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ARTICLE

Making space for singing in the 21st century classroom – A focus group interview study with primary school music teachers in Sweden

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Abstract

The present study aimed to increase understanding of how singing activities may be initiated in primary school, and what support and assistance teachers require to conduct singing activities as an integrated part of the school day. Five music teachers participated in a focus group interview. The following main themes were identified: 1) pedagogical and methodological flexibility, 2) the role of routines and familiarity, 3) the embodied and multimodal dimensions of singing, 4) the importance of accompaniment and instruments, 5) the experience of insecurity and obstacles and 6) the perceived synergies between singing and other learning activities. This knowledge may be important to integrate within music teacher education in order to secure singing's place in schools.

Keywords: Singing activities; primary school; music teacher education; Sånghälsa

Introduction

Over several decades, singing's place within the music curriculum has shifted from a central to a peripheral role in several European national contexts (Ashley, 2014; Djupsjöbacka, 2018; Johnson, 2020). This shift has occurred despite recent research suggesting links between music engagement (with singing in particular) and well-being (Welch, 2017; Dingle et al., 2021) and between musical training and cognitive and academic benefits (Maule & Hilpold, 2013; Román-Caballero et al., 2022). For example, Guhn et al. (2020) reported positive associations between academic achievement and school music participation based on population level educational records. Welch et al. (2009), in an evaluation of a large-scale singing program, reported a linear association between children's singing development and a positive sense of self and social inclusion. Based on these findings, a case can be made for the potential benefits of making space for daily singing activities. Where further research is needed is on questions of how song activities can best be integrated and organised within the school day, as well as how such singing activities may support children's cognitive and linguistic development, vocal confidence and listening abilities, contribute to improved learning environments and strengthen social bonds.

An important and significant source of knowledge for obtaining information on how singing instruction in compulsory school can be coordinated and organised lies in music teachers'

professional experiences (Backman Bister & Persson, 2021). We know that cuts in arts education and teacher education can threaten the place of singing in primary and lower secondary schools and potentially impair children's equal access to high-quality singing music education (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) and presumed extra-musical benefits. We currently have little experience and knowledge of *how* to counteract this ominous development. In the present study, we interviewed music teachers in a focus group with the aim of increasing our understanding of how singing activities may be initiated in primary school, and what support and assistance teachers require to conduct singing activities as an integrated part of the school day.

Background

Music making and singing involves all parts of the body and mind and have been shown to be complex and multimodal with measurable properties that promote health and quality of life (Bonde, 2011; Saarikallio, 2011). These measurable properties and qualities can consist of physiological responses such as deeper breathing and diaphragm activity, self-regulation of emotion and cognitive stimulation, sensory and aesthetic entrainment, imagination stimulation, among other positive effects (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Researchers have described how music in general and singing in particular may promote health and well-being as 1) a tool for expressing and regulating emotion (Coutinho et al., 2014), 2) a medium of communication and contact with others (Welch & Preti, 2014) and 3) a means of identity construction (e.g. Denora, 2001; Laiho, 2004; Ruud, 2013; Welch et al., 2014), factors which assessed individually or collectively can be seen as highly relevant for the promotion of a safe and nurturing school environment. Several studies have shown that music making can have positive effects on health and quality of life (Gabrielsson, 2011; Theorell et al., 2014; Løkken et al., 2018; Theorell & Bojner Horwitz, 2019). Studies of twins indicate how self-regulation of emotion may be associated with to what degree a person has been active in music; the more hours spent in musical practice the better children are able to differentiate, communicate and read others' emotional states (Theorell et al., 2014). Some research supports the theory that singing in particular may have a stronger potential to affect factors such as health, well-being, social cohesion and learning compared to playing other instruments due to its intimacy, universality and antiquity, as well as singing's possible role in the evolution of human societies and spoken language (Mithen, 2005; Dalla Bella, 2014).

