

A Children and Parents' Choir in a Francophone Minority Setting: Singing and Belonging

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Abstract

This presentation highlights the sociocultural impact of a children and parents choir in a French language elementary school in Eastern Ontario. Members of the francophone community in Ontario are regularly exposed to the majority Anglophone culture through the media and various social activities and they have less opportunity to relate to the French culture. The French language school then becomes an essential institution for the preservation of its language and culture. Also, the role of the community is fundamental in promoting the French culture and ensuring its ethnolinguistic vitality. As such, cultural activities play an important role in the identity development and sense of belonging of French speaking Ontarians. More specifically, studies have put forward the impact of the arts on children's personal growth as well as on the development of their sense of belonging to the francophone community (Chagnon-Lampron & Haentjens, 2004). In this perspective, the children and parents choir brings together members of the francophone community in which children and parents alike can develop their musical abilities while gaining an awareness of the music of their culture and other cultures. As children are invited to participate in this activity with their parents, they are given the opportunity to experience choral singing, which they might not do in other circumstances. The children and parents choir in the francophone minority setting not only benefits a time for family and social gathering, it also incites the development of a sense of self through singing and musical activities.

Introduction

Singing or vocal activity appears to be a common phenomenon across cultures (Blacking, 1987; Small, 1980). When looking at an event like Festival 500 *Sharing the Voices*, a biennial, world-class international choral festival in St. John's, Newfoundland, choral singing is definitely an important activity in many cultures. The 2007 Festival featured choral groups from Australia, Canada, Ireland, Finland, Mexico, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Apart from being a musical function, collective singing is a social function as well. Cox (in Durrant & Himonides, 1998) states: "One of the great things that happens in choral groups is that people of all kinds and stations and abilities can get a very real sense of togetherness, and common concern, and accomplishment (p. 64)." Lannom (in Durrant & Himonides, 1998) adds: "There is no question but that, particularly in choral groups, people who are diverse in backgrounds, diverse in age, diverse in cultural environment, can relate very beautifully and get to understand each other through music participation (p. 64)." As such, the participants of Festival 500, children, adolescents, and adults from different regions of the world, gathered from July 1 to July 8, 2007 to sing and make music together.

Different types of choirs are typically formed according to age or gender. For example, the 2007 Festival 500 featured children choirs, youth choirs, adult choirs, women's choirs, and men's choirs. Choirs are also formed around particular settings, such as school choirs, university choirs, community choirs, chamber choirs, or philharmonic choirs. However, in the

literature on choral singing, there seems to be a lack of research on intergenerational choirs. In a preliminary literature review, I came upon two studies on intergenerational choirs. Bowers (1998) examines the attitudes of college students and senior citizens towards each other by incorporating components of a senior citizens' music program into the Adopt-A-Choir program established in a university music education/therapy program. Darrow, Johnson, and Ollenberger (1994) examine the effect of participation in an intergenerational choir on teens' and older persons' cross-age attitudes. In both of these studies, the choirs are made up of adolescents or young adults and senior adults. No such study seems to implicate a choir of children and adults.

An intergenerational choir has been put together in a French language elementary school in Eastern Ontario to encourage singing among children and their parents. The choir was initiated in 1998 by a parent who wished to counter the absence of a choir and reinforce the musical notions that children learned at school. I have been the choral conductor of the choir for the past three years. The following article reflects on the implications of such a choir among its members and in the Francophone community of Ontario: In the first section, the Francophone minority setting of Ontario will be discussed as well as the role that music and the arts play in that community; in the second section, the context of the choir will be described and; in the third section, a self-study perspective will be examined as a reflection about my role in the choir.

Singing in the Francophone Minority Setting of Ontario

In the Francophone communities of Canada, the school, the family, and the church have always played an important role (Gérin-Lajoie, 1996, 2001, 2002). It is through these three institutions that French language and culture was being transmitted from one generation to the next. Today, however, the influence of the church is diminishing and there are fewer exclusively French-speaking families. School is then called upon to play an important role within Francophone communities. Other than assuring the construction of knowledge and the socialization of students, the French language school is expected to transmit and promote French language and culture. To do so, the school has to establish various strategies to encourage the learning and teaching of the French language. In Ontario, a specific policy called *La Politique d'aménagement linguistique de l'Ontario* (2004) was established as a guide for school boards and school personnel offering intervention methods for the promotion of French language and culture.

However, according to Bernard (1997), the French language school faces an important contradiction. In the majority setting, the school is similar to the student's living environment and reproduces this environment, but in the minority setting, the French language school is an environment different from the everyday living environment of the students and thus, becomes a social change agent. The role given to the French language school is, therefore, quite complex and the expectations of parents and the community are sometimes excessive.

