# Teacher perspectives on singing in school education:

## purposes, approaches and participatory factors

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**ABSTRACT**

*Since the beginning of structured education in Australia, singing has been an expected school activity. By drawing on teacher perspectives, an analysis of the origins, purposes, approaches to and participatory factors of school singing provides insight into the types of singing activities undertaken by school students in Sydney government schools in the early 21$^{st}$ Century. The qualitative research study was undertaken through surveys and in-depth interviews of primary and secondary school teachers. Research findings indicate that a dichotomy exists between singing activities where students use the singing voice and singing activities where students are taught how to use the singing voice. Facilitating a singing activity does not in itself constitute teaching singing, nor does it guarantee that the singing will be developmentally appropriate. In an age where voice science and research should underpin strategies for student vocal development and vocal health, it is imperative that educational advocacy include a cross curricula perspective in voice studies for school education.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Singing is a participatory activity that has been evident in Australian schools since colonial times. Historically, singing has been an activity associated with musical learning (Stevens 1978; NSW Department of Education 1952). Determining the circumstances in which school singing now occurs provides the impetus for the research discussed in this article (Hughes 2007). Drawing on primary and secondary teacher perspectives on singing in schools, an analysis of the origins, purposes and participatory factors of school singing provides insight into the types of school singing activities undertaken by primary and secondary students in the early 21st Century in New South Wales (NSW) government schools in Sydney. The range of singing activities and approaches to teaching singing identified in the study raise considerations for the development of multi-disciplinary teaching strategies that incorporate the voice in cross curricula areas (Hughes 2008; Hughes, Callaghan & Power 2009; Callaghan, Hughes & Power 2009; Hughes & Callaghan 2010).

This article begins with contextual discussion on singing in the 21st Century. It then discusses school singing in NSW education. Following an overview of the rationale and research design, research findings are discussed. The article concludes with cumulative findings that underpin the need for advocacy in the 21st Century.

**SINGING IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

Singing is a means of human expression and communication. It is an activity that may be enjoyed irrespective of age, gender, culture, ethnicity or religion (Hughes 2007, p.14). The act of singing is physiologically and anatomically complex and requires a range of adjustments within the vocal mechanism that are relevant to the individual singer, the singing intent and their repertoire. Voice science and research (Callaghan 2000; Miller 1996; Sataloff 2006; Sundberg 1987; Thurman & Welch 2000a), together with singing methodologies (Chapman 2006; Peckham 2006; Phillips 1996), now demonstrate that appropriate vocal usage and technique implemented during singing aids in optimum functioning of the vocal mechanism, that is, vocal production and efficient voice usage.

The relevance of school singing is highlighted in the early 21st Century with the establishment of the 'Sing Up' programme in 2007 in the United Kingdom (UK). This national programme targets singing in primary schools. From the Government's 'Music Manifesto' (2006), a 'National Singing Programme' developed (Welch, Himonides, Saunders, Papageorgi, Rinta, Preti, Stewart, Lani, Vraka, & Hill 2008, p.10) on the recommendation 'of putting group singing at the heart of all primary school music activity' (Music Manifesto 2006, p.8). The Sing Up programme receives a total of £40 million in Government funding, being £10 million each year for the period 2007 – 2011 (Welch et al. 2008, p.11). While the programme is linked to culminate in celebrations during the 2012 Olympic Games in London (Music Manifesto 2006, p.8), Welch et al. (2008) note that the programme also recognises 'the perceived importance of singing as a foundation for all round music education development' (p.10). This is based on the Music Manifesto introduction where singing is viewed as being elemental, accessible and participatory when making music (Music Manifesto 2006, p.4).

In Australia, a National curriculum for schools is currently being devised to promote 'excellence and equity' (Australian Education Ministers 2008, p.7). It is therefore timely that research on singing in schools in an Australian context be discussed.


**SCHOOL SINGING IN NSW EDUCATION**

During the 19th Century, Australian school singing found its origins in the belief that singing procured social and personal benefits (NSW Legislative Assembly 1856, pp.16-17). Viewed as a means of cultivating 'aesthetic, moral, and intellectual' attributes (Jones 1871, p.41), school singing was seen to facilitate a simultaneous development of musical ability and social character. Musically oriented singing became an expected learning outcome in colonial schools. In the Sydney District in the 1870s, proficiency tables ranked school singing outcomes on a scale of 'good' to 'indifferent' (Johnson & Bradley 1871, pp.133-134). School singing was assessable.

