilise and refine them. Therefore, choir practices during and after the COVID-19 pandemic at DBCS evolved into a resilient, multilayered, dynamic system which could survive, adapt and thrive through one of the most unprecedented, volatile and disruptive events in recent history.

5.2 The dynamics of choir practices at DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic with reference to the literature

This discussion incorporates recent scholarly literature, emphasising peer-reviewed journal articles and other media that reported on special events and health-related COVID-19 protocols affecting choir practices. Consequently, literature published before December 2019 has been excluded from this discussion. However, relevant theoretical concepts related to choir practices, as well as other literature on themes in the findings of this study published before the pandemic and not covered in the integrative literature review in Chapter 2, are included in the discussion. Furthermore, this chapter will integrate recent, relevant literature published since the initial integrative literature review, as well as relevant doctoral and master's theses (Chilala, 2024; Joy, 2024; Milliren, 2022; Weiss, 2023) to enrich the discussion of this inquiry's findings.

Since the relevant literature provides no theory of the dynamics of choir practices during the pandemic, this case study first had to establish a definition of choir practices at DBCS and provide a framework of choir practices at DBCS before COVID-19, as illustrated in Figures 4, 8 and 10 in Chapter 4. This framework was based on the findings of the qualitative data analysis, which implied that choir practices entails a network of relationships. The focus was not only on choir rehearsal techniques but also on how choir rehearsals and performances relate to recruitment, marketing, social media, academic, choir and music programmes, and the relationship between boarding and recreational activities and the choir's functioning. This thesis also showed, through adopting a systems thinking perspective (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008), how this interrelated network of activities strengthened or weakened the choir (Figures 10-12). This framework outlined pre-COVID-19 choir practices as a balanced state (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008) or in equilibrium (Kumpfer, 1999) in which the choir's identity was rooted in a stable cultural system. No other study has focused on these relationships.

However, three studies explored how choirs adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic when choral activities were suspended (Chilala, 2024; Milliren, 2022; Weiss, 2023). Only one of these studies, namely Weiss (2023), explored choral culture and the collaborative relationship between conductor and choristers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It

presented a framework of choir pedagogy with a focus on choir pedagogy, including rehearsal and singing techniques (Smith & Sataloff, 2013) and the value of movement and gestures while conducting (Hangen, 2020), but did not relate these issues to choir practices in a broader perspective.

5.3 The influence of COVID-19-related events on choir practice, with reference to the literature

The findings of the current study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic was an external shock to choir practices, but that the nature of choir practices cannot be separated from the timeline of the crisis. Four significant events were identified as leverage points (LPs)²⁹ (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008) as the pandemic evolved (see below the red rectangle “Influential COVID-19 events” in Figure 28): two stressors and two positive inputs into the system of choir practices. The findings of this inquiry are in line with Kumpfer’s (1999) Transactional Resilience Model, where resilience is a dynamic process. Individuals who normally exist in a balanced state respond to environmental challenges (stressors) that trigger disequilibrium and adaptation processes between individuals and their environment (external protectors e.g. community resources, cultural values, social networks and technology) and activate internal assets (internal protective factors, e.g. creativity, commitment, perseverance, problem-solving skills). These protectors act as buffers that can re-establish equilibrium, leading to growth and adaptation, or to maladjustment, vulnerability and further imbalances. Similarly, before the pandemic, choir practices were in a balanced state; then came the two primary stressors (Kumpfer, 1999), first the reports of COVID-19 cases and then the pandemic and lockdown decrees, which caused disequilibrium in the system and led to a dynamic process in which the choir responded with various adaptation strategies. In contrast to Kumpfer’s (1999)

²⁹ Leverage points are small changes in complex systems which have a significant influence on other elements in the system (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 2008). In contrast, problem-focused coping involves tackling the source of stress directly by altering the situation, taking necessary actions, or finding solutions. This can include seeking information, planning, and engaging in problem-solving (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Transactional Resilience Model, these adaptive processes did not take place between an individual and the environment, but between a dynamic system of activities executed by a group of people, including choir staff, choristers and the supportive community around the choir and the distinctive environment that emerged because of COVID-19. As in Kumpfer (1999), imbalances were buffered by external factors such as community support, the choir's cultural values, effective use of social networks, and the use of technology to conduct online teaching, and create productions and establish social media platforms. Internal assets of the music staff, including commitment, perseverance and innovative problem-solving skills, counteracted the disequilibrium in choir practices. Most of the buffers could contribute to a resilient and adaptable system, but certain other strategies also led to disequilibrium and maladjustment, for example, online productions that could not generate sufficient income to sustain the choir.

Alternatively, in contrast to the first two events as stressors (Kumpfer, 1999), two other events had a positive impact on choir practices. They correspond with leverage points in systems thinking theory (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008) (see bottom left upward arrows under “Influential events during COVID-19” in Figure 28). The first leverage point was the special dispensation for the DBCS to rehearse and perform (negotiations with the KZN Department of Education by the choir staff from May to September 2020), which resulted in permission to rehearse and perform while other in-person choir activities were suspended in SA. The second leverage point was the lifting of the pandemic restrictions on 22 June 2022 (Ramaphosa, 2022), which allowed the choir to function without any restrictions. As a result, the choir was allowed free movement and tours, and recruitment and all other activities could resume. These two events triggered responses to bring the choir system back to a balanced state through Positive Reinforcing Loops (Meadows, 2008) (see “Proactive choir culture” and the green block “Positive Reinforcing Loops” in Figure 28). Consequently, I incorporated these four events and timeline of the pandemic into the structure of my findings, since the dynamics of choir practices (the relationships between its various aspects) were mostly responses determined by events that triggered safety rules and regulations, having an immense influence on the functioning of the choir (see above the red block “Influential COVID-19 related events” in Figure 28).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) focused on how individuals assess stress and employ coping mechanisms by either engaging in or delaying action, utilising either problem-focused³⁰ or emotion-focused coping strategies (see green and purple rectangles in Figure 28). Similarly, the choir evaluated situations and responded accordingly during the pandemic. After reports of COVID-19 outbreaks, the choir delayed action to suspend choir activities, but proactively prepared to understand the transmission pathways of viral infections. When the pandemic was announced, and the lockdown was imposed in South Africa on 15 March 2020 (Du Toit, 2020; SA Government, 2023), choir management reacted immediately by suspending all choir activities as a problem-focused stress response to restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the virus and keeping choristers healthy. Other problem-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) immediate responses included managing disruptions, implementing online learning and rehearsal activities, creating opportunities to perform in various formats ranging from online productions to adapted rehearsals and performances that had to comply with health and safety regulations. Emotion-focused responses were activated to engage choristers in online activities to continue learning, but also to build morale, identity and cohesion through online productions and later adapted performances to comply with health regulations.

Choir practices during COVID-19 at DBCS relied on coping and resilience strategies as the choir constantly evaluated influential events and either delayed actions or adapted to them by using problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies, or a combination of them to address challenges (pink oval on the left in Figure 28), drawing from internal assets (problem-solving skills, commitment, creativity) and external factors (the community, cultural values, social networks, the use of digital formats and technology) (Kumpfer, 1999). According to the systems thinking perspective (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008), challenges (see the brown block labelled “Negative Reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28) resulting from stressors were counteracted by the “Positive Reinforcing

³⁰ Problem-focused coping involves tackling the source of stress directly by altering the situation, taking necessary actions, or finding solutions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Loop” (green block in Figure 28), ensuring sustainable, continued choir practices during COVID-19.