Singing behavior in early childhood development has been shown in multiple studies to facilitate mother–infant bonding, aid in language acquisition and develop self-regulation skills, with positive effects on children's health, well-being and development (Trehub & Gudmundsdottir, 2014; Tsang et al., 2017; Falk et al., 2021). A survey study by Maule and Hilpold (2013) found that there was evidence of a clear positive association between singing to one's children at an early age and their later academic achievements as students in reading, science and mathematics. ROSENBERG et al., (2022 ms) showed that in families where the parents sung to their infants, the children's lexicon was significantly greater at 24 months of age compared to the children in families where singing was not a significant activity. Singing involves components which can be thought to strengthen language skills among older children, but the connection between singing and language remains under researched. Those few studies which have examined possible associations between language learning and singing are extremely difficult to compare due to varying and in some cases weak methods. An exception is Schön et al. (2008) who conducted a series of experiments studying acquisition of new words by young adults, concluding that sung novel words were significantly easier for participants to remember and repeat compared to spoken words.

A handful of studies have looked at the connection between language and musical processing in children with 'developmental language disorder' (DLD) finding that they exhibit similar difficulties with musical processes and language syntax (Jentschke et al., 2005, 2008). This may be due to the fact that children with DLD often have difficulties processing auditory information such as sound pitch,

Table 1. The questions included in the interview guide

1. Based on your experience as a music teacher, what methods are useful for initiating singing activities in primary school?
2. What kind of support have you had in your work for getting primary school children to sing?
3. What else might you need to assist you in getting primary school children singing in the classroom?

duration and fast formant changes, elements which are necessary for processing both musical as well as language syntax. Interventions using music and rhythm have been shown to be effective in the treatment of children with DLD (Bedoin et al., 2016). Anvari et al. (2002) found in a study of four- and five-year-olds that music making and musical competence (discrimination between similar and dissimilar musical statements, production of rhythm and melody sequences) was a reliable predictor of reading level even when controlling for cognitive ability.

To summarise, current research shows music and singing in particular to have positive effects on health, well-being, language learning and social cohesion. To the best of our knowledge, no negative effects associated with increased focus on singing in compulsory education have been shown in current research. In short, it seems clear that promoting wider participation in music and singing activities in elementary school could have wide-reaching benefits for life-long learning and public health. Teacher's competence, discretionary powers and professional experience may well be key factors in the successful integration of singing activities into the school day and therefore need to be further studied and better understood.

Overall aim with our research

The present study was conducted within the project *Singing, health and well-being in school – a societal matter* (SiS: Sånghälsa i skolan), a Swedish multi-year transdisciplinary research initiative that aims to develop models for research-based, developmentally appropriate daily singing instruction in elementary school and to measure the effects of daily singing on children's sense of well-being and learning environment, as well as on their cognitive, language and social competences. In order to develop this research-based model in the best possible way, we started by interviewing music teachers in a focus group to collect and build a deeper understanding of professional attitudes and experiences of working with singing in their everyday primary school work. The aim with this focus group interview was to build practice-based knowledge with music teachers based on their experiences of initiating and leading singing activities in primary schools 2021.

Methodology

To be able to better understand the phenomenon of singing in primary schools from the perspectives of in-service music teachers, a focus group method was used. This focus group interview sought to analyse teachers' experiences and ideas about singing activities that are integrated into the school day in primary schools in Sweden, for children aged 8-9 years. Questions focused on the teachers' didactic tools and ideas on how to implement singing activities in the classroom (see the interview guide Table 1).

Participants

Five music teachers were included in the focus group after a purposive selection procedure. Contact information for a group of potential participants fulfilling the study's inclusion criteria were collected. To address unknown sources of bias, participants were selected randomly from this larger group for inclusion in the study. Considerations for the composition of the study sample

were the inclusion of participants who 1) received teacher training from different higher education institutions (from northern, central and southern Sweden), 2) had varying amount of professional experience as music teachers (a spread from 1981 until 2021) and 3) were active as music teachers in Swedish primary school 2021. The sample was also constituted to include both women and men. In these ways the study sample sought to address possible geographical, experience and gender biases. All of the participants provided written consent for their inclusion in the study.

The oldest music teacher in the focus group has been working continuously since the beginning of the 1980s and the youngest finished their music teacher education three years ago. All of them were working as music teachers at the time of the interview. In this article, the five participating music teachers have been given fictitious names: Anna (A), Bea (B), Carl (C), Dennis (D), Eric (E).