To mark the occasion of the Federation of Australian states and territories on 1 January 1901, a celebratory chorus of 10,000 school children sang 'Advance Australia Fair' and 'Rule Britannia' (Powerhouse Museum n.d.). To support the vocal production required for such choral performances, and to promote the development of appropriate elocution (Southcott 2006), the early 20th Century included vocal instruction that encompassed technique and voice production for school singing activities. Articles on singing and musicianship techniques, singing technique, the artistry of singing and the teaching of singing were published periodically as teaching support material (Williams 1907; Kenny 1908; Tearne 1909, 1910). It was during this time, however, that school Inspectors lamented the poor quality of singing heard in rural schools (Blumer 1910; Cotterill 1909; Finney 1910; Riley 1909). Fielding explanations such as 'some [teachers] are unable to teach it [singing], others boldly try to do so, but with very slight success as regards uniformity of pitch, sweetness of tone, or correctness of time' (Blumer 1910, p.70), poor quality school singing was typically attributed to a lack of teacher training, confidence and/or expertise (Riley 1909, p.116; Fraser 1910, p.114).

The issue of teaching confidence and expertise continues to be of concern (Hughes 2007; Hughes & Callaghan 2010). Teaching expertise was clearly described in relation to the effective delivery of the music component in the *Curriculum for Primary Schools* (NSW Department of Education 1952) where teachers were required to model the voice (p.443). Teacher requirements were amended in the 1963 revision of the curriculum where instruments were viewed as an 'excellent substitute' (NSW Department of Education 1963, p.13) and broadcasts were recommended 'for the teacher lacking confidence' (p.13).  The 1963 syllabus revisions therefore offered strategies for teachers lacking confidence in voice modeling. In doing so, the revisions also acknowledged issues in relation to singing competency and teaching expertise.

Inadequate teaching confidence and expertise was again evident in the impetus for a trial program initiated in 1972 by the school executive at a Sydney government primary school (Hamilton 1974). A school generated teaching scheme for 'specialised' subjects, including music, was implemented to address varying levels of teacher expertise and confidence amongst primary generalist classroom teachers. Based on teacher interest, knowledge and expertise, the program designated 'specialist' teachers for specific subjects. Participants in the program reportedly welcomed a reduction in the scope of their teaching and concluded that through the program previously 'neglected subjects' (p.324) had been covered in the school's curriculum.

Appropriate teaching expertise and teacher training were issues also identified in relation to school music education in the late 20th Century (Russell-Bowie 1993, 1997; Jeanneret 1996) and in the early 21st Century (Jones 2003). Specifically in relation to school singing, Vaughan (2000), in a study on participation rates of adolescent boys singing in NSW secondary schools in Years 7 and 8 (p.6), highlights significant concern in the treatment of developing voices and suggested that problems begin in primary schools where 'many primary teachers seem ill equipped to deal with singing or the teaching of these skills' (p.7). Vaughan concluded that many primary teachers 'demonstrate little knowledge of and/or interest in vocal skills' (p.8). The *National Review of School Music Education* (Australian Government 2005) raises implications for the education of teachers in relation to singing competency (p.128). Insufficient teacher training of generalist primary teachers and professional development was seen to result in 'a lack of confidence with all aspects of teaching music' (p. 61).

The literature clearly demonstrates that the training of teachers and teacher confidence have been recurring themes in relation to singing and music in NSW education (Stevens 1978; Hughes 2007; Hughes & Callaghan 2010) and yet currently, singing is an expected performance experience within NSW Music education. The primary *Creative Arts K-6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies [BOS] NSW 2000) identifies the voice as 'the most accessible sound source' (p.12). Singing is viewed as having a 'central role' in a child's musical development and should be included in 'music learning experiences' (p.92). In the secondary *Music Years 7-10 Syllabus* (BOS NSW, 2003), singing is also identified as a musical activity occurring within the learning experiences of music students. Students progressing to a NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) level of music study may be offered Music 1, Music 2 and Music Extension. Singing may be an instrument of choice for HSC performance assessments (BOS NSW 1999a, 1999b) programs of study.