5.3.1 Events evoking responses related to health and safety

Before COVID-19, all aspects of choir practice at DBCS centred on choir training, rehearsals and performances. When the pandemic restrictions were imposed, all activities had to adhere to health and safety regulations, placing the health and safety of choristers and the staff as the main concern of the management of the choir (see green “Problem-focused” rectangle in Figure 28), which had a direct impact on all aspects of choir practices. After restrictions were lifted, the focus shifted back to choir as the primary focus, but the choir and all its activities were shaped by slightly different values.

Since January 2020, choir practices at the DBCS depended on knowledge and reports about the newly identified virus, as this would directly affect the choir's operations. Despite media reports (Kalla & Laher, 2020) and ongoing information from the SA government, choir practices proceeded as usual at DBCS from January 2020 until 15 March 2020. At the start of the pandemic, limited scientific knowledge was available about the SARS-Co-V-2 virus (Ashley, 2020). However, the school's health officer proactively researched viral transmission pathways and compiled as much information as possible, which she and the choir's health committee disseminated to the choir staff throughout this period. This committee gathered information as a proactive problem-focused action until the announcement of the pandemic (see the pink oval, circle and green “Problem-focused” rectangle in Figure 28). This proactive response delayed any action to alter choir practices, which continued normally, as conveyed in Theme 2 and illustrated in Figure 13. This flow of information and awareness of the possible threat stabilised choir practices (as part of the green “Positive Reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28), and the complex web of interrelated choral activities at DBCS continued relentlessly before the official announcement of the pandemic on 15 March 2020, despite growing pressure and uncertainty about an unpredictable future. Contrary to choir practices at DBCS, Chilala (2024) recommended that, for future preparedness in health-threatening situations, ongoing collaboration between health experts and music educators is advised. The scholarly literature did not address how other choirs responded to the looming threat of an inevitable pandemic. It can be assumed that choirs continued practising while

implementing general safety measures, such as social distancing, self-quarantine and hygiene protocols.

Choir activities continued until reported outbreaks and deaths linked to choral singing (Charlotte, 2020; Hamner et al., 2020; Katelaris et al., 2021; McKie, 2020; Waldstein, 2020; Williams, 2020), leading to choral singing being labelled a high-risk activity. Globally, choral activities were immediately suspended until further notice. This strategy resonates with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) problem-focused coping, in which governments and the WHO acted by immediately changing the situation and halting in-person social gatherings during the first lockdown. However, the literature did not refer to these actions as coping strategies. I would label this as a reactive problem-focused coping strategy (see the grey rectangle in Figure 28). Choir practice at DBCS also had to comply with health and safety restrictions; all choir activities were halted, and as DBCS is a boarding school, all choristers were sent home (which relates to the brown "Negative Reinforcing Loop" in Figure 28).

5.3.2 Changing dynamics of choir practices during the first lockdowns

A subtle shift in choir practice regarding health issues became apparent during the pandemic. Before COVID-19, choirs focused on vocal health as part of health-related issues of choir practice (Smith & Sataloff, 2013; Weiss, 2023), but reports of outbreaks and deaths led to heightened fear and caution (Axon et al., 2023; Chilala, 2024). All choral activities were adapted to comply with health and safety regulations. Compliance with these changing health regulations caused disruptions in the operational function of the DBCS choir (and choirs globally), including suspension of choir activities and, after special dispensation, adapted choir rehearsals and performances were possible, while still following health and safety regulations (see "Reactive choir culture in Figure 28). Choirs in the USA, Canada, Norway and Sweden were allowed to rehearse if they could meet the strict safety regulations (Ashley, 2020; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Spede & Weaver, 2023), but many choirs stopped rehearsing as they did not have enough space or the resources to rehearse (Ashley, 2020; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Spede & Weaver, 2023). Alternatively, choirs in the UK, China, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, South Africa, Turkey and Latvia reverted to online activities (Akarsu, 2021; Alonderé, 2020; Cheng &

Lam, 2021; Daubney & Fautley, 2020; Engzell et al., 2021; Grushka et al., 2021; Rossouw, 2021; Schiavio et al., 2021).

However, the choir staff adopted a proactive coping strategy (the green-blue rectangle in Figure 28) in the months before the first lockdowns in March 2020 and during the pandemic; this entailed gaining more information about COVID-19 transmission and prevention, while extensive tests were conducted worldwide to better understand transmission pathways to reduce the risk of infection during singing (Bauer et al., 2022; Echternach et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2020; Kniesburgs et al., 2021; Richter et al., 2021; Westphalen et al., 2021). Furthermore, as the pandemic progressed, scientific evidence emerged that adolescents and younger children emit fewer aerosols while singing, reducing the risk of infections (Ashley, 2020; Good et al., 2021; Heavey et al., 2020; Lozano et al., 2023; Mürbe et al., 2020, 2021; Riediker & Morawska, 2020), which aligned with the school's health officer's knowledge and research. Furthermore, unlike the first reports of outbreaks in choirs, no choristers were seriously ill or hospitalised during the pandemic at the school, which was consistent with findings that young children and adolescents under 20 were less symptomatic than older age groups (Kalla & Laher, 2020). The choir followed all health and safety protocols, but the social distancing regulations caused stress for young choristers living in dormitories. The choir were mostly healthy, but there were two outbreaks at the school after the choristers had been away on holiday, resulting in three weeks of lockdowns. Choristers had only mild symptoms, and choir activities resumed after the temporary lockdowns were lifted. It could be argued that the isolated location of the choir could have contributed to the staff and choristers having 'herd immunity,'³¹ creating a safe bubble, this resonates with the 'bubbling' concept of Tupper et al. (2020), reducing the risk of outbreaks. Although the choir remained safe, a continuous flow of information about COVID-19 transmission and prevention stabilised choir activities and minimised fear, helping choir staff distinguish between misinformation,

³¹ "'Herd immunity' is the indirect protection from an infectious disease that happens when a population is immune either through vaccination or immunity developed through previous infection" (Kalla & Laher, 2020).

unreliable or incomplete scientific reports (Ashley, 2020; Axon et al., 2023) and reliable, scientifically based research.

Another influential event which was a leverage point (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008) that had a significant positive influence on choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic was that the DBCS, in contrast to many choirs, was permitted to rehearse from June 2020 and to give concerts from 9 September 2020, following a special dispensation negotiated with the KZN Department of Education that allowed in-person rehearsals and, later, concerts. This was a problem-focused, proactive coping strategy (see green “Problem-focused” and “Proactive choir culture” in Figure 28) by the choir staff to address the hopeless situation of no in-person rehearsals or performances. Through negotiations and strong networking, the choir staff convinced the officials that choir practices were an essential part of the choir school’s curriculum, and later that the choir had to perform and that masks made it difficult to perform. All these requests were granted. However, the choir had to comply with health regulations but was permitted to perform concerts without masks. This finding corresponds with Ashley (2020), who reported that choirs in Norway and Sweden were not shut down during the pandemic, but could continue rehearsing if they adhered to strict ventilation, social distancing, sanitising and other preventive regulations. One choir in Norway, the Nidaros Cathedral Boys’ Choir (Nidarosdomens Guttekor) in Trondheim, could continue rehearsing in their spacious cathedral (Ashley, 2020). Concerts, however, were limited, while the DBCS could perform regularly except during official lockdowns.³² Unlike many choirs in Norway and Sweden, the choir’s isolated location enabled outdoor rehearsals and performances. Furthermore, performances in the choir’s auditorium had effective airflow and ventilation, surrounded by large open spaces which, according to later studies, kept viral loads low, lowering contamination risks (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021; NIH, 2023; O’Keeffe, 2020; Tupper et al., 2020; Vance et al., 2023). The guidance and continuous feedback from the health committee were invaluable to choir practices, as the choir’s health depended on their

³² Lockdowns were announced in SA when spikes in infections occurred and outbreaks were identified during the pandemic.

recommendations and communication of reliable information. The scholarly literature did not connect the information flow to choirs as part of a coping strategy in choir practices, except for Chilala (2024), who expressed a need for expert health guidance in future.

