Vocal Practice in Spanish Primary Schools

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Abstract

The need for investigation arises from a real concern derived from my practice in the training of preservice primary music teachers, some of whom are reluctant to sing, and even display vocal problems. The study aims at filling a gap in the research of teachers' perspectives on singing in school, which will help develop a research-based singing pedagogy.

This study tried to find out how singing is practiced at primary schools, and to understand it in its context. A qualitative case study strategy of inquiry was used, focused on the vocal practice of two music teachers in two schools in Madrid. Data collection techniques included non-participant observations, the open and semi-structured interviews, field notes and journals, and the analysis of documents and materials.

The data were collected was made during the 2006-2007 academic year. The analysis and interpretation of data reveal that in two vocal practices singing had a predominant place, with similarities and differences that produced two styles of vocal practice. Both teachers made a systematic evaluation of the vocal progress of students, and offered two suited vocal models adapted to children's vocal characteristics. The context is determinant and affects the continuity of vocal practice or its absence, as well as the correlation between perceptions and actions of the teachers.

Significant implications for teacher training are derived from this study, related to the necessity, nature and approaches of vocal training. We need to think about the convenience of typifying the way that the technical vocal training must be carried out, designing the role of the music teacher, and defining and systematizing which is the right singing voice model that he or she must offer in the classroom.

Rationale and Aims

This investigation came about due to a real concern arising from my teaching practice as lecturer in vocal training at the Faculty of Education (Complutense University of Madrid). Some of my students, future specialists in teaching primary music, displayed reluctance and a variety of vocal problems when it came to singing.

This study aims to understand the problems arising from the process of teaching and learning singing within general education, and to pave the way for the development of specific didactics, which could be of real benefit for schools. It also serves to compensate for the lack of research in this area.

Three main questions guided the study: 1) What is the nature of singing as it is practiced in primary school? Various factors were considered: a) The role of singing in the classroom. b) The importance that it is given. c) The technical vocal work that is carried out. d) The evaluation of vocal progress. e) Continuity and structuring of vocal practice throughout the primary school. f) The methodology employed in the teaching of songs. g) The repertoire that is sung, and the criteria used when selecting it.

2) What is the nature of the vocal model offered by music teachers in the classroom? This question stems from the previous one and is concerned with the characteristics of the vocal model, which teachers offer in the classroom when speaking and singing. It aims to discover the interaction, if any, between vocal training, vocal model and classroom practice, and teachers' perceptions of this.

3) What are primary teachers' beliefs with regard to singing in school classrooms, and in what measure do they correspond to their actions? The third question aims to discover teachers' perceptions in this area and to look for the connections, and possible contradictions, between them and the teachers' actions in light of the influence of different contexts.

According to Bresler (2004), to understand school music it is necessary to carry out an in-depth study into the contexts that "shape and define" it. She states that there are three contexts that interact with each other: the "macro context," comprising the cultural and social values; the "meso context," comprising the structures and goals of the school system; and the "micro context," referring to teachers' aims and experience.

Methodology

This study was based on two cases. Data collection methods were those associated with a qualitative methodology such as non-participant observation, open or semi-structured interviews, field notes, and analysis of documents and materials used in the classroom or supplementary material used for teaching practice or enrichment.

Research Design

The overall setting for the study was the primary education schools of the Madrid Autonomous Community. Criteria were developed for the selection of possible case studies based on the principle of maximum variation, in order to seek contrast. After reviewing the initial sample, two teachers were selected because of their high motivation in teaching singing, and having contrasting profiles and training. Equally important was their enthusiasm in participating in the study. The field study was carried out during the 2006-2007 academic year. After transcription, some categories or principles emerged from the data that steered and organized the process of analysis and interpretation.

Methodological triangulation was carried out by means of observation, interview, and study of documents. In the second case, I also considered it appropriate to triangulate using information supplied by different people.

Analysis of Data

After completing the process of data analysis and interpretation, I considered, in each case, relevant factors such as profile, teacher beliefs, context, teaching style, vocal practice, vocal model, or repertoire.

