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IMPROVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SINGING

by

P. Annette Hansen

A seminar report submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Approved:

Major Professor

Head of Department

Dean of Graduate Studies

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of helping children to make continual progress in their singing ability has been of particular interest to me because of the experiences I have had in teaching music to third, fifth, and sixth graders. In most cases the children had had few teachers who were trained or experienced in teaching music. In one district there wasn't even a music supervisor to whom teachers could go for help if they felt they needed it.

The problems on which I have done research to write this paper are the ones which have been the most common in my experience. I have attempted to find the most recent information available, or to pick out of slightly older material, the ideas which would prove helpful to me in organizing a situation which would be of value in developing the musical ability of the children I teach.

IMPROVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SINGING

I Standards

The Vocal Instrument

Before beginning to teach children to sing it may be helpful to know something about the construction of the vocal instrument. It may give insight to what can be expected from children.

Anne E. Pierce compares the voice to a violin. The motor or stimulator is the vocal chords. The resonator is the cavities of the chest, throat and head. To make sound, the vocal chords are brought together, stretched across the larynx. The exhaled breath sets them to vibrating. "The force of the breath, the length and thickness of the chords, the manner in which the column of air resonates, the size, shape and condition of the resonating chambers, all affect the pitch quality and loudness of sound."¹

The organs of articulation when properly coordinated with the stimulator, vibrator and resonator, produce clear words. These organs are the tongue, lips, hard and soft palate, jaw and teeth.

Physical Development

The child's immature voice quality is light, lacking the color and resonance of mature voices. The range is termed treble or soprano. Power to control breath and dynamics grows as the child grows physically.²

¹ Anne E. Pierce, *Teaching Music in the Elementary Schools* (New York, Holt and Company, 1959), pp 39-40.

² Pierce, op. cit. p. 40.

During the kindergarten years, children like to use their large muscles. They enjoy acting out songs with sweeping motions. They like to handle books and play simple instruments.

The voices of kindergarten and first grade children can not be expected to be unified in group singing. Some are not able at that age to carry a tune. Other children may use their "play voices" while singing, and so sound very unmusical. Thus, class singing is often unmusical. These pupils will gradually learn quality, diction, phrasing, pitch recall and pitch reproduction if they are given proper guidance. By second or third grade, most problems will be solved.

This does not mean, however, that the teacher should accept just anything. The children should be motivated to produce the best music their ability will allow. Songs should be chosen carefully so that this best quality can be attained. The range of these children's voices is usually from d to d.

By second grade, most pupils have gained better muscular coordination. They are thus able to execute smoother, more graceful responses. Their eyes are not ready for much close work, but they can begin to observe some clearly printed aspects of notation. They are able to listen to music for a longer period of time and their musical vocabulary increases.

Third grade is often considered the dividing line between early childhood and the intermediate grades. All musical responses show growth during this period. Children's eyes have developed to the point where they can deal effectively with easy aspects of notation. Most children, by this time can sing independently.

Group singing can also be musically satisfactory. Voices begin to take on more flute-like qualities. The pitch is more dependable and the range extends from d to f.

By fourth grade, children's eyes are able to look at a musical score for a reasonable length of time without straining. Their voices become more stable and expressive. More difficult and interesting songs can be taught. It is important not to over-emphasize technical proficiency, however.

By the time children reach fifth and sixth grades their muscles have become well-coordinated. Their eyes function well so they are able to use music books easily. They should be able to sing both unison and part songs artistically. It should be remembered, however, that the span of ability differences will be greater each year.

The range of these voices generally extends from c to g. They are able to use more volume without destroying the beauty of their voices.

Changing Voice

During adolescence a boy's larynx grows so that the chords lengthen and the pitch of his voice drops. The size of his controlling muscles also changes. Sometimes these muscles seem to tire or lose control. The voice cracks and it is difficult to find the pitch of the song. The difficulty lies in the fact that the mature male voice is an octave lower than the child's voice. Adolescents are often extremely embarrassed by these cracks.

