

# Improving choral education in schools: A review of the choral animateur concept in the UK

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## Introduction

The concept of *Choral Animation Schemes* was created by the British Federation of Young Choirs in 1992 in response to government reports and general media speculation that singing in UK state schools was on the decline and a cause for concern. The British Federation of Young Choirs, formed in 1983, aims to stimulate and encourage choral singing amongst young people in the UK and to develop links between young choirs in the UK and overseas.

Central to the 'animateur' concept was the use of a specialist who was expert in the teaching of singing in a school context to work alongside other less experienced teachers over a period of time. The schemes, which were to take place in several parts of the country, were to be funded by various means of sponsorship independent of the government funding for education.

During 1995, at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Music Education at Roehampton Institute London, a small group of like-minded professionals had begun to meet with the aim of creating a research-based project which would contribute to the development of singing and the professional development of teachers involved in vocal and choral activity in the UK. As a consequence, a partnership with the British Federation of Young Choirs was made in 1998 and a research team was formed in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the BFYC Choral Animation Schemes in a number of London boroughs.

I was appointed to begin the first evaluation of an Animation Scheme which had just been completed in the London borough of Brent. Further ongoing projects are being evaluated in the Royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea, The London borough of Islington and the London borough of Harrow, which are to be completed this year.

## Singing in state schools in the UK: evidence during the last 8 years

Research has revealed two kinds of evidence regarding singing in schools:

- (i) the amount of singing taking place in schools;
- (ii) the quality of singing produced in schools.

## The amount of singing

A report published in 1991 by The Council of Local Education Authorities (CLEA) in the UK, on behalf of BFYC, sought to assess the level of singing and choir work in their schools. Some authorities claimed that singing was improving in their primary and secondary schools. More reported, however, that singing was being squeezed out by the demands of the National Curriculum, that choral singing had been in steady decline for the past few years or, most commonly, that singing was flourishing at primary level but it was increasingly difficult to maintain at secondary level.

Government reports across the twentieth century have continued to present singing as central to good classroom practice in music. In 1991 The National Curriculum Interim Report on Music restated the significance of singing within the music curriculum:

Singing has always formed part of music making in schools, although a more recent emphasis on instrumental work has tended to diminish at least its apparent importance. We consider that singing, which generally precedes and is of crucial importance to successful playing of instruments, should be firmly established in the curriculum as the equal partner of playing (Department of Education and Science, (DES) 1991b, p.14).

Current opinion suggests that an important basis for good singing during adolescence lies in the establishment of a good foundation in voice work in the early years. However, recent legislation by the government demanding that Primary schools devote more time to literacy and numeracy has resulted in the arts being marginalized in the Primary School curriculum. A survey in April 1998, carried out by The Times Educational Supplement, *The musical life of British children is at risk*, investigated the implications for music of the government's plans to focus on the literacy and numeracy in UK primary schools. The survey carried out in 692 primaries revealed that one in five primary schools is cutting down on music teaching and some are dropping the subject altogether.

Furthermore, the RSA (Royal Society of Arts) publication *The Disappearing Arts?* (1998, p. 6) confirmed the findings of the earlier NFER (National Federation of Educational Research) study of initial training of primary teachers, *The Arts: a preparation to teach* (NFER, 1986) which found considerable variation in provision for the arts in programmes for intending primary teachers and in the number of hours devoted to arts courses. As a consequence, many newly qualified primary teachers were found to have little confidence in teaching the arts, especially in drama and music. The report concluded that :

... a lack of confidence in the arts is...perpetuated from teacher to pupil to student to teacher. There would seem to be an important role here for teacher education in breaking this cycle and helping to raise confidence in the arts.

## The quality of singing

Evidence revealed by OFSTED (Office For Standards In Education) in 1995 suggested that there were significant shortcomings in the teaching of singing at KS3 (key stage three) which is the lower secondary or Junior High School age:

Singing of a technical and expressive quality which would rarely be tolerated in the last year of the primary school is often welcomed in the first year of the secondary school (OFSTED, 1995, p. 8).

