

Opinion

Singing contributes to school culture

Marc Jaffrey



Over the past five years we've seen huge improvements in music education and I've been lucky enough to have a ringside seat. In 2004 the Music Manifesto was formed, which campaigned to improve music-making opportunities for young people and culminated in major recommendations for improvement that encouraged the government to invest a record £32m into music education in 2007.

I led the Music Manifesto campaign and one of our biggest ideas was that singing should be an integral part of a child's life and should be re-established into the culture of every primary school in the country. A major consultation, led by the composer and passionate education advocate Howard Goodall, made a series of recommendations that culminated in the funding of Sing Up - the biggest ever investment in singing this country has seen.

The Music Manifesto generated a number of high-profile music programmes including In Harmony, the English version of the Venezuelan social musical project El Sistema, now being so ably led by Julian Lloyd Webber. It also refocused attention on the importance of music services for schools. However, to my mind, the most innovative contribution to the culture of schools and the lives of children has been Sing Up.

Here was an opportunity to restore singing into all our primary schools. To show teachers that not only should they not be afraid of leading singing (the majority were), they should recognise and embrace it as a teaching tool with special powers - the power to enrich the curriculum, to aid memory, teamwork and enjoyment, as well as develop musicality.

In some senses, singing in schools is a no-brainer or, more accurately, a brain enhancer. After all, humans have used singing as a communication tool since the dawn of time. And scientific evidence continues to grow about the positive effects of singing on the brain, health and wellbeing. But can it also affect standards in school, and drive up attainment? Where should it sit on the curriculum? Tucked away in the music coordinator's classroom as a specialist activity, or embraced by the entire school? Sing Up's Platinum award schools would argue that there is a direct correlation between singing and attainment, because it frames and focuses children's school lives. But can't focusing on any cross-curricular subject do that? What's so special about singing?

Less than three years since its launch, the headline answer to these questions is that 85% of all schools are using singing to enhance their children's learning and all political parties are backing it. Singing is working for the majority of schools. There has been much done and achieved through Sing Up but there is still more to do. The Music Manifesto sought to deliver a major singing programme through primary schools and in my book Sing Up is a manifesto commitment kept. Let's hope our politicians can do the same.

Marc Jaffrey, OBE, is former Music Manifesto champion and is now director of Think Again Media

Key points

- Sing Up was launched by the government in 2007, with four years' funding, to make every school a "singing school" and give each primary school child the opportunity to enjoy the learning and developmental benefits of singing. A national singing programme was recommended in the Music Manifesto report "Making Every Child's Music Matter".
- Since then, 85% of primary schools have joined the Sing Up programme, and are registered to use its online resources and get its termly magazine.
- Sing Up is spearheaded by composer Howard Goodall and led by Youth

- Music, the UK's largest children's music charity, in partnership with Faber Music publishers, The Sage Gateshead and advertising agency AMV BBDO.
- More than 317 songs are available on the Sing Up website, as well as warm-ups, teaching tools and lesson plans.
- Many continuing professional development opportunities are available through Sing Up and include a flexible training and CPD programme to increase the skills, confidence and repertoire of diverse participants across the country.
- 30,000 people have attended Sing Up training sessions. **DH**

We'd like to teach the world to sing ...

The national singing programme Sing Up wants every primary school up, a recent debate focused on how to measure the benefits and bring to be a 'singing school' by 2011. With 85% signed more schools on board. **Diana Hinds** reports

Singing is back in fashion in our primary schools. Few people would dispute the value of children singing together in school, and Sing Up, the Music Manifesto national singing programme, has played a significant role in making singing fun. Launched in 2007, with the aim of making every primary school "a singing school" by 2011, Sing Up's programme has already reached 85% of primary schools. For some schools, singing is simply a nice thing to do, a bolt-on to the curriculum. Others, however, are trying to take a cross-curricular approach and make singing more central to school life, as a growing body of evidence suggests that singing can aid children's attainment, improve their behaviour and enhance their sense of wellbeing and belonging. What is the future of singing and can more schools be convinced that it represents part of the key to whole-school improvement?

These questions were explored at a recent roundtable discussion convened by Education Guardian in collaboration with Sing Up. Following the Chatham House rule, contributions to the discussion were recorded without attribution, in order to encourage uninhibited debate. Key topics addressed were: what does a singing school look like? What is it that makes singing special in terms of promoting children's learning and development and where is the evidence for this? What can be done to help the many non-specialist teachers who lack confidence in music and singing?

