

# Recognizing the Value of Two Aesthetics of Singing: A Strategy for Creating All-Inclusive Singing School Communities

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*(This session begins with the group singing "Funga Alafia," a Nigerian Welcome Song.)*

*After singing the following questions are posed to the group:*

*What has or has not changed since we sang together?*

*What was the importance of singing together?*

*What was emphasized? (tone quality? pitch? note reading?)*

Bernice Johnson Reagon makes bold statements about the kind of singing we just experienced. She says, "When we sing we announce our existence" and that "you cannot sing a song without changing your condition" (Reagon, 1991). It seems to me, from observing what just happened in this room, that Reagon's statements have proven to be true. This type of group or community singing is powerful and has reason to hold a prominent place in our educational communities. The value we place on this type of singing determines who sings and who considers themselves a singer.

It is not news that music teachers worry about getting more children singing in our schools. But, my concern is that even when the children are singing, the rest of the school community may not be. In research conducted over the past five years I have found that the majority of classroom teachers do not sing themselves or almost never with their students. Further, the school staff and administrators are not involved in school singing activities. The primary reason: they consider themselves unable to sing or consider themselves to be non-singers. Even more curious, I discovered that educators who I assume automatically fall into the category of being "musically talented" also do not sing with their students. And for the same reason: they consider themselves "non-singers." This evidence clearly points to a problem that needs addressing. We are not creating all-inclusive singing school communities if the only people singing are the children.

After analyzing these data, I became curious not only about why this phenomenon is true but, more importantly, about shifting this paradigm in order to open the possibility of creating educational communities where singing is all-inclusive and everyone is considered a singer. I began to imagine what a portrait of such a school would look like; one where everyone sang, where everyone felt like a singer, where everyone defined themselves as a singer.

Despite the latest trends in music education which promote a greater inclusion of world music and emphasis on a more process-oriented approach, singing in most educational settings (in the United States) continues to be defined in terms of one aesthetic. It is one that has been valued by music educators for several hundred years and continues to be endorsed by schools of music education. This aesthetic is deeply rooted and frames the philosophy and pedagogy of music education. Geared towards serving music education programs, it highly values and stresses such things as performance, note reading, and skill building. Although there is no doubt that these are important and relevant elements of music education, the result is that singing becomes an exclusive activity in which many are not included.

In order to create dynamic school communities where everyone sings this paradigm must shift. The definition of what it means to "sing" and to be a "singer" must be broadened. Alongside performance, skill building and note reading, participation, spontaneity, recreational singing, and community building must be equally valued. In other words, is there a way to shift our thinking about music education so the kind of singing we all just experienced at the beginning of this session is considered of equal importance and significance as a formal, rehearsed and perfected choral performance?

How can this shift actually happen? Is it really possible? Those of us who work in the field of music education are committed to bringing musical experiences to as many students as possible. We believe in the power of music and know how it can affect the emotional and spiritual lives of our students. However, in the process of reaching the overarching goal of getting our students singing, we have failed to notice that a large portion of the school population is excluded from making music, primarily because they feel they are unable to sing. How do we get *everyone* singing? I literally mean everybody—students, teachers, administrators and parents. How do we “convince” those non-singers to sing? And, moreover, why is it in our best interest to do so?

### Portrait of a Singing School Community

In addressing how to create this all-inclusive singing environment, I will direct the discussion to two groups of individuals who can most influence the transformation: the music specialists and the classroom teachers.

#### Music Specialists

Faced with administrators who often do not completely understand the value of singing or even support the music program and classroom teachers who are not singing with their students, music specialists might wonder why they should spend time and energy encouraging everyone to sing. Will this not just take time away from the music curriculum, diminish the value of singing and lower the quality of the music program?

