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A Case Study on Pupils' Perceptions of Attending a Choral Class: You Get to Know One Another and Reach a Community

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Abstract

Music activities can have a positive impact on pupils' schooling. It is therefore interesting to obtain more knowledge about pupils' perceptions of different kinds of music activities in school and how these activities affect their schooling. The study was conducted in Sweden at a municipal elementary school where pupils are offered choral lessons three times a week in addition to regular teaching. The aim of the study was to obtain knowledge about pupils' perceptions of attending these choral classes. The results show that the choral singing creates a sense of togetherness. Pupils' learning becomes situated in a practice where everyone is expected to do their best and to contribute to a joint process. These circumstances make the attending pupils to describe their schooling as fun, developing, and instructive.

Introduction

Music can truly be said to be a part of people's lives (Small, 1998; De Nora, 2000; Lilliestam, 2006). Involvement in different music activities can give strong experiences that affect people in different ways. Such experiences can be experienced in childhood or later in life, at home, at school, or in other contexts (Gabrielsson, 2008). Research has shown that music and other forms of the arts have a positive impact on pupils' academic performance, as well as on the social climate in schools (Spychinger, 2001; Gooding, 2009; Parker, 2011). The subject is also important for the sake of every pupil's opportunity to learn and experience music (Lindgren, 2006; Lindström, 2012). As music activities can have a positive impact on pupil's schooling, it is interesting to obtain more knowledge about their perceptions of different kinds of music activities in school and how they experience these activities as affecting their schooling. What can be learnt from their experiences in an attempt to make school a more interesting and stimulating environment for all pupils? In Sweden, music is a school subject and there is a syllabus that describes content and standards for grade 3, 6, and 9. In summary, the learning goals for the syllabus state that pupils are to develop skills in singing and playing in various forms, to analyse and discuss musical expressions in different social, cultural, and historical contexts, and to be able to create music and communicate ideas with others. As seen, the subject of music has a focus on social dimensions and collaboration (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011, pp. 95-98). In Sweden, some schools offer the option to choose classes for playing instruments, dancing or singing in a choir. This article reports from a study conducted at a municipal elementary school where pupils in such music classes are offered choral lessons three times a week in addition to regular teaching. The aim of the study is to obtain knowledge about pupils' perceptions of attending choral classes. Two questions are asked: "What do pupils experience in choral singing?" and "How does choral singing affect their schooling?"

Earlier Research

How music affects people both physically and socially has been of interest in research. Grape et al. (2003, 2008, 2010) have studied how singing in a choir affects individuals physically using quasi-experimental methods, where data are gathered using biological markers. Studies have also been conducted with the aim of obtaining an understanding of why people choose to sing in a choir and what the choir means to them. One study that predicts high school students' participation in choral music, showed that important factors include positive support from home and positive experiences earlier in elementary school. A positive self-concept in regard to music and support from peers was also essential (Siebenaler, 2006). Choirs are often experienced as a social group where people can meet and socialize with others and only secondarily as a musical group (Faulkner & Davidsson, 2006; Balsnes, 2010; Durrant, 2011). It is not only the enjoyment of singing but also the social reasons that make students attend a

choir (Conway & Borst, 2001). Theorell, Lennartsson, Madison, Mosing and Ullen (2015) have studied predictors of continued playing or singing from childhood to adult years. 3,820 men and women aged 27-54 years participated in the study. The results show that music activities with a social function, for example singing and playing the guitar, are associated with continued playing in adulthood.

Elpus (2015) studied the participation rates of males and females among American high school students; approximately 70% attending a high school choir are female. The sense of a shared interest is an important reason to attend a school choir. In a study of grade eight male students in a choir class, Sweet (2010) shows that the boys attend the choir if they were motivated to do so by others who have the same interest in singing. As fewer boys attend choir classes, Freer (2009) states that it is important that boys feel that singing in a choir and musical success are also possible for them. Freer also highlights that singing in a choir is one way of fostering a positive sense of self-esteem for males and that the choir can be a place for them to meet friends with same interest. In a study of 26 adolescent singers' experiences of belonging to a school choral ensemble, Parker (2010) highlights that students—both males and females—feel that the choir is a safe place for pivotal bonding experiences and that they feel that choral singing is uncompetitive and gives a shared experience. Singing in a choir also affects students' learning and development. Lyndell (2010) reports that students who participate in a one-hour weekly session enhance not only their musical skills but also their personal skills and confidence level. It has also been highlighted that singing in a choir promotes students' well being (Wills, 2011). In a compilation and analysis of studies of the arts in education from 170 countries conducted on behalf of UNESCO, Bamford (2009), however, highlights that if positive results are to be achieved through education in the arts it is essential that the teaching is of a good quality. Examples of what characterizes good quality include schools collaborating with artists and institutions outside the school, education being equal for all students, the teaching being perceived as meaningful and students having the opportunity to showcase and reflect on what they have done. Similarly, other research has shown that what is necessary for success in the classroom setting is students' ability to relate to oneself and to others and to have sufficient skill to complete assigned tasks (McClung, 2000).

