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Sustaining motivation in young singers: addressing possible issues with student engagement in one-to-one singing lessons

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Sustaining motivation in young singers: addressing possible issues with student engagement in one-to-one singing lessons

Introduction

As a singing teacher working with primary and secondary school students, I am drawn to the idea that creating the space within ourselves to reflect on our practice has a direct impact on our ability to respond to students' diverse needs (Hendricks, Smith and Stanuch, 2014; Parkinson, 2016; Ayub, Yazdani and Kanwal, 2022; Charfe et al., 2020). Since beginning the process of investigating this topic, I have also discovered reflection models which I believe will help me to analyse, not only my own teaching style, but the effect that this might have on my students' motivation (specifically, their drive to pursue and achieve a goal (Schunk and Usher, 2019)). There are elements of Wareing's (2017) Me, My, More, Must model (which encourages reflection on one's own values before reflecting on an experience), which seem to encapsulate many of the questions I am dealing with daily. I am keen to examine my practice with this model in mind. In addition, Thompson's (2021) PCS model, which recognises three levels of influence on a person's outlook as a professional (personal, social and cultural), raises questions about who holds power in a teacher–student relationship: consideration of this model could help me to focus on the ethics involved in teacher interactions with students. Through reflection, I also hope to begin to understand more about the ways in which a teacher's past learning experiences might impact their teaching approach.

I have become increasingly aware, as I gain teaching experience, that a teacher's competency and confidence might play a central role in helping to build students' confidence (Brühwiler and Vogt, 2020). Accordingly, this might also directly impact their willingness to engage in the learning process (Brühwiler and Vogt, 2020). This suggestion will form a part of my analysis of possible reasons for students deciding not to continue with lessons, or for initial interest seemingly beginning to wane. I will also consider the extent to which there might be an inevitable process of disengagement in some teenage students. Whilst acknowledging that these are problems which many singing teachers might occasionally face (Lowe, 2012), my intention is to propose teaching strategies which could help to mitigate against them.

Important to note is that I have found there to be a paucity of specific references to singing lessons for children and teenagers in the research literature. This has led me to draw on a

wide range of sources, including studies of students in tertiary education, and some significant work by authors in a variety of different disciplines, spanning the past ten years or more.

The link between motivation and confidence

There would seem to be myriad possible avenues for research into student motivation. However, most productive in terms of my own teaching is the idea that developing a student's confidence (or indeed, self-confidence, as it might also be referred to) could be a key factor in sustaining their sense of motivation (Quigley, 2016). Confidence has been described as an overarching belief that one will be successful (Angelo, 2017; Maclellan, 2014; Quigley, 2016). Further to this, confidence is closely linked, according to Quigley (2016), to Albert Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, which relates specifically to a person's self-belief in their ability to perform a given task (Gill, Osborne and McPherson, 2024; Hendricks, 2016). As Quigley (2016) contends, the term self-efficacy is perhaps more precise, and therefore potentially more useful, for teachers to work with than, for example, a trait such as self-esteem, which might be deemed harder to evaluate and measure in students.

Bandura (1997) identified four main influences on self-efficacy, which are relevant to this discussion because of their potential to contribute to the development of effective strategies to sustain student motivation in singing lessons. These influences are: mastery task performance experiences (for example, practising in front of an audience or overcoming a technical difficulty in a lesson); vicarious/modelling experiences (learning through observing peers or perhaps seeing role models perform); verbal persuasion or encouragement from teachers; and awareness of physiological or affective states which might affect performance (such as anxiety) (Bandura, 1997; Ritchie and Williamon, 2011; McPherson and Davidson, 2012; Hendricks, 2016; Gill, Osborne and McPherson, 2024).

