

## **IMPACT OF SINGING EXPERIENCES ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: NARRATIVES OF FIVE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Singing is considered as an important activity in Wesley College of Education, Kumasi in Ghana. As a Christian-dominated teacher training institution established by the Wesleyan mission in 1922, pre-service teachers are taught how to sing hymns and other songs for preparation to participate in Sunday church services and also to build a repertoire of songs for future use during their professional practice. This study employ participant narratives to examine the impact of singing experiences on teacher professional practice in the classroom and in the primary school environment.*

**KEYWORDS:** Singing, Primary School, Teachers, Pre-Service Teachers.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Singing is considered as one of the greatest traditions of Wesley College of Education, Kumasi in Ghana. Wesley College of Education is one of the tertiary teacher training institutions established in 1922 by the Wesleyan Mission in Aburi in the Eastern Region and subsequently relocated to Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana in 1924 (Students' Handbook, 2016/2017 Academic Year). One important function held on every Saturday morning between 6.30 am and 8.30 am when the College is in session, is the 'Principal's Worship'. This is a programme which consists of approximately fifteen minutes of Christian prayers followed by about thirty minutes teaching and singing of hymns and other songs after which the Principal who is the academic and administrative head of the institution talks to the entire pre-service teachers on issues bordering on religion and the society.

As a pre-service teacher between 1995 and 1998, I participated actively in the Principal's Worship. Currently, as a music and teacher educator in Wesley College of Education, I lead the teaching and singing of hymns and songs during the Principal's Worship, a role I have played for the past thirteen years. Being a Christian-dominated institution, the primary aim of the teaching and singing of hymns is to prepare the students for church services which are held on every Sunday in the College. During liturgical processes of the church services, it is expected that students know how to sing and also sing the selected hymns effectively.

For the past nine years, a period for teaching how to sing has found a space on the College's time table. During every second semester of the academic year, all first year pre-service teachers are assembled at the College's assembly hall on every Tuesday morning between 7.00 am and 8.00 am for the singing lessons. Second year students are met on every Friday morning between 7.00 am and 8.00 am for the same purpose. The aim of these lessons is to assist pre-service teachers to acquire skills in singing and also to build a repertoire of all types of songs for use in their future classrooms. It is therefore expected that all teachers who were trained in Wesley College of Education, Kumasi, should have some level of competency in the teaching and singing of songs in their various schools.

All curriculum subjects in Ghanaian primary schools are taught by the classroom teacher (Sarfo & Adusei, 2015). Singing forms an important component of the 2007 Creative Arts curriculum for Ghanaian primary schools (Curriculum Research and Development Division (CRDD), 2007). For example, a section under teaching and learning activities in the lower primary syllabus states, “pupils sing songs from the locality as well as other popular songs and accompany them with available instruments, dancing and other movements” (CRDD, 2007, p. 6). This activity is for pupils (age 6) in class one while similar activities are designed for students in classes two to six (ages 7 to 11). For example, for pupils in class 6, teachers are to “lead pupils to sing the ‘Ghana Patriot March’ until they can sing without the teacher joining” (CRDD, 2007, p. 67). It is therefore important to acknowledge the crucial role teachers play in providing singing experiences for their students. However, often times, some teachers express lack of confidence, knowledge and skills to provide musical experiences for their pupils (Adjepong, 2018; Opoku-Asare, 2015; Thorn & Brasche, 2015). While searching for the literature, I discovered that information is deficient on the role of singing in primary school education in the city of Kumasi, Ghana. This study, therefore, attempts to examine the impact of teacher’s prior singing experiences on their practices in the school setting. Findings will provide and contribute to knowledge about the effects of singing experiences in the primary school. The following question guided this study: *What is the impact of primary school teachers’ singing experiences on their professional practice?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Singing is an activity enjoyed by many people. It appears to be the most dominant of musical culture of children (Rauduvaite et al., 2017; Spodek & Saracho, 1994) and experiences in it are believed to constitute a component of developing lifelong engagements and interests (Pitts, 2009). Children respond to singing spontaneously during play and on the playground (Dzanzi, 2004; Countryman, 2014) with more energy than with skills (Spodek & Saracho, 1994). Singing supports children’s pre-reading skills and language acquisition (Watson, 2014; Essa, 2003; Heyning, 2011), builds their social cohesion and responsiveness (Jackman, 2005; Manford, 1996), supports the development of listening skills (Heyning, 2011), and establishes the base for their aesthetic understanding (Manford, 1996; Ko & Choi, 2014). The results of Hancox and Clift (2017) research about the perceived benefits of singing of a College Choral Society indicated that “93% of respondents agreed that singing helps to make their mood, more positive, 89% reported feeling happiness, 71% felt it improves their mental well-being, and 64% felt it gives them a more positive attitude (p. 253). Heyning (2011) observed that, the more children are engaged in singing, the more the brain is charged and communication is strengthened between the two sides of the brain. Based on these findings, there is no doubt that children should be provided with many opportunities to engage in singing as part of their school life.