The fourth event or leverage point (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008) that changed the dynamics of choir practices was the lifting of the COVID-19 pandemic regulations on 22 June 2022 (Ramaphosa, 2022). Without restrictions, choir activities could return to what it once was before COVID-19. However, choir staff had to reflect, reassess and adapt once again to sustain growth. This process of reflection, re-evaluation and adaptation to become more resilient and stronger in the face of volatility resonates with Taleb's (2016) antifragility theory, which holds that resilient systems (Kumpfer, 1999) grow stronger through adaptation and innovation in the face of adversity. Additionally, viability theory (Usher et al., 2025) expands the notion of antifragility, where systems become viable through a process of reflection, re-evaluation and adaptation during and after volatile circumstances (Usher et al., 2025), resulting in thriving or flourishing systems (see the blue oval on the right in Figure 28). Innovative formats such as online rehearsals, lessons and productions, adaptive ways of performing, and community involvement developed under stress and contributed to a stronger, more adaptable choir practices (see green "Positive Reinforcing Loop" and blue "Viable choir practices" oval in Figure 28). Although there were no limiting health restrictions, the choir had to adapt to the financial constraints, the loss of choristers and staff, the need to rebuild audiences, and finding new ways to market and recruit, as many schools were unwilling to allow the choir to visit their schools for recruitment, as they had also lost students as a result of COVID-19 (challenges related to the brown "Negative Reinforcing Loop" in Figure 28). Parents remained fearful and did not want to leave their sons at boarding school, far away from home. A strong reliance on social media could still be utilised, but the choir could sustain its core identity and cultural function (see blue "Cultural and social embeddedness" in Figure 28) while adapting its structure under challenging circumstances, which aligns with the viability theory posited by Usher et al. (2025). Lessons learned during COVID-19 were applied while the choir could still draw from its community support, cultural heritage and performance rituals. The stabilising triangle (centre of Figure 28) of choir staff, choristers and parents as a community became more central to choir practices, making it viable and

resilient after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no scholarly literature on how choirs adapted after the COVID-19 pandemic and this inquiry fills that gap in knowledge.

5.3.2.1 *Problem-focused aspects of online choral activities during the COVID-19 pandemic*

As stressors (see the red rectangle in Figure 28), the first lockdowns caused severe disruption to rehearsals, performances and communal musicking (see the brown “Negative Reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28). Online activities were proactive, problem-focused approaches to continue choir practices as an alternative to the in-person choral rehearsals that came to a halt (see light green “Positive Reinforcing Loop” and green “Problem-focused” in Figure 28). After the lockdowns, the DBCS reverted to online choral rehearsals as many choirs did (see green rectangles in Figure 28), making the continuation of choir activities possible from different locations (Alonderè, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021; Dowson et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021, 2021). The choir did not integrate remote performers with live choral performances, as choirs experimented with these formats (Daffern et al., 2021; Fu, 2023; Price et al., 2021; Rinn, 2023; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023). However, the choir was invited to participate in national and international collaborations with other projects as part of other virtual choir projects and as reported by other studies (Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021). Similar to other choirs, choir practices at DBCS also included many virtual choir productions during the pandemic.

Teleconferencing rehearsals on Zoom and WhatsApp were primarily used for online rehearsals, as reported in various blogs and scholarly articles (Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Price et al., 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023). The choir at DBCS also reverted to online rehearsals during the first year of the pandemic. Similar to many choirs (Akarsu, 2021; Cheng & Lam, 2021; Chilala, 2024; Daubney & Fautley, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Milliren, 2022; Schiavio et al., 2021; Weiss, 2023), the DBCS found technological difficulties with latency, loss in audio quality, time constraints and digital fatigue as challenges to effective online choir rehearsals. Milliren (2022) reported a lack of software and availability in some affluent districts. Many of the choristers’ parents at DBCS did not have the means to buy sufficient data, and music staff often bought data for their students. In contrast to other choirs and schools, as a proactive

coping strategy, the choir alternatively used platforms that needed less bandwidth, such as WhatsApp calls, to save costs. Therefore, the choir learned to adapt to limitations and accept the disadvantages of online rehearsals, yet responded with strategies that worked effectively within the constraints of the system; this aligns with Taleb's (2016) concept of antifragility: adapting and growing stronger through adversity. This strategy was also evident in studies which found that technological challenges during COVID-19 led to creativity, adaptability and resilience as well as improved management skills to continue choir activities (Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021); there were also echoes of Kumpfer's (1999) resilience model.

Several studies shared and analysed technical and software information (Alonderé, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021; Dowson et al., 2021; Eren & Öztug, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Interkultur, n.d.; Lamm, 2020; Mróz et al., 2022; Sublet, 2020). These efforts served as exemplars for other choir conductors who wanted to learn how to conduct online rehearsals. Conductors globally learned from and supported each other. Choir practices at DBCS also became part of the online community and formed a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which implies that communities learn from each other through adaptation, knowledge sharing, innovative formats and shared goals. Collective learning strengthens resilience, social identity and cohesion. The music staff not only supported each other and choristers in learning new skills at school, but also supported them within a wider global community (see the pink rectangle "Learning activities" in Figure 28). Through this community of practice and with limited resources, the choir staff could produce online productions to sustain choral activities (refer to the green "Positive Reinforcing Loop in Figure 28), despite the fact that most of the staff were not properly prepared for online teaching and lacked the necessary training, as found in numerous studies (Ang et al., 2022; Chilala, 2024; Daffern et al., 2021; Weiss, 2023). These studies suggested that digital education is a critical investment for future resilience during lockdowns and would also benefit music staff at DBCS.

5.3.3 Problem-focused strategies to manage compliance with health protocols

Several studies reported disruptions in the functioning of choirs worldwide during the first lockdowns (Biasutti et al., 2024; Chilala, 2024; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Milliren, 2022; Weiss, 2023), causing fear, uncertainty and disequilibrium. Similarly, the DBCS was also

affected. As a response to suspended choral activities, choirs around the world focused on reverting to online rehearsals and performances or adopting hybrid forms of instruction, combining in-person and online practices as an alternative to in-person singing (Chilala, 2024; Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Milliren, 2022; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Price et al., 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2021; Weiss, 2023). Choirs adapted to restrictions through these different formats to continue some forms of choral activities. In line with other studies, this study showed that compliance with health regulations similarly disrupted choir rehearsals and performances at DBCS. As a reactive stress response (see “Reactive choir culture” in Figure 28), all choir activities were suspended for a while. Alternatively, as a proactive stress response (see green “Problem focused”, “Proactive choir culture” and “Positive reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28), the choir reverted to online training, rehearsals and productions as an alternative to F2F rehearsals. Later during the pandemic, restricted in-person rehearsals and performances were permitted for the DBCS, with a positive impact on all choir-related activities, serving as a proactive stress response (see Figure 28). At DBCS, choir practices in these adapted forms were imperative for the choir’s financial survival because the choir had to be ready to perform if the opportunity arose. This goal of sustainable, ongoing choir practices enabled the choir to adapt swiftly to various performance formats, ensuring its financial survival, similar to Taleb’s (2016) concepts of antifragility and Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) coping strategies (as illustrated in Figure 29). The scholarly literature did not focus on this aspect of readiness and adaptability to resume choir rehearsals and performances after restrictions were eased.