They go on to say that, "lacklustre singing is accepted at the lower secondary stage and is often praised" (OFSTED, 1995, p. 12). Many speculate that the reason for the evident demise in singing in secondary schools is the increase in instrumental work in the curriculum. Everett (1993), who has investigated participatory music in schools in the UK claims that as a result of the growth of instrumental music opportunities in schools, "many young people see choral singing as less glamorous and challenging than playing in an ensemble" (Everett, 1993, p. 45).

Other reasons are proposed as to why so few young people seem to sing in adolescence. Lansdale (1998) suggests that:

It is relatively easy to identify reasons or make excuses - physiological changes during puberty, uninspiring or inappropriate repertoire available, too many leisure activities on offer...not to mention the decidedly 'uncool' image that singing in choirs can conjure up in the mind of the average teenager. (Lansdale, 1998, p. 3)

## The choral animateur

The idea of using the term *animateur* in the title was rooted in the experience of a BFYC member who had come across the term in relation to musicians, usually instrumentalists, working in schools in Scandinavia. My research revealed that the term *animateur* was not used widely in the UK and, if used at all, was used in the context of dance and mime. In the last decade one of the only references to the use of the word 'animateur' in the media in the UK was in *The Guardian* (25th Jan. 1991: 25), in an article by David Rowan: *How Language Mirrors Culture*. He states that: an expanding term is *animateur*, one who communicates difficult concepts and brings them to life.

Minutes from the BFYC *Finance and General Purpose Committee* in 1992 state that the aim of the proposed Choral Animation Schemes would be to stimulate choral singing amongst young people in the region selected, in line with the aims and objectives of the BFYC.

The principal tasks for the BFYC Choral Animateur were to:

- seek to develop voice production and part-singing, as well as general musicianship within a wide repertoire of composed and improvised styles.
- devise in partnership with schools a balanced annual programme.
- arrange support and training for teachers in vocal techniques.

The Choral Animateur would be a singer with good organisation and inter-personal

skills. Experience of voice and choir training with young people would be essential along with an understanding of how schools work. The contracts would be for two to three years, and the Animateur would be expected to work for two days per week. The interviewees were to be interviewed by a panel of choral experts and representatives from the educational authority to which the successful applicant was to be appointed. The interviewees would be required to teach a class of children a piece of vocal music which involved part-singing.

## **The scale of the choral animateur projects since 1992**

The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) statistics for the UK in September 1998 reveal that there are 209 educational authorities, or equivalent, in the UK, educating 8,295,000 students between the ages of 5 and 15 years of age. The BFYC Choral Animateur programmes have now been set up in 26 educational authorities and each project works in approximately 10 schools reaching about 5000 students. (There are currently many authorities waiting to begin a scheme). Consequently, 1.5 % of children of school age in the UK have now been exposed to the scheme since 1992. For every school age child in the country to experience the project at this moment in time, 1000 Choral Animateurs would be needed! If such a situation was required, a strategy of a rolling programme would need to be created.

## **The research: The Brent study (J.A. Hill 1998)**

The aim and value of the evaluation of all of the London-based projects is to provide an assessment and to form a judgment of the overall effectiveness of the schemes. The aim is not to provide answers but to highlight the projects and their outcomes. Essentially, the aim is grounded on the positive premise that the purpose of the evaluation is to facilitate further development in the field of Choral Education.

### **The London Borough of Brent**

A striking feature of Brent as an area in London is the contrasts that exist in its economic, environmental, ethnic and social make-up. Its population is the most culturally and racially diverse of all the educational authorities in England and Wales. The black and Asian communities account for over 40% of the local population and almost one in ten residents are Irish-born.

Contrasts are also evident in the borough's physical and social character. Some areas in the south of the borough experience high levels of social deprivation, including high unemployment, over-crowding and poor housing, whereas areas in the north are characterised by tree-lined streets and pleasant open spaces. The area stretches around seven miles from east to west providing education for 34,000 pupils of school age.

## Methodology

The choice of research procedure was limited in the Brent study as the evaluation was to be carried out retrospectively and so methods such as testing pre and post and observation were not possible. In terms of traditional research strategies as defined by Robson (1993), the procedure chosen was a case study, which he describes as, "the development of detailed, intensive knowledge about a single 'case'." (Robson, 1993:40)

Bassey (1981) describes a case study as something which will, "provide the reader with a three-dimensional picture and will illustrate relationships, micropolitical issues and patterns of influences in a particular context." (Bassey, 1981:86)

On the basis of the variety of roles and personnel, six key interviewees were chosen and information regarding the background to the project was collected and used to contextualise the data.