The benefits (Chen, 2024), or otherwise, of interaction with and modelling by peers (Swanson, 2020) is, I believe, a topic worthy of study. In my view, there is a fine balance between the positive results of observing models with whom a student is closely matched, and hence believes they could emulate, and the more negative outcome of a perception of inadequacy which might result from comparison (Hendricks, 2016; Quigley, 2016). As young students progress through secondary school, relationships with peers are likely to become increasingly important; feelings of self-consciousness might also come into play (McPherson and McCormick, 2006; Lowe, 2012; Hendricks, Smith and Stanuch, 2014; Hendricks, 2016; Larrouy-Maestri et al., 2023). I would suggest that a reluctance to perform in public has been a factor in my students' continued engagement in their lessons. Taking into consideration the

need to be sensitive to possible anxieties about performing (Henshaw and Collyer, 2022; Rucsanda, Cazan and Truţa, 2020), my recommended strategy is to ensure that they have opportunities for engaging in confidence-boosting performance with their peers and for singing together in small groups where possible (Feil, 2021; Davies, Bentham and Duah, 2023; Rabinowitch, Cross and Burnard, 2013). I believe this has the potential to be motivating and enjoyable for them. With my private pupils, especially those in the early years of secondary school, my strategy will be to organise regular informal student concerts, giving them the chance to interact with each other and to perform for a supportive audience (Southwick et al., 2016; Freer and Evans, 2019).

Reflecting on my approach here, the first (*Me*) stage of Wareing's (2017) Me, My, More, Must model encourages contemplation of what makes a person feel confident in their work situation and what might stand in the way of this. I find this element of the model particularly thought-provoking, since I tend to compare myself negatively with others, both as performer and teacher, even in the light of evidence of personal success, and despite reassurance from others. This mirrors the work I am doing with my students in ways I had not expected, and I find the connection both compelling and fascinating: I have realised that confidence-building and reassurance are at the heart of my teaching approach, perhaps because of my own learning experiences, which have not always reinforced my feelings of self-efficacy.

Encouraging the take-up and continuation of one-to-one singing lessons

There have been a significant number of studies which suggest that there are both intrinsic (enjoyment-based) and extrinsic (goal-oriented) motivating factors for a child commencing individual music lessons (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000; McPherson and Davidson, 2012; Evans, 2015). In my experience, introducing one-to-one singing lessons into the school I work in at primary age has resulted in an enthusiastic response. However, one of the main issues for a singing teacher, I would suggest, is that singing is generally understood to be a skill everyone possesses to some extent. Conversely, there are also many people who believe they cannot sing or hold a tune, a belief which is likely to have originated in childhood (Welch, 2015). Whilst singing might be generally perceived as a *natural* activity (Gudmundsdottir, 2020), research has shown that development of *skill* in singing cannot necessarily be assumed (Welch, 2015): there is a need for it to be taught (Hedden, 2012; 2020). Indeed, as Welch (2015) found, while most children can sing reasonably well in tune by the age of 11, before this, development tends to be variable.

Papageorgi et al. (2022) draw attention to the likelihood that a child who is not (yet) a skilled singer will be aware of this and might therefore feel marginalised. However, as research by Welch (2012) and Hedden (2020) would imply, teachers are likely to be aware of the variety

of skills which need to be developed to help someone to sing with ease and confidence. Significantly, developing children's competency in singing also has many possible emotional and psychological benefits, including the enhancement of feelings of self-efficacy (Welch, 2012, Hedden, 2020). I would agree that singing can engender strong feelings of pleasure and a sense of achievement, and I aim to foster these positive emotions in my teaching (Rucsanda, Cazan and Truţa, 2020).

Further to this, as the eminent Hungarian composer and teacher Zoltan Kodály posited, singing has the potential to be an inclusive pursuit for all children, if they enjoy it (Gardiner, 2020). Kodály also theorised that singing should be seen as a vital prerequisite for learning other instruments (Organization of American Kodály Educators, 2024). This seems to me to be particularly relevant, because of my experience of some young singers giving up singing lessons, whilst continuing their tuition in instruments such as piano, which might sometimes be viewed by their parents as being more important for developing musical skills (McPherson, 2009; Corrigall and Schellenberg, 2015).

To address this potential problem, my strategy will be to incorporate musicianship skills into my lessons, with a particular focus on aural/listening and sight-singing. The strategy will include the use of Kodály hand signs for younger students; these are recognised as a valuable visual tool for improving vocal pitch accuracy (Organization of American Kodály Educators, 2024). In my experience, students might also need guidance about the best way to practise their singing (Creech, 2010): helping them to focus on specific tasks, for example, remembering to warm up their voice, practising the Kodály hand signs or learning the words of their songs, will therefore be another element of this strategy.