"Because of the emotional status of the adolescent boy, he should be treated with calmness, good humor, and infinite patience."²

The way the teacher handles the situation will to a large extent, determine what the boy will do later in the field of music. She should help him realize that what is taking place is a natural process. He should sing the part that is most comfortable for him. If the voice is allowed to develop naturally, there is no break. He may want to sing the low parts just because he is lazy. His general physical development is a good guide to follow if there is a question as to whether his voice is really changing.

Not many boys' voices change before junior high school, but there are often a few in fifth or sixth grade. The teacher should be aware of them. These students will be even more self conscious of the change because they will seem to be so different from the rest of the class.

In adolescent girls the larynx also grows, but the chords do not lengthen to the extent that boys' do. Their tones become richer and fuller.

It should be remembered that all children tire easily. The teacher should never expect them to sing well for great length of time.

Performance Standards

The child's voice is naturally beautiful, but in order to get the fullest benefit of that beauty the child should be trained to

² G. A. Rorke, Choral Teaching at the Junior High Level (Chicago Hall and McCreary Company, 1947), p. 11

sing artistically. Fundamental voice work should begin at an early age. Alertness to good voice use in accordance with the laws of the functions of the body can be acquired in early years, and they will carry through with maturity.⁴

The standards set for a group should take into consideration the purpose for which the music is being learned. They should be based on the children's achievements at the time of performance. The teacher should be sure to give plenty of time to learn the songs. The children should know the songs better if they are for public performance than if they are just to be used for classroom enjoyment.

Artistic singing is characterized by good tone quality. It should (a) be musical and produced without effort, (b) display correct tempo. The mood of the words and music calls for a tempo that enhances the mood. (c) display correct rendition of the symbols on the printed page. (d) display correct phrasing. (e) display obvious emotional response, and (f) display good enunciation and pronunciation.

If the children are made aware of these qualities at the beginning of their singing experiences, they will develop naturally. If they are allowed to continually sing haphazardly these qualities will never be attained. Unless the group has a set of attainable to work for, little progress can be expected. James L. Mursell

⁴ M. E. Wilson, How to Help Your Child With Music (New York, Henry Schuman, 1951), p. 109.

suggests we must have standards because "... (a) Without standards no one can make effective educational progress... (b) The ability to discriminate excellence is a most important factor in high human quality." ⁵

Alfred Ellison suggests several aids in developing standards for classroom music.

DO

1. Pitch the songs comfortably for the class.
2. Encourage enthusiastic response.
3. Pick songs your children will like.

DO NOT

1. Pitch the song too high.
2. Shush the children into a light head tone.
3. Pick songs to teach technical problems." ⁶

Enthusiasm must precede any set of standards. This enthusiasm may be shown by requests for certain songs, ease with which the children learn them and apparent enjoyment in singing. After the class has learned a song they can begin to listen critically to their own singing. Children are often able to make excellent suggestions as to how the singing can be improved.

"If the classroom is conducive to serious purpose, and if the children are sufficiently interested in what they are doing, they will want to give the finest performance of which they are

5. James L. Mursell, Human Values in Music Education (New York, Silver Burdett and Company, 1934), p. 325.

6. Alfred Ellison, Music With Children (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959), p. 83.

capable." ⁷ The class should never be allowed to drift off into mediocrity. "...Eventually it is only singing that is accurate, sincere, and musically expressive that will bring lasting satisfaction to the children." ⁸

7. Eileen L. McMillan, Guiding Children's Growth Through Music (Boston Ginn and Company, 1948), p. 32.

8. Beatrice Landeck, "Standards of Literature and Performance at the Primary Level" (Music Educator's Journal, 43:54, November, 1956).

II Developing Good Singing

Classroom Atmosphere

Musical experiences should contribute to the enjoyment of each child. The teacher must display friendly respect for each child. She should never try to force children to perform musical tasks they particularly dislike. If they have to sing a song over and over too many times they become bored with it and no improvement will be made. The teacher should give encouragement to students when they do well, but undeserved praise is detrimental rather than helpful.