### The Interviews

A check-list style of semi-structured interview was used for the heads of music departments as it was considered that their degree of involvement was similar. However, a more unstructured style of interview, where the interview constitutes a flow of consciousness on the part of the interviewee, was used for other professionals, such as the Animateur and Directors of Schools whose involvement might have been more wide-ranging. All interviews were recorded on a tape-recorder.

### The Outcome

Following the the transcriptions of the interview, the data was summarised under two headings:

- (a) factual knowledge about the scheme in operation
- (b) personal feelings and general comments about the scheme

#### Factual Knowledge:

- All thirteen High Schools in Brent were given the opportunity to take part in the project and the eight schools that responded were situated in the South of the Borough.
- The teachers that took part in the scheme, all of whom held music degrees, had little knowledge of what physiological changes took place in the adolescent voice and had few ideas of suitable repertoire before the Choral Animateur arrived; subsequently, considerable improvements were effected in both these areas.
- The schools in Brent had recently 'opted-out' of the control of the local education authority and become Grant Maintained. ( This was very much an initiative of the former Conservative party in the UK who were encouraging schools to become independent of local education authorities and to manage their own budgets. The new Labour govern-

ment is now insisting that schools opt in again!). Consequently, all schools, at the time of the Choral Animation project, were becoming autonomous and an infrastructure for music within the authority had virtually disappeared. There was no inspector for music or any advisory teachers for music as these jobs had been abolished due to lack of funding available to the borough under the new political dispensation.

- A festival was organised in the first year that brought schools together to sing. A Youth Choir was planned to take place outside school time but no one turned up.

- Teachers had been attracted to the scheme as they recognised their own lack of skill and knowledge regarding singing.

- The Animateur thought the job description was 'perfect' for him when he saw the advertised post because he was a singer and had worked as a classroom teacher in schools.

### Personal feelings:

- All interviewees felt that the Brent Choral Animation scheme had had a positive effect on the singing featuring in Brent schools. However, the overbearing strength of feeling was that the political situation in the educational authority in Brent had worked against some of the principles of the project, in particular the lack of a borough-wide infrastructure had made the coming together of schools in the project difficult.

- All mentioned feelings of professional isolation and the perceived need to work with other colleagues involved in arts education.

- It was felt that the work in the High Schools would have been more effective if the students had been given a foundation in choral education in the Primary School.

- It was generally felt that the Youth Choir did not happen because many students are not encouraged by their families to take part in after-school activities that may not be recognised by their own culture.

- Disquiet was expressed over the issue of communicating the meaning of the term Choral Animateur to students and colleagues. Feelings were expressed that the word 'choral' had old fashioned connotations of singing in choirs and did not relate to the singing experiences, or perceptions of singing, that many young people have in our society today. Feelings of despair at the lack of musical support for students and teachers featured heavily.

- Feelings were expressed about the reasons why it is so difficult to get suitable repertoire to sing and it was generally suggested that it is because of the broad cultural intake in the schools and the unsuitability of some of the 'old school music'. Some teachers felt nostalgia for the past era when, they considered, 'everyone sang in schools'. Corporate singing was said to be almost non-existent.

- Music teachers felt that there was confusion as to what constitutes acceptable singing in our society today. It was generally felt that pop-singing and singing of a trained singer were seen respectively as low and high forms of vocal activity on a continuum of acceptability in choral education. Many had not attempted singing with their students as they felt self-conscious about their lack of vocal competence. Some felt that the idea of singing as a natural activity is being lost in our society.

- New teachers have little training in Higher Education to prepare them for

teaching singing and all felt they had received no preparation as students.

- The animateur felt that he had tried to do too much and suggested the need to develop effective ways to carry out his work and the need to reduce the level of professional stress.

- All criticised the fact that once the scheme had finished there was no further monitoring of the development of choral work in their schools.

- Most considered that they were more able to deal with singing in their schools as a result of the scheme but it was generally felt that more expertise in singing was necessary in order to continue.

- The Animateur expressed feelings of frustration that he was very much on his own while working on the project.