The roundtable heard first from several participants with personal experience of the Sing Up programme in school. "It's hard to quantify ... but since the introduction of Sing Up, the atmosphere in school has been inspired and they have become more resilient, more willing to have a go at things. Children's confidence has improved, and so has behaviour."

In another school, it has taken 10 years to establish singing, but singing is now, with the help of Sing Up, "a pivotal part of the curriculum", leading to many opportunities to sing with other schools and generally "boosting children's self-esteem".

One school introduced singing in the hope of raising standards by encouraging children to work together and building confidence, and now has SATs results above the national average. "I love the inclusive side of music - every single person can sing. Sport is good, but not every one likes it."

Participants said that the strengths of Sing Up were that it was a voluntary programme and "not a didactic one", encouraging schools to incorporate singing in ways that best suited them - ranging from choirs, singing with other schools and weekly whole-school singing, to singing as part of other subject lessons, and singing while tidying up or lining up.

Successful singing schools, one participant said, "find that place for their workforce where quality and passion come together" and depend on "good vocal leadership". The importance of schools getting better at singing was emphasised: "It's not enough just to put singing into a school ... it's when children are being stretched to sing well that you start to get the real rewards."

Pinpointing the evidence for why singing is good for schools proved more difficult. "It's really important to focus on what makes the special difference in music and singing," said one participant. "Is it the impact on other areas of learning? Is it that it creates a sense of belonging? Of cultural identity? Of community? Or is it a combination of all these things? It would be good to have a systematic way of codifying that, so it can be simply explained, and repeated."

One participant believed you could identify "an energised way of communicating, a sort of 'twinkle factor' in the communications department" among children involved in singing.

Another asserted that if you took the "15 highest-performing, happy schools, you wouldn't find one that wasn't a singing school".

But this was challenged by another at the table: "Isn't that because Sing Up is a new initiative that these schools have taken on in a positive way? Doesn't having a focus - whether it's singing, sport or maths - always help to raise standards? Aren't new things always exciting - in the



At the table



Baroness Estelle Morris (Chair)
Labour MP



Christina Coker OBE
Chief executive, Youth Music



Howard Goodall
National Singing Ambassador



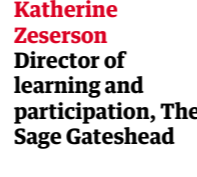
Professor Graham Welch
Chair of music education, Institute of Education



Baroness Delyth Morgan
Undersecretary of state, Department for Children, Schools and Families



Helen Burrows
Chief of staff, Shadow Office for Culture and Creative Industries



Katherine Zeserson
Director of learning and participation, The Sage Gateshead



James Dickinson
Head of services, Hertfordshire Music Service



Elizabeth Hills
Executive headteacher, Ilderton primary school



Marc Jaffrey OBE
Director, Think Again Media



Laurie Jacques
Director of policy and quality, National Centre for Excellence in the Training of Mathematics



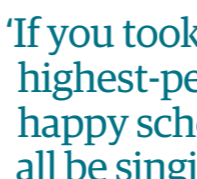
Sue Nicholls
Music education consultant



Helen Bennett
Parent, Wylam first school, Northumberland



Martyn Soulsby
Teacher, North Lakes primary school, Cumbria



Jill Walker
Team leader, Northumberland Creative and Performing Arts

If you took the 15 highest-performing, happy schools, they'd all be singing schools'

Pupils at Winterfold school, Kidderminster. Singing can improve the relationship of the school to the community

way that the numeracy hour raised standards when it first came in?"

Recent research data, said another participant, shows "quite a strong correlation" between children involved in singing and children who have a sense of worth and sense of belonging. "It's something about engaging in music as a collective."

There is also evidence from neuroscience that singing (in adults) involves more parts of the brain than, for instance, playing the violin, or playing chess. Singing is a "whole-brain activity" that touches the nervous system, the endocrine system and the immune system, moderating the stress hormone cortisol, and enabling people "to feel part of a collective". "The evidence is that everybody can sing and everybody can benefit ... What we haven't researched is singing and school improvement - we need to do that."