Music educators know the benefits of a music education program. These benefits are profound, unique and well-documented in the literature (Elliott, 1995; Campbell, 2000; Demorest & Morrison, 2000; Goldberg, 2001). Music-making achieves fundamental values such as self-growth, self-knowledge, musical enjoyment and self-esteem and affects the power of students to think, know, value, and evaluate (Elliott, 1995). Music programs in schools also have been shown to build parental support for the school, energize students, and activate creativity, imagination, and holistic thinking (Rozmajzl & Boyer-Alexander, 2000). Even though music education programs naturally support, enhance and strengthen these basic goals of general education, these outcomes are not at all evident to most educators beyond the music specialist.

Music classes are usually isolated from the classroom and classroom teachers and other school staff are rarely involved during music class time. An overarching concern voiced at every music conference and in music education journals is that our *children* are not singing. Ironically, there is never, to my knowledge, a discussion or concern about the lack of singing by the teachers, administrators and other school personnel. The attention is focussed solely on the students. What might happen if all the teachers and the administrators were encouraged to sing with their students during regular class time? How would that happen? Would a possible outcome be the creation of a stronger music program that is supported by the entire community?

To transform a school into a total singing community involves perceiving singing in a broader sense. To accomplish this, the activity of singing needs to expand in all directions. In other words, all students, up and down every grade level can learn the elements of singing, an activity directed by the music specialist. Simultaneously, everyone across the school can experience singing simply for the joy of it, an activity that needs not be initiated only by the music specialist but can easily be led by many other members of the school community. The outcome is that singing becomes an integral part of everyone's experience.

The first step to accomplish this goal is to actually see “beyond,” to use Maxine Greene's words, “What is supposedly fixed and finished” (Greene 1995, p.16) and to broaden the concept of what it means to sing. What it means to be a singer or to sing is, for all intents and purposes, in music education circles “fixed and somewhat finished” (p.19). We must let it be known and demonstrate throughout the school that there are many ways to perceive the phenomenon of singing.

There are several potential ways to accomplish this. I am going to present a few suggestions. Singing at a faculty meeting is a great place to begin. Imagine how the energy

in the room would change if the meeting began with a song. The music specialist could introduce the topic of singing and engage everyone in a discussion about what it means to be a singer. Pose these questions to the group: What is a singer? Are you one? How do you know that? Engage individuals in considering where their assumptions about singing are rooted. Once aware of the context in which their beliefs are rooted, a shift in perception can occur. There is an essential key to making this shift. The music specialist must also make the shift and be open to accepting more than one perspectives of what it means to sing. Here are some suggestions for music specialist in beginning this process.

*Encourage everyone to feel they are singers.*

"Non-singers" will consider taking a risk and "singing" when they are able to experience singing through a new perspective. They need to trust that their voices will be accepted and valued, that participation and group collaboration are as important as performance and skill building.

A key factor in building an all-inclusive singing community is "experiential learning." No amount of "talking about" the fact that everyone can sing changes attitudes. Those who consider themselves "non-singers" will shift their thinking when they have had a positive experience with singing by actively singing in an environment that is accepting and encouraging. Teaching vocal skills or using technical music language should be avoided. The genuine goal is to get people singing for the pure joy of singing together. An elementary music specialist relayed a story to me, once she initiated this new perspective of singing in her school.

I have watched the classroom teachers in my school who told me they weren't musical, couldn't sing, felt scared about singing, noticeably change once I began redefining singing in more than one way. I emphasized the importance of participation and group building. They now contribute to the musicality of the school as much if not more than the so-called "musicians." (Elementary music specialist, K-5, New London, CT, 7/01)

*Assist classroom teachers in finding repertoire that is easy to sing and easy to learn to share in their classroom*

Once classroom teachers begin singing, they will be eager to find repertoire that their students will enjoy. They want songs that will "work" and that the students will enjoy. Encourage classroom teachers to build a repertoire from their own experience. Music specialists know songs that are particular favourites among students. Teach those to the classroom teachers.

What will be the possible results of this endeavor? When music specialists assist classroom teachers in learning the songs their students sing in music class, the classroom teachers are more connected to the music program. The students begin to experience that singing is something that is a part of everyone's experience, beyond the music room. The classroom teachers create a model that the children can emulate. This shift gives singing new importance and "normalcy" because everyone is singing.