Additionally, this study pointed out that the functioning of the choir was affected on all operational levels and that these suspensions of activities and health restrictions had a wider impact on the financial stability of the school, staff’s job security and retention, declining numbers of students, recruitment, tours, as well as social and emotional well-being and not only on rehearsals, performances, technical challenges, and social and emotional well-being (see brown “Negative reinforcing loop” in Figure 28). The literature did not focus on the effects of disruptions on choir activities, including the knock-on effect of not being able to tour or perform. However, many conductors and teachers experienced job insecurity and lacked financial support from their respective governments and

institutions (Cheng & Lam, 2021; Daubney & Fautley, 2020; Lozano et al., 2023; Morin & Mahmud, 2021; Spede & Weaver, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020). Similarly, the DBCS also experienced job losses and financial insecurity (see the brown rectangle “Negative reinforcing loop in Figure 28), in contrast to some school choirs in Norway and Sweden, which were supported by governments or churches to ensure their financial survival and they consequently experienced no existential fears (Ashley, 2020). The DBCS received a small financial grant for four months from the South African government, but had to generate an income from school fees, limited concerts and additional income streams, leaving the choir financially extremely vulnerable. Similarly, the Austrian government supported the Vienna Boys Choir during the pandemic, as they also suffered a loss of income as a result of many cancelled concerts (Associated Press, 2023). The European Choral Association also encouraged governments across Europe to support struggling choirs financially (Ashley, 2020). Therefore, choir practices at DBCS were forced to adapt and innovate to survive financially, once again echoing the antifragility theory of Taleb (2016), where choir practices showed growth and became stronger through adaptation and innovation because of volatile situations. The DBCS experienced a decline in enrolment and choristers leaving the school because of financial constraints faced by parents (see brown rectangle in Figure 28). Milliren (2022) reported a decline in enrolment in many school programmes, with some programmes entirely eliminated, but did not provide a broader perspective on the reasons. Theorell (2020) reported that boys in choirs left the choir when they could not perform and found it difficult to rehearse under social-distancing conditions, which the DBCS choir also experienced.

5.3.3.1 *Problem-focused aspects of online choral activities during the COVID-19 pandemic*

As stressors (see the red rectangle in Figure 28), the first lockdowns caused severe disruption to rehearsals, performances and communal musicking (see the brown “Negative Reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28). Online activities were proactive, problem-focused approaches to continue choir practices as an alternative to in-person rehearsals when choral activities came to a halt (see light green “Positive Reinforcing Loop” and green “Problem-focused” in Figure 28). After the lockdowns, the DBCS reverted to online choral rehearsals as many choirs did (see green rectangles in Figure 28), making the

continuation of choir activities possible from different locations (Alonderè, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021; Dowson et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021, 2021). The choir did not integrate remote performers with live choral performances, as choirs experimented with these formats (Daffern et al., 2021; Fu, 2023; Price et al., 2021; Rinn, 2023; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023). However, the choir was invited to participate in national and international collaborations with other projects as part of other virtual choir projects and reported by other studies (Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021). Similar to other choirs, choir practices at DBCS also included many virtual choir productions during the pandemic.

Teleconferencing rehearsals on Zoom and WhatsApp were primarily used for online rehearsals, as reported in various blogs and scholarly articles (Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Price et al., 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023). The choir at DBCS also reverted to online rehearsals during the first year of the pandemic. Similar to many choirs (Akarsu, 2021; Cheng & Lam, 2021; Chilala, 2024; Daubney & Fautley, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Milliren, 2022; Rossouw, 2021; Schiavio et al., 2021; Weiss, 2023), the DBCS found technological difficulties with latency, loss in audio quality, time constraints and digital fatigue as challenges to effective online choir rehearsals. Milliren (2022) and Yildiz et al (2021) reported a lack of software and inconsistent internet access. Similarly, many of the choristers' parents at DBCS did not have the means to buy adequate airtime, and music staff often bought airtime for their students. In contrast to other choirs and schools, as a proactive coping strategy, the choir alternatively used platforms that needed less bandwidth, such as WhatsApp calls, to save costs. Therefore, the choir learned to adapt to limitations and accept the shortfalls of online rehearsals, yet responded with strategies that worked effectively within the constraints of the system, which aligns with Taleb's (2016) concept of antifragility: adapting and growing stronger through adversity. This strategy also corresponds with studies which found that technological challenges during COVID-19 led to creativity, adaptability and resilience as well as improved management skills to continue choir activities (Cusworth, 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021; Rieker & Apanovitch-Leites, 2021; Rossouw, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2022); there were also echoes of Kumpfer's (1999) resilience model.

Several studies shared and analysed technical and software information (Alonderé, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021; Dowson et al., 2021; Eren & Öztug, 2020; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grushka et al., 2021; Interkultur, n.d.; Lamm, 2020; Mróz et al., 2022; Sublet, 2020). These efforts served as exemplars for other choir conductors who wanted to learn how to conduct online rehearsals. Conductors globally learned from and supported each other. Choir practices at DBCS also became part of the online community and formed a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), which implies that communities learn from each other through adaptation, knowledge sharing, innovative formats, and shared goals. Collective learning strengthens resilience, social identity and cohesion. The music staff not only supported each other and choristers in learning new skills at school, but also supported them within a wider global community (see the pink rectangle “Learning activities” in Figure 28). Through this community of practice and with limited resources, the choir staff could produce online productions to continue choral activities (refer to the green “Positive Reinforcing Loop” in Figure 28), despite the fact that most of the staff were not properly prepared for online teaching and lacked training, as found in numerous studies (Ang et al., 2022; Chilala, 2024; Daffern et al., 2021; Rieker & Apanovitch-Leites, 2021; Rossouw, 2021; Weiss, 2023). These studies suggested that digital education is a critical investment for future resilience during lockdowns and would also benefit music staff at DBCS.

5.3.3.2 *Emotional and social aspects of online choir activities during the COVID-19 pandemic with reference to the literature*

During the second year of the pandemic, the choir did not revert to online rehearsals during lockdowns because of technological constraints, time-intensive preparation of material and the fact that online learning of new repertoire was not optimally effective; there were similar reports in the literature that online teaching was not as effective as hoped (Akarsu, 2021; Cheng & Lam, 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Miksza et al., 2021; Rieker & Apanovitch-Leites, 2021). However, one-on-one learning during the training of new choristers at DBCS was successful and consistent with Rossouw (2021) and Milliren's (2022) findings, since the training process provided safe spaces for the new choristers to build confidence, improve self-efficacy and build connections with the music staff (Cusworth, 2021; Foulkes, 2021; MacDonald & Zumbansen, 2023; Tamplin &