Nevertheless, the French language school is an important institution for the Canadian Francophone minority. In such a context, music and the arts are seen as essential elements for the promotion of French language and culture. Arts and music are considered important for youths' personal growth, for the development of their cultural identity, and for their sense of belonging to the Francophone community (Haentjens & Chagnon-Lampron, 2004; Lowe, 1998a, 1998b, 2004,). However, outside of the school, social and cultural activities such as arts, music, or sports usually take place in English, the Anglophone majority language. Children rarely have the opportunity to completely interact in French except at school. This is why social and cultural

activities, such as the children and parents' choir, are important for the sense of belonging of Francophones in Ontario.

Music and choral singing can also provide means by which people can recognize and express self-identity and cultural identity. Stokes (in Durrant & Himonides, 1998) puts it this way:

The point is surely that music is itself a potent symbol of identity; like language (and attributes of language such as accent and dialect), it is one of those aspects of culture which can, when the need to assert *ethnic identity* arises, most readily serve this purpose. Its effectiveness may be twofold; not only does it act as a ready means for the identification of different ethnic or social groups, but it has potent emotional connotations and can be used to assert and negotiate identity in a particular powerful manner (p. 65).

As part of a multicultural community, the children and parents' choir is not only a means for its members to consolidate their identity as Francophones living in Ontario, but also to share elements of various cultures through singing. An important component of the choir is to introduce and reinforce French language folk songs, but also to create an awareness of the music of different cultures.

A Study on the Children and Parents' Choir

As social and cultural activities are important elements of the Francophone community in Ontario, the context of the children and parents' choir deserves to be examined more closely. To do so, I suggest a two-fold study: First, I examine the evolution of the choir through documentary research by looking at newspaper articles as well as concert programs; secondly, I adopt a self-study perspective to reflect upon my role as conductor through the lenses of *Self as teacher* (Baird, 2004) and *Self in teaching* (Baird, 2004). The methodology consists of analyzing the personal journal that I kept over the past two years (I did not keep one during the first year: I will continue journaling during the next season). The methodology also consists of looking at my personal notes and my rehearsal plans and analyzing the discussions that I have had with the founder of the choir (who is also a parent and a member of the choir) and discussions that I plan to have with someone who the literature on self-study calls a "critical friend." A critical friend is usually someone who is familiar with the context of study, but who is also external and has an open mind about the situation. This person is there to help the researcher reflect and to consider different perspectives on various events (Schuck & Russell, 2005). For example, my critical friend could be the previous conductor of the choir.

The research questions underlying the study are as follows:

1. How has the choir evolved since its beginning?
2. Examining the *Self as teacher*, how do I see my role in this choir? What have I learned in the three years that I have conducted this choir?
3. Examining the *Self in teaching*, what do I value in my teaching/conducting of this choir? What do I do in my teaching? What are the challenges that I face?

The Evolution of a Children and Parents' Choir

Francophonía is the name of our multi-age, intergenerational, and multicultural choir that was founded to address needs of the students of a French language elementary school in Ontario and those of their family members. The age of the members ranges from three years to adult. The choir meets for rehearsal once a week for one hour and sings at various events at the school and in the community. The choir was initiated in the fall of 1998 with a student from the local university as the choral conductor. At that time, the choir was a year-round activity and sang at various events, such as the school annual picnic, the school's Christmas concert, the twentieth anniversary of the school, and various concerts in the community. In 2002, another university student took over the role of conductor and it was then that the choir adopted its name. In 2004, it was decided that the choir would become a winter activity only, from January to May, to give the members the opportunity to participate in other activities throughout the year.

In the winter of 2005, I took on the role of choral conductor. At that time, I was a Master's student in Education, after having completed a Bachelor of Music and a Bachelor of Education. As postsecondary studies can sometimes be overwhelming and take up a lot of time, conducting the choir was a great opportunity for me to make music again and to develop my conducting abilities. Since then, the choir has sung in the school carnival, their annual spring concert, as well as in nursing homes and retirement homes in the community. Over the years, the choir has ranged from 20 to 57 members. Next year, the choir will be celebrating its tenth anniversary.

A Self-study Perspective

When discussing the nature of self-study in teaching and teacher education, Baird (2004) considers five possible interpretations of "Self:"

1. Self in teaching
2. Self as teacher
3. Self as researcher of my teaching or of me as a teacher
4. Self as researcher of teaching, teacher education, or of educational research (but not expressly of me doing these practices)
5. Self as researcher of self-study (not expressly of my own self-study)

The current study examines the first two interpretations: Self in my teaching practices and Self as a teacher/choral conductor.

Self in teaching

Baird (2004) describes the Self in teaching interpretation this way: "studying myself acting as a teacher or teacher educator: my description is of what I do as I teach (p. 1445)." To examine this interpretation of Self, I reflected upon my goals and values for this choir, the challenges that I face, and the strategies that I use in my teaching. My main goal for this choir is to give the

children and families of the Francophone community the opportunity to get together and get to know one another by singing and having fun. The choir gives the students of the school the opportunity to interact with other children from different grades and it creates a context where the parents can meet and get to know each other. Another goal that I have for this choir is to get it out into the community and singing at various events. Sharing their repertoire of songs gives the members of the choir a sense of accomplishment and acts a means to express their sense of belonging to the community.