Outside school, children in Sweden are offered teaching in music at *Community music school* and many take the opportunity to participate, but both entry to Community music school and withdrawal are dependent on factors beyond the control of the child (Lilliestam, 2006). Theorell, Lennartsson, Madison, Mosing, and Ullen (2015) highlight that parental encouragement and an interest in music were of importance when it comes to individuals beginning to play or sing and also for them continuing to play or sing as adults. Similar results

are shown by Ng and Hartwig (2011), who highlight factors such as peer influence and quality of curriculum as being important to continuing to play and sing as adults.

Theoretical Assumptions

The study is based on a socio-cultural perspective. The data is analysed in the light of Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and the fact that learning takes place in communities of practice. The starting points in Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory is that we, in our everyday life, form part of several communities of practice that affect our development and that we in these communities affect the practice to a varying degree as well. A definition of *a community of practice* is “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 95).

The definition gives the term “community of practice” a broad meaning. In the context of this study the two choral classes, the teachers, and the collaboration between the choral classes at the particular school can be understood as a community of practice that are interconnected to a varying extent. These choral classes form a community of practice that affect everyone involved, who also effect the community in itself, and what is possible to achieve in the particular community.

From this theoretical perspective, learning and development can be understood as the inexperienced novice's development from peripheral participation to increasingly full participation in becoming part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The progression from peripheral to full participation in a community of practice involves the changes of the individuals as well as the community of practice. As part of the development from inexperienced to experienced, there is a dimension that involves a change of one's self-image and identity. Going from peripheral to full participation in a community of practice can be seen as becoming more and more able to identify with and to see oneself as part of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Method

The study was conducted between autumn 2014 and spring 2015 in two choral classes in grades four and seven at a specific school in central Sweden. A total of thirty-eight pupils answered a questionnaire, of whom sixteen pupils in grade four and nine pupils in grade seven were interviewed. The criterion for the sample was all pupils attending these two choral classes. The questionnaire was handed out and collected at one occasion in autumn 2014 and the interviews were conducted at two different days at the school in spring 2015. The study followed the Swedish Research Council's ethical principles (The Swedish Research Council, 2011). The participants signed a consent form to participate in the study. All pupils and their

parents were informed of the aim of the study, how it will be presented, that they can withdraw at any time during the study, and that the results will be presented anonymously. All interviews were also recorded with the permission of the participants.

The questionnaire started with two questions about gender and grade. Question 3 asked why the pupils had chosen a choral class, and five reasons were listed as alternatives:

1. I decided by myself
2. My parents inspired me to choose choral class
3. I have siblings that inspired me
4. I have friends that inspired me
5. Other reasons

Question 4 asked if they also sang in a choir in their spare time, and question 5 asked what they like the most about singing in a choir, with three reasons listed as alternatives:

1. Singing together
2. Practising for a concert
3. Singing at a concert

In question 6, the participants were asked to mark five out of sixteen words that they find most appropriate for their experiences of singing in a choir. The words were chosen by me and another researcher and were: community, tough, instructive, enjoyable, stimulating, stressful, motivating, meaningful, hard, fun, mood-full, scary, boring, challenging, restorative and peaceful. Finally, question 7 was an open-ended question asking for a description of a strong experience of singing in a choir. In the analysis of the questionnaire, all answers were summarized and interpreted by me and another researcher and the results later formed a basis for the formulation of an interview guide.

Seven girls and two boys in grade seven and thirteen girls and three boys in grade four were interviewed. Four of the pupils in grade seven, two girls and the two boys, have studied choral classes since grade 4. One of the girls began in grade six and four of the girls started in year seven. All pupils in grade 4 began choral classes in grade 4. Twenty-five pupils were interviewed; these interviews took place in one of the study rooms at the school, lasting from ten minutes to forty minutes. In total 3 hours and 40 minutes of interview data were generated. Each pupil or pair of pupils were interviewed once. Five pupils were interviewed individually and twenty in pairs, giving a total of twenty-five pupils. The choice in letting the pupils' choose to be interviewed in pairs were founded in the adoption that it would make the interview situation more comfortable for them (Cohen, Lawrence, Manion, & Morrison, 2000,

p. 125). It was clear that the interaction in the pairs affected what came to be the focus of the interviews, but it was also clear that the pupils helped each other to recall things that they might not otherwise have raised in a one-to-one interview. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed. In the transcription, the focus was on the content and not on reproducing *how* things were said, rather on *what* was said.