The interviewer 1 (music and health researcher) and interviewer 2 (music education researcher and director) facilitated the interview together. The interview took place via ZOOM and was audio recorded in September 2021, for 70 minutes.

Data collection

Data was collected from one focus group consisting of five music teachers and two researchers (Interviewer 1 and 2).

The focus group interview followed a set of questions based on the interview guide (Table 1), which were based on previous research findings and used a phenomenological hermeneutic approach (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2003; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2018). This method was chosen to better understand how music teachers experienced singing activities in their own classrooms; discussions pursuing related issues, particular processes and embodied experiences were facilitated by the researchers. The preunderstanding of the interviewers, with long professional involvement in music education, music and health and voice and vocal music pedagogy, were useful in the analysis of the transcripts. Each participant contributed to the focus group interviews and all participants' narratives are part of the complete interpretation. With regard to the richness of the focus group interview, a saturation arose before the discussion ended; that is, nothing new emerged during the final part of the interview.

Data analysis

We analysed the participants' conversation through a phenomenological-hermeneutic lens which helped us to identify, organise, interpret and systematise meaning units and themes that emerged from within the data that mirrors the entire data set. This approach goes beyond a semantic analysis as it identifies underlying patterns and assumptions that shape the semantic content in the data (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2003). The preunderstanding of the interviewers is part of the analytical process and Naïve Reading. A Naïve Reading is the general comprehension of the whole (text)material which serves as a direction for the structural analyses. The phenomenological-hermeneutic method is inspired by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1976) and has earlier been used by many researchers (Ekman et al., 1993; Norberg et al., 1994; Talseth et al., 2000; Bojner Horwitz, 2004).

In accordance with the problem outlined and the aim of our research, we analysed the data in the following order:

- 1) Reading through all the material, after orthographical transcribing from audio recording by Interviewer 2.
- 2) Writing a Naïve Reading.
- 3) Interpreting and systematically categorising the content of the interview transcripts into meaning units, sub-themes and themes and associated patterns.

- 4) Thematising and structuring the text according to the significant meaning (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2017; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2018).
- 5) Writing a structure analysis.
- 6) Rendering a complete interpretation.

Interviewer 1 (Bojner Horwitz) first analysed the transcribed interviews. The preunderstanding of interviewer 1 added deeper interpretations and helped to ensure richness and details from the material. In the next step of the analyses, interviewer 2 (Bygdéus) added her interpretations and together with interviewer 1 discussed overlapping and new findings. This multi-step process of building broader knowledge and interpretation from the transcripts can strengthen internal and interpretive validity and is of great value for the *Complete Interpretation*: that is, the final step of the analyses where all the different steps of the structure analyses are set (Silverman, 2014).

Interlinked verification was conducted involving all six of the present study's co-authors which led to a consensus regarding the categories and themes that were identified. They were thus identified by using an inductive approach and not based on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This process was particularly rewarding due to the unusually broad multidisciplinary backgrounds of the co-authors who represent a wide range of professional competences and theoretical perspectives from diverse fields: speech and language development and pathology, music and health, music education, psychology, social medicine, sound and music computing and music psychology. This interdisciplinary mix affords this study a unique perspective on the subject material.

Results

Our analysis of the focus group interview conversation identified six main themes that serve to deepen an understanding of how singing is and can be integrated into the school day. These themes were 1) pedagogical and methodological flexibility, 2) the role of routines and familiarity, 3) the embodied and multimodal dimensions of singing, 4) accompaniment and instruments play a role in singing education, 5) the experience of insecurities and obstacles and 6) the perceived synergies between singing and other learning activities. The six themes will be presented in greater detail below.

Theme 1: Pedagogical and methodological flexibility

Examples of citations and sub-themes related to pedagogical and methodological flexibility (Theme 1) are shown in Table 2.

