



How Do You Get Everyone Singing Like This?

What I Say to My Singers

by *Anna Langness, Ph.D.*



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During the past few years numerous parents and college students have observed my music classes. In our brief conversations most observers commented on the high level of willing, if not eager, student participation. Many were impressed with the music knowledge and skill levels that had been demonstrated. Most were very pleased to hear the quality of the class singing and were surprised to see the ease with which many boys and girls sang alone. Usually, these observers wanted to know, how do you get everyone singing like this? In this article I will share what I have told my visitors and present some of the ways I talk with children about their voices. I attempt to keep voice study as an ongoing strand of every music lesson.

Singing as Part of the Curriculum

Within a balanced music education program, which includes singing, listening, moving, playing instruments, creating, reading and writing music, I place a high priority on the development of personal skills for speaking and singing. I believe that all children can learn to use their voices in healthy ways and can sing tunefully and expressively. Each year, every child is expected to set personal goals for vocal development and to make progress toward those goals.

To achieve the goal of vocal skill development for every child, a teacher must make a tremendous commitment to provide necessary instruction and experiences for that to happen. To help children develop vocal skills, I have cultivated in myself a sensitivity to the quality of singing (the children's and my

own) and an awareness of the conditions for singing that occur during all music study. I attempt to keep voice study as an ongoing strand through every music lesson. This may be as simple as a gesture toward the abdomen to remind students to send more energy, a brief vocal warm-up, or a critically timed side-trip into a mini-voice lesson. In activities where singing is not necessarily the focus, I adjust the lesson to make the conditions more favorable for singing. For example, when practicing rhythm reading without a melody, changing the pitch and energy level of vocal production keeps the exercise alive and musically satisfying. Consistent attention to conditions for quality singing has been richly rewarding. Musical singing has been aesthetically pleasing and satisfying for us all and has become a real asset to the music program in our school.

Creating the Atmosphere

Students need to know our expectations for their learning and whenever possible, should set personal goals for meeting those expectations. By describing the process needed to develop a skill, rather than focusing only on the end product, we help students focus on the musical and social behaviors that help them achieve their goals. For example, we can describe aspects of vocal production that result in the ability to sing accurately.

Instruction about vocal production becomes more meaningful and appealing for children if we connect it to physical education. We can describe vocal training as exercising, conditioning and building muscle coordination. In my opening remarks concerning voice education, I am aware of the attitude and feelings that I communicate to the students. I attempt to:

- look confident, enthusiastic, and at ease.
- sound competent, pleasant, energized, and businesslike about the work to be done.
- avoid coaxing participation or reassuring students that they will be comfortable and successful.
- Convey the message that I want students to enjoy singing and am concerned for their growth in comfort and confidence.

Following are examples of what I say to older students as an introduction to voice study.

In addition to learning about music, we will learn about our voices and how to use them for singing and speaking.

One of our expectations in music class is that every student will gain vocal skills.

Just as in physical education you learn better ways your body can walk and run, in music class you will learn more efficient ways your voice can speak and sing.

You will want to develop a habit of singing and participating in every exercise so that the various sets of muscles that work together for singing can become conditioned and coordinated. Then your voice can produce a wide range of pitches and will be flexible for singing patterns in melodies.

Your muscles involved with breathing will be able to send whatever energized air flow your voice needs. Now, while this may sound rather complicated, it is actually fascinating to explore and discover what voices can do. In fact, we may be surprised to find what your voices can produce this year.

Responding to Student Singing

When responding to student singing, there are many types of feedback (Langness, 1992) from which to choose. Depending on the purpose of the task and what the student needs to know, one might choose from the following.

- Descriptive, which informs by describing the responses.
- Corrective or diagnostic, which tells what is wrong with the answer, how it was derived, and how to improve.
- Normative, which compares the present performance with previous attempts, tells of progress.
- Summative, which gives a summary that addresses a series of responses or responses over a period time
- Encouragement, which cheers on or reassures a child for the effort or attempt to respond.
- Acceptance and acknowledgment, which indicates that the response has been heard.
- Praise, a high intensity approval or evaluation of a response, best used when it is spontaneous and genuine.

In Conclusion:

Singing can be life-changing! Knowing about our voices and ways to use them is part of knowing who we are as individuals. Valuing the unique and identifiable qualities of each personal voice is also valuing that person as a unique individual. Since everyone possesses this musical instrument, the voice, skills learned can serve as an avenue for personal expression and music making, alone or in groups, for a lifetime of enjoyment and satisfaction.

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