Analytical Method

The material was analysed using a qualitative content analytical method (Kvale, 1997), which meant that the questionnaires and the transcribed interviews were repeatedly read through and various related content was marked using different colours and comments. The next stage involved creating different content categories. The five categories that emerged were: singing in a choir is fun, singing in a choir is a form of community, singing in a choir impacts on school, singing in a choir affects self-confidence, and singing in a choir places demands. The categories were then analysed separately and in relation to the material as a whole.

The questionnaire was first analysed qualitatively separately and later also in parallel with the transcriptions of the interviews, and served to provide greater breadth and a basis for the interpretations. From a research perspective, the theoretical concepts helped me as a researcher to interpret and understand the material through an abductive process. In the analytical process another researcher took note of the data and gave input on the interpretations process as a strategy to bolster the study's trustworthiness (Ely, 1993).

The presentation of the results includes some quotes from the open-ended question in the questionnaire and from the interviews, and these have been carefully edited without compromising the significance of the content in order to maintain participants' anonymity. The quotes are included to illustrate parts of the material which form the basis for the interpretations.

Method discussion

Questionnaires are useful when collecting data as a basis for interviews, and interviews are useful when one is interested in achieving a deeper understanding of people's thoughts and understandings (Kvale, 1997). Since the purpose of the study is to achieve a better understanding of pupils' perceptions of attending a choral class, a combination of a questionnaire and interviews were found to be an appropriate method of data collection.

Choosing the questionnaire as a basis for formulating an interview guide and as a supplement for the interpretation provided complementary and valuable input that gave the opportunity to briefly reconcile the experiences and perceptions of the informants. Since the study is a small

scale investigation and only refers to a small group of pupils' the result cannot be generalized, but discussed in relation to earlier research the study can create recognition and bring another perspective on the topic.

Result and Analysis

The results of this case study show that out of 38 pupils answering the questionnaire, 6 are boys and 32 are girls. Boys attending choir class are in the minority—a result similar to that obtained by Elpus (2015). The results show that the pupils have largely chosen to study in a choral class by themselves. (See Table 1).

Table 1

The results of the question about what lies behind the pupils' choice to attend choral classes.

What lies behind choosing choral class?	Quantity
I decided by myself	22
My parents inspired me to choose choral class	4
I have siblings that inspired me	7
I have friends that inspired me	5
Other reasons	0

This result differs from the larger study by Theorell et al. (2015) showing that parental attitudes were of the most importance for the choice of music as an interest in childhood. It is apparent that the interest in singing in a choir is connected to the school, since only 4 out of the 38 children also sing in a choir in their spare time. Singing together is what the pupils like the most about singing in a choir. Three pupils in grade four marked two alternatives. (See Table 2)

Table 2

The result of the question about what the pupils like the most about singing in a choir.

What do you like the most about singing in a choir?	Quantity
Singing together	22
Practising for a concert	5
Singing at a concert	14

The result shows that the experience of togetherness in choral singing is the most important factor.

In question 6, the participants were asked to mark five words they associate with their experiences of singing in a choir. Five pupils instead marked four words, giving a total of 187 marked words. All words except *stressful* were marked by at least one pupil. The word cloud below illustrates the result (<http://www.wordle.net/>). The larger the word, the more often the word was marked. As can be seen, the most common word marked was *fun*, closely followed by *community*, *instructive*, and *developing*. (See Figure 1). The results are presented below with examples from the analysis categories.



Figure 1. The word cloud illustrating word associations.

Singing in a Choir is Fun

The results from the word cloud harmonize with the answers from the final question in the questionnaire, in which the pupils were asked to describe a strong experience of singing in a choir. 33 pupils out of 38 answered the final question. The most common adjective used in the descriptions is fun, but words such as exiting, happy and cool are also used in a positive sense. For most pupils, 27, their strong experiences of singing in a choir are connected to concerts at school which are described as fun. Here are three quotes from pupils in grades 4 and 7:

*It was at our first concert. It was great fun to sing and everything went well.
Afterwards I was so happy and just wanted to continue to sing. (Girl, grade 7)*

I thought that our first concert was fun. There was a lot of applause and we sang well. I felt happy when the concert was over. (Girl, grade 4)

The strongest experience was at a Christmas concert. I had a solo. It was exciting, fun and a bit scary. It felt like I was flying and I sang in the final song. It was really cool. (Girl, grade 4)

However, a few of the described experiences connected to concerts are not expressed as something that is fun. Attending a concert can sometimes also be associated with stage fright and nervousness.