It is interesting to note that, as research by both Hedden (2020) and Dabback (2018) found, where there is a strong culture of singing (either on a national scale (Hedden, 2020) or on a community or individual school level), this can be very rewarding for children, who come to regard it as something that they can enjoy with no fear of exclusion. Students' involvement in school singing has been of benefit in my own teaching practice and I have found that many are keen school choir members. An important strategy for maintaining my students' levels of engagement is to reinforce the link between these group activities and the skills we work on in one-to-one lessons. Encouraging students' self-image as *singers* is, I believe, paramount in helping to sustain motivation (Monks, 2003).

I am particularly keen to evaluate the potential psychological benefits of learning singing in a one-to-one situation, especially when teaching children with differing needs, who might benefit from more individual attention (I will analyse this in more detail in my discussion of teaching models). However, I am also aware of the argument that the advantages of one-to-

one tuition should be balanced against ensuring students have exposure to group learning opportunities as well (Carey and Grant, 2015). Overall, encouraging young singers' continued participation in one-to-one lessons (where these are accessible and affordable), alongside their involvement in group singing activities, could, I contend, be of great benefit to them (Carey and Grant, 2015; The Music Commission, 2019; Henley and Barton, 2022).

Research into parental influence on a child's motivation to persist in their musical training highlights another potentially interesting factor here: Corrigall and Schellenberg (2015) suggest that there might be a genetic element to children's openness to trying new things, which in turn might be an important predictor of their continued engagement with music as adults. Theorell et al. (2015) also found a strong link with music practice, ideally supported and encouraged by parents, and the likelihood that a young person would continue playing or singing. Establishing and maintaining communication with parents, including with teenage students, could, I would argue, therefore be fundamental to a successful student–teacher relationship, and will hopefully encourage engagement (Reuning-Hummel, Meyer and Rowland, 2016; Upitis et al., 2017; MacArthur, Davidson and Krause, 2024). In my experience, without consistent and positive teacher–parent interaction, it can be difficult to gauge the level of commitment which is being encouraged at home. My recommendation and strategy here would be to set up meetings with parents (in person or by phone) where possible, at least once a term. If a decision needs to be taken about exam or competition entry, this will be particularly important.

The *My* element of Wareing's (2017) model focuses on concerns that might arise from an experience and asks the person reflecting to consider, not only their own feelings and thoughts, but those of others. Important for me to acknowledge is that I find it can be demoralising to lose a student, particularly when I am not sure why this has occurred. Alongside an ongoing dialogue with parents, and with reference to the *More* part of Wareing's (2017) model, which focuses on questions and ideas arising from an experience, as a strategy to maintain students' interest, I recommend reflecting with them on the content of their lessons. This could be achieved by asking questions at the end of every lesson about the things they have learned, what they have most enjoyed and what they might wish to change.

Different teaching approaches for different students: learning models and the student–teacher relationship

As Brühwiler and Vogt (2020) have emphasised, teaching is a dynamic process – its unpredictability requires a teacher to be adaptable, often on a moment-by-moment basis (Küpers, van Dijk and van Geert, 2014; Küpers et al., 2015). I am drawn to the idea that

adaptability might be a key part of the teaching process, and reflection on this should help me to analyse the extent to which I tailor my teaching approach depending on the needs of my individual students (Fairbanks et al., 2010). Vaughn et al. (2016) identified four facets of adaptive teaching which I find to be relevant in the context of my work. They are: (1) constant assessment, on an informal basis, of individual students' learning; (2) deep reflection on teaching practice; (3) understanding and getting to know students as individuals; (4) having a clear personal vision of what one is trying to achieve with students. These elements build a picture of a reflective and, perhaps above all, flexible teacher, who will try to place their students at the centre of everything they do (Vaughn et al., 2016).

