

The power of simply singing together in the classroom

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J.H. Nketia, perhaps the foremost African musicologist once said, "A village that has no organized music or neglects singing and dancing is said to be dead" (Chernoff 1979 p.36). I believe what Nketia is referring to, in this quote, is the importance of music in building a sense of community and the people's relationship to the society they live in.

Nketia's words are central to the focus of my talk today. Let's imagine for a minute that the village Nketia speaks of is a community of learners or a classroom of students. If the lack of music or singing and dancing defines a classroom of learners without life, I shudder to think how many classrooms would, in Nketia's description, be close to dying. Is this the case and what can be done to change the situation?

To begin, I would like to encourage you, as musicians, as music educators, as teachers committed to providing quality music programs in schools, to open your minds to the possibility that everyone should and could sing with their students in their classrooms. For some of you this idea may be one you can wholeheartedly support. It seems like a logical and sensible remedy to Nketia's 'dead' classroom. But others of you may have serious doubts.

Imagine this scenario: a classroom teacher implements singing with her students when in fact she herself knows next to nothing about music theory, certainly does not have a trained voice and moreover is singing with goals that are very different from those of the music specialist. How could this possibly be a good idea? Wouldn't this hurt the music program? Damage the quality of the children's singing voices?

To find answers to some of these questions I've raised, I want to describe an incident that has haunted me for quite some time. Recently, I coordinated an arts program for a non-profit organization that provided an artist-in-residence program for a very large elementary school in the greater Boston area. One day I was at the school, wandering through the hallways after observing one of the artists at work with students when I bumped into the head of the Music Department.

As she and I continued walking down the hall, she gave me a brief update on the types of music programs her department was providing for the students across this particular school district. As we passed one of the kindergarten rooms, we heard the voices of children singing. She stopped short, turned abruptly to me and said, "Don't you just hate it when you hear some of these teachers singing with their students? They sing so badly and are so out of tune. I just can't stand it."

Much to her surprise and chagrin I responded with a quick and rather emphatic, "No. It actually makes me quite pleased. At least they're singing." She simply looked shocked and turned and walked away. Our conversation came to an abrupt end.

But, this brief encounter has remained in my mind for quite some time. It holds great weight in the following discussion, a discussion about the role of music in the schools that does not replace or diminish the role of the music specialist. It does not replace the choral music program. Rather, it is about the possibility of creating 'living' classrooms by having every classroom participate in singing. It is a discussion about having every teacher sing with her students and not leaving this task only to the music specialist or choral director.

Is this even possible? Are there classroom teachers, particularly those who have not had musical training, who are willing to sing with their students? To answer these questions, I would like to share another story with you.

Several years ago I began teaching for a M.Ed. program entitled, 'Creative Arts in Learning', which is the creation of Lesley College located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This rather unique program encourages classroom teachers, kindergarten through high school, to integrate the arts into their curriculum in order to enhance learning for all students. This particular Master's program is offered in sites across Massachusetts as well as in sixteen other states in the United States and in Israel.

I teach the opening, introductory course of the program and the music course. In both courses I include a lot of singing. I am always a bit astonished the first evening of the course by the manner in which many students introduce themselves. Often I hear, "Hi my name is Sophie and I can't sing". Or, "Hi my name is Kate and I need to tell you that I'm really not at all musical".

After hearing these introductory responses time and again, I realize that I actually don't know what they mean when they say, "I can't sing". I was very curious and wanted to explore this further. Does it mean they are unable to actually make a sound? Or their vocal chords don't work? Or might it mean they aren't able to sing in a manner that matches the vocal quality of their favorite singer. What exactly do they mean?

Upon further interrogation, I found that in most cases they are referring, as song leader Nick Page states in his book, 'Sing and Shine On!' to a perceived gap that is very prevalent in the United States. It is a gap between the talented and the untalented. The gap applies not only to our ability to understand music but also to perform it. But this gap need not exist. Yes, there are talented musicians, but the so-called untalented have far more abilities than anyone has previously realized" (Page, 1995 p.137). In most cultures of the world, this gap between the talented and untalented does not exist (Blacking 1984 p.43-52). In Western cultures, certainly in the U.S., we maintain this 'specialist' view of the arts. You must have talent to sing; otherwise don't bother.

Perhaps this mind set is symptomatic of United States culture. It is certainly a fact that many general education teachers in the U.S. are extremely self-conscious about their singing voices. The majority of teachers receive no musical training as part of their teacher preparation program. Thus, they do not include singing in any part of their classroom curriculum. They have not made any connections to the ways singing enhances curriculum

and promotes a positive classroom environment. They have rarely had positive musical experiences themselves and therefore graciously hand over the task of singing to the music specialist or the choral director.