Thompson, 2023; Thompson et al., 2021). This study corresponds with numerous studies confirming that virtual choir performances provided a short-term solution as an alternative (Price et al., 2021; Weiss, 2023) to in-person choral activities, but this was not a long-term solution for group singing (Cusworth, 2021; Daffern et al., 2021; Milliren, 2022; Theorell et al., 2020; Trycieckyj, 2022; Wardani & Suyajai, 2023). Furthermore, virtual projects could not duplicate the aesthetic and artistic elements of live choral performances (Cusworth, 2021; Fu, 2023; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Levstek et al., 2021; Lozano et al., 2023; Martinho et al., 2023; Price et al., 2021; Rinn, 2023; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023; Theorell et al., 2020; Trycieckyj, 2022; Wardani & Suyajai, 2023). Similarly, this study found that online rehearsals could not replace in-person choir activities. In contrast, as a proactive coping response, the choir management went to great lengths to obtain a special dispensation, enabling the choir to hold in-person rehearsals and concerts, during the time that F2F choral activities were not allowed in South Africa. The literature highlights that online rehearsals cannot be used to learn and sing in synchrony as a choir (Biasutti et al., 2024; Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023). Additionally, other choral directors changed the repertoire and gave choristers ownership over music choices (Milliren, 2022; Price et al., 2021; Weiss, 2023), while Galván and Clauhs (2020) reduced the difficulty of pieces to accommodate limitations in online learning. The music staff at DBCS had similar experiences, but the choir could continue singing and learning new repertoire during the first lockdowns, though not as effectively as in F2F rehearsals. However, during later lockdowns, the DBCS music staff adapted and rather focused on “checking in” on the members, similar to the point made by Cusworth (2021) and Milliren (2022), namely that music staff served ‘in loco parentis’, creating a sense of belonging and identity, switching from a problem-focused to an emotion-focused strategy (see green and purple rectangles in Figure 28) related to the concepts of coping and antifragility (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Taleb, 2016). These emotion-focused strategies also relate to Small’s (1998) concept of musicking, which holds that musicmaking is a relational process in which meaningful musical experiences are involved (see the blue rectangle labelled “Cultural embeddedness” in Figure 28). Furthermore, musicking (Small, 1998) builds and supports relationships, reinforcing social identity and community connections through meaningful musical experiences. An example is the DBCS choir utilising online productions to create meaning for choristers whose families and friends were affected by the riots in KZN during the 2021 lockdown

by participation in a production which was a prayer that they could relate to as they were worried about their loved ones. Many of the productions showed solidarity and support and conveyed musical meaning for a threatened world. Similar to musicking (Small, 1998), the importance lay not in the finished musical product but in the act of participating together.

The findings of this study also indicated the importance of the interaction ritual theory (Collins, 2004), emphasising that social activities can generate emotional energy, solidarity and shared meaning. If certain conditions are met, including bodily co-presence, mutual focus of attention, clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and shared mood, successful rituals can generate emotional energy, promoting cohesion and resilience within the group (Collins, 2004). The choristers experienced collective emotional energy during concerts and “fed” on the energy of the audience during performances. In terms of this ritual, the audience, which could be seen as outsiders who become part of the interactive musicking experience (Small, 1998) and, through shared mood, mutual focus and bodily co-presence, experience the collective emotional energy that promoted cohesion and resilience within the group—especially during COVID-19, when supporters went to great lengths to attend concerts. On the other hand, when the choir could not perform, the choristers started to question their purpose and existence. Consequently, the music staff created opportunities to perform to lift choristers' morale by fostering collective energy through active participation and audience response. The scholarly literature did not link Small's (1998) concept of musicking or Collins's (2004) interaction ritual theory to online or restricted choral activities during COVID-19, although these concepts proved to be invaluable to choir practices at DBCS during the pandemic.

Online rehearsals, learning, productions and social media posts at DBCS were therefore part of an emotion-focused coping strategy (see the purple rectangle in Figure 28), related to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) emotion-focused coping strategies, since these activities engaged the choristers during lockdowns and supported them emotionally, lifting their morale, strengthening cohesion and combating isolation, contrary to studies that found lower levels of well-being during the pandemic (Lozano et al., 2023; Youngblood et al., 2021). In contrast, similar to the goals of other conductors (Daffern et al., 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Grushka et al., 2021; Lee

et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021; Tamplin & Thompson, 2023), choir practices at DBCS aimed to combat isolation and fear of isolation with online activities and also aimed to create a sense of normalcy and connectedness when F2F rehearsals stopped (Cusworth, 2021; Price et al., 2021; Trycieckyj, 2022).

The scholarly literature shows that virtual choirs unite and connect through shared musical experiences (Alonderé, 2020; Daffern et al., 2021; Fu, 2023; Granot et al., 2021; Paparo, 2022; Trycieckyj, 2022). This study confirms these findings, as online productions at DBCS connected and united viewers from around the world through performances that spread messages of solidarity, hope and goodwill. Online productions and other social media posts were also used to recruit boys and raise awareness. The findings of this study are also in line with Small's (1998) findings that musical experiences (musicking) build and support relations, reinforcing social identity and community, even though they were in an online format during COVID-19 online activities (see the blue rectangle "Cultural embeddedness" in Figure 28). However, the choir experienced mutual collective energy during Zoom rehearsals, even though they were not bodily co-present; they were co-present in a virtual rehearsal room, sharing the same focus with clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders, since you had to be invited via a link to attend the rehearsal.

Interestingly, boys who left in Grade 9 the previous year "hacked" into the rehearsal, only so that they could experience the feeling of cohesion and collective effervescence through participation in the rehearsal, which, according to Collins's (2004) ritual interaction theory, implies that social activities can generate emotional energy, solidarity and shared meaning. Although contrary to Collins's (2004) theory, the boys were outsiders and uninvited, but they nevertheless had a mutual focus and shared mood. The rehearsal was not as successful as the conductor wanted it to be, but the energy and joy of singing together, even as outsiders, made it an unforgettable experience. The choir also experienced collective energy when viewers on social platforms commented on video posts of the choir and the numbers of views on these platforms created feelings of excitement, solidarity and cohesion, even though the choristers were not together when they were recorded for a virtual production, nor was the audience bodily co-present, but somehow the meaning of the music and the video production resulted in collective energy

across virtual spaces between insiders and outsiders. The scholarly literature did not relate the theories of Small (1998) and Collins (2004) to choral practices, rehearsals or performances during COVID-19, although their findings do describe the loss of meaningful musicking and collective energy during online rehearsals and activities (Biasutti et al., 2024; Daffern et al., 2021; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Wardani & Suyajai, 2023). Similarly, the DBCS choir mostly experienced a loss of social connection with the conductor, other singers and audiences, as they had no physical interaction, embodiment or synchronic movement during online choir activities; they also missed the support of other singers during recordings (Draper & Dingle, 2021; Galván & Clauhs, 2020; Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Levstek et al., 2021; Martinho et al., 2023; Rossouw, 2021).