Hoffman and Duffy (2016) ask the challenging question as to whether this kind of truly flexible teaching really exists. They maintain that teachers need to be willing to engage in the difficult process of double-loop learning (Argyris, 2002), where deep-rooted teaching assumptions are brought to the surface and unflinchingly addressed (Bassot, 2020). Hoffman and Duffy (2016) call for teachers to move beyond passively adhering to familiar teaching practices, reflecting on how they might find creative ways of maintaining students' interest and engagement. Further to this, Cinque, Bălan Budoiu and Zagrean (2024) have proposed an adaptive teaching model (for higher education music colleges), which ensures students with special educational needs, and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, are not made to feel excluded. This translates well, in my view, to one-to-one singing lessons, and I would concur that it should be prioritised. Even at the level of the words a teacher uses when giving feedback to a student, it would perhaps be wise to be sensitive to the feelings of a young singer, and to try to avoid any sense of negative judgement, which might affect their motivation (Tucker, 2018). It is also important for teachers to consider that some neurodivergent students might struggle to accept constructive feedback and to be aware that extra support might be needed to help them to cope with it (Bedrossian, 2012)

Feedback has been widely discussed in the field of educational psychology. Carol Dweck's (2006, pp. 11–12) concept of a "growth mindset" (whereby students learn from challenges and find a way to achieve in the face of setbacks), as opposed to a "fixed mindset" (where their abilities do not develop) is interesting to consider here. It might seem natural for teachers to praise students by saying that they are talented, for example, but research has shown that this kind of comment can be both counterproductive and demotivating (Austin, Renwick and McPherson, 2006; Dweck, 2015; Evans, 2015). As these authors highlight, commending them for their efforts whilst also, importantly, looking for ways to help them improve their performance, has a far more positive effect. Haimovitz and Dweck (2017) emphasise that linking effort with outcome is essential: they suggest that, without a belief

that progression is possible, a child might eventually lose the motivation to try to improve and give up altogether (Haimovitz and Dweck, 2017).

In evaluating the kind of relationship with students I aim to foster while teaching, I am mindful of the need to adopt an ethical and non-discriminatory approach (Thompson, 2021). Maintaining an appropriate level of involvement and support, within the limits of my professional knowledge, is likely to be fundamental to this (Fardell, 2024). Thompson's (2021) PCS model has also helped me to consider how far my own previous experiences as a music student may have affected my teaching, with both cultural and structural/institutional influences (whether positive or negative), having played a part (Mills and Smith, 2003; Hedden, 2012; Sherwood, 2023). Rather than a power dynamic which is balanced firmly in the teacher's favour, I aspire to a more student-centred, supportive approach (Abrahams and Abrahams, 2015).

Indeed, I am increasingly drawn to Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) flow theory, which posits that being engrossed in an enjoyable activity (or in a state of flow) can greatly enhance feelings of wellbeing, even from a young age (Sinnamon, Moran and O'Connell, 2012; Abrahams and Abrahams, 2015). Research suggests that flow can be transferred from teacher to student when both are absorbed in making music (Bakker, 2004). This might particularly benefit children on the autistic spectrum (Scholtens, 2019). As Zadina (2023) writes, joint engagement in an activity has the potential to create a sense of harmony between them which might not only be beneficial for young students' mental health and wellbeing but could also encourage a positive view of their learning experience: this in turn could lead to positive outcomes in terms of motivation and the ability to sustain interest in their studies. Importantly, for flow to be at its peak, the level of challenge also needs to be balanced by the student's level of skill (Davies, Bentham and Duah, 2023). The latter point seems particularly pertinent to my own practice as a singing teacher: I am conscious that it is my students' enjoyment of their singing which is likely to stimulate them to continue with their lessons (Hallam et al., 2016). However, focusing on developing technical skills *through* enjoyable music-making activities, such as the strategy of using movement in warm-ups and song performance to enhance energy levels and help young singers to feel the music physically (Meissner, 2017), could be key to sustaining their enjoyment in the long-term (Parkinson, 2016; Maxfield, 2023).