The first task, I believe, is to shift this paradigm. Singing in the classroom is not about identifying the talented. It is not an exercise, in my opinion, of striving to sing perfectly. It is, in my opinion, about participation.

In a recent study trip to Ghana I began to understand the philosophy of participation. The Ghanaians truly believe that "without participation, there is no meaning." (Chernoff 1979 p.23) Singing and dancing create the community and establish the framework for communal integrity. The Ghanaians, as other Africans, hold completely different assumptions about the conditions of involvement in music. Music is not set apart from its social and cultural context. There is seldom a distinction between the audience and the musicians. Everyone is involved in some way, whether dancing, singing, playing, or shouting responses. There is no such thing as an untalented person. Everyone can make music. It's about being alive. (Page, 1995 p.12) I explain this philosophy to teachers enrolled in the Master's program at the beginning of the music course and they stare at me with disbelief.

However, after several sessions of singing together, where the major emphasis is on participation, not on mastering melody, rhythm or lyrics, the climate of the classroom and attitudes of these teachers shifts dramatically. The most resistant, scared and often cynical students, thoroughly convinced they aren't musical and convinced they will never be able to master singing themselves or with their students, find they are not only participating in singing but they are actually enjoying it.

Most surprisingly, given their positive experience with group singing, they return to their individual classrooms and initiate singing activities with their students. The results are astonishing. They return to share stories of ways that singing with their students has effected the entire classroom environment for learning. Their stories convinced me that singing could be a part of every classroom. Yes, it is possible. I have chosen three of their testimonials to share with you.

This first story is from a student who is an art specialist in an elementary school. She is deaf in one ear and she was told very early in her life to never sing. She said,

All my life I had been told I was tone deaf, that I shouldn't sing. I was scared to attend the music course. Would I be able to hear the notes, sing on key, understand my professor? What would I gain? In the end my classroom teaching was highly impacted by the course but the most significant contribution of the course goes beyond my professional experiences into my personal being. I discovered that music has indeed played a significant part in my life. I discovered that my music comprised of the most important element of my life – people. People are my music. I listen intensely to the sound of others. I judge feelings, thoughts, and actions by the sounds of other human beings. The sense of freedom I have achieved through this one connection has freed years of misconceptions and perceptions about music. I now sing along uninhibited by tone confusion for the sheer joy of calling out and celebrating; the concept of being alive is music. My discovery is life-long and eternal, never to be forgotten.

Another student who teaches elementary-age special education and is in the Master's program shared this story with me in a letter written after she completed the music course.

Many of my students I work with are 'selected mutes' which means they have chosen not to speak. Others in my class have severe language delays. Before attending the music course, it had not occurred to me to sing with my students. Why would I try to sing with children who don't speak? Aside from the fact that I actually couldn't imagine my students singing, I had no personal experience singing. So the idea of implementing singing in my classroom had not ever occurred to me. My previous educational training did not include any music training.

Her story continues,

Since attending your music course I have instituted singing every morning. And to my surprise the children who choose not to speak, DO sing.

She goes on to say,

One very hectic Monday morning I didn't sing after morning meeting time. As we started our work that day, suddenly one child, who rarely speaks, called out in a loud voice, "We didn't sing yet!" I quickly responded by asking everybody to stand up. The room was instantly filled with song. Singing in my classroom has brought the joy of being able to celebrate all voices in the classroom.

Here is one final testimonial from a Master's student who teaches first grade.

Before the music course, I never wanted to sing with my class because I thought that my voice was terrible. After returning from the weekend course, I tried some of the songs I learned in class with my students. One boy was at first afraid to sing because he didn't know the words. Now he is the biggest supporter for singing everyday. Music now plays an important role in our day. I'm no longer self-conscious about my voice. It doesn't bother me. My children tell me I have a beautiful voice. Little kids are great that way.

These stories contain content that is quite familiar to music specialists and choral directors. Singing is powerful, affecting us emotionally, physically and spiritually. Many of us have had years of experience, watching the joy on children's faces, the eagerness and excitement, the interest and focus of the group as children participating in singing as part of a school day. Singing can be a common and natural phenomenon. And, the power of singing is not surprising. I believe you who are music educators could construct a list, in a matter of minutes that includes hundreds of reasons why singing is a powerful educational tool. But for those who have never experienced singing with their students, the phenomenon of singing is a new discovery.

Inspired by these stories and still haunted by the Music Department head's comment about singing, I began to explore further. **Who** are the classroom teachers who actually do sing with their students and **why** do they sing? **What** do they see as the

impact of their singing? Do they have the same goals as the music specialist or do they see their role as different? Is it possible to create a school community that honors music in many forms? I thought if I found the answers to some of these questions I would gain insight into ways to make singing possible for all classroom teachers.

Driven by my own passion and curiosity about these questions, I recently interviewed three elementary school teachers who regularly sing with their students. I began by asking them specifically why they sing and also what experience in their own lives lead them to feel confident singing with their students. Finally, I asked them about their goals in relationship to those of the music specialist.

