

Vocal Union

Singing in primary schools, a creative thread through the curriculum

Presentation given at the World Alliance of Arts Education Conference held in Newcastle in December 2009

Vocal Union offers an opportunity to not only develop singing in the school but also to investigate partnership working between musicians and teachers.

The National Curriculum is based on the premise that everyone is musical; in practice music often remains on a pedestal. There is often an acknowledgement that music is of value in a school setting, but is often the subject that is avoided and that many staff lack confidence in, willingly passing on the responsibility to someone else, often a visiting teacher. There is a mixed picture across the UK which includes outstanding musical practice in some primary schools, but this is not uniformly the case. Vocal Union grew out of a perceived need that singing needed promoting. Less and less singing seemed to be occurring in primary schools and research showed a general lack of confidence in delivering music in the classroom.

Music has an air of mystique surrounding it, many teachers and students believe that one is born with a special talent for music - 'you can either do it or you can't'. In order to demystify music and truly make it accessible to all, we need to move away from the elitist view of the talented few and the culture of a non-musical majority. A focus on the gifted and talented, assumes that others are not. We all have a need and a right to access music and the participatory aspect of music in school needs to be continually nurtured. We all certainly should be offered equality of access. Janet Mills stresses that music is for all children and that it can be detrimental:

if the culture of the school is that class teachers teach everything – a model that reflects and reinforces the ability of all students to do all subjects- then it can damage students' image of themselves as musicians if special arrangements are made for music. ¹

If our teachers have had a negative experience of music at school or don't feel enabled to practise, what hope for the young people in our schools? Past experiences affect us all and one of the teachers in one of our research studies recalled that she had very little musical input as a child. She didn't play an instrument, she had no musical training and she hated music at school.² She was also very apprehensive about taking part in the project, her head teacher had decided she undertake it without consultation.

I didn't want to do it (sing). I really didn't want to do it.....
When I got there it wasn't as bad as I imagined it to be. ³

¹ (Mills, J. 2005) 27

² Sophie Lowes. Interview 9th July 2008

³ (Clarke, J., Taylor, H., 2007) 27

In this study a musician worked alongside a key stage 1 teacher almost once a week. The sessions were jointly planned with the full involvement of the class teachers. The Strong sense of partnership working which developed over the period led to an increase in confidence in *both* musicians and teachers. Previously this teacher had avoided music but now is confident and happy to deliver music. I observed her deliver a music session on her own without the support of a musician. She integrated a song into a literacy and history session ('London's burning') and without prior knowledge I would never have guessed that this teacher had previously avoided music. She was fluent, confident and had a great singing voice, this indeed was a transformation.

Vocal Union began as a programme investigating ways of integrating singing into the life of a school and attempting to provide a sustainable model for schools to enable them to carry on once they had left the programme. This started out as a programme for primary schools and now in its fourth year we are beginning to work with secondary schools. Vocal Union promotes a culture of singing throughout the school community and aims to dispel the perception that music is the sole preserve of the specialist or expert, whilst still being committed to the pursuit of excellence in delivery, training and support. The starting point is looking at ways of integrating singing across the curriculum and not confining singing to one music session a week, but for it to become an integral part of the school day. Through encouraging more teachers to incorporate singing into their lessons and the school day it can enhance and improve the musical opportunities available to all and encourage a climate of accessibility and inclusive participation.

Each school with its own idiosyncrasies and needs has meant that leaders have had to develop personalised programmes for each setting they work within. The time spent in preparation and planning the project has enabled us to have a clear framework upon which to build the personalised programmes. The structure allows for flexibility, imagination and the unexpected. The feedback from school staff and vocal practitioners alike has been overwhelmingly positive. This is not to say that it hasn't been a challenging programme for all parties involved and not successful in every case. It has taken time to build confidence and challenge often long held beliefs about singing and music. It has been a big commitment from schools to allocate time to this project but feedback suggests it has had a very positive influence on the curriculum and general ethos of most schools. The project has been most successful where the Head Teacher has fully endorsed the programme and the whole school has embraced the project. Staff have been able to develop their own practice through modelling the singing leaders, trying things out in vocal remedies sessions and in their own classrooms when the singing leaders have not been present.

One teacher said that it had really helped her confidence and that she could see the same in others. She also said that she would never have sung with children or adults before. I would say she is now one of the best teachers at encouraging her class to sing and always joins in with confidence and a smile on her face which in turn helps her class to be one of the more confident classes.

Relationships take time to develop and change doesn't happen overnight; one head teacher reported at a steering group meeting that takes a long time for all the staff to feel confident with singing, without the support in the second year, she could see that the singing could fall back. She used the 2nd year to focus on building the skills of her teachers who were all consulted and said what elements of music they wanted to cover.

Aspirations were expressed:

- Hopefully it will free us from the reins of L.C.P. music which we tend to use as a crutch, and in reality is not particularly enjoyed by children or staff... would love to do more...I can see how it can be implemented in both key stages...build confidence and bring the whole school together...songwriting within class...people now have a starting point within their own comfort zone...lots of activities to do with children, for musicality, team building, PSHCE and many more (curriculum) areas...practical application in classroom, assemblies, brain gym...we will soon be a singing school!

Changes in approaches to teaching were also observed and shared:

It was lovely that the class teacher commented that she'd learnt to let the children take control of the creativity and not to impose her ideas – to trust the children really. I noticed that she was very much part of the group - working with the children. This was very productive and following the first two sessions, we really didn't have to put in much input here.

Conclusion

If teachers lack confidence in music and perceive it as an unattainable skill, music may not be high on the agenda, nor be a particularly enjoyable experience. In Vocal Union a partnership model is offered and gives teachers and musicians the opportunity to discover and reinvestigate the best ways of working together, offering greater empowerment to teacher and musician alike.

It is a tall order to expect one teacher to deliver everything to the class; however the teacher is the classroom expert and she knows her class and the individuals it comprises of. The musician brings in musical knowledge and subject expertise, this combination is unique and valuable. A true partnership between teacher and musician can deter the tendency to place the musician on a pedestal, reinforcing the perception that to be a musician requires 'special' talents. This can go along way to normalising music so that it is not seen as elitist.

Some examples of feedback from questionnaires or conversations.

Responses from children

What happens when we sing about things we learn in school?

- It brings singing into us and helps us learn more about things.
- I liked the way Em helped us turn our words into songs. It was hard at first.
- I liked the call and response, It made us feel good about singing

- It makes boring staff fun.
- When I think about lyrics I remember
- You get better
- It give us a fun way of remembering the things we learn in different lessons
- We remember more about the topic
- Helps us learn and exercises our voice box

Practitioner feedback.

- *In Vocal Health session had some very positive feed back. One teacher said that it has really helped her confidence and that she could see the same in the other teachers. She also said that she would never have sang with the children or adults before, and I would say that she is now one of the best teachers at encouraging her class to sing and always joins in with confidence and a smile on her face, which in turn helps her class to be one of the more confident classes.*
- *Although the teachers appear to be a little shy with each other during Remedies, when we get them singing together they sound absolutely lovely. Two of the teachers sing in a choir through the week and they are trying to learn the songs we are taking in for them and teach them to their choir. It is also obvious that they have little fear for singing with the children as they are working with the material we are giving them.*

Bibliography:

Clarke J. And Taylor H. ‘ Let’s sing it in four parts now’ unpublished report for The Sage Gateshead and Paul Hamlyn Foundation, (2007). - *This is available from me.*

Kekus S. Vocal Union Evaluation for DfES, (unpublished report for DfES, 2007) - *Department for Education and Skills now the DCSF*

Mills, J. *Music in the school*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)