Case study 1: Cecilia

The first case study concerns a teacher with an elementary level of music education, with a delicate voice, and whose teacher beliefs are the product of her life experiences. Music and dance were not significant parts of her childhood, though theatre was. Due to poor teacher

practice she did not sing during adolescence. She discovered music during teacher training, and felt the need to train and prepare herself. She developed herself within the realm of certain figures in musical pedagogy and with some of the most important methodologies of our times. She has also developed a continuous reflection on her own teacher practice. Cecilia's profile is, therefore, that of a dynamic, lively professional engaged in a continuous process of learning and reflection.

The context is characterized by a lack of conflicts. Cecilia is highly regarded and has managed to secure two sessions of music a week for her students. Her teaching style is interactive and favours a classroom dynamics based on rules, which lead to habit formation and encourage self-regulation and involvement.

Cecilia's vocal practice reveals two approaches to singing. On the one hand, she uses it as a resource for diverse learning such as the discrimination of beat and phrase, timbre, intensity, or lyrical content, or she may turn to song as the principal means of creating and structuring activities. On the other hand, she considers singing to be an end in itself, echoing the ideas of Phillips (1992), when he points out that singing is learned behaviour which transcends the singing of songs and which can be improved through vocal instruction. This translates into practice as a thorough approach covering all the parameters on which the development of the ability to sing is based, from both the psychological and physiological points of view. She works on awareness of the body, posture, breathing, and emission, and she structures practice appropriately. With regard to those children who do not intone, she detects and categorises, both individually and in groups, her student's vocal problems, and, if individual follow-up is not possible, she sets objectives and specifies strategies for achieving them. All students, regardless of gender, sing in all years of study.

Cecilia is aware of the didactic implications of the vocal model which she herself transmits when speaking and singing. This awareness makes it a cause for constant consideration, so that vocal training has come to be one of the core objectives of her ongoing training as a teacher. She knows her voice and makes an effort to adapt her emission to that of the children, even though, as a woman and a soprano, it is already very close to theirs. When Cecilia resorts to other vocal models she looks for quality and suitability.

Regarding the repertoire, she aims for it to be of use both in and outside of the classroom. She uses educational songs, world music, and traditional repertoire, placing special importance on traditional Spanish repertoire, which she values in itself, with important educational implications. Cecilia is very rigorous about the criteria of selection of the repertoire that she uses.

Case study 2: Pilar

Pilar holds degrees in piano and in education. She has sung since childhood and continues to sing contralto in high quality amateur choirs, although she has no formal training in singing. On her own initiative, she directs the school choir. Her ideas as a teacher are based on her training and personal profile, and, above all, on her thoughts about the context in which her teacher practice develops, and the interaction between them.

Based on the Bresler (2004) concept of macro context are the parameters of dominant cultural and social perceptions on the teaching of music and the continuously changing legislation which limits the time allotted to music education.

Within the meso context, regarding the school management are the latent problems about actions or omissions with regard to music or the choir. There are two specialists teaching music.

Spanish primary education is divided into three stages of two years each. The first stage students are six and seven years old, the second stage are eight and nine, and the third stage are ten and eleven. In the first and second stages, the two teachers work independently, but they share the third stage. The conflict between specialists arises from their differing ideas with regard to certain important aspects of teaching and music. In the micro context, there is a conflict between the way in which the teacher views musical education and the possibilities of putting this into practice. There is only one session of music a week.

Singing occupies an important place within music teaching for Pilar. The teaching of singing in the first and the third stages will be treated separately, since the other specialist teacher teaches the second stage.

Vocal practice in the first stage also goes beyond simply singing songs. Pilar uses singing as a resource for the development of ability, talent, and attitude. Analysis of the data shows that singing is the unifying theme of music lessons during the first stage. Students sing both solo and together. Pilar combines movement and dramatization with singing, and uses lyrics as another means of encouraging integration. Lyrical content includes transversal themes of other areas of knowledge. A cappella vocal music is used frequently as a means of linking diverse activities. On the one hand, it was instrumental for working on different skills or talents such as movement, spatial awareness, rhythmic coordination, laterality, dramatization, recognition of tempo, intensity, beat and phrase, aesthetic appreciation, and understanding of historical songs and on the other hand, attitudes such as loss of inhibition. Pilar pays careful attention to specific vocal factors such as breathing, emission, pitch, articulation, and diction. Technical work is carried out through the songs and vocal exercise sequences. Regular individual follow-up allows her to check the needs and progress of her students and to detect possible vocal problems. Motivation is high and gender difference is not a factor.