Each interviewee provided me with very specific reasons why they sing with their students. When I compiled the data from the interviews the list was long and covered many educational components. Most of the responses fell into three major categories: classroom management, emotional and mental release, and skill building.

Singing, for these classroom teachers, provides a powerful impact on a classroom environment. Group singing enhances learning on many levels. It strengthens particular skills such as literacy and language development. It enhances listening skills, helps auditory memory, builds self-confidence, teaches performance skills and builds group cohesiveness. Singing is, to them, energizing, calming, uplifting and creates a classroom atmosphere that promotes sharing, understanding and appreciation of the diverse school population.

These teachers have come to realize what researchers in the field of music, such as Don Campbell, have continued to prove. "Music charges the brain. The more we sing, the more we strengthen the communication between the two sides of the brain. Too often this connection has atrophied and learning has become one-sided" (Campbell 1989, p.66-67). "Brain research shows not only that people enjoy music, but also that it improves our brain development and even enhances skills in other subjects such as reading and math" (Weinberger 1998, p. 36-40).

When I asked these teachers how they 'knew' to sing with their students, all three recall positive musical experiences from their childhood. Each of their mothers always sang to them. Their family always sang in the car. They all took piano lessons. They attended symphony rehearsals. And interestingly, although they all participated in positive musical experiences as children, none of them received any musical training in preparation for teaching children.

As music educators, we know that singing is important. "Singing serves a basic function; it satisfies the hunger for mental stimulation" (Page 1995, p.38). Research in many scientific fields is now beginning to reveal what many cultures have believed for a long time, that singing is a living force, a force that affects us in many ways, inspiring us, healing us, calming us, and uniting us as communities" (Page 1995, p.16).

We as music educators are committed to the existence of singing. As demonstrated in these interviews, classroom teachers who do sing also have a clear appreciation and understanding of the value of singing in the classroom. It is also obvious that the music specialist and the classroom teacher have different goals for singing with their students. But, if singing is so very powerful, it must be available and encouraged by everyone in the learning environment.

I believe our responsibility as singers and as music educators is to encourage the self-defined 'non-singer' to include singing in the classroom. The benefits will be widespread. The results will affect the teachers, students, administrators, parents, families and anyone else who is part of the school community.

Children and teachers who experience singing as part of the classroom day will become more emotionally, physically and spiritually alive. The benefits will carry over to the music programs. Students who experience music in the classroom as positive and joyful will join the chorus, band or orchestra. Singing must not be saved for the unusual or special event or the specialist only; singing is a common phenomenon and must be shared by all.

If this were true, what does this have to do with us? What can we as music educators do? What is our responsibility? How can we start?

First, I believe, we must adopt the mind-set that all people can sing. Again to quote Page, "The quality of the voice is not as important as one thinks. What is important is enjoying singing. The spirit of singing effects students far more than the tonal quality" (Page 1995, p.136). Participation is essential. Without everyone participating there is no meaning. As I have discovered in my music courses, it is possible to change the attitudes of those self-defined non-singers.

Step two is simply to sing together. Get the school staff to sing together. Incorporate regular community sings at the beginning of all staff meetings. I guarantee that if, as Page suggests, "we all began the next school staff meeting with a song, the meeting would be much more efficient and the administration and staff would be much more likely to support music and the arts at all levels of education. Sometimes all the words in the world are useless compared to the emotional impact of singing a good song" (Page 1995, p.137). Simply getting people to sing, to enjoy it, to experience singing is the important first step. The familiar Zimbabwe proverb comes to mind once again, "If you can walk, you can dance, if you can talk, you can sing." Everyone can sing.

As music educators, we are very familiar with and spend a great deal of time selecting appropriate repertoire. Share some of that repertoire with colleagues. Suggest songs that enable groups to sound good, songs with energizing rhythms, songs that make you fully alive when you sing them. Suggest folk songs from a vast array of the world's cultures. Those songs have survived generations and provide an understanding of the culture and share an historical context.

And last, if possible, mentor classroom teachers in singing in the classroom. Singing, for the classroom teacher, builds creativity and compassion, enhances learning, and connects to the emotional frame of mind of the students. Provide a model for that kind of singing. Visit the classrooms, if possible, when the classroom teacher is in the room and sing together.

"Everyone is born with the potential to be a magnificent musician. When a child or a teacher thinks she has no talent, it is as if the light switch has been turned off" (Page 1995 p.149). An environment that encourages that light to continue to burn will enhance the full human potential of everyone involved. We will no longer be looking at a classroom without life. Our classrooms will be filled with the energy and life force needed fill our

minds, bodies and spirits and the whole educational enterprise will not only be more effective but more pleasurable.

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