Using the final, *Must*, step in Wareing's (2017) model and looking to the future in my teaching (see Appendix: Personal and Professional Development Plan), I am keen to focus on enhancing my students' sense of autonomy in their learning. My recommended strategy for achieving this would be to offer them a certain amount of choice in repertoire or the

structure of the lesson, which might help to sustain their intrinsic motivation (Mills and Smith, 2003; McPherson and Davidson, 2012; Hallam et al., 2016). Finally, I am aware that some students find exams and competitions motivating, whilst others do not. I would always encourage them to work towards achievable goals; however, being prepared to be adaptable in my teaching is a strategy which will allow me to accommodate my students' particular strengths and interests.

Reflection

At an early stage in this assignment, I realised that I would find critical reflection valuable in relation to my practice (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2024). I hoped to be able to convey a genuine belief in its efficacy through my writing. Without any previous knowledge of formal critical reflection, it has been revelatory for me to discover the many different models which exist, along with the vast array of information sources available. These have assisted me in choosing models which strongly resonate with me.

For reflection on my learning, I have decided to use Gibbs' (1998) reflective cycle, not only because it encourages the processing of emotions and feelings but because I am attracted to the level of analysis it encourages (Bassot, 2016).

Description: From the beginning of the assignment, I had a conviction that I should focus on motivation in young singers, analysing possible reasons for disengagement from lessons. However, although I believed I would be capable of synthesising a large amount of material, at first, I found it difficult to hone my title and to carve out time for the preparatory work I knew was required. This left me feeling anxious about whether I would be able to write the essay I wanted to write. I had also accumulated and read many articles; I found it difficult to stop researching and following new citation paths, particularly in my search for recent work.

Evaluation: A negative aspect of studying was that, initially, I allowed my confidence to be shaken by reading articles about the kinds of qualifications successful teachers require. Specifically, Davidson et al.'s (1998) article on teacher characteristics left me feeling that I could not achieve as much as other teachers and that my abilities were lacking. This in turn contributed to feelings of inadequacy in relation to my academic work: my own motivation and sense of self-efficacy were affected. More positively, I have found that my recent research and reflection has begun to feed into my teaching and contribute to some encouraging outcomes with my students.

Analysis: I had not realised the extent to which my tendency to compare myself unfavourably with others would impact on my academic work. My desire to avoid making mistakes, and my fear of missing something important in the research if I did not manage to read a huge

amount, has made the process strenuous. However, I have found that my reading has helped to enhance my knowledge to a greater degree than I could have predicted, which has had a direct and positive effect on my teaching.

Conclusion/action plan: It took me a while to realise that I could not possibly read *everything* on my subject, and that I was ready to begin writing. With hindsight, I could have set myself more achievable targets. My research question went through many iterations, but it was not until late on that I understood the need to be more ruthless in stripping it back so that I could answer it satisfactorily. I hope to avoid this in future by setting myself more realistic limits. Whilst I have felt the need for reassurance about my abilities as a teacher, partly arising from this research, it would be beneficial for me to acknowledge that, since my students generally seem to enjoy their lessons with me, I have my own strengths. I will continue to focus on improving the aspects of my teaching which I feel are lacking, by taking courses and studying (see Appendix: Personal and Professional Development Plan). I will also endeavour to spend more time appreciating working as a teacher and enjoying rewarding interactions with my students.

Conclusion

This essay has set out to analyse possible issues with young singers' engagement in singing lessons and has looked at ways in which their motivation might be sustained and enhanced. It has suggested strategies which might be of help to teachers working one-to-one with students and has made the following recommendations:

- Encourage performance opportunities/organise regular student concerts
- Focus on improving students' musicianship skills and set actionable homework activities
- Reinforce links between group activities and skills worked on in lessons
- Schedule regular contact with parents, where possible
- Encourage student reflection on their lessons and their level of enjoyment
- Incorporate energising movement activities into warm-ups and explore physical connections in song-learning
- Offer some free choice of repertoire and flexibility in lesson structure
- Be adaptable to students' strengths and interests

Important to acknowledge is that students' possible loss of motivation might be as much about teaching style as a student's own attitudes to learning (Haddon, 2009). For this reason, I would suggest that a reflective, flexible teaching approach could have beneficial effects for both student and teacher (Garnett, 2014). Whatever the eventual outcome with a

student, implementing strategies which ensure that lessons are as enjoyable and productive as possible could improve both teacher confidence and students' experience of their singing lessons.

