Introduction to Research Article on “Developing Sight-Singing in Third Graders”

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Elementary and middle school music education does not have strict guidelines to regulate what must be taught. When observing elementary music programs it is often hard to understand the curriculum. Because developmental levels of children are changing so rapidly during the elementary school years it is difficult for an un-experienced educator to know what can be accomplished in the music rehearsal. In observing elementary music classes it is also sometimes hard to know if students are making significant improvements. A popular theory involving music education is that people who excel in performance are those who are naturally gifted. If this is the case than what is the purpose of teaching students who will not be able to keep up with the gifted? Enjoyment of the curriculum and the ability to keep students attention are very important aspects to be considered when designing an elementary music program’s curriculum, and especially when teaching rudimentary aspects of music such as music reading and interpretation. Music educators need information on each of these areas. Several studies have been conducted which provide excellent information regarding each of these topics.

Interval training is commonly used in elementary classrooms and is often used in game playing to make the training more enjoyable for the students. Matching pitch and singing basic note patterns can be challenging for second grade students (Reifinger, 2009).
James Reifinger (2009) conducted a study in which four note patterns were used to test second grade students’ sight reading ability. Accuracy of pitch and contour were both scored. Familiar patterns were found to be easier to sing than unfamiliar patterns, however, even with familiar patterns note accuracy was more difficult to sing correctly than contour accuracy. Many music educators believe that contour is one of the most basic concepts for early elementary students to understand and learn. This makes contour study an important aspect of early musical education.

In a separate study conducted by Reifinger (2012) entitled The Acquisition of Sight Singing Skills in Second – Grade General Music Class, contour accuracy was improved most when patterns were started in an ascending contour line. This study which was published in the Journal of Music Education, tested students on contour and pitch accuracy using 25 different four note patterns. Besides using ascending patterns, familiar patterns helped students to sing the contour of four note patterns correctly. Larger intervals also helped the students to improve their scores on singing the contour of four note patterns, but did not help with the singing of correct pitches. Pitch accuracy was helped most when notes within a smaller intervallic range were used. Patterns which used repeated notes were more commonly sung incorrectly than patterns with moving pitches. The four note patterns of do-re-mi-sol, and do-re-mi-do were found to be most often correctly sung patterns out of 25 which were tested. In general, patterns such as this which started in an ascending order were easier to sing correctly. The second most correctly sung pattern was do-do-do-mi. The third most correctly sung included the minor third interval of sol-mi-sol (Reifinger, 2012).
Reifinger (2012) also conducted a separate study on second grade students in which 193 students were trained to sight read using familiar and unfamiliar patterns throughout a 16 week course which had 25 minute training sessions in each class period. One goal of this research was to find if sight reading skills learned in class could transfer into unfamiliar sight reading patterns. The results showed that sight reading training via singing tonal patterns, singing games, and specific songs did lead to improved contour accuracy, and pitch accuracy in later testing.

Other interesting data produced from this experiment was that singing related songs with similar interval and contour patterns did not help with tonal accuracy; however, contour accuracy did improve (Reifinger, 2012). This supports a theory proposed by Reifinger which states that contour is one of the most fundamental parts of music learning at an early age. This contour learning theory may be the reason for another result found in this experiment regarding musical contour which was that students who used the syllable loo rather than singing sol-fege had better contour accuracy. The result that sight singing skills can improve through instruction in elementary level music classes has been found in other studies.
In a separate study which researched singing achievement and tonal aptitude development conducted by Christina Hornbach and Cynthia Taggart (2005), results showed that singing achievement may improve if it is taught. This was based on the findings that singing achievement did improve in grades K-2, however, in this particular study, third grade singing achievement was not as high as second grade singing achievement. Another aspect of this study was to see if students who were thought of as “musically gifted” and were to match pitch by singing would do better at overall singing achievement than students who could not match a given pitch. The result was that this ability did not correlate with high singing achievement.

These results may lead educators to think that perhaps using instruments in early grades might help third grade students and “musically gifted” children to perform better on musical achievement. In reading an article written by Mark Wolbergs he discussed a topic very similar to this.

Mark Wolbers (2004) is an instrumental music educator who has found that integrating singing into instrumental ensemble rehearsals is very affective. He believes that instrumental warm-ups should include singing and that vocalizing can help students develop aural skills. Using games involving intonation and training students to sing whole and half steps is recommended. In his article he claims that conceptualizing and hearing intervals before playing them will help brass and woodwind players with intonation. He also believes that singing melodic lines will make phrases sound more natural rather than mechanical and will help in adding unwritten crescendos and decrescendos. Because many band pieces are based off of
folk songs, singing the original folk song will help students to understand phrasing and what the music is about.

Although singing is thought of to be an important aspect of music rehearsal by many music educators, content and curriculum of each rehearsal is still largely left up to the teacher. Sight singing does not necessarily represent musical or performance proficiency (Norris, 2010). There are many conflicting opinions regarding how important sight singing instruction is.

Norris (2010) conducted a survey with questions pertaining to how important sight singing was to 227 individual middle school music teachers in the Florida area. 92.76% of the teachers said that they taught sight singing to all of their choirs. Half of them claimed to teach sight reading in all of their rehearsals. When asked about what materials they used to teach sight singing more than half said they used books which included rhythm and melody exercises. Notation software was also used by a few teachers.

Teaching sight singing via self-designed methods was also popular. Melody exercises, and rhythm exercises was a commonly used instructional technique. All of the teachers agreed that hand signs, solfege syllables, and movable do should be used. Teachers often disagreed on how much piano should be used, the importance of choral festivals and the importance of testing sight singing skills.
The disagreement among teachers on the importance of testing sight reading is also evident in States across our nation. Kuehne (2010) compiled information on sight singing taken from numerous researchers and one of the studies (Norris, 2004) found that only 17 states required both sight reading and performance for Jr. High and High School. Only 4 States require sight reading with content based on class level.

In reading the research articles on sight reading many questions can be raised with regards to sight reading. The purpose of this article is to answer questions which have been ignored by previous researchers with regard to sight singing. These questions include:

1. Would using musical instruments along with singing help to improve sight reading skills of third graders?
2. Does regular testing of sight singing lead to improved sight reading skills?
3. Does regular testing of sight singing lead to improved musical performance?
4. Does the ability to sight read correlate with other musical areas such as improvisation, expression, and performance?
References


