

Music
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COMMENT

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WHY ALL OF BRITAIN'S SCHOOLS SHOULD BE SINGING FROM THE SAME HYMN SHEET

IN JANUARY I WAS appointed National Ambassador for Singing with a brief to lead a programme that would reintroduce group singing into every primary school in the country. This might seem like an ambitious target but I believe it can be done. We have the expertise in Britain to pull it off, it's just that that expertise at the moment is too thinly spread. We have a firm commitment, ministerial enthusiasm and money from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to roll out our plans and, unless the Eton College Prefects' Common Room takes over Whitehall in the next year or so and tells us otherwise, this represents something of an historic opportunity that I would be a fool not to want to see through.

Why do we need a national singing programme for primary schools? The benefits of singing are numerous and far-reaching. It is healthy, promotes good breathing and posture, can help reduce asthmatic symptoms and even provide therapies for speech disorders such as stammering. Singing makes us feel better about ourselves, enhances our self-esteem and sense of well-being, it allows us to work collaboratively within groups in a non-competitive, highly supportive environment. We can achieve musical heights collectively in a choir that - mostly - we cannot reach on our own. Singing is the best possible gateway for a life of engagement with music and for learning to play a musical instrument. Singing acts as an emotional release, it gives shy and withdrawn children a means of expression, and is also, let's not forget, very good fun. It stimulates our brains and turbo-charges our memories. It is something we can all do - indeed, very young children "learn" to sing without anyone actually teaching them so to do, as if it is hard-wired into us at birth. In the past, when we were nomadic tribes, we used singing to bind our wandering communities together. Singing became integral to rituals of every kind, gave courage before battle, comfort after loss and, perhaps most significantly of all, a vital bond between mother and child in the earliest years of life.

All these attributes seem so obvious that we have lapsed into taking them for granted. Somewhere along the way over the last 100 years, we have allowed the fundamental rewards of singing to slip off the edge of what we expect children to acquire during their schooling. Perhaps, because anyone over, say, 35 was made to sing at assembly when they were small,

they weren't noticing that a generation of children in recent times were not having this experience. I don't think that the decline of group singing in schools was a deliberate act of negligence, more that we as a sophisticated, modernising society became distracted by other purposes and priorities.

The strange thing is that some of these other priorities would have been better served had singing not been allowed to sink into the background. Take numeracy. Singing has been demonstrated in a whole host of studies all over the world to improve dramatically a child's grasp of counting. In successful programmes I have witnessed dotted around the UK, singing has also been used to accelerate the mastering of languages and of reading skills. We worry about children's ability to assert themselves, to be able to perform, to interact positively with others around them: again, I have seen outstanding work in the way singing can help meet these aspirations. Headteachers whose schools encourage plenty of singing will also testify to its beneficial effect on behaviour. Are these not the core concerns for all modern schools?

It's important that we don't blame ourselves for a trend that is more or less universal around the industrialised world. In fact the quality of what is done in some places in Britain is the best of its kind anywhere. The job of our National Singing Programme, or SingUp! as it will be known, is to spread the best practice to those areas that at present do not have it. We are already training thousands of new singing leaders and non-specialist teachers to be able to run singing sessions in their schools.

By Christmas, every area of the country will have someone in place specifically to develop, coordinate and spread singing locally. So far about half the country's choir schools are running outreach programmes in primary schools. By the end of next year we hope it will be all of them. We are about to roll out our national singing resource - hundreds of songs especially chosen by primary singing experts that will be free to all schools and teachers, complete with backing tracks, support materials and recordings of children singing them to demonstrate and inspire. A high profile publicity campaign to raise parental awareness of the benefits of singing will also go live in November.

Once schools get the singing habit, in my experience, they never want to let it go. I hope that what works for individual schools will soon work for the whole country.