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Appendix

Personal and professional development plan

.	My specific learning goals	How will I achieve this?	How will I measure this?	When will I achieve this by?	People who can help me achieve my goals
Personal objectives					
#1	To become more confident in my abilities as a teacher and more generally.	By putting into practice the techniques I have been studying on the masters course so far, which has opened up a wealth of pedagogical theories and practices I had no knowledge of previously. To continue to teach and to observe both my own development and that of my students.	I will measure this by the success of my teaching practice – maintaining students' interest in lessons and their levels of enjoyment as well as my own. Student retention beyond primary level will play an important part in measuring this.	This is ongoing, but by the end of the masters course, in 2026, I hope to have gained more confidence in my abilities generally.	Voice Study Centre; AOTOS; the music academy I teach as part of.
	To work on my self-belief as an academic writer.	By getting going on projects with less hesitation than previously and trying to see the end point as a goal that I can reach rather than something that looks impossible.	By the results I achieve with my assignments, which I hope will reflect the work I have put into them.	By 2026, the end of the masters course.	Voice Study Centre tutors; myself.
	To use the skills I have learned as an editor in my academic work.	By continuing my work as an editor alongside the masters and my teaching. Maintaining my	I will measure this by the number of editing tasks I am able to take on alongside my	Ongoing.	The clients I work for as a freelance editor.

		level of skill, which has been built up over many years, and putting it into practice in my masters writing.	studies and teaching and complete to the high standard required, meeting the deadlines.		
	To follow my own path and be more mindful about comparing myself to others.	By heeding advice and spending time on understanding myself better. Taking time out for reflection.	I will measure this by seeing an improvement in my own confidence levels in relation to my work.	Ongoing.	Supportive friends and colleagues.
Professional /work objectives					
#1	To complete this module of the master's and to feel that I have expanded my horizons as a teacher.	By persevering even in the face of challenges such as other demands on my time, which often have to take precedence.	I will measure this by the level of satisfaction I feel, having worked to the best of my abilities and produced the best work I have been capable of.	By 1 November 2024.	My tutors at Voice Study Centre, myself.
	To improve my piano skills and general musicianship skills to a level which I feel will enhance my confidence as a teacher.	Completing a musicianship course I am signed up for this autumn to help teachers incorporate Kodály skills into their lessons. Continuing with piano lessons to improve my sight-reading skills and to focus on technique which I had not focused on	I will measure this by the extent to which increasing my skills as a musician impacts on my teaching and my willingness to take on new challenges.	End of November 2024. Ongoing fortnightly lessons.	My piano teacher, vocal coach and other musicians I work with.

		since I was very young.			
	To feel ready to take on more adult and secondary school students in my practice.	By taking every learning opportunity available to me to build my own confidence in teaching beyond primary level.	I will measure this by the number of new students I am able to take on and retain, along with feeling prepared to make an application to a music service and apply for work in secondary schools, should opportunities arise	By the end of 2025.	The music academy I work for; supportive singing teacher friends and colleagues; myself.
	To maintain my professional career as a singer as far as possible.	Prepare a recital programme of English song which can be ready to be performed for music societies and at other venues. Aim to perform in a professional concert or sing at professional engagements whenever the opportunity arises.	Measured by the number of professional engagements I perform in.	Give an informal afternoon recital by the end of 2024 in collaboration with my accompanist. Approach music societies with a complete programme for 2025.	The accompanist and coach I work with; my professional musician friends and colleagues. Local chamber choirs and conductors with whom I have contact. Supportive friends who would attend my concerts.
	To take courses and pursue continuing professional development opportunities wherever possible and affordable. To join another professional	Keep up with the schedule for courses offered by Voice Study Centre and AOTOS, along with attending singing teaching conferences and taking	Measured by the number of CPD courses I manage to complete and gaining accreditation for them where possible.	Ongoing. Join another professional association over the next year.	Voice Study Centre; AOTOS, other professional associations such as the BVA.

	association such as the British Voice Association, to add to the possibilities I have for professional development.	other recommended courses.			

(Adapted from Chartered Institute for Archaeologists Personal Development Plan, available at: https://www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/CIfA%20PDP%20example.pdf)