Vocal practice in the third stage is in stark contrast. Children lack motivation; they do not intone, or they sing another melody, and singing out of tune is common. The break which occurred in the second cycle may explain the lack of motivation and practice. Pilar teaches in the first cycle and when she picks up again with the children in the third cycle they have lost both the habit of singing and the enjoyment of it. Gender difference is a factor.

The choir is Pilar's personal project; a voluntary activity in which children from the second and third stages participate. It is a mixed choir. Vocal work forms part of each session. Care is taken with pitch, and it is corrected. Breathing is worked on directly during the musical works. I did not observe any mention of relaxation or posture. Pilar takes extreme care with the sound, the dynamics, and the tempi without losing sight of all the parameters of the lyrics: diction, articulation, phrasing, as well as the specific phonetics of each language, be it Hebrew, Italian, or many other languages. The children are highly motivated. They have won various prizes and have made a recording. Whether they are boys or girls, the children have a different attitude to the rest of their peers in the third stage with regard to singing. They sing, they are in tune, and they enjoy it.

When Pilar gives vocal examples she lightens and clears her voice. In fact, as a woman, she does not have to worry about the possibility that her emission could disconcert and confuse the youngest and most inexperienced, since she emits at the same frequency as the children. Belonging to the contralto range, in which Pilar sings, can imply the need to seek out certain aesthetic models for vocal "colour," "body," or "depth," but she displays great flexibility in adapting her emission and in searching for a lightness and clarity closer to the children's vocal characteristics.

Pilar takes care when selecting the repertoire and situates it in historical, geographical, and cultural contexts; traditional Spanish repertoire occupies an important place. The lyrics of these songs connect to the distant or recent past, the rural or the urban, the learned or the popular.

Conclusions

Analysis and interpretation of the data has led me to draw the following conclusions:

1. We are presented with two models of vocal practice – with similarities and differences – in which singing occupies an important place, and which have given rise to two styles of vocal practice. The first style was born of necessity and careful consideration, and results in a thorough and methodical approach. The second was born of experience and is more focused and spontaneous.
2. If we take it that continuity may be one of the keys to progression in vocal education, we find that, in the first case, there is continuity throughout the stage and increasing progression in vocal education both by year and by stage. Meanwhile, in the second case, there is a break during the second stage, in which students lose motivation, the habit of singing and their enjoyment of it.
3. Both teachers carry out systematic evaluations of student's vocal progress.
4. While Cecilia does not permit the influence of gender, Pilar does not question it and sees it as natural that the male children do not sing in the third stage.
5. In the process of learning songs, both teachers place great importance of a cappella singing, by imitation. The repertoire is varied, of good quality, and traditional Spanish repertoire occupies an important place and both situate it in the historical, geographical, and cultural contexts.
6. Both offer appropriate vocal models adapted to the children's vocal characteristics. For Cecilia, this topic is the object of careful consideration and she always looks for an appropriate vocal model. Pilar adapts her emission in pursuit of lightness and clarity.
7. The influence of context is decisive for teacher practice in both cases. In Cecilia's case the lack of conflict has an effect on the continuity of vocal practice. In Pilar's case the conflict between specialists causes the rupture.
8. Cecilia's actions in the classroom are in keeping with her beliefs on the subject. Not only does her practice reveal a lack of contradictions, but her attitude is to seek out possible contradictions and their resolution. Meanwhile, Pilar lives the contradiction between some of her pedagogical convictions and her teacher beliefs with regard to her actions in the third stage, whilst in the first stage and in the choir there is total agreement.

Coda

Significant recommendations for the training of teachers relating to the need, nature, and approaches of teacher's vocal training emerge from this study. It is important to outline the way in which technical-vocal training should be carried out, defining the role of the teacher in his or her subject area, and furthermore characterising, establishing, and standardising what constitutes the appropriate model of the singing voice that should be offered in the classroom, in order to equip the teaching profession with a solid frame of reference on the subject, keeping

in mind that the importance of vocal training is based on three interrelated factors: their own vocal health; the teaching implications of their emission when speaking and singing; and the training of their students.

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