## RESEARCH RATIONALE AND DESIGN

A multiple method mode of inquiry (Silverman 2000) was undertaken between 2004 to 2007 (Hughes 2007) to determine who facilitates singing, what types of singing occur, the methods used to facilitate singing and the reasons as to why singing occurs in Sydney government schools in the early 21st Century. The key research questions and their sub-set groupings are detailed in Table 1. The research consisted of two sequential stages of data collection and analysis. Part 1, a questionnaire study completed anonymously, was designed to obtain qualitative data from primary and secondary teacher respondents on singing practices in primary and secondary Sydney government schools. Data analysis utilised open-coding (Pidgeon & Henwood 2004, p.629) to determine the components present in respondent teaching strategies and then axial coding or the coding of 'selected core categories' (p.629) to determine the relationships between these components. The process of open and axial coding enabled the composition of the approaches to teaching singing to emerge from the data.

The conceptual themes that emerged from Part 1 were used to focus and orientate Part 2 of the study. Part 2 involved in-depth interviews of teacher participants purposively sampled to investigate a range of key issues and school singing cultures. This study, although making the distinction that it is not a grounded theory study (Hughes 2007, p.59), utilises grounded theory strategies such as the inductive process of constant comparative method of analysis (Merriam 1998 p.18; Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.67) to determine 'similarities and differences' in the data (Merriam 1998, p.18). In addition, purposive maximum variation sampling (Merriam 1998, pp.62-63; Pidgeon &

Henwood 2004, p.635) was utilised for interview participant selection and enabled the interview sample to encompass the range of Part 1 key issues.

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|---|---|
| **1.** | **Who teaches singing in schools?** |
| | <ul><li>Do primary generalist classroom teachers teach school singing?</li><li>Do primary specialist teachers teach school singing?</li><li>Do secondary music teachers teach school singing?</li><li>Do private singing teachers teach school singing?</li><li></li></ul> |
| **2.** | **What types of singing are taught in schools?** |
| | <ul><li>What school singing activities are offered to children and adolescents?</li><li>Do the types of school singing vary at different educational Stages?</li></ul> |
| **3.** | **How is singing taught in schools?** |
| | <ul><li>Are children and adolescents taught a song or are they taught how to sing (it)?</li><li>When teaching primary and secondary school singing, are the developmental stages of child and adolescent voices considered?</li><li>Are there different approaches to and styles of teaching school singing?</li></ul> |
| **4.** | **Why is singing taught in schools?** |
| | <ul><li>What are the purposes of singing in schools?</li><li>Is school singing part of a K-12 continuum of learning in music?</li><li>Is school singing relevant in an educational environment?</li><li>Is school singing valued in an educational environment?</li></ul> |

*Table 1: Research questions*

**PART 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY**

Individual respondents (*N*=127), comprising of 103 primary teachers and 24 secondary teachers, were representative of 115 government schools in the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) Sydney regions. Primary Year 3 and primary choir teachers, together with secondary classroom Music and secondary choir teachers, were targeted to complete the questionnaire. Year 3 was seen as a year when most student voices would be pre-pubertal. It was therefore envisaged that the Year 3 singing capabilities of boys and girls would be similar and, as such, it was a mid-primary year targeted for investigation.

**WHO TEACHES SCHOOL SINGING?**

Of the primary teacher respondents, 80 respondents taught primary choir activities and 23 respondents were Year 3 classroom teachers who taught no choir activities; of the secondary respondents, 10 respondents taught both classroom Music and choir, and 14 respondents taught classroom Music. Primary generalist classroom teachers, either solely or in conjunction with others, were identified as those teachers predominantly responsible for school

singing activities. Primary respondents (*n*=33) also indicated that categories of 'specialist' teachers were responsible for singing activities in primary school (Hughes 2007, pp.96-97). The range of 'specialist' teachers described by respondents was not always indicative of specific singing training or singing experience (Hughes 2007, pp.101-102). The identified categories of specialist teachers included 'dedicated' music teachers, choir teachers and performing arts teachers whose teaching focused on these areas, and also 'designated' singing teachers who, in addition to being primary generalist classroom teachers, facilitated singing activities across K-6. 'Designated' music teachers included those who taught music and other areas of education at their schools. Indicating the transitory nature of specialist teaching expertise in any given year, one respondent stated that no one 'this year' was responsible for school singing. Identifying that not all teachers at their school taught singing, another respondent stated that '[designated] teachers with some music background/interest' were responsible for school singing and another stated that classes were exchanged as 'only 5 teachers were confident' to teach singing.