It is a good idea to start and end the singing period with songs the children already know well and especially enjoy. This will make them look forward to the next singing period with pleasure. Working on all new material during the entire music period can be very tiring.

Learning a song can not be forced onto a child. Each child learns at his own rate. Some need much repetition. Other memorize unconsciously. No type of coercion or punishment will speed up the process. It will probably just arouse hostilities.

It all adds up to the necessity of a free, friendly atmosphere in the classroom. If this atmosphere is present the children will likely want to learn to sing well. Their voices will reflect their pleasure.

Selection of Songs

The songs children are taught should present a wide variety of forms, moods, melodic and rhythmic patterns. There are children's songs written for nearly every occasion. Each group will have its

individual preferences. Songs of all types should be presented throughout the year. These could be folk songs, songs by great composers, traditional songs, nonsense songs, or other songs written for children. Care should be taken however, not to try to over simplify songs for children. They sense if a song has been "written down" to their level. It is an insult to their dignity.

Children respond to exciting rhythms and songs that arouse emotions. This is evident in the interest they show in the songs their older brothers and sisters sing.

The rhythm pattern is no longer considered a major problem in the songs for young children. Children learn very intricate rhythmic patterns just by listening to the radio and watching television. After hearing a song a very few times they can imitate the rhythmic pattern very well.

A song does not consist of just one note right after another, but rather the sounds group themselves into short musical sentences, called phrases. Phrases should be short for those to whom singing is a new experience. Artistic singing requires that a phrase be sung in one breath. The small child does not have the breath control to sing long phrases.

"The correct range of song material or song materials is that which permits the vocalist to sing easily without forcing his tones."⁹ The range of songs for children should lie within the

9. Louise Kifer Myers, Teaching Children Music in the Elementary School (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc), p. 33.

treble clef, and occasionally a lower or higher note could be sung. Songs written in the key of C are plentiful but are not usually advisable for groups of young children because they usually center around middle C. Many teachers choose songs written in that key because they are easy to play. But because a song is written in the key of C does not mean it is not a good song. It could possibly center around the higher C and thus, would be comfortably in the range of the children's voices. Most children's songs can easily be transposed to another key if they are too low or too high.

The child must know the meaning of the words he is singing. As a child, I loved to sing the song "Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel." I had been going to church for six or seven years before I discovered that the words were "We all have work, let no one shirk," and not "We all have work, let no one's shirt." Such errors are not so likely to occur if the child has a full understanding of what he is singing about.

There are certain songs all children are expected to know which have phrases that children may not understand. Some of these songs are "The Stars Spangled Banner," "America", and "America the Beautiful". Great care must be taken in teaching these songs to make sure that the children are singing the words correctly and with understanding.

To sum up the points of a good song it must:

1. Be of proper range and difficulty.
2. Remain in the memory after a little study.

3. Have smooth, flowing, interesting and vital rhythm.
4. Be of proper length.
5. Have a proper text.
6. Have easily sung words.
7. Have words and music which agree.
8. Be one the children like to sing.
9. Have permanent value.
10. Qualify as good music.
11. Be one the teacher enjoys hearing again and again.

III Teachers' Responsibilities

Qualifications

"A singing teacher--not a teacher of singing--but a teacher who sings is one of the best means of acquainting children with singing and awakening in them the desire to sing."¹⁰ This statement places a great deal of responsibility upon the teachers in the elementary schools.

Children learn to sing the same way they learn to talk, from listening to people around them. Since children learn from listening, the teacher must set a good example for the children to follow. Her voice should be free and natural, not strained or fearful. She should use a light voice since children are not capable of producing the heavy tones of the mature voice. The same thing holds true for male teachers. Their natural voices are much easier to follow than falsetto.¹¹

The teacher's voice should be true in pitch and quality. She should develop a fine sense of tonal discrimination if she expects the children to produce accurate tones.

Before teaching the song the teacher should study the song carefully to be sure of the proper tempo, rhythmic plan, climax or climaxes, dynamic shadings and tonal quality, and phrasing. If she knows the song well enough she should be able to sing it freely and her face can reflect the meaning of the words she is singing.