'Sometimes you do not like to sing a song and then it does not work . . . you need to give it a few lessons before they really start to understand how it should be and then they think it is fun' (C)

Participants stressed the need to have flexible lesson plans and a relaxed attitude to make room for singing to work well and engage students. Listening, empathy, giving the process time and *flexibility* need to be exhibited in music making both by the children and by the music teacher. The pedagogical instruction is often multimodal, with diverse strategies used to teach and engage the group: symbols representing the lyrics, saying the first sentence and letting the children fill in new words, call and response, shifting learners' attention to different focal points (e.g., 'look at my mouth, look at me, you decide where you want to look'), giving options of how to follow along (e.g., lip reading/text/image). Giving options for how learners can direct their attention in this way becomes a support for learning which is an integral part of methodological flexibility. As one participant states, 'You can choose a little yourself whatever you want to look at'. Sometimes, learners are best engaged by simply listening and imitating the vocal leader. At other times, learning props may support learner engagement. The tactile experience of feeling objects related to

Table 2. Theme 1 – Pedagogical and methodological flexibility

Raw data – illustrative citations	Quote summary	Sub-themes
<i>'That you do not like to sing a song and then it does not work . . . you need to give it a few lessons before they really start to understand how it should be and then they think it is fun'. (C)</i>	Give the process time so we understand what we do	Time and patience
<i>'Give it time - it may take several lessons - then it will be fun'. (D)</i>	Necessity of giving the process time in order to find joy	Time is needed to find joy
<i>'Patience and repetition usually also helps a lot'. (C)</i>	Repetition and patience	Repetition and patience
<i>'We redo it (the star song) a bit every time - we change it and start with a 'hello' and then we change it, so we sing hello in different languages. so, we sing hello and ola . . .' (E)</i>	Re-do, re-think, re-sing, cognitive flexibility	Openness to be able to find cognitive flexibility
<i>'I tested using pictures as a learning prop ["bildstöd"] and combined it with them having access to the text so you can choose a little yourself whatever you want to look at: if you want to look at pictures or read in the text or a mixture of just listen and imitate'. (D)</i>	Combining image, text or listen and imitate – be open to different modalities	Combine different perceptions

Table 3. Theme 2 – The role of routines and familiarity

Raw data – illustrative citations	Quote summary	Sub-themes
<i>'Sometimes you try to skip something, and you must not do that because then someone points it out'. (B)</i>	To be very consistent with what you do	Consistency when you perform
<i>'So there is almost no doubt about what will happen when you enter the room'. (D)</i>	The structure in everything you do is key	Structure and security
<i>'I always have a small rug in front of my feet where there are things that are connected to the texts so right now there are some chestnuts and leaves yes you understand that there were always some concrete things too'. (B)</i>	Recognition in every detail, i.e. in props and tools ['rekvesita']	Consistency in every detail
<i>'It's a great way to always start with (the startsong) to get to know all the children with someone's names that should not be so complicated'. (D)</i>	Routines in doing, acting and singing	Correspondence between song and recall

themes expressed in song lyrics such as chestnuts, leaves, things spread on a carpet or hidden in a bag may also catch learners' attention in other ways and support learning and active participation.

Theme 2: The role of routines and familiarity

Examples of citations and sub-themes related to the role of routines and familiarity (Theme 2) are shown in Table 3.

'It's a great way to always start with [the startson] to get to know all the children with someone's names that should not be so complicated' (D)

Strategies for 'getting started' were discussed and described by study participants in diverse ways. Some may introduce each lesson by starting with the same song for an entire semester, an entire academic year or for a certain period, before it is time to change the introductory song. At the start song, the children usually sound the most – it's what they know the best – and if the music teacher

Table 4. Theme 3 –The embodied and multimodal dimensions of singing

Raw data – illustrative citations	Quote summary	Sub-themes
'... arranged the song with these instruments so they kind of start by listening to when I heard a guitar, and I heard a bass, and I heard a violin and so on, so that you have managed to weave it (the song) in there'. (E)	Listening after specific instruments in a playful way – thereby integrating the singing with listening	Increased embodied awareness via listening
'... it can be if it is pulse or tempi embodied or something I wrote on the board ... but I do not use more than 2 new words at a time'. (A)	Visual input through embodied writing	Embodied visual input
'You make movements to the songs so that the words become clearer through it, you do a lot with the youngest children, you act out everything: you know how to fish and fly, and everything you do as well'. (B)	Collective movements to integrate the song with mind and embodied awareness and thereby knowledge building	A collective motor/ embodied knowledge
'... using pictures as learning props ["bildstöd"] and combining them: having access to the text so you can choose a little yourself if you would like to look at pictures or read in the text or mix this, or just listen and imitate'. (D)	Chose which modality that suits you the best when learning to sing	Learning via multimodal support