Of the Year 3 generalist classroom respondents, 5 respondents indicated that they did not incorporate singing activities in their teaching. One respondent noted that that singing activities were the responsibility of the specialist teacher; another respondent indicated that singing activities actually occurred in a combined Stage 2 singing class held once a week. In response to additional questions, the remaining 3 respondents described the singing activities that actually occurred during their classes. The implication in these latter responses is that 'teaching' singing activities is perceived as being different to 'facilitating' classroom singing.

Of the 24 secondary respondents, 22 respondents stated that secondary classroom music teachers were responsible for school singing activities either solely or in conjunction with other teachers at the school.  Respondents indicated that a choir teacher (*n*=1) and a drama teacher (*n*=1) respectively were also responsible for school singing activities; another respondent indicated that only one secondary classroom music teacher at their school actually 'sings with classes'. Three secondary respondents indicated peripatetic singing tutors were present at their respective schools and, as such, they shared the responsibility of singing activities with secondary classroom music teachers.

**WHAT TYPES OF SCHOOL SINGING OCCUR?**

All primary and secondary educational years were identified as being years in which school singing activities potentially occur. School singing activities occurred in the classroom, during school assemblies, at school concerts, in associated school activities and outside the school. Singing performances in primary school assemblies were the most reported singing activities (Hughes 2007, p.120). Whole school singing in primary assemblies was also frequently reported. 'Other' performance oriented primary school singing activities occurred outside the school and included such performances as eisteddfods and performances at nursing homes.

The findings identified a marked difference in the types of school singing activities occurring in respondent primary and secondary schools. In primary schools, students participate in a range of singing activities with a performance focus or outcome. In contrast, respondents at secondary schools indicated that singing activities primarily occurred in the music classroom or as music assessments (Hughes 2007, p.123). With a music classroom focus, it is perhaps not surprising that singing performances and whole school singing at school assemblies are less prevalent in secondary

schools than in primary schools. Singing to the broader community is also more likely to occur in primary schools than in secondary schools.

The study also identified sources external to respondent schools that impacted on the types of school singing available to students in respondent schools. Music festivals organised either through regional or area committees, provided opportunities for students at some primary and secondary respondent schools to participate in massed choral events. The vocal music for such events was usually determined externally to the school and taught by some respondents at their schools to their school choirs. Both primary and secondary respondents also identified group singing activities available to their students initiated by the NSW DET Arts Unit. Solo singing opportunities, such as individual student involvement in the Talent Development Project that is open to NSW DET secondary students via an audition process, occurred outside the context of respondent schools.

**HOW IS SINGING TAUGHT?**

While the time spent singing in classrooms appears to be at the discretion of individual teachers, the amount of time spent singing in classrooms alters throughout the educational Stages. Primary respondents ($n$=5) indicated that more time was spent singing in Early Stage 1 and Stage 1 classrooms, than in upper primary classrooms. At secondary level, students choosing to sing in Stage 6 music classes at times spent entire periods (performance lessons) individually practicing their singing.

When viewing the percentage responses of the types of vocal music most frequently sung in Year 3 classrooms (Hughes 2007, p.128) and secondary music classrooms (Hughes 2007, p.135), a progression in vocal music complexity was evident from the traditional children's songs sung in Year 3 classrooms to the classical vocal music styles of Stage 6 Music 2 and Music Extension. The predominant criteria used in vocal music selection varied from 'student age' in Year 3 (Hughes 2007, p.128) to student 'singing ability' in secondary music classrooms (Hughes 2007, p.136). As some primary choral repertoire was noted by respondents as being selected by festival committees or by the Arts Unit, the onus of selecting suitable vocal music was not always the responsibility of respondents teaching choir activities. In contrast, the selection of suitable vocal music in classrooms was predominantly the responsibility of classroom teachers. Exceptions to this were secondary music teacher respondents who chose vocal music in conjunction with elective music students ($n$=11) and classroom music students ($n$=3). While the majority of respondents noted the criterion of student age in their selection of vocal music, whether age suitability was in relation to musical and/or lyrical content could not be determined.

