

Hearing the Voices of Singing Schools

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Introduction

Following the release of “The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum” in 2000, the Ministry of Education has, through the six national Colleges of Education, funded extensive professional development for teachers as they implement the new curriculum. In the course of my work as a music facilitator across the central region of the North Island, I encountered a number of schools which identified themselves as “singing schools.”

In a few cases, principals seemed to be using the term to establish distance between their staff and music facilitators, the message being, “we’re a singing school and don’t ask us to do more than that!” In some cases, the statement was an indication of what was going well in the school’s music program and a precursor to identifying other aspects of the program that required professional development attention. It was also clear that for many principals, the perception of themselves as a singing school was a source of pride and a cause for celebration. It is three of these schools which provided the data for the research project described here.

Singing has been an important part of the life of New Zealand schools for as long as formal schooling has taken place in this country (Braatvedt & Sell, 2003). In more recent decades, the music program has expanded to include playing instruments, creating music and broadly-based music listening. Nonetheless, for many New Zealand teachers and students, singing is synonymous with school music.

The widespread practice of singing in the school context has not necessarily meant that all New Zealand students’ experiences of school singing have been positive and fruitful (Boyack, 2000). There is an ongoing need to increase general classroom teachers’ knowledge of learning and teaching as it applies to singing, as well as a need for teachers to be exposed to internationally-recognized research into how singing skills and attitudes develop. There is also a need to explore the range of contexts in which singing occurs in the school setting and the provision of appropriate repertoire.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the songs, practices, beliefs and attitudes of principals, teachers and students from three contrasting schools which identify as “singing schools.” It is hoped that the knowledge gained will support and encourage other schools to establish worthwhile and relevant singing programs.

The Study

Including three contrasting schools in the study recognized that there is unlikely to be one “right” way of being a “singing school” but that factors like the community context, staff strengths and composition, student background and physical setting would all impact, to a greater or lesser extent, on the nature of singing in the school. The case study approach also allowed for a more in-depth exploration of what was occurring in schools than, for example, a written survey of a larger number of schools.

Three schools which had identified themselves as “singing schools” were approached and agreed to take part in the study. Although consent was obtained to record interviews, recording was not used. Because of the informal nature of the interviews, it was decided that writing field notes in the course of interviews would be less disruptive to the flow of conversation. Interviews were conducted with small groups of children, groups of teachers who wished to take part, and the school principals. In addition, I was able to visit teachers in their classrooms during singing activities as well as attend school assemblies and other singing events.

At the present time, some interviews with children have been completed but there is a need to speak more widely to children in each school. This will include talking to members

of different singing groups and to children in the junior school. Interviews are yet to be held with members of the wider school community, in particular, parents and *whanau* (extended families), and members of each school's Board of Trustees.

In framing the study, I was profoundly influenced by Patricia Shehan Campbell's (1998) *Songs in their Heads*. My initial idea had been to conduct an observational study of singing behaviour and events in selected schools. I arrogantly assumed that discussions with key people would confirm what I had observed and what I already knew anyway. However, after reading Campbell's inspiring account of talking with children about music, I realized that I must talk with the children themselves about how they experience singing in their schools and what it means to them.

The purpose of the interviews was to elicit information about such things as the times and places that singing occurred in the school context; the singing repertoire of each school; the people and material resources that supported singing; and how each group or key participant perceived and felt about singing in the school. Interviews followed a semi-structured format and in all cases diverged from the prepared questions as participants elaborated on particular features of singing in their own school. Each interview concluded with a question about what it would mean to the participant(s) if singing were totally banned in their school.

Description of Schools

School A is a full primary (years 1-8), state-integrated Catholic school with approximately 280 pupils and 10 classroom teachers. As well as the singing that occurs daily in most classrooms, the school has a number of other opportunities for children to be involved in singing activities. There is an all-comers choir, Born to Sing, of almost seventy children and a junior and senior school *kapahaka* (Maori culture) group. These groups are likely to lead the singing or provide singing performances for special occasions such as welcomes or festivals.

Singing associated with worship is a significant part of School A's singing life. Each term there are school-wide and team masses. For these masses there is a standard repertoire of contemporary worship songs that can be drawn on with new songs continually being added to the repertoire.