- All interviewees felt that the projects were often disruptive to the rest of the curriculum and took up a great deal of extra time to support.

## An evaluation of the findings

### Strengths

The data revealed that the scheme was generally effective in carrying out the main requirements of the job specification since the evidence demonstrated that, (i) singing for young people in secondary schools was stimulated and encouraged and (ii) teachers were given support and training in vocal technique.

### Weaknesses

There were major drawbacks in carrying out the project as evidenced by communication problems between schools in the authority who had 'opted-out' of the authority's control and those who were still under their control.

### An assessment of the findings

Evidence revealed in the research suggests that the work of the Choral Animateur (CA) could be made more effective if the following points were addressed:

- the CA needs to have a broader support base of professionals within the educational authority to work with, such as senior teachers and senior management representatives in schools.

- projects should start in the primary schools and continue through to secondary schools.

- schools need further support once the schemes have finished.

## Implications for further research

Further research related to areas raised in this study might include:

- an inquiry into teachers' understanding of the adolescent singing voice; and the possible links between this level of understanding and pedagogical practice;
  - a study of approaches that are effective in getting young people to become involved in choral activities;
  - reasons why teachers feel the need to work collaboratively in music education.
- On-going research into the effectiveness of Choral Animation Schemes in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the London Borough of Harrow and the London borough of Islington.

Although these areas of London are distinctly different in terms of economic, environmental, ethnic and social make-up, the outcomes of the projects are proving to be very similar. All Animateurs have been highly valued by the schools, essentially because there is a recognised need for singing to take place in schools and because few have teachers who feel confident to lead vocal activities. Recent comments from head-teachers resonate with those from the earlier Brent interviews:

Singing with the Animateur just released the children's spirits and seemed to enable them to learn.

I feel that the effect of singing has had an incredible unifying effect on the staff and students.

Singing seems to be so therapeutic so surely we should be doing more?

It is so difficult to know what to sing nowadays!

The idea of choral singing is outdated.

I am determined to continue this work once the scheme is finished.

I have no knowledge about the physiological changes that take place in the young voice.

All the Choral Animateurs acknowledged that the advertised post did seem ideal for them. However, the reality of working within schools and arranging singing events, often with little other professional support within the education authorities, has caused high levels of stress, suggesting that (a) BFYC needs to address the issue of Animateur induction and support, and (b) the current BFYC job and person description might need review to reflect the realities of the post in inner London boroughs. The animateurs have encountered many students and teachers who have experienced little or no singing opportunities in their education so far and have felt confused as to which approach, to help them,

would be most effective. Some Animateurs wonder if they will complete the projects, due to professional stress, and suggest that the schemes might be shorter and more intensive.

The main similarities between the Brent Study and the new evaluations so far are that the schemes have enhanced the profile of singing in the schools generally and all Animateurs have experienced frustration in carrying out the schemes. The difference is that the new evaluations are all based in Primary schools and so far all Head teachers have indicated their intention to continue the choral work once the projects come to an end.

## Summary

The effect of these Choral Animation Schemes is determined by a complex make-up of government policy, including policy from OFSTED and QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority), LEA control, schools, teachers, pupils and the Choral Animateur themselves, all of whom may have differing views as to what should constitute 'improving choral education', as there is no national policy for choral education. Until that time comes, the schemes will remain a vital means, it seems, of providing young people with the unique experience of making music through singing, something that is being denied to many at this time.

Essentially, Choral Animation projects are having a positive effect on many people's lives, as is evidenced in the research, and the concept of the projects is raising issues, which, if addressed, may contribute to the growth of the schemes and heightened awareness of the need to investigate choral education in schools in the UK.

However, the high level of stress experienced by the Choral Animateurs, as evidenced in the research, suggests that the role of the Choral Animateur and the realities of working in the mentioned London boroughs requires further consideration by BFYC. There is also a significant question to be answered as to whether the BFYC scheme is having any long-term, system wide benefits.

## Choral education in the new millennium

Improved choral education in the UK, possibly delivered through projects such as those of the BFYC, needs to be based on a more focussed understanding of what the concept of singing means in our society today and not, as is often the case in the UK, on a foundation of romanticised nostalgia about the way things used to be. Only then can we begin to create a realistic vision of an effective way to improve Choral Education for all children and young people in our schools.

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