The content or components of respondent teaching strategies was used to determine singing teaching approaches ($N$=124). The study found that in a sing-along approach ($n$=4; 3.2%), a song approach ($n$=42; 33.9%) and a song dominant approach ($n$=65; 52.4%), students are predominantly taught a song. In a sing-along approach, the singing activity is totally focused in singing the song. The learning process is osmotic and there is typically no instruction in technical or expressive components. Singing may involve the singing of familiar repertoire or the song may be acquired through repeated listening of recorded modeling. In the song approach, the focus is also on the song. There is no inclusion of exercises or activities to engender individual singing development. Minimal technical and expressive components are addressed in relation to student delivery of the vocal music. In the song dominant approach, the

focus continues to be on the singing of songs. While this approach may include vocal exercises, the exercises are typically group focusing exercises and vocal warm-ups. Any additional technical and expressive components are usually addressed through singing the songs. A functional approach to singing ($n$=10; 8.1%) was determined by the inclusion of vocal exercises designed to facilitate singing improvement. A developmental approach ($n$=3; 2.4%) also included specific developmental exercises and offered student feedback strategies on their progress.


**WHY IS SINGING TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS?**


Contributory factors of school singing such as support for school singing, objectives of school singing, the aptitude for school singing and the constraints restricting school singing were identified in respondent data. The purposes of singing were often dictated by the motivation of those responsible for or participating in school singing activities: teachers, students and the school community. In some cases, the school culture also determined the types and purposes of school singing. Where school singing was established within the school culture, singing activities were reported as being well supported and the school culture was such that it encouraged or even enabled singing activities to occur. Underpinning the culture of school singing was the school executive and the willingness of teachers at the school to act cooperatively in their support of activities. In schools with an established singing culture, much of the school singing was community driven and the resulting ethos was seen to "uplift" the school and its students. In this context, school singing was valued beyond its curriculum relevance and students themselves were reported as being enthusiastic participants. Financial constraints, accessibility of resources and time issues that either limited or precluded participation in school music were also evident.

Participatory factors for both primary and secondary students encompassed whether the type of school singing was inclusive, such as classroom singing or whether it was selective, such as an auditioned choir. The issue of selectivity was complicated by potential sub-groupings of what were initially inclusive groups. School directives, together with teacher priorities and interests, also impacted on the types of singing activities offered and on the time spent on singing activities. Respondents noted that in some classrooms, singing activities were either rare or did not occur (Hughes 2007, p.133).


**PART 1: KEY ISSUES**

A range of key issues emerged in Part 1 and are detailed in the following discussion.

**Access to specialist teachers**

In addition to classroom teachers, music and/or singing 'specialist' teachers were identified in the study as those teachers who taught school singing to groups of students. A range of specialist teachers was identified as teaching primary school singing. However, not all specialist teachers identified in the study held tertiary qualifications in music or had specific training in teaching singing. As such, not all primary school children have equitable access to qualified 'specialist' teachers (Australian Government 2005, p.61).

**Formal and informal school singing**

The types of singing offered to children and adolescents in Part 1 respondent schools varied. Whether the teaching approach dictated the types of school singing or whether the types of singing dictated the teaching approach was unresolved. An analysis of the respondent approaches revealed reliance on 'the song' or on informal singing. In addition, several respondents were unfamiliar with the term 'vocal health'. A minority of respondents (n=5) discussed vocal care strategies to prevent young singers from forcing their voices. One respondent suggested assigning vocal parts 'according to child's natural unforced range'. Avoiding a 'high or low tessitura' and 'tighter vowels on high notes', this respondent also noted that vocal ranges in repertoire needed to suit children's voices. Although primary respondents noted that boys transitioning voices 'can be embarrassing' and that boys may be 'a bit too conscious', formal strategies for guiding boys through voice change were not identified in Part 1 data.