*Make a visit to the classroom and sing songs together*

Help the classroom teacher identify students in the class who are particularly comfortable with singing and capable of leading songs. Open up the leadership and encourage others to take on that role.

*Provide an atmosphere that encourages every voice to be heard*

Establish singing opportunities that help create a safe environment. The simple act of arranging everyone in a circle immediately sets a tone of safety. Avoid solos or situations that separate individuals from the group. Pitch songs in key that are accessible to all voices and avoid the use of technical musical terms. Most importantly, announce to the group immediately that the goal of singing together is for everyone to participate, to build group cohesiveness, in effect, to build an ensemble and to have fun. This kind of singing is not

focussed on improving tone quality or becoming musically literate; therefore, it is important to refrain from making judgments about voice quality, teaching specific vocal technique or worrying about voice range.

### Classroom Teachers

If classroom teachers have never considered the possibility of singing with students, they might wonder where to begin the process. How do they find songs? Will the students really sing with them? Where can they find support? Can they enlist the music specialist to help with repertoire? What inherent value is there in singing with the students? Where can they find time in a day filled with meeting standards and teaching to standardized tests to sing?

Once classroom teachers realize that singing together is much more than simply fun and can be integrated into the daily classroom curriculum in ways that enhance memory skills, creativity, imagination, attention span, and problem solving they become much more interested in integrating singing into their day. Students have diverse learning styles and some learn more easily when ideas or concepts are put to a rhythm and/or a melody. It is no mere coincidence that many of us remember the alphabet through singing the *Alphabet Song*.

Here are some suggestions for classroom teachers to begin the process of implementing singing in the classroom setting.

#### *Accept and value another way to perceive singing*

Community singing focuses on participation, not skill-building or performance. Singing in the classroom supports important learning goals that complement the singing that goes on in the music room.

#### *Ask the music specialist or others in the school to support the idea of singing in the classroom and to provide encouragement*

Invite the music specialist, other classroom teachers, administrators or parents to visit the classroom and sing with the class. Each of these people can share a new and diverse repertoire and bring other perspectives to singing. They can share the role of song leading. In today's classrooms, educators often discuss the hope of creating harmony and peace among individuals, societies, cultures and countries. The act of singing together is practice in doing that on a smaller scale. Responsibility and respect for others are inherent in community singing. We all want to be good listeners, responsible, respectful, and cooperative world citizens. Singing together gives us practice in doing that.

#### *Note the ways singing can enhance curriculum*

Songs can support the basic needs of a classroom through the development and enhancement of cooperation, improving listening skills, team building, valuing diversity, releasing stress and tension and lifting the spirit. Use singing to enhance those goals. Create original songs that connect to curriculum.

#### *Begin by singing songs originating from the personal history and culture of the class.*

A useful task for the students and classroom teachers is to write down childhood songs and sing them. Begin with familiar songs. Everyone has a repertoire of songs. Sometimes it is a matter of taking time to recall them. A sixth grade teacher I worked with shared this story.

On a recent trip to visit my grandmother in West Virginia, I asked her if she knew any songs from her childhood. She sang some and I taped them and shared them with my class. This inspired a wonderful interview/research project on songs with my students. (Sixth grade special education teacher, Columbus, South Carolina, 5/01)

## Conclusion

Singing together in school allows for every voice to be heard both literally and metaphorically. Singing together requires listening to one another and builds a school community that tends to be more cooperative, understanding, tolerant and appreciative. Music education is a construct growing out of our particular society and history and now it is time to begin viewing it through a wider, more critical lens. If we expect our students to become open learners, eager questioners, seekers of knowledge, then we educators must begin to perceive teaching and learning through multiple lenses and with imagination. We can no longer be complacent about the current construction and continue to think of ourselves as "non-singers" any more than we can continue to think of ourselves as "non-listeners," "non-participants," "non-members of the community" or "non-learners." We must begin to expand, revise, engage ourselves more authentically and adventurously in every component of education. Singing is a wonderful place to begin.

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