5.3.4 The role of interaction rituals in DBCS choir practices during the pandemic with reference to the scholarly literature

The literature found that restricted rehearsals after the first lockdowns were perceived as meaningless and unsatisfying, as choristers could neither interact with each other during rehearsals nor engage with audiences during performances and concerts. They also experienced a loss of belonging to the choir and of connection to audiences, the conductor and peers, leading to a loss of meaning and joy (Lozano et al., 2023; Martinho et al., 2023; Youngblood et al., 2021). These findings align with this thesis (see the blue “Cultural embeddedness” and purple “Emotion-focused” rectangles in Figure 28). Choristers were excited to be back at school and could rehearse again, but after a while, they also found endless rehearsals meaningless without the opportunity to perform what they had learned and, in that way, engage with audiences. The school created impromptu opportunities to perform informally at community events to engage the choir, raise awareness and create the effervescence and joy that ritual interactions generate during performances (Collins, 2004). Wardani (2023) found that choristers struggled to interpret the conductor’s facial expression and gestures and to blend as a group, while Stückelberger (personal communication, 14 February 2024) found that when unrestricted choral performances resumed, choristers did not know how to engage with audiences or present themselves on stage, as they had never had the opportunity to perform live since joining the choir. Similar to Wardani’s and Suyajai’s findings (2023), this study found that the conductors had difficulty seeing and interpreting the choristers’ facial expressions and

body language during online and socially distanced rehearsals, especially when choristers wore masks. Alternatively, Kirsch et al. (2026) found that the wearing of masks did not impact choir performances, but that experience, age and musical development had a greater impact on the quality of the performance than the distancing measures. In contrast, choristers at DBCS missed the collective energy generated during rehearsals and performances, because they could not hear or support one another, leading to a loss of connection. As a proactive, emotion-focused response to this loss of emotional and social well-being, the choir staff realised that all choir activities were grounded in meaningful musical and relational interactions (Collins, 2004; Cusworth, 2021; Small, 1998), which reinforced emotional meaning and shared identity. The scholarly literature did not directly mention the interaction rituals of Small (1998) and Collins (2004) and relate them to choir-related activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.4 Linking the dynamics of choir practices at DBCS during the pandemic to theoretical elements in the literature

To fully understand the theory of choir practices at DBCS during the pandemic (Figure 28), I had to connect the findings of this inquiry to theoretical concepts in the literature, not only on how the scholarly literature accounts for choir activities during the pandemic. The relationships between the different aspects of choral activities will illuminate how choir practices, as a multilayered, interconnected system, evolved into an adaptive, antifragile and viable system during and after the pandemic. The findings of this study highlighted that choir practices at the DBCS benefited a great deal from the resilience of the system. Therefore, based on the findings, choir practices at DBCS during the pandemic can be understood as a system built on the synthesis of resilience theories.

Stressors (Kumpfer, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and leverage points (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008) had a direct influence on practices. After evaluating the stressor, the choir either acted immediately or delayed immediate action by seeking alternative solutions or gathering knowledge. Choir practices responded either through problem-focused or emotion-focused responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), utilising internal assets and external resources, which contributed to the resilience (Kumpfer, 1999). Responses also resembled balancing loops, which counteracted the imbalances

in choir practices (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Meadows, 2008). Problem-focused responses entailed reverting to online rehearsals, training and productions to continue choir rehearsals and, later, performances. Emotion-focused responses were morale-building through online training and social media support, relational support through interaction during online rehearsals and training, and ritual continuity through online productions, virtual collaborations and later adapted performances and impromptu participation in community-supported events. Internal assets, including creativity, commitment, innovation and problem-solving skills and the use of external resources, such as the community and technological resources, also contributed to the resilience (Kumpfer, 1999). Choir practices preserved musicking as a relational practice contributing to meaningful musical experiences (Small, 1998) through various formats, including online rehearsals, productions and adapted performances, thereby reinforcing choir practices. Rehearsals without performances highlighted the need for choristers to experience energising relationships between audiences, choristers and conductors while musicking (Collins, 2004). These relational musical experiences (Collins, 2004; Small, 1998) strengthened cohesion, morale and identity among choristers. A community of practice (Wenger, 1998) highlighted choir practices as a collective learning community, where members learn from each other, exchange knowledge and innovate formats to sustain teaching and performance practices, contributing to resilience, sustainability and the continuation of choir practices. During the pandemic and afterwards, choir practices could grow and become stronger (Taleb, 2016) in response to the volatile situation. Furthermore, through a process of reflection, re-evaluation and adaptation, choir practices evolved into a viable cultural system (Usher et al., 2025) in which they could flourish.

5.5 Implications for choir practices

The study will be of interest and value to scholars, choral conductors and choir administrators who seek a deeper understanding of how choirs function as multi-layered cultural systems and how choirs can adapt, become more resilient, grow and thrive during times of crisis. Furthermore, audiences and supporters of the DBCS will gain valuable insights into how the choir has become more resilient and stronger through community involvement and support amid the chaos and disruption of the pandemic.

This study can help conductors gain insight into the importance of meaningful relational musical experiences, which contributed significantly to the emotional well-being of choristers, and into the ways all aspects of choir singing are related and interdependent, enabling choirs to flourish. This study emphasises that the choir is a community involving the choir staff, choristers and a supporting network of parents and supporters.

Choir administrators, conductors and scholars can learn from the various coping strategies the choir implemented and from the importance of identifying stressors or opportunities, evaluating situations, and responding, sometimes by delaying, engaging or avoiding actions.

Choral conductors can gain valuable insights into the importance of evolving relationships between the operational functions of choirs, learning, performing, and fostering the social and emotional well-being of choristers and staff during turbulent times.

5.6 Achievements and limitations

This study contributed to the scholarly knowledge of this field by connecting the various aspects of choral singing into a single, all-encompassing term: choir practices. This inquiry shed light not only on rehearsals and performances of choirs, but also on the role of recruitment, touring, financial stability, human resources, learning, and the social and emotional well-being and meaningful cultural experiences and relationships in the optimal functioning of choirs. This included the way that the choir developed resilience and coping techniques during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study did not include choirs or choristers from different age groups and the findings may be less applicable to choirs that are not at boarding schools, but the concepts of, coping, building resilience through adaptability, creativity, commitment and perseverance, as well as balancing and reinforcing practices, a community of practice, the importance of meaningful musical experiences, as well as antifragility by becoming stronger through adversity, and the concepts of flourishing through a process of reflexive re-evaluation and adaptability could be transferred to other choirs. The challenge was to develop a theory of choir practice because no theory has explored its dynamics in this holistic way.

5.7 Future research

My study of how choir practices adapted and evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic could inspire research into the way that choirs function and adapt during times of crisis. This study could also inspire scholars to delve into the relationships among the various aspects of choir practices that strengthen or undermine choirs, as well as the connections between choral singing and meaningful interrelational musical experiences during volatile situations.

5.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study showed that choir practice at DBCS during and after the COVID-19 pandemic could continue, survive and thrive by valuing the choir staff, choristers and their support systems. Furthermore, the choir could become resilient, grow and flourish through its ability to identify, evaluate and respond to the events that can have a potentially devastating impact on them. Choir practices focused on addressing challenges that negatively impacted the choir's functioning and on responding with problem-focused or emotion-focused actions that reinforced choir practices. The staff became innovative through a community of practice, supporting and learning from one another to revert to various online formats and adapt to restricted rehearsals and performances. Meaningful musical experiences unified the choir and contributed to the collective energy that lifted morale during challenging times. The social and emotional well-being of choristers and staff played a significant role in providing stability during the pandemic. Furthermore, the DBCS choir's cultural values and heritage, along with its isolated location, fostered cohesion, strengthened identity and enabled it to adapt, innovate and thrive, even as many other choirs globally could not continue rehearsing or performing during the pandemic.

If you ever visit the Dragon's Den and you are drawn into the magical realm of musicking, be on the lookout for random blue dots ... perhaps in front of the auditorium ... or the Tuck Shop ... or the ticket office ... or the dining hall ... or the class rooms ...

take note ... they are the silent witnesses to the epic battle of ...

the Dragon and the Beast!

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Addendum 1

National State of Disaster (South African Government, 2022) National State of Disaster (South African Government, 2022)

The National State of Disaster has been lifted as from 5 April 2022.

Adjusted alert level 1 was in place from 1 October 2021 to 4 April 2022.