**Student gender**

The issue of predominantly female singing participation was identified. The prevalence of girls participating in primary singing activities was exemplified in relation to primary choir participation with the majority of respondents reporting that more girls than boys participated in choir activities (Hughes 2007, p.140). Secondary respondents from coeducational schools also reported a higher incidence of girls participating in classroom singing activities in educational Stages 4, 5 and 6 (Hughes 2007, p.132). Of particular interest in relation to secondary choir participation, although calculated from a small sample, was the determined average age of 15.9 years of male students being higher than that of 14.6 years of female students (Hughes 2007, p.143). The higher male average reflects that by this stage of vocal development, male students may exhibit more stable singing capabilities as typical male voice transformation occurs between 12 and 15 years (Cooksey 2000a, p.822).

**The relevance of school singing**

The key issue of the relevance of school singing was evident in the different types of approaches identified in respondent data. Teaching school singing is highly contextualised, with school singing activities usually occurring in groups and for a variety of purposes.  As such, the relevance of school singing varied between individual responses. Determining whether school singing should form the basis of musical learning, and whether it should be included as such within the school curricula, required further investigation.

**The value of school singing**

There were varied responses as to the issue of the value of school singing. Establishing a singing culture within a school seemed to be largely determined by the dedication, perseverance and interests of individual teachers and the interests of the students at their respective schools. Community objectives, together with teacher and student fulfillment, were often the mitigating factors present in respondent data that facilitated school singing activities. For students, peers and the 'cool' factor were reported as both negative and positive contributory factors that either aided or precluded student participation.

**PART 2: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

Specific questions, see Table 2, were designed to probe the key issues that emerged in Part 1 findings. The issues were investigated through in-depth interviews (N=10). For Part 2 of the study, a variety of participants from a range of school types, locations and sizes were sought. Potential participant schools were determined as either having no apparent singing culture, an establishing school singing culture or an established singing culture. Of the 45 schools contacted, 10 participants from 10 schools consented to interviews. Each of the four NSW DET Sydney metropolitan regions was represented by at least two interview participants. The participant sample was also representative of all school sizes. The interview sample included male and female teachers, primary and secondary teachers, and choir and non-choir teachers.

**Informing the key issues**

The key issue of access to specialist teachers is particularly relevant to primary education. In relation to teaching school singing, the interview data confirmed that being a music 'specialist' teacher at primary level or a 'non-singing' music teacher at secondary level might not necessarily facilitate the teaching of singing to rise above a sing-along or song level. Although devising strategies to ensure that primary students experienced singing, a self proclaimed 'non-singer' primary participant emphasised that only one teacher at the school had a 'musical ear'. For many students, their experiences of singing would therefore be limited to singing along with CDs. Another 'non-singer', highly committed to a secondary school band program, did not facilitate choir activities and there were few actual opportunities for instruction in curriculum related singing. Students at this school were referred to external private singing teachers to learn how to sing. In contrast to the concept of the 'non-singer' were participants who, although not having a singing background, valued school singing and as such were committed to the task of raising the profile of singing within their schools. Teaching directives, ability, interests and experiences were therefore seen to play a vital role in the level of approach and the inherent expertise in teaching school singing.

Formal and informal school singing was a dichotomy found to exist in the types of school singing occurring in Sydney government schools and in the types of school singing at times occurring within individual Sydney government schools. If formal singing relates to school singing activities and practices where singing technique is embodied and included in instruction, that is, where singing is taught 'properly' (Participant 8), then the more formal approaches to school singing occurred predominantly in non-syllabus choir singing activities and in Stage 6 music activities where students chose to sing as an elective. In contrast, informal singing, or singing that did not embody technical aspects of singing, occurred when singing was a vehicle for musical exploration or was an activity where the actual singing was incidental to the learning outcome.

**Key Issue 1: Access to specialist teachers**

- Why does the school involve students in singing?

- How is singing taught at your school?

- How relevant is it for teachers to be competent singers?

- How relevant is it for teachers to be interested in singing?

**Key Issue 2: Formal and informal school singing**

- How is singing taught at your school?