School B is a large city school with a bilingual (English/Maori) unit, an attached sensory resource unit, and an ethnically diverse school population. The school is one of very few in the region to employ a teacher as a part-time music specialist and this position is a reflection of the principal's and the school community's commitment to music and the arts in general. The specialist teacher concerned is particularly gifted as both a music educator and as a facilitator of learning for generalist classroom teachers.

The all-comers school choir is so popular that it has been restricted to Year 4 - 6 children with a new group formed to provide for children in the junior school. All children in the bilingual unit are members of a *kapahaka* group which practices as part of the regular classroom program. In addition, children from the rest of the school are able to join a school-wide *kapahaka* group.

School C is a smaller city school with 240 students and 9 musically active classroom teachers. The school boasts a very popular all-comers choir and a fledging *kapahaka* group. Singing is a feature of every classroom program and is supported by regular team singing. In addition, singing is an important component of full school assemblies which alternate fortnightly with school singing.

Results and Discussion

Interviews and observations yielded fascinating insights into the use and value placed on singing in the participant schools. Similarities and differences sprung into focus with each group and with each new school. There was a high-level of congruence over the value and purpose of singing in the school between principal, teachers and students at each school,

and differences were most marked when discussing suitable and appealing song repertoire.

Each school revealed features which were an important part of their own singing culture. For example in School A, the annual school concert provides an opportunity for the teachers to perform as a choir, an item which is shrouded in secrecy over the rehearsal period and eagerly awaited by the children. The principal of School A does not regard himself as a singer and does not take part in the item. However, he willingly contributes his precious time to supervise playground duty every time the staff choir is rehearsing and to keep the children away from the rehearsal area.

School B achieved success in a national songwriting competition and this success has been celebrated and exploited positively for the benefit of the full school community.

School C threads singing and specific songs through its ANZAC Day (April 25) commemoration service and although the service was not held this year because it fell in a holiday period, students talked about the songs in detail. One student commented that although "slow songs are often boring" the slow songs on ANZAC Day are acceptable because "it's okay to have sad songs then."

I was privileged to observe examples of exemplary practice including song composition at all three schools. A junior teacher, who described herself as loving music and singing but not being very good at it, confided to me that she often made up songs to use with her class. She launched into a charming and simply-constructed melody that followed the life cycle of a butterfly. The children had created movements for each verse and each verse had a mood of its own. She then picked up her guitar and using D and A major chords improvised a song to settle the children back onto the mat, confessing to me that "I never do that when other adults are around, it's just for the children!"

Another teacher regularly created songs with his class by playing chord sequences along with simple poems while he and the children found melodic phrases to fit. When I asked them to sing me some, they launched enthusiastically into song after song, using different keys, modes, rhythmic frameworks and moods as they sang.

Although the story of each school is unique and will be told in greater detail in the final research report, the purpose of this paper is to tease out the notion of a "singing school" in order to assist schools which may aspire to such a label. As the study progressed, the following important themes and principles surfaced. Woven together, these form the material of "singing schools."

Singing for a purpose and singing for its own sake

In Aotearoa/New Zealand schools there is a wide range of contexts in which singing can naturally occur. These include *powhiri* (welcome ceremonies) in which children may be the welcomers or the welcomed (in each case singing is required); calling the class roll; whole school musical productions, festivals or concerts; songs linked to study in other curriculum areas; between class (often senior to junior) sharing of new songs; chants and songs to accompany playground games and activities; and services or special celebrations such as the ANZAC Day service, Year 6 graduation or a school Mass. Purposeful singing of this type was evident in all the schools studied.

Children commented on how individual teachers use singing for different reasons during the school day and on different uses of singing in the junior and senior schools. One girl talked about how her teacher uses songs to warm them up, get them happy and settle them down in the morning but suggested to me that I "shouldn't listen outside our classroom early in the morning because our voices aren't so good then."

In all three schools singing occurs on a class, team and school-wide basis because it is perceived as an inherently worthwhile activity in its own right. As one principal put it, "Singing is central to the heart of this school. It does something for the core ethos of the school and the tone of the classrooms." Another described singing as "the ultimate team game" and one of his teachers commented that "singing is the soul of our school."

