

Empowering All Voices



Redefining what it means to be 'musical' and gaining confidence to sing

Foreword

Research shows that participating in music activities can be hugely beneficial for multiple areas of children's lives - increasing their educational attainment, supporting their health and wellbeing, and fostering vital social, emotional, and cognitive skills.¹ Despite this, delivering music education activities in the classroom with primary school children can be daunting. Teachers, who often do not identify themselves as musical, can experience anxiety when singing in front of others, and may be concerned about their perceived lack of technical ability. These factors can hinder their confidence to deliver classroom music activities, meaning that children miss out.

Voices Foundation works in partnership with teachers and school communities, providing focused Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) that equips and empowers all school staff, including those who do not believe that they can be musical, to participate in and lead music activities, both inside and outside of the classroom. By delivering accessible and inclusive whole-school music CPDL programmes, we aim to transform in-school music learning so that all children have access to a high-quality music education that enables them to find their voice.

From 2018 to 2021, Voices Foundation delivered and tested our Singing Schools model in collaboration with the pupils and staff at six David Ross Education Trust primary schools based across Hull, Grimsby, Northampton, and Kettering. The Singing Schools model is an intensive teacher development programme that supports schools to embed daily singing into school life. This work was generously supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Teacher Development Fund, and our programme activities were evaluated by Sound Connections and Birmingham City University.²

As part of this programme evaluation, we explored the barriers that teachers and school staff can face when participating in and leading singing, and we considered how we can work with them to overcome these challenges. Our evaluation indicated that the Singing Schools programme had a strong positive impact on teachers' confidence to deliver music activities. Yet, to fully empower all teachers to provide their pupils with high-quality music learning experiences, we must work together to change the perceptions in society of what it means to be 'musical'.



A (lack of) musical identity

At the beginning of the Singing Schools programme, we found that teachers had strong preconceived opinions of themselves as being either musical or not. Past musical experiences – such as feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed when asked to sing, or being told that they couldn't sing, couldn't sing in tune, or weren't good enough – had significant psychological effects and impacted the way that teachers used (or didn't use) music in their classrooms:

“Music is one of those things you either have it or not. I do dread teaching it in all honesty.” **Teacher**

“When we first discussed the idea of the Singing Schools programme, there was a lot of resistance. [Staff were] very hesitant because of their own subject knowledge and their own history of singing – I personally remember my first day in secondary school being asked to sing by the teacher which was painful – those experiences live with people.” **Senior Leader**

“I was told I couldn't sing at primary school, that's been with me ever since.” **Teacher**

Research indicates that singing-related anxiety can have very real and visible effects on participants' behaviour, cognition, emotions, and physiological experiences.³ Simply being told that 'anybody can sing' may be intimidating and underestimate the challenges faced by

those who perceive themselves as non-singers:

“I get that they say ‘everybody is a singer’ - but actually no, you can't just do it off the cuff, you need a bit more understanding. I'm not an expert in music.” **Teacher**

The teachers who felt more confident with music at the start of the Singing Schools programme generally attributed this to previous training or instrumental learning. However, even those with instrumental experience noted that there was something different about singing:

“I have a musical background, Grade 5 violin, so I came with confidence in music. But mine was more the [instrumental] side of it. I was confident with the instrument side but not as confident with the singing side, it wasn't a big part of my musical background.” **Teacher**

As opposed to instrumental activity where the sound made is one step removed from the person who creates it, singing and using the voice expressively is a highly personal activity, with the potential to leave individuals feeling exposed and even vulnerable. It can also feel unpredictable. Whilst trained singers know what will 'emerge' when they sing, untrained singers often do not have this degree of security in their voice. This lack of control can further contribute to feelings of anxiety.

Singing in front of other adults

Multiple teachers in the Singing Schools programme reported feeling anxious about singing. Specifically, it was singing in front of other adults that they found particularly stressful. Pupils, on the other hand, were seen as being non-judgmental and free of embarrassment:

“I will happily sing with the pupils but the thought of singing in staff meetings or with [the music practitioner] causes immense stress and anxiety.” **Teacher**

“We're the ones that get embarrassed, they [the children] don't.” **Teacher**

“The pupils don't judge - they just take it that the adult is doing a song. But if another adult is there, there is the potential to judge whether you are doing it right or wrong.”

