

# Singing in music education as a tool for the development of children's communication skills

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**Abstract:** This chapter examines how singing in music education serves as a valuable method for developing children's communication skills. Far from being merely a musical exercise, singing opens unique opportunities for children to express themselves, form social relationships and improve emotional well-being, providing a solid foundation for lifelong communication skills. When singing in a group, children develop essential skills - such as attentive listening, empathy and cooperative teamwork, which contribute to their social identity and emotional health. However, group singing is in decline, partly due to digital distractions and changing pedagogical methods, which threatens its place in today's school programmes. Citing relevant research by academics on the subject, this chapter emphasises the urgent need for an innovative, holistic teaching approach to reintegrate singing into music lessons. It argues that including singing in formal music curricula can develop musical skills and social and emotional competencies crucial for building responsible and engaged members of society.

**Keywords:** Singing, music education, social skills, communication skills

## Introduction and Literature Review

Singing, a joyful and fun activity, is crucial in engaging children in music and involving them deeply in their education (Marsh & Young, 2016). For young learners, music is not just a separate concept; it is naturally interwoven into their everyday experiences. As Welch (2001) states, singing is an essential element of

childhood and development, which children would continue to do even without formal music lessons as it is a basic human behaviour. Music is an active, shared experience for children – a perspective emphasised by Small (1998), who stresses that music is not just an object but an activity that people do together. Small further argues that it is crucial to understand music as an action rather than a “thing”. Singing becomes

an interactive, playful way for children to express themselves, connect with others and become aware of their surroundings (Niland, 2019). This chapter examines how singing promotes the development of communication skills in children.

Gordon (1990), Gardner (1993), and May (2013) all stress the importance of fostering musical abilities in early childhood, as young children are naturally receptive to environmental influences. Educators play a crucial role in this process. Niland's (2019) study highlights the positive effects of singing activities, showing improvements in communication skills, creativity, identity, and agency. The ages of 3 to 5 represent a crucial period for music education, as children rapidly absorb information. With educators at the forefront, Gardner's advocacy for early musical exposure helps create a solid foundation for child development.

Research by Kreutz et al. (2015), Keeler et al. (2015), Blank and Adamek (2010), and Welch et al. (2014) reveals the emotional impact of music on the brain. Their findings indicate strong links between singing and children's social integration, reduced stress, and increased positive emotions. These studies also indicate that regular singing supports learning, sound processing, language, and literacy, all linked to accelerated brain development. For educators, understanding music's emotional impact is essential.

Reimer (2009) and Regelski (1996)

underscore music's role in holistic growth, describing it as a universal human trait that fosters personal development, problem-solving, and critical thinking. As a universal art form, singing promotes emotional expression and bridges cultural divides. Reimer (2009) further suggests that singing in religious contexts can be a profound spiritual experience, connecting individuals and a sense of the divine.

Barrett et al. (2018) and Hallam (2015) affirm the value of early musical activities for well-being, relaxation, social bonding, spiritual growth, and even immune support. Clift and Hancox (2001) highlight singing's benefits, including relaxation and spiritual enrichment. Hallam (2015) also notes that musical activities improve auditory perception, language, memory, spatial awareness, self-regulation, creativity, and academic performance. Hungarian composer and educator Zoltán Kodály emphasises active participation in music, promoting emotional expression and community identity (Mabini, 2024).

Research consistently demonstrates that early exposure to music and singing has a profound, lasting impact on children's development, enhancing cognitive growth, social-emotional well-being, and overall learning. Experts agree that musical experiences reveal vital aspects of children's emotional, cognitive, and social growth (Ilari & Gluschkof, 2009). Music is naturally wo-

ven into daily life for many children, from rhythmic interactions with caregivers in infancy to so-mi chants preschoolers use to engage with friends (Lee Nardo et al., 2006). Music educators build on these spontaneous interactions, helping children develop skills that bring lifelong enjoyment and fulfilment (Lee Nardo et al., 2006).

Early musical experiences also play a critical role in brain development, with scientific studies showing that music supports essential cognitive functions (Maureen, 2007). Because the first five years establish the foundation for all areas of learning, fostering a 'music vocabulary' of listening and singing is as crucial as developing early skills in language, maths, and other core areas (Fox, 1991). This scientific evidence provides educators with a solid basis for understanding and promoting the benefits of music in early childhood education.

Understanding the stages of child development is vital to effective teaching. As children progress, their cognitive, social-emotional, and learning capacities change, requiring educators to adapt their methods to these evolving stages (Allen et al., 2015; Ruiz et al., 2016). Cognitive development is a layered process shaped by developmental stages, which educators should consider when tailoring teaching strategies. Piaget's cognitive theory, though criticised for emphasising stages over continuous growth (Alahmad, 2020), remains inva-

luable for understanding the progression of children's thinking abilities (Young, 2024).