should choose to start or end in some other way, the children may be quick to reprimand and note that, 'Now you forgot!': that is, the routine is important for the children, a start routine that sets the tone and provides security and courage. As one participant states, routines are so vital and clearly established to the point where 'there is almost no doubt about what will happen when you enter the room'.

Theme 3: The embodied and multimodal dimensions of singing

Examples of citations and sub-themes related to embodied multimodal transformation (Theme 3) are shown in Table 4.

'... it can be 'pulse' or 'tempi', 'embodied' or something I wrote on the board ... but I do not use more than two new words at a time'. (A)

An embodied *multimodal approach* for the music teacher is emphasised allowing children to follow along by watching the mouth, gestures, texts, images, notation and alternating symbols in musical embodied learning:

'You make movements to the songs so that the words become clearer through it, you do a lot with the youngest children, you act out everything: you know how to fish and fly, and everything you do as well'. (B)

By nurturing a learning experience grounded in playfulness with their bodies and the importance of play, teachers can engender an embodied multimodal transformation that allows for musical elements to be tried several times and in different ways. Working multimodally – following cues from body language and facial expressions, for example – can also contribute to flexibility. Multimodal work in singing instruction helps 'so that the words become clearer' for learners. With the youngest children, 'you act out everything'. The study participants stressed the fact that

Table 5. Theme 4 – Accompaniment and instruments play a role in singing education

Raw data – illustrative examples	Quote summary	Sub-themes
<i>'It is difficult for those (music teachers) students today to lead a class because they simply do not have that (instrument) knowledge'. (A)</i>	The knowledge of playing a musical instrument is very important when singing with children	An adequate accompaniment instrument is part of the singing skill
<i>'I respect the fact that music teachers should be able to play instruments, but we come to primary school teachers who want a lot, so you have to give them the tools to dare (to play an instrument)'. (E)</i>	We need tools to help teachers dare to play	Tools that help teachers to play an instrument
<i>'I think that piano and guitar have different advantages, but the guitar has the advantage that you can sit a lot closer, you can sit in the group on the floor and get close with the guitar'. (B)</i>	Advantages of certain instruments	Instrument and togetherness in singing
<i>'They cannot (play) an instrument and not be a model, and I personally think it is almost a mockery of our own profession when you have studied so much ... but it is seen as extremely important to be able to handle, you know, piano and guitar well'. (A)</i>	If you can't play a piano or the guitar – your study credits do not mean anything	An instrument is key in singing
<i>'... handle the instrument without expending energy- [it] should go towards the children not down in what your hands do but what you master well so that you can have your energy towards the children that is what is your best instrument I think'. (B)</i>	Embodied knowledge and experience so you can focus on the most important part, i.e. the children	Master your instrument so it does not distract attention

singing and music are not events that take place only in one particular formal classroom learning environment at school. Instead, they describe the subject as being in the classroom, in the corridor, in the gym, in different rooms and not just at one time a week, but rather as something that can permeate a school milieu in different places within the framework of the school day.

In the focus group conversation, the five music teachers discussed themes such as expressing embodied emotions through music, the 'sparkling eyes' of engaged students, the roll of place and learning environment in singing pedagogy, community, group energy, play and playfulness, call and response and tools to encourage collaborative learning. These elements can all be seen as part of the embodied dimension of singing.

Theme 4: Accompaniment and instruments play a role in singing education

Examples of citations and sub-themes related to the role and meaning of instruments (Theme 4) are shown in Table 5.