- Can you describe the relevance of the singing at your school?

- How important/relevant is repertoire selection?

- Is it appropriate to address vocal (singing) technique in your teaching?

- Are singing activities that relate to curriculum different to extra-curricular singing activities?

**Key Issue 3: Student gender**

- Does gender impact on repertoire selection?

- Are there any factors including gender, cultural and financial, that may influence singing participation at your school?

- More specifically, do you think there are any differences between girls and boys participating in singing at school?

- Do you think that girl only or boy only singing activities/choirs would be beneficial?

**Key Issue 4: The relevance of school singing**

- Can you describe the relevance of the singing at your school?

- Is singing included in the K-12 continuum of musical leaning?

- Would it be beneficial and/or appropriate for choral/school singing to be included in the curriculum?

- Do you think that singing should form the foundation of music curriculum?

- Can you suggest other strategies to ensure student participation in singing activities?

- Do you think it is beneficial for students to sing at school?

**Key Issue 5: The value of school singing**

- Why do students participate in singing at school?

- What are your experiences of children's/student attitudes to singing?

- Is school singing 'cool'? Should school singing be 'cool'?

- If singing was a whole school or perfectly normal school activity, or a singing culture existed at the school, would this adequately address any student hesitancy to sing?

- Do you consider the school singing voice to be a musical instrument?

*Table 2: Emergent key issues*

The issue of student gender and singing participation was recognised and addressed in different ways by interview participants. At primary level, one participant actively raised the profile of the school choir within the community by including boy only choir auditions and selecting boys to sing solo sections. These strategies reportedly raised the number of boys participating in the school choir. Another participant stood next to boys in school assemblies to encourage their singing. Primary boys were particularly noted as enjoying their lunchtimes, so the scheduling of singing rehearsals at others times was seen as being crucial to their involvement in elective singing activities. Similarly, the vocal music selection was seen to either attract or disinterest boys in singing.

At secondary level, redressing the imbalance was not as apparent. One participant discussed offering adolescent boys strategies to 'find' their voices and to develop singing confidence; another encouraged the 'cool' boys at the school to participate in the vocal group. If the gender imbalance in school singing activities is believed due in part to puberty and voice change, only one participant discussed ways to constructively aid boys' singing through their transitioning phases.

The interviews revealed that the relevance of school singing is very much dependant upon how school executives and individual teachers view the educational objectives and the needs of their students. In addition to teacher confidence, interest and expertise, establishing a school singing culture seemed largely dependant on student interest and the appeal that singing activities conveyed. Participants expressed that constraints of time, finances, resources, student peer pressure and student cultural backgrounds precluded or limited a culture of school singing. However, where there was an established school culture of singing, the value of school singing was consistently supported by the school community.

Some secondary music teacher participants stressed the relevance of primary singing activities within the continuum of musical learning. Participants believed that teaching singing skills and access to singing experiences should occur in primary education. Irrespective of the method of instruction, the inference from these participants was that if singing instruction was available to all primary students, then the student culture in high schools may be more receptive to singing activities. Underlying this is the premise that younger children are more likely to participate willingly in singing activities than adolescents. Several participants noted wider relevance and application of singing activities. Singing was viewed as enabling students to work cooperatively and collaboratively as a team. Singing was also used to explore language studies and rote learning in primary mathematics. Singing activities included those to aid student reading and to annunciate words.

**CUMULATIVE FINDINGS: BEYOND THE SONG**

Curriculum based singing was linked to teaching objectives present in outcomes based musical learning and singing was, at times, a musical outcome. Singing that was unrelated to the music curriculum brought school singing activities into non-musical subjects for illustrative or supportive learning purposes (Hughes 2007, pp.117-118; Hughes 2008). Many of these contributory factors of school singing identified in the research were supported by the literature. The relevance of vocal music selection to school singing participation (Mizener 1993, p.241; Kennedy 2002, p.30) was also evident. The reporting of predominantly female participation in singing activities in many respondent schools

and the effects on singing participation of boys changing voices and stereotyping are consistent with the literature (Harrison 2001, 2004; Stupple 2007).