Lemont et al. (2012) are of the view, that, children’s singing skills need “appropriate support, modeling, guidance and teaching in order to develop” (p. 252) and according to Manford (1996), singing must form the foundation of primary school musical activities because, “many musical understanding and skills can develop through well-chosen and worthwhile songs and singing activities in the classroom” (p. 24). Gill (2007) stated that, “the best music program is one that is vocally based and when properly taught, provides the necessary musical information on the music program” (p. 24). This suggests that through singing, various musical concepts such as tempo, pitch, rhythm, and melody can be taught to children.

Citing Hennessy (2000), Seldon and Biasutti (2008), and Neokleous (2009), Lemont et al. (2012) explained that some primary school teachers in England lack confidence in singing skills and therefore may avoid singing with their class. In Ghana, Opoku-Asare (2015), Bofo-Agyemang (2010) and Adjepong (2018) found that some in-service and pre-service primary teachers lack adequate knowledge and skills in teaching the Creative Arts which include music. This phenomenon may result in avoidance of teaching the subject altogether.

Notwithstanding the above stated challenges, it is suggested that positive experiences in the arts serve as a motivation factor for further engagements in them. According to Russell-Bowie (2009) and Dinham (2011), teachers are more likely to teach music when they consider themselves as confident and competent in the art. Koca (2016) also noted that the competency of teachers can favourably affect their professional practice, and as noted by Garvis (2008), if pre-service teachers are assisted to “build practical skills and knowledge that leads to effective disciplinary mastery in music, teachers are more likely to have increased self-efficacy resulting in greater engagements with music in their classrooms” (p. 317). These stances gives the indication that as pre-service primary teachers are given more opportunity to engage in singing activities, they are also likely to provide positive singing experiences for their future students in the classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design was adopted for this study. The design provides opportunity to gather extensive and rich descriptive data based on real-life experiences (Wellington, 2004). Thus, the qualitative method allows for reliance on primary source of data. In this regard, an individual's experiences can be understood through the narration of his or her stories. Narratives are regarded as people's reflections and representations of their experiences (Delpont & Dhlomo, 2010). The narrator “has first-hand encounters and thus in a position to share detailed experiences (Delpont & Dhlomo, 2010, p. 7).

Although some storytellers may not be endowed with the ability to recount vivid encounters to provide good narratives in written form, I believe that the strategy allows for free expression of perspectives without feeling intimidated. In this study, I decided to collect data in written format limited to two plain sheets of paper on which the question is typed on the first sheet. Respondents were requested to align their stories to the following one open ended question:

*Reflect on your experiences as both pre-service and in-service teacher and respond to the following question as honestly and as thoroughly as possible: **How do you experience teaching how to sing to your primary school students?***

The typed question was given to all respondents on the 2nd and 3rd of June, 2018 and they were requested to give their responses within one week. I collected the responses between 11th and 13th June, 2018.

## Participants

There is a large a number of practicing primary school teachers in the city of Kumasi who had their pre-service teacher education in Wesley College of Education. However, five out of eight of these teachers, who were between the ages of twenty five and thirty seven, and with two to nine years of teaching experiences, approached individually, agreed to take part in this study.

They were informed of the aim of this research and were also assured of confidential treatment of information gathered from them. Each of the selected participants signed a consent form to indicate their willingness to provide information for this study.