Research from anthropology, psychology, and medicine (Cowell et al., 1992; Dawson et al., 1992a; Weinberger, 1998; Hyde et al., 2009; Haslbeck et al., 2020) further underscores the role of music in brain development, suggesting that children acquire knowledge most holistically during their first year. Language and motor skills develop in tandem with social-emotional abilities, forming an integrated foundation. Around 12 to 24 months, children enter a more active phase, using movement, sensory exploration, and emerging rhythmic awareness, which is the ability to recognise and respond to patterns of sound and movement to engage with the world.

Music exposure is beneficial even before birth, as the auditory and vestibular systems mature in the womb. This allows the foetus to respond to sounds and lays the groundwork for language skills. For educators, understanding these developmental stages is critical in supporting holistic learning.

As children approach school age, the focus shifts from gross to fine motor skills, with music supporting this transition. Songs and rhythmic activities foster motor skills, socialisation, and language learning across all stages, encouraging children to think holistically and interactively and grasp the world's interconnected nature. Motiva-

tional songs, such as ‘The Wheels on the Bus’ or ‘If You’re Happy and You Know It’, tailored to a child’s age and interests, make learning engaging, as young children are especially drawn to rhythms and words.

A caregiver’s songs during routines provide rhythmic and emotional support for infants, creating a warm learning environment. As children grow, outdoor environments - at home or in school - are ideal for exploration. They experiment with sound-making objects like wooden spoons and pans, and educators can provide materials to support rhythm exploration, helping children improvise and interact musically. Rhythmic greetings help focus young children, while movement songs offer security, particularly for shy children or those with motor challenges.

Encouraging children’s musical individuality builds self-esteem and character. Children explore their physical surroundings and abstract ideas through singing, sounds, and gestures, using play to engage with all their senses. Music’s rich aesthetic and exploratory potential opens doors to endless experiences children can enjoy through play. Educators without formal musical training can foster meaningful learning by guiding children in simple sound exploration. As May (2013) suggests, an ideal environment for music learning supports diverse experiences through play, exploration, and social interaction, allowing children to engage in creativity freely.

## **Singing and the Development of Social competences**

The concept of ‘social competence’ has long been debated among scholars, with numerous definitions reflecting its multifaceted nature. The variety of definitions may be as great as the number of researchers working on the subject (Varner, 2020). Social competence must be understood as a behavioural achievement at the heart of social skills. However, it also encompasses the acquisition of social and cognitive skills, the judgement of others and the psychological risks individuals take when experimenting with new forms of interaction. Often, “appropriate social behaviour” is used synonymously with “social competence” or “social skills”. Goldfried and D’Zurilla (1969) and Junge et al. (2020) view social competence as a person’s effective response to specific situations, emphasising the ability to achieve desirable outcomes while creating mutual benefit in interactions (Lecroy & Beker, 2014). Social competence is also the basis for the broader ‘soft skills’ category.

‘Competence’ refers to the essential attitudes, skills or knowledge required to perform a particular action. Therefore, an exhaustive definition of ‘social competence’ is challenging, as ‘socially intelligent’ behaviour is highly context-dependent (Brinkschulte, 2022). Socially intelligent behaviour is essential for a successful life and has far-reaching

implications for academic achievement, peer relationships, family dynamics and participation in activities. As Gooding (2009, p. 35) points out, children and adolescents who face social, academic or behavioural challenges can experience immediate and long-term effects on their academic and social success.

Research by Bracken and Fischel (2007) and Lane et al. (2004) found that social and behavioural difficulties can correlate with poor academic performance in childhood. In addition, children with deficits in social skills are at risk of dropping out of school, having strained social relationships, engaging in substance abuse, and even facing peer marginalisation (Lane et al., 2004). Gooding (2009) cites the American National Association of School Psychologists, which defines social skills as knowing what to say, making informed decisions and acting appropriately.

The potential of music to develop social and particularly communication skills has been widely studied (Campayo-Muñoz & Cabedo-Mas, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2023; Welch et al., 2020). Improving communication through musical activities is an area of growing interest, as music is recognised as a promising tool for promoting important social skills.

## **Communication as a social skill and the role of music in its development**

Communication and social skills are crucial for a child's social development, especially when interacting with peers and in the school environment. Educators play a crucial role in recognising and supporting children's different communication styles, contributing to their social and academic progress (Sigafoos et al., 2008; Maleki et al., 2019; Sidera et al., 2018). Effective communication forms the basis of children's social adjustment and is vital to building social competence, with language skills enabling deeper peer interactions (Brooks-Gunn, 2005). In particular, social and emotional skills interact closely with cognitive skills, reinforcing and promoting children's long-term potential (Marta, 2015).

The importance of communicative and social skills for the social development of children, particularly in dealing with peers and in education, cannot be emphasised enough. Educators who recognise and encourage individual communication styles help to support children's overall social and academic growth. Francis (2015) categorises children's communication into four main types: outgoing, reserved, self-interested, and passive. For educators, understanding a child's primary communication style provides insight into their social identity and peer interactions. It is important to remember

that while communication style reflects personality, it can also be influenced by factors such as health, medication and developmental changes. For example, children with a passive communication style who initiate few interactions often become more socially engaged through structured activities such as music. Such activities offer these children new opportunities to express themselves and build social relationships.