'It is difficult for those (music teacher) students today to lead a class because they simply do not have that (instrument) knowledge'. (A)

According to study participants, an acoustic instrument such as a piano or guitar is unbeatable when working with children and young people: to find simple songs, have fun and find a popular way to socialise through the song and music. The piano's strength to be able to present a melody and to be able to do so much more if you master the instrument is one of the tools teacher students today need time for in teacher education, although other instruments such as guitar have their

Table 6. Theme 5 – The experience of insecurity and obstacles

Raw data – illustrative examples	Quote summary	Sub-themes
<i>'There are very many primary school teachers who are very insecure in music'. (E)</i>	Insecurity in teachers is common in music education	Insecurity in music
<i>'I have teachers around me who think it would be great to be able to work with music in the classroom more, but they do not have the tools to do so'. (E)</i>	Tools are missing to be able to play more in the classrooms	Tools for musicking are lacking
<i>'Some children are not allowed to sing'. (B)</i>	Taboos and restrictions from outside school limit some children's participation	Not every child is allowed to sing in their home environment.
<i>'The biggest challenge for me is the repertoire: that you have managed to pick out songs that both you can handle and that the children like to sing and that are simple enough but not too simple'. (D)</i>	Finding the right songs appropriate for students voices, language skills and interests	Challenge of finding the appropriate level of difficulty in repertoire
<i>'... it must not be like this: 'and now we must sing together'. It must feel unartificial, this is very important'. (E)</i>	Find a natural way to find an organic singing space	Avoid unnatural attitudes towards singing
<i>'If the class teacher does not have any musical experience, I think it is a better idea to have a recording with someone who plays and sings'. (D)</i>	Replacing the teacher with a music recording	Technical support instead of experience
<i>'But I do not think any of us music teachers have time to do such a process (educate others in singing in the classroom), so I do not see how I can put more time for such a project outside my music teaching time'. (E)</i>	Find time for music teachers to help other teachers with singing	Time is scarce

own relative advantages. Many firmly feel that instruments in the room are the best option for supporting and leading group singing; pre-recorded tools and creating online material may also be needed, but a real instrument gives more power and strength to the music. The ability to play along while leading the group, however, requires a high degree of familiarity and technical mastery if the teacher is to be able to effectively accompany while maintaining focus primarily on the singers; they need to 'handle the instrument without expending energy- [it] should go towards the children, not down in what your hands do'. Musical instruments then are useful but require a high level of mastery in order to be used effectively. Participants noted the often low level of mastery on accompaniment instruments exhibited by student teachers and the limitations this can imply for their professional competence.

Theme 5: The experience of insecurity and obstacles

Examples of citations and sub-themes related to insecurity and obstacles/challenges (Theme 5) are shown in Table 6.

'Some children are not allowed to sing...' (B)

Situations where a child is not allowed to sing may occur due to cultural or personal reasons. Regulations and restrictions imposed from outside school are challenges that are important to handle so that all children are able to participate actively in classroom singing activities.

Table 7. Theme 6 – Perceived synergies between singing and other learning activities

Raw data – illustrative examples	Quote summary	Sub-themes
<i>'I also think that there would be incredible benefits precisely if music is not an event that takes place once a week in a special room but that the music is in more places during the week and during the school day and in different places – then it will also be another ride'. (B)</i>	Open up spaces more frequently during the whole week	Singing ought to have more space in the school week
<i>'precisely that music does not only take place at a special time once a week – A fun repertoire that is not too complicated'. (C)</i>	More than one time a week	Singing synergies (spread)
<i>'I fill this Spotify list all the time., I also do this so they can sing at home, so the parents can play (the list) and so on and so forth. It became like another step, how the songs you sing continue to be sung'. (A)</i>	Encouraging singing outside school time requires tools	Singing synergies outside school
<i>'[Singing] can help the children develop and I think that language and music are very closely related. I know myself how many rhymes you learned in school that still remain after like 20 years so that it matters of course'. (C)</i>	Importance of synergies between language and rhythm	Develop synergies between language and music
<i>'I do not think we need to work so incredibly hard for them, in fact it is important to choose the right songs so that we ourselves can sing them over and over again and find them rewarding'. (B)</i>	Trust in singing that is 'good enough' to allow for progressive growth; singing as its own reward	Rewarding synergies
<i>'I have noticed in school that it [language] gets better with music, the statement that the Swedes know how to pronounce things . . . they put the words in other places . . . that is precisely what it [the singing] improves - I have really noticed that'. (A)</i>	Improve language skills with singing	Synergy between language learning and singing
<i>'I do not think it is a problem for the rest [of the staff] to get in and set aside a quarter of an hour and sing. I think it is just appreciated'. (D)</i>	Synergies with the rest of the schedule	Synergies with school schedule