10. Utah State Dept. of Public Instruction, The Music Guide (Salt Lake City, Utah Dept. of Public Instruction, 1948), p. 3.

11. McMillan, op. cit. p. 56.

The length and type of song and the ability of the class will determine whether the song is taught by the whole or part method. Many feel that better interpretation is learned through the whole method. Either way the teacher should "...Know when to sing with pupils and when not to. Too much teacher participation may be disastrous to the pupils' development of musical assurance. Too little singing by the teacher can lead to lack of rapport between her and her class. Then too, if she withdraws before the children know the song, they may feel insecure and form a dislike for it." ¹²

Above all it must be remembered that the teacher is the example. The class production will be no better than the example she sets.

Conducting and Accompanying

In teaching children to sing, the question of accompaniment and conducting movements often arises. Anne E. Pierce suggests, "...Use accompaniment only when it contributes significantly to the song or when it is the best way of presenting a song or solving some musical problem." ¹³

Well played accompaniment may help to encourage beautiful singing. It may emphasize phrasing, rhythm and interpretive effects. Accompaniment on less complicated instruments such as song bells or autoharp is preferable to a poorly played piano accompaniment. It is very helpful to get considerable experience with both accompanied and unaccompanied singing.

12. Pierce, op. cit. p. 63.

13. Ibid, p. 67

Conducting can make some specific contributions to elementary school singing, even though it is not as formal as at the high school level.

1. It can indicate when to start and stop, so that attacks and endings are precise.

2. It can indicate tempo so that the spirit of the song is carried throughout, and the children do not follow their natural tendency to slow down.

3. It can help the teacher to avoid leading the children with her voice which tends to dominate children's singing by adult quality.

4. It allows more flexible tempos and more colorful interpretation.

5. It can help to bring out the natural beauty of the children's voices by indicating dynamic shadings.¹⁴

Following a conductor's beat is something which must be taught with great patience. Children must be able to feel the rhythm before they will be able to follow. It takes careful planning and teaching before the class will be able to follow accurately and freely.

14. McMillan, op. cit. p. 43.

IV Intonation

Causes and Treatment

Poor intonation is sometimes caused by a poor musical ear, but it is more likely to be the result of improper voice production. This improper voice production can be caused by any one or combination of conditions.

If the music to be sung has not been carefully selected in regards to range, words, intervals, and phrasing, the children's lack of interest will probably make them careless in their tone production. This often results in their singing flat, especially on leaps upwards. No one sings well if he is bored with the song.

If the pupils are allowed to sit or stand with a slouched posture or if they are required to remain in one position for too long a time, they will tire easily. Good intonation is almost impossible to achieve under these conditions. Lengthy drilling will only aggravate the situation not help it. It would be better to postpone the singing period until a later time when the children are rested and alert.

Very often, if a song is sung too slowly, the children sing flat because they lack the breath control to sustain the long notes or phrases. Often the ends of the phrases drop to flatted tones. If the tempo is kept up in the spirit of the mood suggested by the words, and if they are breathing as the phrasing indicates, this problem is not so likely to arise.

It is very difficult to sing in a room that is not ventilated properly. Hot stale air tends to cause flatting. Cold air sometimes causes sharpening. Any uncomfortable condition affects tone production adversely.

Awareness

It is not uncommon to find pupils that simply do not realize that tone accuracy is important, or that there even is such a thing. They must be taught that each pitch has a specific sound and anything below or above it is not good enough. Very often their ears will have to be trained to hear the difference in good and bad tonation. The teacher could begin with having the children match easy intervals such as sol to do, and then work on the more difficult intervals, increasing the number of tones to be matched gradually. In one elementary music class I taught, this drilling proved to be a real revelation to the students. They became much more critical of their own singing. Mursell suggests that the pupils think a tone very carefully before singing it.¹⁵

The teacher must be careful to see and recognize difference between improvement and accuracy. She should never be satisfied with poor tone just because it is better than it has been. Good intonation is a goal to continually work for. When progress is being made the children should be told about it. There is little incentive to go on if they feel they are getting nowhere.