Schools are increasingly looking to involve parents in their children's education, and singing, participants argued, is a good way to engage parents. "Music is something parents can do with their children, something they can do collectively and it is a missed opportunity if schools don't take it," said one. "Parents used to come to watch their children in concerts, but now there will often be a great big sing for everyone," said another.

Schools also need to draw on all the available talent they can in their wider communities to help promote singing, participants said, such as members of local church choirs, opera companies, or gifted parents. "What makes music and singing different from, say, maths, is that it's about community."

Once schools engage in singing as a community practice, "all sorts of unexpected things happen", said one participant, calling this process of "random spiral causality". "People talk to each other differently and find out different things. New spirals of activity - not necessarily all musical - start up in their community, which are to do with the community becoming an engaged and productive place."

The roundtable was unanimous in affirming the belief that everyone can sing, once given a chance to find their voice. But the legacy persists from the days when some children were told they couldn't sing, and there are many teachers still struggling with a crippling lack of confidence when it comes to music and singing. Given the shortage of music specialists in primary schools, what can be done to help non-specialists find their voices?

One participant reported that primary teachers often became more interested in

taking music and singing on board once they could see links with other curriculum areas, for instance, common multiples, patterning and sequencing, rhyme and rhythm. "If you can give them a scaffold, they'll take that away and develop it."

The importance of training in singing was strongly underlined, and particularly as part of teacher training. "Trainee teachers need to try some singing when they are on placement," said one. "If they don't have that first go, it will never happen."

"It's about persuading teachers that you can be a good leader of singing even if you don't have the most brilliant voice," said another.

Help from music specialists was considered essential, and one participant suggested that if non-specialists' confidence in singing could be boosted by gaining some sort of accreditation or qualification, they would then find music specialists less of a threat and more of an asset.

The roundtable was divided as to the merits of the new primary curriculum in terms of music and singing. Some saw the new curriculum as "a fantastic opportunity" for music and singing, with the chance to combine it with dance and drama. But others feared that some schools might pick certain art strands and "sideline music and singing completely".

The four years of government funding for Sing Up comes to an end in March 2011, and participants stressed the need for singing to be "embedded for the longer term". Many primary pupils stop singing as soon as they reach secondary school, and Sing Up is anxious to do more work in this area, as well as with early years children.

Participants agreed that the different national music bodies needed to speak with one voice to make the case for singing, and to bring all the available evidence together. A "case-study" approach to collecting evidence was a critical part of this, said one.

"There is a pressing need for clear evidence of what works and what doesn't," argued another. "Other lobbies, such as dance and drama, will also claim to improve standards, so where does the government prioritise? Policy makers need some robust evidence."

"The danger is that singing looks easy because Sing Up has been so successful," one participant summed up. "But it's vital that the investment in singing continues."

www.singup.org



Roundtable report commissioned and controlled by the Guardian. **Discussion** hosted by a brief agreed with Sing Up. **Funded by** Sing Up. For information on roundtables visit guardian.co.uk/supp-guidelines

Project hits the right notes

Singing builds confidence and social skills for children with special needs outside mainstream schools

Sarah Jewell

Singing helps children outside mainstream education to develop, become more confident and integrate with their peers, according to a new study from the national singing programme Sing Up. Their report, Beyond the Mainstream, is a comprehensive assessment of the success of their 14 nationwide pilot programmes that were designed to reach more than 800 children with different needs who are schooled outside of mainstream primaries.

These children included those with special educational needs (SEN), children who attend short stay schools, looked-after children, refugees and asylum seekers, young carers, children with physical disabilities and children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and mental health problems. The projects ranged from the Sound Minds "Songs from the South" project, which worked with children with mental health problems, to the Plymouth Music Zone project for children with profound and multiple learning disabilities, which used vocal looping technology to help engage with children who were unable to use their voices.

The feedback was very positive and researchers found that the various projects helped children with their self-confidence and self-esteem, sense of achievement and also their social interactions. Singing also acted as a leveller, helping the children to mix with their peers in mainstream schools. As one project leader who worked with children about to enter the UK education system for the first time said: "It was good to work with the mainstream primary as our children were given a huge confidence boost by discovering they were just as capable as their mainstream peers."

Some children said they now felt "confident to stand up and sing a solo" and "proud of their final performance", while their teachers noticed that the children were growing more confident as a whole and how this was helping them to integrate with other children, as well as be clearer and more confident in stating their own needs.