Primary school teachers, teacher students and even specialist music teachers can feel insecure in the subject of music and singing in particular. A participant noted, 'I have teachers around me who think it would be great to be able to work with music in the classroom more, but they do not have the tools to do so'. Skills and tools such as a reliable repertoire of songs take time and classroom experience to develop. Repertoire was identified by one participant as 'the biggest challenge': to find music 'that both you can handle and that the children like to sing and that are simple enough but not too simple'. Mentorship from music teachers would be valuable for new teachers and teachers less experienced in classroom singing to help in development of repertoire and singing practices, but this represents a large commitment of work hours that are difficult to come by. As one participant puts it, 'I do not think any of us music teachers have time to do such a process'.

Participants describe situations where music teacher-students come out for internships and are afraid to lead music activities. In these instances, the student teacher's ability to serve as a positive role model – which is crucial in the meeting with children and young people – is sorely lacking.

Theme 6: The perceived synergies between singing and other learning activities

Examples of citations and sub-themes related to synergies (Theme 6) are shown in Table 7.

'[Singing] can help the children develop and I think that language and music are very closely related. I know myself how many rhymes you learned in school that still remain after like 20 years'. (C)

'I have noticed in school that it [language] gets better with music'. (A)

A synergy between learning language and singing was noted by participants. An attitude of aiming for singing that is 'good enough' may be employed in the learning of singing repertoire in stages of independence and sophistication with the children: the leader singing the whole song first for the group, trying the whole and then working with the parts, choosing to listen or sing along or to vary, choosing where learners want to fix their gaze (for example, text, image or prop) during performance of the song. Participants describe giving learners space to 'hop on' to a song, listen and imitate, sing along more and more in a gradual expansion of the child's own space for participation that creates choice for the children. This open attitude of 'good enough' enables growth into an active participation over time.

Discussion

In the present study, five music teachers discussed themes such as expressing emotions through music, multimodal learning, learning environment in singing pedagogy, group energy, play and playfulness, confidence, learning tools, collaborative learning and the embodied dimension of singing. While limited conclusions may be drawn from this study's small sample size, results point towards a framework for understanding those elements which may support the initiation of singing activities. The recurring use of various mediating tools in our participants' everyday singing pedagogy experience, for example, links very well to previous research suggesting the central role such tools can play (Bygdéus, 2015, 2018). The importance of props such as pictures that reinforce aspects of musical performance (via media such as PowerPoint/keynote to display images or texts) and various other forms of symbols and objects that enhance the learning environment were important for music teachers' leading singing activities.

Singing instruction is often multimodal, with diverse strategies used to lead and engage the group of children: symbols representing the lyrics, leaves and chestnuts stimulating the tactile senses, saying the first sentence and letting the children fill in new words, call and response, shifting learners' attention and the like. Listening, empathy skills and flexibility are exhibited in the music making both by the children and by the music teacher. Giving options for how learners (in this case both music teachers and children) can direct their attention also becomes a support for the musical/singing learning. This multimodal strategy gives young students a chance to learn new words in a multi-faceted way.

Singing together supports dimensions of language such as phonology, vocabulary, grammar and language use (pragmatics) (Anvari et al., 2002). The multimodal processing of auditory, visual and motor cues develop and support language learning in mono as well as in the increasing number of multi-lingual children with Swedish as L2 in schools today (Rudner et al., 2018). Dynamic aspects of singing such as variations in rhythm, tempo, pausing and interaction with others may contribute to development of turn-taking skills and basic aspects of executive functioning such as flexibility and inhibition. To give feedback to children about the meaningful interaction between singing and language emerges from the present study's results is an important part of the music teachers' multifaceted role.