Extremely hushed or repressed singing is usually fault, tone-wise. Most often it is flat. It causes the muscles to tense so that accurate tone is very difficult to attain. On the opposite end, if children are forced to sing too loudly, their tones also become inaccurate. This also happens sometimes if the children

15. James L. Mursell, Human Values in Music Education (New York, Silver Burdett and Company, 1943), p. 218.

are over-excited. For this reason many authorities feel that singing should not immediately follow a recess period.

The previously mentioned condition of a friendly, happy atmosphere cannot be overemphasized if good intonation is desired. In a school in which I was employed in San Jose, California, the fourth, fifth and sixth grades met each Friday in the assembly hall for half an hour of singing. The songs, however, were not always wisely selected, the accompaniment was often faulty, and the director often did not know the songs well. The general feeling was one of nervousness. When the group did not respond with beautiful tones, or appeared to be bored, the principle walked about the hall shouting crossly, "This is fun! Have fun!" This, of course, did not help to create the desired atmosphere. Children cannot be forced into a feeling of happiness. It must be created by those in charge. A feeling of joy and happiness in the teacher is contagious. This will do much more than hours of scolding.

V Tone Quality

The greatest contribution to good tone quality is the creation of an atmosphere free from tension. "Our voices, barring physical defects, reflect us as people. The more closely a song 'reaches' us as individuals the better we are able to sing that song. A song which children understand and which affects them deeply will be better sung in terms of tone quality than the song which they do not understand or to which they may be indifferent." ¹⁶

Wise Selection of Songs

Wisely chosen songs may remedy undesirable qualities which show up in singing from day to day. If tone lacks vitality and brightness, some gay, bright songs may help. Some good examples are "Pop Goes the Weasle," "Susie Little Susie," and "Row, Row Your Boat."

If the children are using excited, harsh voices, songs such as "Sweet and Low" or "Old Black Joe" may subdue them.

Songs that are slow and sustained will help to develop a smooth legato singing. Some good examples are "Now the Day is Over," "Home on the Range," and "Silent Night." It should be noted that the mood of these songs calls for the slow tempo. It doesn't work to have a song which is normally sung fast slowed down.

Light Head Tone

Until recent years most music educators have advocated the idea that children should use "light head tones" in their singing. Such suggestions were made as the teacher put her hand on

16. Ellison, op. cit. p. 88.

top of the students' heads to help them to achieve this unnatural tone. More recent literature opposes this idea strongly. Alfred Ellison's view is typical of that of most music educator's today. Light head tones often lead to hushed, devitalized, half voices. Try to get enthusiastic singing from children. "Too early an insistence on adult standards of good tone quality, particularly such a limiting one as the light head tone, may effectively block any enthusiastic response to singing on the part of children." ¹⁷

This does not mean children should be allowed to shout. They should use their natural singing voices as they are influenced by the interpretation of the songs they sing.

Volume

Children can produce a variety of volume, but never really loud or really soft. ¹⁸ As has been previously mentioned, the ability to increase and decrease volume develops as the child grows physically. Loud and soft are relative terms. They should not be compared with volume variations in adult choruses.

If children are forced to sing too loudly the tone will be harsh and unmusical. Their voices will tire very quickly. Conversely, if they are continually told to sing more and more quietly, the tones become pinched and thin. This also tends to tire the voice and cause the children to lose interest.

17. Grant Parks, Music for Elementary Teachers (New York, Appleton-Century, Crofts, Inc., 1951), p. 128.

18. Ibid. p. 48.

This pinched or tight tone can also be caused by the children's trying too hard. They become tense and anxious and cause the muscles to tighten. This can best be prevented by the proper classroom attitude. The teacher should try to get the students to relax and realize that if they are making mistakes they can be overcome in time. Often some light exercise or activities can do much to help the children relax.