Singing reflects and affects our mood and our environment

Children were surprisingly articulate about how singing affects them personally and

how it may also reflect what is going on for them. One group of children (speaking about choir) commented that teachers sometimes expect them to sing all the time and sometimes they do not feel in the mood. However, one went on to say that "if you don't want to sing but you sing anyway, you always end up feeling better" and a teacher noted that "you can't be miserable singing."

I was fascinated that in two of the student interview groups, children burst into spontaneous song on more than one occasion as the discussion led them to a particular song in their collective repertoire. These spontaneous songs were energetically performed and generally accompanied by actions and much laughter.

Teachers from one of the schools spoke about a particular child who has achieved considerable success and recognition through her involvement in school singing activities. They observed that singing had provided the means for this child to cope with extraordinarily difficult life experiences. As one teacher put it "singing fills up our emotional tank."

Singing is both an inclusive activity and one in which individuals can shine

All three schools involved in the study were passionate about providing inclusive singing opportunities. Children were clear that "singing groups like choir and *kapahaka* are for anyone who likes singing." The only reason children were excluded from particular singing groups was in School B because of age (there was a junior choir started for numerical reasons) and because of language of instruction (the bilingual *kapahaka* group practised in timetabled time so another group was formed to cater for children in mainstream classes).

In two of the three schools, all singing groups took place in timetabled time in order to maximize opportunities for children to participate. In addition, choir and *kapahaka* rehearsals were held at different times so that children could belong to both groups. Students and teachers expressed the view that singing is something you get better at the more you practice. One teacher in charge of a school singing group commented, "In tune, out of tune, it doesn't matter. Singing is a safe experience in this school."

In addition to discussing the inclusive nature of singing in the three schools, teachers and students also spoke about special singing opportunities. For example, children in the Born to Sing group in School A can prepare and perform solos, duets and small group "items" to sing at rehearsal time. Teachers give their own time to work with students who would like support as they prepare items.

A number of children interviewed from Schools B and C had auditioned to represent the school as potential soloists at a city-wide singing festival, with each school being restricted to two children. The children at School B proudly pointed out the two who represented their school, one of whom went on to win a solo spot. There was no acrimony or apparent envy on the part of those who were not successful. Likewise, the children at School C described that it was disappointing when they were not selected but that one of the two who were selected went on to gain a solo spot at the festival. There was a genuine feeling of warmth towards this student and pride in her achievement. The School C teacher responsible told how during the auditions he had made comments like, "You are all making this so hard for me" and "Please, won't somebody sing badly so that I cross them off the list."

Teachers spoke about children who had had the opportunity to develop their singing skills in the school context and noted the value of this for children who struggled socially. Among a range of stories about specific children I was told about one boy, previously a loner, whose strong singing has given him "mana" (respect) in the school.

Singing is an important community activity and a deeply-ingrained part of the school culture

The three principals interviewed were united on the importance of singing to the life of their schools. The principal of School A commented that singing was vital to the special

character of their school, to worship and to the celebration of Mass. School B's principal stated that "singing is one of the very few things in school that everyone can do together." He went on to say that singing "helps develop our collective memory through shared experiences." The principal of School C stated that singing had always been a strong tradition in his school and that there was an expectation on the part of the wider school community that this would not change.

The importance of Maori cultural influences to the singing life of the schools concerned cannot be overstated. They are reflected in the ceremonies that are threaded through school life, such as the *powhiri* in which selected *waiata* or songs strengthen, soften or shift the emphasis of each individual speaker; in the words and messages of the *waiata* sung throughout the school day—songs for gathering together and moving apart, songs that support and encourage respect and knowledge of heritage, songs that strengthen the development of fluency in *te reo* Maori (Maori language); and in the prevailing attitude towards singing that appears to exist in each school—that singing is for everyone.

Singing occurs in a cohesive and comprehensive way across the school

Related to the overall singing culture of each school is the notion that singing needs to be perceived in a cohesive and comprehensive way. One teacher described singing as "a nest for musical development." In all three schools, teachers demonstrated an awareness of vocal development and how it can be encouraged and nurtured. One teacher noted that "we do things to encourage children to start singing, basic things like giving the note and things to help the confidence and quality of the singing."

