

Learning to be...singing: A choral music education program

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The purpose of this paper is to share the success story of a choral music education program for children and youth, to discuss its benefits to members, and to relate the results to current best practice and research. Beyond its musical and artistic purposes, the Coral Polifónico Juvenil intended to promote on its members, aged between 10 and 16 years, the development of personal, interpersonal, and social skills. The most important findings are that the musical participation in the choral activity has had very positive impacts on pupil's perceptions, attitudes and beliefs toward music in general and toward choral music participation at school. The pupils felt important, happy, and more useful as well as appreciated by their colleagues at school, by their families, and their communities. They expressed a sense of responsibility and conscientiousness, with notions of values of persistency and perseverance. Regarding interpersonal benefits, they acknowledged in these activities an excellent chance to relate themselves with others and to enlarge their cultural and musical experiences. The pupils recognized that their participation in the choral activity provided them with opportunities to develop their personal, social, and cultural skills and knowledge, as well as providing them with other professional perspectives.

Keywords: extracurricular musical activities; choral environment; music education; self-perceptions; attitudes

This study reports on an academic year case study of the impact of a choral music education program on children and youth at the College João de Barros, Meirinhas, a rural town in Portugal. The aim, as Hoz (1985, p. 43)

says of case studies, was to provide “a circumscriptive scrutiny of opinions” through a “scientific method which analyses reality” on its variables and relationships which surrounds it.

Research has shown that classes that require active participation as a chorus and are presented by music educators with the aim of achieving mastery of musical skills and knowledge has failed to attract a significant number of participants from the school population (Nierman and Weak 1997). Usually the participation in choral music programs is somewhat small at secondary schools when compared to participation in elementary schools (Mizener 1993).

The Coral Polifónico Juvenil of the João de Barros College was founded in September, 2002, and integrated into the extracurricular activities at school. The choir started with 60 students aged between 9 and 16 years old, with repertoire including Gregorian Chant, Portuguese popular music, as well as a selection from Mozart, César Franck, Handel, and Fernando Lopes Graça.

Since the beginning, the choir has had many public presentations with and without instrumental accompaniment, mainly during religious dates. Furthermore, the choir has been playing an important role in several school initiatives as well as providing cultural and generational encounters through participation in concerts in social institutions throughout the country.

Beyond its musical and artistic purposes, the Coral Polifónico Juvenil intended to promote on its members the development of personal, interpersonal, and social skills. Students’ awareness of their skills and self-perceptions are carefully addressed during choir activities as they relate to the notion of “self-esteem” (Freitas 2003).

Research also indicates that taking part in musical activities at school can affect children’s identification with school music lessons, and that their identification with school in general can be increased. In particular, children who participate in extra-curricular musical activities can experience a higher sense of identification with school as they move from primary to secondary school than children who do not. Other studies have supported this view by investigating the direct effects of children’s participation in those activities, showing that they can help to raise children’s future aspirations (Denny 2007).

This study intends to examine the impact of participating in a choral music education program in extracurricular settings on participant’s attitudes, self-perceptions, and beliefs about music and themselves. What are pupil’s perceptions regarding their participation in the choral activity? What are pupil’s attitudes and beliefs with respect to choral music at school?

METHOD

Participants

All 50 participants in the study were students from the Portuguese secondary school Colégio João de Barros in Pombal, who took regular part in the choral activity on a facultative basis. All students lived near school and were from social, artistic, and cultural low or medium classes. Participants were aged between 10 and 16 years old, of which 42% were boys and 58% girls. The majority were in grade 9, representing 40% of the participants, followed by 24% in grade 7, 14% in grades 6 and 8, and 8% in grade 5. The soprano voice had 46% of the participants, contralto 32%, and tenors 22%.

Materials

The questionnaire aimed to obtain a detailed description of participants' attitudes and beliefs about choral music participation. The questionnaire included two main types of measures: participants' perceptions regarding their participation in the choral activity; and participants' attitudes and beliefs with respect to choral music in school. The questionnaire used closed questions, dichotomous questions, rating scales and opened questions.

Procedure

Before the questionnaire was administered to participants, a validate study was conducted by submitting it to the judgment of three experts (Oppenheim 1992), who presented their opinions in order to increase the reliability, validity, and practicability of the questionnaire. The researchers distributed the questionnaire to all participants with a maximum response level.