Posture

Many classes sing with a lifeless tone. A very common cause of this and other problems is poor posture. The lungs are formed of a spongy, elastic tissue, perforated by thousands of little tubes which receive air. They are separated from the abdominal cavity by a convex muscular partition called the diaphragm upon which they rest. As breath is taken in this partition drops, causing the base of the lungs to expand. If the posture is poor the lungs can fill only partly with air. The bottom part of the lungs which should receive most of the air will receive the least. The result will be much chest action and tightening of the muscles of the shoulders, throat and neck. Every muscle must be relaxed if tones are to be of good quality. Posture is the fundamental basis for all singing.

The correct posture means sitting or standing so that the vertebrae are in a straight line. The chest should be comfortably up, the head held naturally, and the chin at approximately a right angle to the throat. If the students are standing, the weight should be on the balls of the feet and the knees unbent. If they are seated the body should be slightly away from the back of the

chair. Care must be taken, however, that posture is not over-emphasized to the point where the children become tense and rigid. This defeats the purpose. They must be relaxed.

Self Confidence

An important aspect in good tone production is confidence. If a child is convinced that he can't sing, he won't be able to. Many so called vocal cripples are caused by teachers who in trying to help them, use devices which do more to create a feeling of inadequacy than to develop good singing. Just because a child cannot sing as well as the rest of the class, however, he should not be left out of group singing. "Never sacrifice any child on the alter of good tone quality...Better that a few voices carry along 'out of tune' than that any children develop the feeling that they cannot sing. Their desire to sing and their attitudes about their own voices will do more to help these children develop control over their singing voices than any combination of so-called training devices." ¹⁹

Nasal Tones

A quality universally considered a perversion of good tone quality, is what is termed the nasal tone. It may have nothing to do with the nose but it is the conventional term used to describe this certain twangy quality. About the only cure is a demonstration of correct quality. If this quality is present, the teacher should "...avoid humming and the use of songs that

19. Ellison, Op. Cit. p. 88.

contain much of the sound of er or a as in cat. Ask the children to sing long tones, fairly high and soft, on the vowels ah and oo, or use songs with texts containing many of these sounds." ²⁰ A little work with children to make them aware of the undesirability of the quality, should eliminate it.

Voice Control

Children become aware of voice control gradually as they grow older. Some of the formal training procedures can be introduced as the children show they are ready for them. Some of the basic devices which can be used are emphasis of freedom of mouth and jaw, conscious control of the breath, and intentional and deliberate projection of the voice. These, and especially the latter should be used only if the children show real interest and development.

With proper guidance, tone quality will improve naturally with each year as the children develop in their ability. Without the guidance they never realize the pleasure that can come from beautiful singing.

20. Parks, Op. cit. p. 130

VI SUMMARY

There seem to be several basic principles in developing any desirable quality in the musical production at the elementary level. A reasonably high set of standards must always be present whether it is in tone quality, intonation or any other goal the class and teacher is seeking. These standards are more meaningful if set up by the teacher and the students. Children must be made aware of what sounds good and what doesn't.

The example set by the teacher will reflect in every phase of the children's singing. Her self-assurance, enjoyment of singing and teaching and her tonal accuracy will all help to motivate the students to produce the best music possible at their stage of development.

The classroom atmosphere has been stressed throughout most literature on elementary singing. This atmosphere is created through the teachers example and through cooperative planning between pupils and teacher.

The songs which the teacher chooses for the children to sing will to a large extent determine how well they express themselves musically. If wisely chosen their voices will more likely display good tone quality, intonation, phrasing and interpretation.

Physical conditions are important. The ventilation of the room, comfort of the seats the children sit in, their posture, and other physical comfort all contribute or detract to good or poor music.

Standards in all phases of music should be flexible and individual in nature. The important thing is to measure up to one's best. There are certain growth patterns that should be recognized in determining childrens' musical expressions, but sequence or organization and choice of materials must be decided upon as the teacher experiences with children and discovers that they can take. "It is the teacher's responsibility to awaken within each child an awareness of his worth and capacity to grow and contribute musically." ²¹

21. Utah State Dept. of Public Instruction, op. cit. p. 3.

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