Attention is paid to the use of singing in different teams within the schools so that junior teachers routinely use singing as a teaching tool across the curriculum and as a constructive management tool. There is strong emphasis placed on a repertoire that meets the differing developmental stages in singing of all children with senior school teachers consciously selecting repertoire to suit the more sophisticated tastes of their students.

Teachers commented that vibrant whole school singing experiences provided younger children with models and experience of such things as part-singing, songs with extended range, and songs with complex rhythmic and melodic structures. They spoke with some surprise about the speed and confidence with which junior school children learned songs that were more widely used as part of middle or senior school repertoire.

Teachers and principals play a pivotal role in children's views of singing and of themselves as singers

One child from School B stated "Our principal is a singing principal" and the others nodded in agreement. They told me how the principal (an outstanding advocate for music and the arts in education) plays his guitar and sings as the different classes arrive at school assembly and how the children all join in. They spoke with warmth and great pride about how their teachers and principal enjoy singing and how this helps the students to enjoy it too.

All schools were fortunate to have on their staff male teachers with strengths in music. In School C, the sole male teacher (apart from the principal) commented that he felt the boys in the school had become more willing to sing since he joined the staff. The involvement of all teachers (including reluctant principals) in school singing events was widely commented on by their students. Teachers who sang with their classes, especially those who play guitar as well, were perceived as "very cool" and "funky," and "just the best."

One group of children attempted to describe what singing means to their school. One commented that "singing is important because it's something our school enjoys—teachers and kids." The group went on to suggest that I "come to our team singing" or "come to our concert at the Regent and then you'll get a better idea of what it's like."

New teachers in the school are supported into the singing culture of the schools

Teachers in all three schools were expected to take part in singing activities with their own classes and in the wider school environment. It seems that when a teacher joins the staff of a "singing school" this is non-negotiable! For some teachers "there is often an adjustment to the expectation of singing." At the same time, there is considerable support for teachers who may lack personal singing self-efficacy and lack confidence in their ability to teach singing. Support may take the form of sharing song resources, ideas for teaching strategies, collaborative teaching or loads of verbal encouragement. One group of teachers told me that "team and assembly singing supported by tapes and CDs allows less experienced teachers to take song back to their classrooms."

Principals are conscious of building new singing leaders in the school

All three principals spoke in glowing terms of their lead teachers' skills and strengths in music. At the same time, each was conscious of the need to grow the leadership skills of other teachers in order to protect the singing culture of the school and to encourage teachers to develop their personal potential as singing leaders. On a visit to one of the schools, I observed two less experienced teachers lead school singing for the first time, the result of a clear action on the part of the principal whose policy is to "deliberately allow new blood to develop singing leadership skills—sometimes I have to create space for these teachers." When appointing new staff, particularly beginning teachers, one principal commented that he looked favourably on teachers with strengths in singing because such teachers tended to use singing to build a happy and well-functioning classroom environment.

Conclusion

My personal notion of what constitutes a "singing school" has been enriched immeasurably by this study of principals', teachers' and children's views of singing in their schools. Although there are clearly observable surface features that may distinguish "singing schools" from other schools, I was unprepared for the depth of feeling and commitment both expressed and lived by participants in the study, and for how powerfully and passionately they articulated their beliefs about singing.

This study has taught me that when we focus on the technical aspects of how to foster and improve singing in schools we may neglect the principles that underpin the development of a "singing school" and that sustain it over years and decades. It is vital that we assist schools to recognise these principles and to explicitly foster their development in joyous and meaningful ways.

The importance of singing to the corporate life of the three case study schools was exemplified by responses to the final question about what it would mean for there to be no singing in their schools. Responses ranged from shock and horror through to grief ("we could sing a *really* sad song") and loss and to expressions of civil disobedience ("we could start a singing rebellion"). One child commented, "Music is *in us*—why should we have a voice if we can't sing?" Another child responded that she would just do it anyway because "when you have a song in your head you've got to sing it," unconsciously echoing the words of renowned Maori music educator Keri Kaa who said, "We sing because we must" (Kaa, 2001).

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