Singing in a Choir is a Form of Community

All pupils, including those who like to sing solos, describe singing together with others as one of the most positive experiences in connection with attending a choral class.

Although you are afraid to sing the solo, you can feel confident when you sing with others. (Girl, grade 4)

I do not dare to sing solos, but singing with the rest of the choir is not a problem. (Boy, grade 7)

All of the pupils in grades seven and four believe that it is important to enjoy singing if you are to study in a choral class. They all find it enjoyable, although a few of them say that there are songs in the repertoire that they find a bit boring. Although they all like to sing, they all—without exception—say that the sense of community they feel together with their classmates is the most positive thing about studying in a choral class. One of the girls in grade seven describes that she has thought about switching to a “regular class” on occasions, but changed her mind because she did not want to break up the class community, which she thinks is special. She believes that the community is developed through choral singing and says:

It has to sound coherent all the time; to accomplish that you must work together, and in doing so you get to know one another and achieve that sense of community. (Girl, grade 7)

Some of the pupils say that the shared interest in singing, all the preparations for the concerts and the concert performances create the sense of community in their own class and also in other choral classes.

Although we are different, you still have something in common: the music. I think one can find that in each other, even if we are different people, and that's what makes it so special. (Girl, grade 7)

Several pupils describe the togetherness and the cooperation in choral singing as bringing them closer to each other in class, and say that the community creates a safe place.

Singing in a Choir Affects Self-confidence

The community also impacts on pupils' self-confidence. Some of them say that they feel they have changed individually since joining choral classes. This involves increased confidence, for example.

I have received very strong self-confidence since I began a choral class. (Girl, grade 7)

You get more confident when singing next to a buddy at all times (Boy, grade 7)

Many of the pupils say that they feel proud of studying in a choral class. This includes managing to get into the class, and the fact that they feel they get a lot of appreciation in the concerts that they participate in.

Singing in a Choir Places Demands

Pupils in grade 7 in particular say that studying in a choral class also places high demands on them, not only with regard to expectations of musical involvement, but also with regard to improvement in other subjects at school. They all have a perception that most pupils who attend choral classes have high grades and work hard at school. Therefore there has been a shift for them when joining the choral class. This is especially true for those starting in grade 7, and this change has been tough but also stimulating. One of the girls in grade 7 says:

There are higher demands; those who study in a choral class are usually very good in all subjects, I would say. Thus they have very high grades. It has been a huge change for me personally. You have to work a bit more both in all music and also with other subjects, I would say. (Girl, grade 7)

Singing in a Choir Impacts on School

All pupils in grade 7 feel that the working discipline is high in choral classes and say that they find it easy to concentrate in all the lessons. All of the pupils who joined choral classes in

grade 7 or 6 feel that there is a very big difference compared with the regular classes they studied previously. One of these girls in grade 7 says:

I don't know, I have previously always been in a class that has been less disciplined. And then when I came here, I wondered why they were all so quiet? In choral classes there are many who want to do the work and be able to finish. (Girl, grade 7)

None of the pupils in grade 7 can pinpoint why there is such good working discipline in the choral class, but many of them feel that choral lessons are fun and something to look forward to. Pupils in both grade 7 and grade 4 say that the feeling of having something to look forward to provides inspiration to work with other school subjects.

I like Tuesdays very much because we have choral lesson in the morning and then on Mondays at the end. I usually feel that now I do my best then time runs faster. (Girl, grade 4)

Yes, but for example, one day we have a choral lesson in the afternoon and you might think that the morning is a bit annoying but you can look forward to a pleasant afternoon. So then maybe you work a little extra, I don't know. (Boy, grade 7)

Some of them also feel that they become more alert and can concentrate better after a choral lesson, and some feel they can benefit from what they learn by singing in choirs in other school subjects.

I think you can work a little bit better because you have got a good start....Then I think you can continue to work better for the rest of the day. (Boy, grade 4)

I feel that when you have another subject, and then a choral lesson after, you have better concentration. (Girl, grade 7)

All the pupils feel that it is instructive to study in a choral class, and state for example that they have the opportunity to develop their singing voice, their singing technique and their ability to sing in parts, and in addition that they learn music theory, concepts and how to read music as well as getting an experience of being able to create music. All the pupils also find it fun to sing in a choir class, although some of them wished that they could influence more of the repertoire. They believe that not all the songs they sing are as fun or easy to learn. For those pupils who started choral classes in grade 4 and for those who started in grade 7, it has not been entirely easy to begin. Although some of them played instruments and also sang in a choir before, there have been many new things to learn and demands to keep up with, and for

one girl in year 7 some of her former classmates point out that they have noticed a change in her since she began choral classes.