Individual teachers were found to be crucial to the inclusion of singing activities within a school environment. Facilitating a singing activity does not in itself constitute the teaching of singing, nor does it guarantee that the singing will be developmentally appropriate. Currently in NSW, school singing occurs as an activity related to primary and secondary music syllabuses and, as such, teaching approaches should convey content that will lead to student progress. If students are not afforded strategies for acquiring singing skills, they will possibly never reach their potential in singing and may not be confident to sing in front of others. When there is a balance of formal and informal school singing, within a sequential progression of student learning, then there is more likely to be an attainment of lifelong skills.

Methods for teaching singing range from private tuition to group teaching. In a school environment, most singing activities typically occur in groups. While the study determined that the majority of teachers did more than facilitate sing-along activities, the findings indicated the emphasis is predominantly on informal delivery of a song (informal) and not on the singing in the song (formal). The literature suggests informal activities are less likely to produce optimum results (Ashmore 1995; Phillips 1996). Phillips (1996) speculates against an informal song approach in singing and writes 'many children become trapped in their lower voices at an early age' (p.71). When comparing formal and informal approaches to singing, Ashmore (1995) recommends that a child's singing instruction include formal exercises. The exercises should compliment singing rather than detract from the enjoyment of singing.

Singing is a formative ability rather than a finite skill (Welch 2000). Consequently, singing ability typically develops over time. Technical elements, including appropriate posture, alignment and breath management, may be progressively implemented. Fundamental to vocal development is a foundation for the singing voice that is devoid of strain, tension, abuse or misuse. Singing development should specifically account for, and be appropriate to, vocal developmental stages as identified in extensive research (Cooksey 2000a; Cooksey 2000b; Gackle 2000a; Gackle 2000b; Cooksey & Welsh 1998).

Whether school singing genuinely enables students to acquire singing skills that engender a lifelong interest in singing is unresolved. A school environment provides opportunities for both formal and informal singing activities and there are many social and community benefits to be gained through both. However, there needs to be a balance to ensure that students learn more than how to sing a song or how to sing a particular song in a particular way. If singing is a school activity devoid of sequential progression, then the distinction is made between using the voice and learning to use the voice.

The study determined that if singing was not viewed as relevant or was not valued within the school culture, there were minimal opportunities for student participation or for student progression within a continuum of learning. In contrast, where student singing was relevant and valued, there were many opportunities for student participation and progression. However, school singing that was selective and did not engender equity in student participation fostered the participation and progression of a minority of students. If current education fails to instruct students in how to sing appropriately and fails to provide equitable opportunities to do so, then the standard of and participation in school

singing activities must surely be compromised. In addition, a syllabus directive of positive singing experiences to engender lifelong skills will not be realised.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Teaching singing involves more than the coaching of song interpretation, delivery or performance. A sequential program that caters to student developmental stages requires musical discernment and a range of expertise. While embodying interpretative elements, the teaching of singing entails knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the voice mechanism (Callaghan 2000; Chapman 2006; Phillips 1996; Thurman & Welch 2000b). Vocal health strategies should be embodied in teaching practices; approaches to singing should be based in scientific fact, not conjecture. In an age where voice science and research should underpin strategies for student vocal development and vocal health (Callaghan 2000), it is imperative that educational advocacy include a cross curriculum perspective in voice studies in school education (Hughes 2008; Hughes et al. 2009; Callaghan et al. 2009; Hughes & Callaghan 2010). A cross curricula perspective could include studies of the vocal mechanism in science, learning about vocal projection and expression in English, and discussion of vocal health in relation to physical development (Hughes 2008, pp.136-137; Hughes et al. 2009; Callaghan et al. 2009; Hughes & Callaghan 2010, pp.311-312). Cross curricula strategies would underpin singing activities in music, singing in cross curricula areas and singing for pleasure. Cross curricula perspectives that are based in fact and voice science have the potential to teach students how to effectively communicate with the voice. Currently Australia is developing national curriculum for school education and if such education is to 'contribute to creating a modern Australia' (Gillard 2008) then cross curricula voice studies (Hughes 2008; Hughes et al. 2009; Callaghan et al. 2009; Hughes & Callaghan 2010) are an 'essential component' (Hughes et al. 2009) of that education.

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