Participants described how it takes patience from the music teacher to dare to work through the music, to be in the rehearsal in different ways with the children and to understand that it may take a few lessons before it gets fun. Fun is not always the first reaction, but with patience and routines it evolves as part of the situated learning response. By nurturing a learning experience grounded in playfulness and the importance of play, the teachers engender a flexibility that allows musical elements to be tried several times in different ways. Working multimodally, i.e., following cues from body language, facial expressions, gaze, gestures, sounds and sensations, also contributes to making a safe space for learning flexibility. Call and response methods were prominent. When the music teacher and the children hit a roadblock, this may be due to misunderstandings or confusion over for example the lyrics or melody; the song can then be split up into smaller bits and practiced (Bygdéus, 2015).

Reference points are needed to create a longing and anticipation from the group; this can be facilitated by building a secure repertoire of songs in the meeting with and through the songs with the children (Johnson, 2021). Beyond repertoire, a rug or similar object that defines a space in front of the feet can act as a focal point to place props during the singing session. This dialogic process interlinking singing practices results in a repertoire of durable songs and routines that stimulate interest and encourage students to continue singing.

Music teachers need knowledge and skills, but they may also need support to dare. Insecurity and self-efficacy have been the focus of music education research assessing teacher willingness to initiate singing and music-making activities. In her study of generalist primary school teachers, Stunell (2010) found that two related dimensions – musical skills and confidence in one’s musical identity– were key to enabling generalist teachers to lead musical activities with their students. De Vries (2011, 2015) found that institutional support and professional development were needed to encourage generalist teachers in initiating music activities. As the present study suggests, even some specialist teacher students and new graduates may lack some of the knowledge, skills and support necessary to dare to lead singing with their students. Both trust and psychological safety (Edmundson, 1999; Edmundson & Lei, 2014) are needed for the courage to express oneself, explore and perform in a group. Whereas trust (in oneself and others) is an individual concept, psychological safety refers to whether it feels safe to take interpersonal risks in a group (Edmundson, 1999; Edmundson & Lei, 2014). For example, the inclusion of new music teachers in teaching teams – where there is space and time to share concepts, for reciprocal feedback and for true collaborative learning – may be crucial for the music teachers’ feeling of safety in the classroom. In-service school leaders have an important role to play here in mentoring apprentice teachers. Additionally, music teachers’ abilities to create psychological safety regarding the broader learning context, e.g. handling restrictions and challenges from students’ experiences outside the school environment as mentioned by study participants are also of great importance for promoting the feeling of psychological safety (Andersson et al., 2022).

Participants reasoned that it can be more difficult to lead singing activities if you do not master an instrument. The focus group conversation revolved around what effects pre-recorded tracks can have on the children’s singing, both positive and negative. Simple songs to sing and having fun together are enriched by live instruments. In this context, many firmly feel that instruments in the room are vital; pre-recorded tools and creating online material may also be needed, but a real instrument gives more power and strength to the music. While other instruments may certainly support learning, the participants’ experiences as related in the present study support an understanding of the piano’s particular strength, allowing teachers to be able to accompany with melody, harmony and rhythm. As such, it can be seen as a tool that ought to be prioritised in teacher education.

Some participants describe important perspectives on singing pedagogy gained from their experiences and observations as teacher trainers and advisors for prospective music teachers. They describe situations where they meet music teacher students lacking basic tools and skills for leading singing effectively: teacher students who cannot play instruments to accompany singing,

do not have repertoire, chant rather than sing, cannot sing in tune and cannot adapt keys and the like. In these instances, the student teacher's ability to serve as a positive role model – which is crucial in the meeting with children and young people when singing – is seriously underdeveloped. Both general classroom school teachers and specialist music teachers can feel insecure in the subject of singing at school. Teachers in primary school may feel that they do not have the tools to work with to be able to create lessons involving singing and singing health.

In conclusion, this study points at several needs and obstacles that are important to consider when integrating singing within the school day in Swedish educational programmes. By building on teacher experiences such as those examined here as well as evidence-based methods, the Singing Health and Well-being in Schools initiative will continue to develop and share knowledge to support effective singing pedagogy in primary schools to further investigate this important dimension of music education.

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