Teacher

This suggests that the shame that can be felt about our singing voices is not a natural part of the experience of a child, but something that we learn as we get older. In fact, studies have shown that music and song are extremely important to babies and young children, who love being sung to. They learn about the world around them through sound, and music is especially vital because its melody and rhythm can convey a lot more information than speech.⁴

As we grow older, we may intake messages from society about what it means to be musical. The images that we see of singers in the media are often those with high levels of musical training. Popular singing talent shows, for example, can celebrate ‘good’ singers but humiliate and laugh at those who ‘can’t’ sing. These types of messages, combined with any prior negative educational experiences with music, may lead us to believe that if we do not have a certain level of training or technical musical skill, then we cannot be a singer. Several teachers participating in the Singing Schools programme reported feeling unable to lead singing activities because they were ‘tone deaf’ or could not sing in tune.

Towards a confident workforce for leading music activity

Voices Foundation helps teachers to value their musicality and feel confident using their singing voices. We do this in conjunction with more technical support that equips teachers with increased musical skills and knowledge. At the end of the Voices Foundation’s Singing Schools programme, 86% of survey respondents agreed that they were confident leading music activity, compared to only 69% at the beginning of the programme. Most of the participants that we interviewed identified a development in their confidence during the programme. This process took time and happened in incremental steps. It involved attitudinal shifts as well as developing new skills and

strategies, and for many, overcoming significant personal barriers.

“At the start I was really anxious about it, [I] don't have a musical background, didn't feel I had any skills to offer, didn't feel like an expert. Now I've done singing assemblies, conducted the choir in a concert. I use singing most days. [I use singing for] behaviour management every day - I sing ‘are you listening, are you ready’. The pupils just join in, singing gets their attention immediately, and creates a nice classroom environment. Because I'm more confident at teaching music they enjoy it more - sessions just flow.” **Teacher**

Collaboration with Voices Foundation’s Practitioners

Through our evaluation, we found that there were several key components of the programme that had contributed to this change. First, the collaborative and supportive relationship developed between teachers and their Voices Foundation music practitioners was key. An understanding of the diversity of each other’s musical experiences, and where applicable, a deep consideration of and empathy for the barriers faced, was needed

to bridge the gap between music practitioners and those without musical training, whose prior musical experiences were often worlds apart. Voices Foundation’s practitioners worked side-by-side with teachers in a flexible way to meet every individual’s needs. They stretched and encouraged teachers to practice musical activities with pupils that they may not have believed that they could lead, whilst ensuring that the teacher felt

comfortable and had additional support when needed:

“Confidence has been a personal barrier, however the Voices programme and the collaborative work with practitioners in both choral and musicianship teaching has significantly helped improve my own practice and skills, giving me a lot more confidence to lead sessions.” **Teacher**

“[The music practitioner] has really been mentoring me, how to conduct, how to lead. Helping me to learn how to do it. [I’ve] got a lot more confidence. Can identify a real change.” **Teacher**

This supportive relationship played an important role in enabling participants to revisit previous musical experiences and reframe their perceptions of their potential to be musical:

“I didn’t know I could sing until I worked with [the music practitioner], it has had a major impact on me. I’ve joined a choir.” **Teacher**

“Engagement with the Singing Schools programme has enabled me to revisit my own musical background, which was a large part of my journey through education.” **Teacher**

A whole school approach

Second, adopting a whole school approach to singing was helpful for increasing staff confidence. Doing so created a supportive culture of ‘we’re in this together’, helped to normalise singing as something that all staff could all take part in, and resulted in teachers feeling less isolated when tackling barriers to singing:

“Some staff have been a bit scared starting the programme. What the staff have done so far is take it on wholeheartedly. They are all having a go.” **Teacher**

“The whole school approach has been really useful, and the fact we’ve had continued and consistent training, team teaching with the practitioners, and whole school events. All of that is making it feel like this is a space for everyone to get involved in.” **Teacher**

As one senior leader expressed, the whole school commitment to singing created a sense of camaraderie:

“I think if we did a survey of who wants to do it at the beginning, there would be hardly any positive response. Everybody else hated the idea because they all thought they couldn’t sing... [In] initial staff meetings people were embarrassed and nervous, giggling like teenagers. But now we’ve all found our voice because we know we can do it. People stand up in front of assembly - everyone sings to a greater or lesser extent across the school.” **Senior Leader**



Regular practice

Third, committing to delivering music activity regularly helped to keep anxieties at bay and served as a consistent reminder to teachers that they were able to lead music themselves.