Adjusted alert level 2 was in place from 13 to 30 September 2021.

Adjusted alert level 3 was in place from 26 July to 12 September 2021.

Adjusted alert level 4 was in place from 28 June to 25 July 2021.

Adjusted alert level 3 was in place from 16 June 2021 to 27 June 2021.

Adjusted alert level 2 was in place from 31 May to 15 June 2021.

Adjusted alert level 1 was in place from 1 March 2021 to 30 May 2021.

Adjusted alert level 3 was in place from 29 December 2020 until 28 February 2021.

Alert level 1 was in effect from 21 September to 28 December 2020.

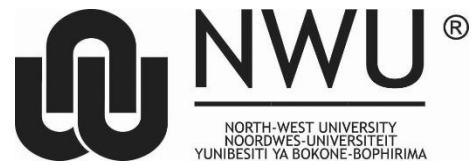
Alert level 2 was in effect from 18 August to 20 September 2020.

Alert level 3 was in effect from 1 June to 17 August 2020.

Alert level 4 was in effect from 1 to 31 May 2020.

Alert level 5 was in effect from midnight 26 March to 30 April 2020.

Addendum 2



Basic Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC)

DATE:



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

Title of the research project	A theory of the dynamics of choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School ³³ during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study
Ethics number	NWU-01060-22-A7

³³ The Drakensberg Boys Choir School is the only boys' choir school in South Africa and only one of three boys choir schools functioning in more or less the same format worldwide. It will therefore be of no use to utilise a pseudonym for the DBCS.

Principal investigator	CARIN HENRIZE LOUW
Student number	10893482
Address	DRAKENSBERG BOYS CHOIR SCHOOL, WINTERTON, 3340
Email address	carinlouw422@gmail.com ; clouw@dbchoir.com
Contact number	0837443641

I am requesting consent from the SMC/Board of the Drakensberg Boys Choir School to conduct a research project that forms part of my PhD in Visual and Performing Arts with Music. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this project that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how the DBCS could be involved. Also, participation of choir staff members is **entirely voluntary**, and they are free to decline to participate. If participants say no, this will not affect them negatively in any way whatsoever. They are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if they do agree to take part. Prior to publication of the study's results (or the point that publication is in process), participants may also withdraw the data you generate.

This study has been approved by the **Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (NWU Potchefstroom)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (2010) and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or relevant authorities to inspect the research records to make sure that we (the researchers) are conducting research in an ethical manner.

What is this research study all about?

- This study is an investigation of the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during COVID-19. and will involve the use of a qualitative intrinsic case study design with in-person or online interviews with semi-structured open-ended questions
- The researcher has been trained to use the methods mentioned in the previous sentence.
- Approximately 12 participants will be included in this study.
- The objectives of this research are:
 - to generate a theory that explains the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Will the DBCS benefit from this research?

- The direct benefits for the DBCS will *probably be to gain acknowledgement for the school's contribution to a theory of the dynamics of choir practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of crisis in history.*
- The indirect benefit will probably be *contributing to knowledge generation.*
- *The findings of this study could be used as a tool to receive funding and as an advocacy document for the existence of the unique boys' choir.*

Are there risks involved in your taking part in this research and how will these be managed?

The possible risks in this study, and how these will be managed, are summarised in the table below:

Possible risk	Mitigation strategy
COVID 19 risk during face-to-face interviews. All COVID-19 risk protocols have been lifted since 23 June 2022.	All COVID-19 risk protocols have been lifted since 23 June 2022. (Due to the potential of Covid-19 infection, the researcher will observe the following rules during in-person/face-to-face data collection: I shall not conduct face-to-face interviews if a participant is feeling ill or could have Covid-19. If restrictions change, the following protocols will be followed if expected to adhere to: • If the current Covid-19 restriction levels do not allow for such in-person meetings, the interviews will not take place.

	• That all persons wear a three-ply mask throughout the interview. • That the researcher takes the temperature of the participants before the start of the interview and FGD. If this is too high, then you will not be allowed to participate. • That hand-sanitizer (with 70% alcohol-content) be used <i>before, during</i> and <i>after</i> the interview. • That social-distancing of 1.5-2 meters be observed between all persons <i>before, during</i> and <i>after</i> the interview. • If the participants do not have a three-ply mask or hand-sanitizer, this will be provided cost-free by the researcher)
Emotional distress of the participants.	Participants should refrain from participating in the study if it can cause emotional distress.
Tiredness and discomfort.	Comfort breaks of 10 minutes.
Lack of privacy and comfort during interviews due to venue chosen for the interview.	This will be addressed by giving the participant the choice of where and when the interview will be conducted where he/she will be private and comfortable.

- *However, we do believe that the benefits to you and to science (as noted in the previous section) outweigh the risks we have listed.*

Who will have access to the data?

The following procedures will be observed in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA):

Principle	How will this be done?	When will this be done?
Anonymity	Anonymity will be ensured by choosing your own fictitious name/code before the interview starts. Only this name will be used in the research process.	Before the interview commence.

Confidentiality	Confidentiality will include the use of pseudonyms/codes for participants. It involves not disclosing any information gained from an interviewee deliberately or accidentally in ways that might identify an individual (The DBCS is the only boys' choir school in South Africa. It will not make sense not to name the school since it is the only boys' choir school in Southern Africa.)	During the recruitment process. During interviews. During analysis and the write-up of findings. During the reporting of findings. During the publication of findings in the form of articles, books, conference proceedings, etc.
De-identification of data	All identifiable personal information will be de-identified to ensure that no information identifies any participants.	After interviews have been completed. After participants, have signed-off on the interview transcripts/responses/any other relevant information sent to them to check. Before data analysis and the write-up of findings start.
Data storage	All data collected for the purpose of the research will be stored safely in electronic format/hardcopy format for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed. The primary investigator will ensure data that both hard-(printed) and soft copy (electronic) are safely locked away and password-protected, respectively. Only approved people in my research team (<i>my promoter and co-promoter</i>) will/may have access to my raw data where the need arises. At the analysis stage, as will be the	During the recruitment process. Before the interviews commences. During the interviews. After the interviews has been completed During the analysis and the write-up of findings. During the reporting of findings.

	case throughout, the use of coding will reinforce participants' non-identification, hence upholding the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.	During the publication of findings in the form of articles, books, conference proceedings, etc.
Privacy	<i>Privacy</i> will be ensured by not probing unnecessarily if participants do not wish to discuss particular matters.	During follow-up interviews.
Transcription/coding of data	I will not use a <i>transcriber</i> for the purpose of the transcripts after the interview. I will not use a <i>statistician/coder</i> for the purpose of the transcripts after the interview.	I, the primary investigator will be responsible for transcribing the data. Therefore, no other person will have access to the data. I, as primary investigator shall sign a NWU Confidentiality Agreement before the study commences.
Translation/interpreter services	I will not use a <i>translator/interpreter</i> for the purpose of the interviews/explaining the informed consent, etc. since all participants are fluent in English and will have no problem understanding the content of the consent form	I shall sign a NWU Confidentiality Agreement and will not be permitted to share any information relating to the study with anyone else.

Collection of only relevant personal information:

Collection of only relevant personal information	I, the principal investigator will only collect personal biographical and opinion-related data about the topic I am studying.	Shortly list the <i>biographical</i> and <i>opinion-related</i> (<i>main themes</i>) information that will be collected for the purpose of the study. Aspects related to the dynamics of choir practices, refer to the network of relationships connected to the functioning of the choir, including types of rehearsals, rehearsal and performance protocols, aspects of touring, marketing, recruiting, social media posts, training of choristers and the inclusion of social and personal wellbeing of the choir and its staff members.
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What will happen to the data?