In the past three years as conductor, I have also come upon a few challenges. Considering the young age of some of the members, the most prominent challenge I face is to maintain everyone's focus and attention during rehearsals. Secondly, the intergenerational aspect of the choir makes it a challenge in selecting appropriate repertoire for all age groups. I need to consider what will please and be appropriate to the voices of the young ones as well as the adults. Thirdly, the rehearsal space can sometimes be a challenge. For example, last winter, our rehearsals were held in a classroom where the space was fairly restricted. We had to move the desks and chairs around to give us enough room to sing and then put them back in their specific places after rehearsal. This made me feel uneasy as I did not want the teacher whose classroom this was to find her classroom untidy the next morning. Finally, I found myself adapting my teaching and conducting strategies from year to year. One of the most important strategies with such a choir is to vary the activities. During a typical rehearsal, we begin with a short physical and vocal warm-up where I often introduce various movements that will please the children (such as pretending to be a puppet whose strings are being pulled up and then let loose, pretending to get dressed to play outside on a cold winter day, breathing rapidly like a dog after a run...). After the warm-up, we sing a familiar song and then continue with newer repertoire. Over the years, I have learned that the time spent on each song needs to be short, usually not more than ten minutes. Throughout the rehearsal, I also introduce other musical activities such as clapping rhythms and learning note names to give a break to the voice and to add variety. I also add movement during a rehearsal to allow the singers to stretch their bodies. Another important strategy that I have discovered is to give the children the opportunity to participate actively and to take the lead. For example, during certain activities, I will invite a child to the front to take on the role of conductor while I take his or her seat (they enjoy this a lot and often find it funny!). Lastly, I have begun to learn how to adapt my conducting techniques and gestures according to the age of the singers in order to be understood without having to speak a word. For example, bringing my arms together and gently moving them from side to side as if rocking a baby indicates to the children to sing softly and sweetly. My facial expressions also greatly influence the sound of the singers.

Self as teacher

As described by Baird (2004), the Self as teacher interpretation implies "studying myself in the role of a teacher or teacher educator: my description is of *what it is for me to be* a teacher or teacher educator (p. 1445)." To examine myself as a teacher and choral conductor of the children and parents' choir, I have begun reflecting on my role in the choir and on what I have learned over the past three years. I have found that I sometimes take on various roles in the choir. The first role, and maybe the most evident one, is the role of conductor. My primary task is to beat the tempo and ensure that everyone sings together. In the role of choral conductor, I am also usually the one who decides on the dynamics and the expression of the piece and will choose my gestures accordingly. However, I also play the role of teacher in the choir. During our

rehearsals, I find myself teaching various musical elements such as tempo, rhythm, note reading, and dynamics. I teach elements of singing – how to properly use the voice and how to warm up adequately before a singing session. Considering the young age of some of the choir members, the third role I adopt is the role of entertainer. In order to maintain everyone's attention and to keep things rolling during an hour-long rehearsal, I need to be alive and expressive and I need to introduce a variety of interesting and fun musical activities and games. My fourth role is what Gohier (2002) calls a *passeur culturel*, or a cultural agent. Strongly influenced by the Anglophone majority culture, the repertoire of songs of many children does not include folk songs of their culture. As such, one of my main goals in conducting this choir is to introduce French Canadian folk songs, as well as songs of different cultures.

Through examining the different roles that I adopt as teacher and choral conductor of the choir as well as the goals, challenges, and strategies present in my teaching, I have become more aware of who I am as a teacher and what it means to me to conduct the children and parents' choir. This examination has given me the opportunity to reflect upon my growth as a teacher and conductor over the past three years and to evaluate how I can still change or modify certain strategies. This experience has been, and continues to be, a most valuable one for me.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the children and parents' choir, *Francophonie*, is an important activity in the Francophone community. The members of the choir are given the opportunity to socialize in French, become acquainted with French Canadian culture by learning French folk songs as well as songs of other cultures, and most importantly, they get to sing and make music together!

Research in the context of this choir could be pursued by adopting an ethnographic perspective that would look more closely at the social and cultural aspects of the choir and examine what this activity means to the participants. Further questions could be asked, such as the following: What do the singers and choir director learn by participating in the choir? What does it mean to them to be part of the choir? How can the adults serve as role models to the children in the choir? How can children serve as role models to other children in the choir? How does the school contribute to this kind of intergenerational singing practice?

Overall, the children and parents' choir brings together members of the Francophone community in which children and parents alike can develop their musical abilities while gaining an awareness of the music of their culture and other cultures. As children are invited to participate in this activity with their parents, they are given the opportunity to experience choral singing, which they might not do in other circumstances. The children and parents' choir in a Francophone minority setting not only provides an opportunity for family and social gathering, it also incites the development of a sense of self through singing and musical activities.

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