My friends say I have changed and become more boring. I feel that I've got to show a little more what I can do....I don't really know how to explain it, but even if they think it's something worse, boring or whatever, I do not think so. But I feel like I am now able to show what I can do, it has become calmer, there is not trouble in class and so on. (Girl, grade 7)

Her former classmates find her boring as she now prioritizes her schoolwork more. She, on the other hand, thinks it is an opportunity that she can now focus more on her schoolwork. She describes this feeling as positive and connects it to the experience of better discipline and an atmosphere of community in the choral class.

Conclusions

The aim of the study was to obtain knowledge of pupils' perceptions of attending choral classes. Two questions were asked: "What do pupils experience in choral singing?" and "How does the choral singing affect their schooling?" The theoretical assumption for the interpretation of the results is that all classes at a school can be seen as communities of practice. The results of the study show that almost all pupils participating in the study like to study in a choral class, but point out that they think that one must enjoy singing in order to do so. The choral singing creates a community of practice where they feel they can learn and develop and share a sense of togetherness. As part of the development from inexperienced to experienced (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in the choral class community, there is a dimension that involves a change in self-image and identity. All pupils contribute to a joint feeling of community which involves individual changes, expressed as "greater self-confidence."

The choral class community also demands full commitment to choral lessons three times a week and preparations for and participation in class concerts. The progression from peripheral to full participation in a choral class community of practice involves submission to discipline, not only in choral exercises but also in other subjects. Some of the pupils express that they would like to influence more, but being a member of these choral classes as a community of practice involves taking part in the repertoire mostly planned by the teachers. Pupils' learning becomes situated in a practice where everyone is expected to do their best and to contribute in a joint process. Pupils' progression from peripheral to full participation in the choral class as a community of practice involves becoming more and more able to identify with and see oneself as part of this community of practice.

Discussion

The results of this study contribute in highlighting pupils' perceptions of attending a choral class. Their experiences highlight the importance of achieving a feeling of community in a school class. The results show that the choral classes are experienced as a group where it is easy to get to know one other and find a sense of community, and only secondarily experienced as a class where one can develop musical skills. This result is in line with earlier findings (Conway & Bost, 2001; Faulkner & Davidsson, 2006; Balsnes, 2010; Durrant, 2011).

At the same time, the pupils are proud of studying in a choral class where they are able to develop singing techniques, sing in parts, and give concerts that they are proud of and perceive that others enjoy. The choral singing itself is important, but mostly because of the sense of community that it brings. The pupils are able to relate to themselves and to others in the choir, and this strengthens their social standing. The choral lessons are also experienced as something fun and something to look forward to, and provide pupils with inspiration to work with other school subjects. In this way, the choir lessons have transfer effects on other lessons and the pupils' experience choral singing as having a positive impact on their academic performance, as well as on the social climate in the class, cf. Spychinger (2001), Gooding (2009) and Parker (2011), who also report that music lessons have a positive impact in schools.

The choral singing has also given some of the pupils a feeling that they have changed individually. This involves an increased self-confidence in singing and in other areas, cf. Lyndell (2010). Pupils are able to experience musical development as well as development in other subject areas, in a community where they are expected to do their best and to contribute, which enhances their self-confidence. The results of the study, as well as earlier research, have highlighted that music activities have a positive impact on pupils' schooling, especially the social climate. In this study, it is evident that the community created in the choral classes is of most importance. How to achieve a feeling of community in a class that makes pupils describe their schooling as fun, developing and instructive must be a desirable goal for all teachers, and a question for research to investigate further. A feeling of community can certainly grow in classes based on activities other than choral singing, but both researchers and educators can be inspired and learn from these choral classes.

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About the Author

Dr. Anna Ehrlin is a Senior Lecturer in Musicology with an emphasis on Music Education and Associate Professor in Education with an emphasis on the Arts. Ehrlin's research is informed by socio-cultural theory and concerns the place and function of music in preschools and schools.

Previous research projects have dealt with questions of assessment in music and history in primary and secondary classrooms in Sweden, music education as an aid for integration in Swedish preschools, preschool teacher students' thoughts about music and their choice in attending a preschool teacher education program with a specific music profile, and questions related to the concept of entrepreneurial learning.

Dr Anna Ehrlin teaches in pre-school teacher and primary teacher education programs and is, since 2016, head of the department of Pedagogy at Mälardalen University.

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