Singing in groups also helped children



Singing is something that children outside of mainstream education can do as well as their peers. Photograph: Getty

who found it difficult to socialise or make new friends, by giving them a focus and encouraging them to work together in a non-threatening environment. As part of the "Songs from the South" project, they found that one child who had not had any previous significant peer relationships developed a "joking relationship" with two other young people. This was a considerable achievement for this child and the project had other similar success stories.

There was also an improved attitude to learning - 13 out of 14 projects, for example, said that the children's concentration had become "better" or "much better". As one foster carer said: "K has been more settled in school since the New Notes project began. This is the first out-of-school activity that I have not had to be there for. K is improving at school all the time."

Many projects saw children showing a marked improvement in musical and vocal language and technique. This was

not only useful for children as a skill and a link into the mainstream curriculum, but it also helped to foster a sense of pride and achievement, a sense that they had become "good at something" and were recognised in that.

In almost all of the projects, the partnerships were key to their success. As Baz Chapman, Sing Up programme director, said: "The pilots have shown us that solid partnerships that focus on the different organisations and individuals involved in a child's life are the lifeblood of successful outcomes for children outside mainstream education." Good training is essential to make these partnerships work and as Chapman says: "From social workers to foster carers to teachers in short stay schools, training and development has played an essential role in helping them to transform the lives of the children in their care, and Sing Up's strong workforce development programme will continue this work beyond the pilots."

The experience of an ambassador school

'All our staff sing with their pupils now'

North Lakes school is an ambassador school for Sing Up - it has won its platinum award for excellence writes teacher Mark Soulsby. There has always been a strong focus on singing in the school, but since we got involved with the Sing Up programme about two years ago we have given singing a much greater profile.

It was a case of developing teacher confidence and encouraging the children to enjoy taking part in singing activities and singing is now an integral part of our daily life. Every day there are either whole-school singing sessions, or singing in assemblies, year-group or classroom singing.

We have been part of a Sing Up cluster of 15 primary schools in Penrith and have had input from a singing leader who develops and enhances our community projects. One of the projects we have worked on is the Songlines ballad, where a song was passed from one Sing Up cluster to another and we all share a common chorus but write our own variations of the song.

As a Platinum school we have now taken the lead in the cluster and we recently formed a "transition choir" of 250 children aged 10 and 11 - who are all leaving primary school next year - to give them the opportunity to work with students from key stage 3. This is a way of helping the children to prepare for secondary school and make new friends so that hopefully it will be a less daunting experience when they leave.

The benefits of singing to the children are enormous - it helps to raise their self-esteem, confidence, concentration and can improve behaviour and attendance. If the children are excited about their singing projects at school it has a

knock-on effect in other areas of teaching and learning. One of the best things about singing is that it is so inclusive - everyone has a voice and everyone can sing.

Last year, to celebrate our community singing projects, we took part in a huge Sing Up event in a local leisure centre where about 400 children performed



You get a great sense of belonging from everyone singing together Photograph: Alamy

and we also sang at our local agricultural show in the main show ring before the grand parade. This was an amazing opportunity for the children to find out more about the area they live in.

All our staff sing with their pupils now, which is a great achievement. I studied singing for my degree, however it can be very daunting for many teachers who are often non-specialists to sing with their class - it has taken time to get there, but we have done it. As we are an ambassador school, I train other teachers in other schools to help them get their Sing Up award, write cross-curricular lesson plans for the Song Bank and represent Sing Up in other events.

Sing Up has an amazing resource bank of more than 300 songs on its site and the material there, which makes lesson planning very easy. Schools don't have to spend money on resources and the website provides a support network. Just knowing that there is an organisation that is promoting singing and making it cool nationally is a fantastic help.

Being part of Sing Up has been personally very satisfying and confidence-boosting - our school is well known in the area now for what we are doing. We are running a workshop for more than 40 teachers from local schools and that wouldn't have happened a few years ago.

People have heard of what we are doing and that is great for the school, but we couldn't be where we are without the support of parents, governors and school staff - it is a whole-school enterprise and that is a fantastic feeling - the sense of belonging that you get from everyone singing together. **Interview by Sarah Jewell**

Martyn Soulsby is music co-ordinator and member of the leadership and management team at North Lakes primary school in Penrith, Cumbria