RESULTS

Participant responses to the 11 items about participating in choir activities showed that 86% felt important and adult in moderate to high levels. Most students, 88%, shared a feeling of freedom and felt a high degree of autonomy, representing 90% in moderate to high levels. Perhaps not surprisingly, a lower number of students, 64%, mentioned the existence of amusing or entertaining moments during choral activity, possibly due to the different students ages involved in the choir in addition to their general level of adulthood beliefs. All students recognized in the choir activity a very good or excellent opportunity to learn singing very well, in addition to the development of memory skills. The increase in the levels of happiness and joy

reported when participating in the choir activities are not surprising, showing a 98% in moderate to very high levels. Participating in this choir activity had implications on students' needs relating to attention and concentration levels during choir rehearsals as well as with their time scheduling and planning to study school subjects as reported by 98% of participants in a moderate to high level. The majority of participants, 92%, said that when participating in the choir activities their behaviour improved moderate to high levels.

Participant responses to the 5 items concerning opportunities provided by participation in the extracurricular choral activity show that the most valued, in high to very high levels by all students, are the chances to construct friendship and camaraderie, to help colleagues when needed, to exchange cultural and musical experiences with other choirs, and to learn and practice society rules of behaviour. Student responses indicated that 86% believed that choral activity provided them with moderate to very high levels of chances to establish new friendships with singers of other choirs.

Participants' opinions about their choir teacher indicated that 100% felt that he is their friend in a high to very high level. Concerning the repertoire sung in the choir, all students' responses showed that they enjoy it in a moderate to very high level. Nevertheless, when asked whether other people enjoyed listening to the choir repertoire, 90% answered yes in a moderate to very high level, 8% considered that public did not enjoy it at all.

All participants shared the opinion in a moderate to very high level that participating in the choir activity allowed students to learn how to use their voice in every day needs. Of the respondents, 8% considered that participating in the choir activity did not contribute to their cultural enrichment. All others reported in a moderate to very high level of perception concerning this contribution.

Of the participants, 68% reported at a moderate to high level that their motivation to study increased since they began participating in the choir activities. Only 10% considered that their motivation had increased very much while the other 22% responded mainly a little. Participants' responses to the importance of values of persistency and perseverance in projects in which one is involved illustrate. 98% think about those attitudes in a moderate to very high level of significance. Only 2%, representing the opinion of 1 student, consider it just a little important.

Students' responses to the 4 items about what they most enjoy when they sing with the choir clearly reveal that they found a high level of enjoyment in the trip and felt it was fundamental (64%), followed by the applauses (56%), and the singing moment (44%). All other students reported moderate to high levels of enjoyment regarding these items.

With a moderate level of enjoyment, 40% expressed that the moment they most preferred was the meal, perhaps due to the low economic and cultural status of most participants' families.

When asked about their opinion concerning the continuity of the choir (Coral Sinfónico Juvenil do CJB), 98% reported an affirmative answer which supports the importance and value that this extracurricular activity represents for participants. Only 78% explained their reasons for the previous response, which refer mainly to reasons previously reported in the questionnaire. Nonetheless, students stressed issues such as: the importance of providing new college students the same opportunity they had been provided by the existence of the choir; the therapeutic role of singing; the school promotion; how proud singing made their families, school, and teachers; a way of showing their skills besides those usually requested at school; and finally an excellent way of being with others and bringing people together.

When asked about their intent to participate later in life in musical activities, 68% reported an affirmative response. 38% of respondents elucidated those activities which included being a professional musician, a professional singer; continuing participating in choral groups, karaoke, and musical moments inside and outside school settings.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study indicate that participating in this choir in extracurricular settings had very high levels of impact on participant's attitudes, self-perceptions, and beliefs about choral music education programs. Participants felt important, proud, happy, and more useful and appreciated by their colleagues, families, and communities. They recognized that their participation in this activity provided them with opportunities to develop their personal, social, and cultural skills and knowledge, as well as providing them with other professional perspectives. They expressed a sense of responsibility and conscientiousness, with notions about the value of persistency and perseverance. Regarding interpersonal benefits, they acknowledged in the choral activity an excellent chance to relate themselves with others and to enlarge their cultural and musical experiences. Students reported that choral participation helped them to understand the importance of attitudes, like respect to others, tolerance, and the importance of applying it to practice in their lives, with themselves, and with society.

It would be interesting to expand this study by comparing results between students', teachers', and parents' perceptions as well as the

influence of music teachers (and conductors) on the participants' attitudes, self-perception, and beliefs.

Through choral music participation, these students gradually developed and constructed their attitudes, self-perceptions, and beliefs about choral music education at school and outside school, about music participation, and about themselves. Through the development of a sense of awareness of their own skills, aptitudes, realizations, and maturity, choral music appears to be associated with a larger project, to the group in which it belongs (Vygotski 1977)—learning to be...singing.

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