The data from this study will be reported in the following ways: The write-up of the final report will involve an analytical narrative with supportive data extracts, while the emerging themes will provide the organisational framework for the analysis. The themes embedded in the case study will be compared with findings from published literature, generating a theory of the dynamics of choral practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for further study will also be made. In all this reporting, participants will not be personally identified. This means that the reporting will not include their names or details that will help others to know that they participated.

This is a once-off study, so the data will not be re-used. The data may however be used in future comparative and collaborative studies, but the same ethical protocols will be strictly adhered to.

Will participants be paid/compensated to take part in this study and are there any costs involved?

No, participants will not be paid/compensated to take part in the study, but water will be provided during face-to-face interviews. If participating in the research means that they have to pay for data used especially for the purpose of participating in online interviews, their data costs will be paid. There will thus be no costs involved.

How will you know about the findings?

- The general findings of the research will be shared with you by email for your approval before the submission of the thesis.

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- You can contact Carin Louw at 083-744 3641 and clouw@dbchoir.com or carinlouw422@gmail.com if you have any further queries or encounter any problems.
- You can contact the chair of the Human Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Prof Erharbor Idemudia) at 018 389 2899 or Erharbor.Idemudia@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns or complaints that have not been adequately addressed by the researcher.
- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own records.

Declaration by a representative of the Board of the DBCS

By signing below, I _____ consent to allow:

- a research study entitled: “A theory of the dynamics of choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study”;
- that staff members at the DBCS can participate in the study and that they can withdraw at any time if they want.
- documents and social media posts as secondary data to illuminate the experiences of the participants.

I declare that:

- I provide *informed consent*.
 - Thus, I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
 - Thus, I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher who is obtaining my consent, and all my questions have been adequately answered.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of Board Representative

Signature of witness

Signature of researcher

- You may contact me again ☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**
- I would like a summary of the findings of this research ☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname:

Postal Address:

Email:

Cell Phone Number

Declaration by a representative of the SMC of the DBCS

By signing below, I _____ consent to allow:

- a research study entitled: “A theory of the dynamics of choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study”;
- that staff members at the DBCS can participate in the study and that they can withdraw at any time if they want.
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 - Thus, I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
 - Thus, I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher who is obtaining my consent, and all my questions have been adequately answered.

Signed at (*place*) _____ on (*date*) _____ 20 _____

Signature of SMC Representative

Signature of witness

Signature of researcher

- You may contact me again ☐ Yes ☐ No
- I would like a summary of the findings of this research ☐ Yes ☐ No

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname:

Postal Address:

Email:

Cell Phone Number



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Tel: +27 18 399-1111/2222

Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics
Committee (BaSSREC)

Faculty of Humanities Ethics Office for Research,
Training and Support
Tel: 018 282-2427

Email: Ethics@kennedy@nwu.ac.za

Senate Committee for Research Ethics

Tel: 018 101-4445

Email: Ethics_Mokone@nwu.ac.za

12 May 2023

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BaSSREC) on 07/05/2023, the Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SERC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: A theory of the dynamics of choir practices at the Drakensberg Boys Choir School during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study.																													
Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Prof. L. Van Der Merwe and Prof. J. Kruger																													
Student/Research Team: C.H. Louw (16893482)																													
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N	W	U	-	0	1	0	6	0	-	2	2	-	A	7															
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Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.																													
Monitoring Due date:	<table border="1"><tr><td>April 2027</td></tr></table>	April 2027																											
April 2027																													

- request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
 - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;
 - withdraw or postpone approval if:
 - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;
 - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the BaSSREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or
 - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- + BaSSREC can be contacted for further information or any report templates via BaSSREC-Admin@nwu.ac.za.

The BaSSREC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the BaSSREC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely



Prof E. Idemudia

Chairperson NWU Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Digital details: (20231100) C:\Users\20231100\Documents\ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY.docx
8 November 2023.

File reference: B-1.1.4.2

Addendum 4

Proposed open-ended questions

The dynamics of choir practices can be defined as:

The various changing aspects of choir practice within the choir include rehearsal and performance protocols, recruiting, social media posts, touring, and the social and personal well-being of choir members and staff.

The research question is: How did choir staff experience the dynamics of choir practices at the DBCS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The proposed questions may change during the research process, should new themes emerge and you don't have to answer a question if you don't feel comfortable to answer it:

A. Introductory demographical questions:

1. What year were you born?
2. Which gender do you identify with?
3. How were you involved with the functioning of the choir as a choir staff member?
4. When did you work at the DBCS during the COVID pandemic, which started in December 2019?

☐ December 2019-December 2020

☐ January 2021-23 June 2022

☐ 24 June 2022-December 2023.

B. Questions about the operational functioning of the choir:

1. How does the choir function within the Drakensberg Boys Choir School?
2. How would you describe the dynamics of choir practice at the DBCS in a broad sense?
3. What stories can you tell me about your experiences of choir rehearsals during the pandemic?

4. What stories can you tell me about the choir's performances during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. How did COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions change choir activities? Please describe your experiences. This question could entail questions 3-6.
6. What was most important for you when the lockdowns were implemented regarding the functioning of the choir?
7. Describe your experiences with alternative and/or online rehearsals during COVID-19.
 - a. What were the strengths of alternative rehearsals?
 - b. What were the weaknesses during alternative rehearsals?
 - c. How did you feel during alternative rehearsals?
8. Describe your experiences of virtual or digital productions.
9. Why did the choir experiment with alternative productions, rehearsals or performances?
10. Tell me about your experiences regarding touring during COVID-19.
11. Why was touring vital?
12. Please tell me stories about how recruitment was done during COVID-19.
13. How did you retain existing choristers during COVID-19?
14. What were your experiences with the marketing strategies that the choir implemented during the pandemic?
15. What role did social media play during the pandemic regarding the functioning of the choir?
16. (How did you feel when choir rehearsals were restricted or stopped during the pandemic?)
17. Please describe the best choir experience you had during the pandemic.
18. Could you tell me more about your worst experience during the pandemic regarding the choir's activities?
19. Did new opportunities emerge for the choir due to experience gained during the pandemic? Please explain

C. Questions about your personal and social well-being:

1. Did your physical well-being or staff members' physical well-being during COVID-19 affect the functioning of the choir?
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence your perception of your professional worth and your functioning in the choir?
3. In your opinion, how did the pandemic influence the emotional well-being of the choristers?
4. How did you experience the social relationships between staff members and choristers during the pandemic?
5. Did your overall well-being influence your functioning as a choir staff member?

6. Can you tell me more about the physical health of the choristers during the pandemic?

D. Other general questions?

1. How did you experience the mood of the choristers during rehearsals when there was no prospect of concerts?
2. Could things be done differently to lessen the pandemic's influence on the functioning of the choir?
3. What were your experiences of any form of support given to members of the choir staff or the choristers during the pandemic?

E. General

1. Any other comments?

Addendum 5

ATLAS.ti documentation:

(ATLAS copy bundles were made available to examiners in Google Drive)

Opening the ATLAS copy bundles is not essential, as they only provide supplementary information. To open ATLAS.ti25

1. Download the free trial here: <https://atlasti.com/free-trial-version>

2. Start the free trial

3. Import the project(s) a. Download the file from Google Drive

b. Import the file into ATLAS.ti25 c. Open the project(s)