### Data Analysis

According to Wellington (2004), there is no one correct method of analysing data. However, three stages can be followed: data reduction, data display and conclusion. In accordance with these, teachers' stories were read repeatedly and coded by this researcher and were followed with another independent data study and coding by a colleague college music educator to ensure verification. Interpretations made independently were then compared and discussed to arrive at the final theme.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Although participants presented varied stories and opinions, what emerged after examination, interpretations, comparison and discussions overwhelmingly pointed to "confidence and competence in singing" as the main theme. Participants reported of this with reference to singing experiences gained during their teacher training period in college. The in-service teachers reported on their perceptions of confidence and competence in singing and not necessarily in the other areas of music. Their opinions suggest a positive impact the College singing programme has had on their singing ability. As a result of the experiences gained, they can now confidently lead and guide their students to sing as part of the teaching and learning activities in their schools and in the classrooms. From the respondents stories, students who are provided with the singing experiences seemed to respond very positively, aligning with the assertion that children love singing and respond to it spontaneously (Dzansi, 2004, Essa, 2003; Countryman, 2004). Some direct quotes as reported by the respondents' are:

*Yes, I believe I learnt and gained a lot from the weekly singing sessions in College. I became very anxious about singing which saw me joining the College Choir. I had never thought of singing in a choir prior to coming to College. I have been able to organise a school choir which sings in two parts and comprises thirty pupils who always show eagerness to attend choir practices which I organise on every Wednesday afternoon (Respondent 1).*

*I always feel great whenever I am leading the entire students to sing. I introduced a weekly singing lessons based on my former College's model here with the consent of the headteacher and the entire teaching staff as soon as I was posted to this school three years ago. I built a repertoire of songs during my teacher training in College which is now serving as the main source of material for the singing lessons I conduct here (Respondent 2).*

*The singing experiences I gained in college have taught me that everybody can sing. I loved singing before enrolling in teacher training and therefore became very passionate about the weekly singing sessions and never missed periods dedicated to that. Now, singing has become the very first activity in my classroom every morning. In fact, I employ singing as a tool for teaching various topics during Ghanaian language lessons in my classroom. I have observed that whenever I engage my pupils in singing, they express a sense of wholeness and self-esteem and this helps them to be very responsive during teaching and learning in the classroom (Respondent 3).*

*Although I find it challenging to interpret and implement all the contents of the performing arts curriculum, I am able to provide to my students the suggested singing experiences in the syllabus. I took singing activities in College very seriously and now I do not have much problem with it. Sometimes, other teachers in this school fall on me to teach songs in their classrooms. I have become very passionate about singing and I love doing so with my students in the classroom. Leading them to sing is one of my favourite activities. It animates my classroom and makes everything in the classroom fun. I wish all teachers could employ singing in their classrooms (Respondent 4).*

*I had no desire to sing but I grew to love it as a result of my constant participation in the weekly singing practice in College. Now singing dominates music activities in my classroom. I employ singing in most of my English and Ghanaian language lessons. I have observed that my students respond to it very positively and also become active participants in lessons in which I use singing. In fact, I could not sing in the presence of people prior to enrolling in teacher training. It was very embarrassing to me. I never imagined leading a group of students to sing but now I do not struggle to do so at all (Respondent 5).*

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that the issue of singing is very significant in pre-service teacher education. Participants' stories suggest their positive experiences in the art which have prepared and empowered them to lead their students to sing and also promote learning in their various classrooms. Some research studies indicate that primary school teachers lack adequate knowledge and skills in teaching music (Adjepong, 2018; Opoku-Asare et al., 2015; Russell-Bowie, 2009). It is also suggested that singing is an activity in which everybody can participate positively (Heyning, 2011; Thorn & Brasche, 2015). Positive and constant experiences in singing, therefore, equip teachers with the necessary skills in leading their students to sing and this gives the hope that if children cannot be provided with a variety of musical experiences, they can at least be led to sing provided teachers have prior positive experiences in the art.

Teachers should be prepared to guide their pupils to sing with confidence thereby experiencing some music. However, informing and convincing teachers to sing with their students is not an effective strategy to promote singing. Heyning (2011) stated that "experiential learning is the format in which we own our own learning whether we are a child or an adult" (p. 22). It is therefore very crucial to provide pre-service primary school teachers with many practical opportunities to sing constantly to build their confidence and competence to apply singing successfully in their future classrooms which can result in developing the whole child to be able to overcome life challenges.

The sample for this study is very small, that is, five primary school teachers and therefore "cannot be indicated universally" (Heyning, 2011, p. 21). Notwithstanding, the findings add to the existing literature on positive experiences in college singing programmes which result in teacher competence and confidence in providing singing experiences for primary school students. Again, the information may assist teachers who are interested in promoting singing and also use it as a tool for teaching and learning. The result may also guide further discussions on the role of singing in school music programmes in general.



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