“Now it is done daily in the classes, slowly the staff are coming to enjoy that time.”

Teacher

Regular singing also helped teachers to internalise Voices Foundation’s singing resources, which heightened confidence even further and meant that teachers were able to use singing flexibly to support other classroom activities and situations:

“We have the [Voices Foundation’s] Inside Music book, but also the CD of the songs. I have it playing all the time to learn the songs. There’s no better feeling than you’ve just got the luxury now of singing any song at any point, without having to go back to the book. I have so many songs stored up, [I] don’t have to plan it, I just sing.”

Teacher

“We can be stuck in the middle of maths and not quite getting it and we can get up and sing. The benefits are huge if you use it correctly, not just one music lesson a week - which has its benefits - but music is there in everything that we do. It’s a life skill that we should be sending them out in the world with.”

Teacher

Focusing on pupils

As a result of the Singing Schools programme, many teachers were able to reframe their anxieties about singing and see themselves from the perspective of their pupils. As a result, several teachers noted that providing an opportunity for pupils to participate in music activity outweighed concerns about their own technical ability:

“It’s not about how good a singer you are; it’s about understanding how to show it to the pupils.”

Teacher

“I love singing, even though I can’t sing in tune, and enjoy the joy and happiness it brings to the classroom. Pupils are able to remember things better through song.”

Teacher

“When I first started I didn’t have much confidence as [I was] teaching Reception - they love it now so my confidence grew. They are not concentrating on me. They are having fun. We sing every day to settle them now, and at the end of the day.”

Teacher

In one case, it was pupils themselves who asserted their right to have access to music, reminding us that what they value is participation and inclusion, and not musical skill or talent:

“[We] had a nursery teacher who is brilliant with younger pupils but didn’t have confidence with singing. It was the pupils, when they heard other pupils singing in reception they were saying ‘we want to sing, why can’t we be part of it?’. Pupils shamed her into it - as part of assemblies we’re always getting pupils up to sing and perform, so if any weren’t getting that offer they would come and speak to SLT and ask us why they weren’t doing that. [It was] really powerful - [the] fact that the pupils were able to do that. We advocated for being a Singing School in assemblies - pupils stood by their right to have that.”

Senior Leader



Summary

It is clear that whole-school CPDL such as Voices Foundation's Singing Schools programme can make a difference to school staff and teachers' confidence to integrate music activities into daily school life. Our evaluation has shown that creating an environment where there is a collaborative and empathetic relationship between music practitioners and school staff, a whole-school approach to singing, regular participation in music activities, and a focus on pupils' engagement in music, is key to this success.

Supporting teachers to reframe their perceptions of their own musicality is not

just important for their development, but crucially it enables them to provide an inclusive music education that shows their pupils that singing is accessible for them too. As presentations of musical activity in public spheres and the media can convey messages about what it means to be musical, we must work together to ensure that these images are inclusive and encourage participation from people of all musical experiences and backgrounds. In doing so, we can widen societal views about what it means to be 'musical' and empower every teacher to deliver music activities in their classroom.

References

¹ Hallam, S. (2010). The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people. *International Journal of Music Education* 28, 269–289.

² D'Amore, A., et al. (2020). *Evaluation of The Voices Foundation Singing Schools Programme*. London: Sound Connections and Birmingham City University.

³ Abril, C. (2007). I have a voice but I just can't sing: A narrative investigation of singing and social anxiety. *Music Education Research*, 9, 1, 1-15.

⁴ Collins, A. (2020). *The Music Advantage: How Music Helps Your Child Develop, Learn and Thrive*. New York: TarcherPerigee.

