

Children and adolescents' singing in everyday life and at school

Graça Boal-Palheiros,^{*1} Hiromichi Mito^{#2}

^{*} Music Department, School of Education, Polytechnic of Porto, Portugal

[#] Psychology Department, Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan

¹gbpalheiros@ese.ipp.pt, ²mito@psy.meijigakuin.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

Background

Extensive research has shown the numerous benefits of singing and overall engagement in music for the intellectual, social, personal and musical development of children and young people (Hallam, 2010; Welch *et al.*, 2010). Previous studies on singing in everyday life and at school suggest that young people actively engage in singing in and out of school. Although they enjoy it in both contexts, some adolescents dislike singing at school because they feel uncomfortable when being exposed and stressed when they are evaluated in singing tests or competitions (Mito & Boal-Palheiros, 2012; 2013). A number of studies in various countries showed the students' low interest for school music and for school singing in particular (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; Kobayashi, 2004). We need to investigate the possible gap between singing in everyday life and at school and how these contexts relate to each other in order to understand the impact of singing in children and adolescents' lives.

Aims

This study is part of an ongoing research on singing activities of young people in Japan and Portugal, which aims to understand the functions of singing in their lives. The present study focused on the perceptions of Portuguese children and adolescents of their singing practice in both school and everyday life. It explored the frequency of and their reasons for singing, as well as their overall attitudes towards singing in both contexts.

Method

Participants (n = 78) were 43 girls and 35 boys in a public school in Porto, Portugal: 38 primary school children aged 8 to 10 years, and 40 secondary school adolescents aged 12 to 15 years. During a music lesson, participants completed a questionnaire with open-ended questions about singing both at school and in their everyday life: (a) frequency and repertoire of songs; attitudes towards singing at school; (b) frequency of and reasons for singing out of school; types of songs and singing situations: where and with whom they sing; possible influences on their motivation for singing.

The questions were refined based on a pilot study carried out with five other children. The responses of the main study were categorized and the categories were revised. A reliability test was carried out in which an independent judge assigned the responses of ten participants into the categories.

Results

Previous research suggested that Portuguese music teachers regularly include singing in Years 5 and 6 of middle schools (Boal-Palheiros, 2005). In this study, participants reported that singing is regularly practiced in music lessons (84.6% out of all responses). They sing mainly 'didactic' songs (to learn specific musical contents), especially in primary school. Some participants (19.3%) could not specify the songs' musical styles whilst others (14.1%) indicated Portuguese and Brazilian popular songs, and Pop and Rock songs. Most participants (85.5% out of 76) liked singing in music lessons and indicated following reasons: *Emotional mood* (32.9%) ('Singing makes me happy'); *Enjoyment* (27.6%); *Learning* (13.2%) ('I train my voice'; 'I learn new songs'); *Identity* (7.9%) ('It inspires me for giving concerts when I will grow up'). Those who did not enjoy singing at school (14.5%) reported either *Disliking singing* or *Singing poorly* ('My voice is out of tune').

Most children and adolescents (71.8% out of all responses) also reported singing regularly out of school. They sing mainly at home, in their bedroom, but also in their family's car, in public places, and a few at karaoke settings. Most of them usually sing alone (56.7%), and some sing with their family (22.4%) or with friends (20.9%). As far as the repertoire is concerned many did not specify the songs' musical styles (33.7% out of 85 responses) and others did not respond (27.1%). Pop and Rock songs were the most sung (28.6%), Hip Hop and Rap (8.3%) were sung by adolescents only and a few (3.6%) sang Portuguese Traditional songs. Most participants (55.1%) reported that nobody has influenced their singing. Some mentioned their family – parents or siblings, and only two referred to their teachers.

The reasons for singing out of school are similar to those for singing at school. They do not usually sing mainly because they *Dislike singing* and only a few think that they *Sing poorly*. They usually sing because of: *Enjoyment* (41.3%) ('I just love singing', 'It is fun'); *Emotional mood* (26.1%) ('It puts my sadness away'); *Identity* (6.5%) ('I can sing well'; 'It is my life'). *Accompaniment of music listening* (26.1%) ('I can't listen to music without singing along to it') emerged in the everyday life context only, and it agrees with some studies on children's music listening (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001).

Conclusions

This study suggests that children and adolescents are actively engaged in singing in and out of school. Their perceived functions of singing (enjoyment, emotional mood, and identity) are similar in both contexts, except for learning at school and

accompaniment of listening out of school. Not surprisingly, their favourite song repertoire in everyday life is quite different between the two age groups and it is also different from the school repertoire, which points to the much debated issue of the selection of repertoire for school music. Some participants believe that they sing poorly at school and therefore view singing as a negative experience. In fact, many adults report negative memories of their school music singing (see Welch, 2006), which has relevant implications for music education.

Research has focused upon children's age and musical training regarding enculturation and training as central aspects of their musical development. Context remains a key issue in analysing children's musical activities and more research is needed to further explore the role of context (Lamont, 2009). Besides other individual variables, a complex set of factors is involved in children's learning, such as their motivation, conceptions and self-perceptions of ability, interests and values (Austin *et al*, 2006). Among broad developmental, cultural, educational and social issues, the teachers' role is crucial in school singing (Welch *et al*, 2010). Thus, further research needs to include teachers' perspectives on children's singing.

Keywords

Children, adolescents, singing, school, out of school.

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