The development of communication skills, which are crucial for social growth, begins in infancy and continues throughout childhood. Gooding (2009) divides social skills into three categories: interpersonal skills (relating to others), self-related skills (self-regulation) and task-related skills (task fulfilment). These skills are fundamental not only to musical development but also to social functioning in general. Music-making can promote positive communication, cooperative behaviour and impulse control - skills essential for social and academic success (Váradi, 2022).

McClung (2000) also emphasises the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication, positive peer interaction, cooperation, self-discipline and responsibility in the classroom. For music educators, by integrating social skills into music education, the music classroom becomes a platform for essential life skills that equip children with the tools for effective interpersonal relationships and personal growth.

The intersection of music education and the development of social skills emphasises the importance of communication in a child's life. By harnessing the social potential of music, educators contribute significantly to raising children who are confident, socially competent and well-prepared for future interactions. Children gain invaluable insights into their personalities through singing, movement and musical instruments - they become more aware of their emotions (Abril, 2011). In addition to self-awareness, musical activities also promote emotional and social skills. When making music in a group, children practise empathy and role-play, developing an understanding of the experiences of others. Music provides a unique space in which children can interact safely and free from judgement with peers of different abilities, encouraging constructive interactions (Music, 2016). As Gooding (2009) states, these interactions support musical expression, interpersonal skill building, non-verbal communication and even positive behaviour change.

A successful musical activity typically requires a positive social setting, which enhances social and interpersonal communication skills. Davies (2013) underscores the connection between music and communication, showing how activities like singing and instrument playing help children cultivate essential mental skills for communication.

Engaging in musical activities can benefit a wide range of cognitive and communication skills, offering practical and developmental advantages (Miendlarzewska & Trost, 2014). Engaging in musical activities strengthens:

1. **Concentration and Focus** – Sustained attention, essential for both music and communication.
2. **Listening Skills** – Attentive listening aids understanding of both spoken language and musical nuance.
3. **Self-Expression** – Music provides a creative outlet, a key element of effective communication.
4. **Memory** – Enhances long-term and short-term memory, which is crucial for language learning.
5. **Phonological Awareness** – Sensitivity to pitch aids in understanding vocal intonation.
6. **Rhythmic Skills** – Recognising rhythm improves fluency in both language and reading.
7. **Anticipation and Adaptability** – Skills for predicting and responding support effective communication in conversations.
8. **Nonverbal Communication** – Encourages eye contact and body language, which are vital in social settings.
9. **Vocabulary and Syntax** – Songs introduce new words and support sentence formation.
10. **Sequencing** – Recognising patterns in music mirrors language structures.

Davies (2013) further explains that music reinforces these skills through structured sequencing, memory enhancement, and pitch awareness, all integral to language development. Rhythmic training, like clapping or reciting poetry, improves children’s grasp of language’s prosodic elements, which supports reading and writing skills (Liang & Taft, 2020). Participation in musical activities also hones the ability to distinguish sounds, a key factor in language development. Music offers a non-verbal medium for self-expression, fostering creativity and enhancing listening.

Singing and music-making are transformative for children’s language and cognitive development, contributing to vocabulary growth, sentence building, and memory. The repetitive nature of songs (like rhymes and structured patterns) helps children internalise language structures, making it easier to recognise and use new vocabulary and sentences (Bintz, 2010; Yuntina, 2021). Vocal learning, which involves mimicking sounds, is also essential, as it lays the groundwork for language. Additionally, singing strengthens auditory memory, aiding vocabulary retention and long-term language acquisition. Research highlights how singing supports children’s vocal performance and psychological well-being, indirectly benefiting language learning (Rinta, 2008).

In essence, singing promotes language acquisition by expanding vocabulary,

improving auditory memory, enhancing vocal control, and boosting psychological health, making music an invaluable part of early language and cognitive development.

Musical activities also enhance phonological awareness, which is crucial for reading readiness (Phillips et al., 2008). Studies indicate that music helps children build foundational literacy skills by breaking down sounds, understanding them, and reassembling them in words (Evans, 1998; Ziolkowski & Goldstein, 2008). Through music, children develop essential skills for decoding language.

Finally, integrating music into educational settings enhances social and emotional competencies. Activities like singing and group music-making teach children skills essential for social interaction:

- 1. Anticipation** - Nursery rhymes help children predict what is next, fostering focus.
- 2. Turn-Taking** - Group music requires listening and responding, reflecting social skills.
- 3. Nonverbal Cues** - Songs with motions encourage eye contact and coordinated gestures.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Education's music programme highlights music's ability to cultivate skills like critical thinking, empathy, and resilience (MOE, 2023). Musical activities nurture core values—such as responsibility, respect, and resilience—by encouraging

children to work collaboratively, persevere through challenges, and appreciate the efforts of others.

Music education thus plays a critical role in shaping children's social and emotional skills. Music promotes values like responsibility and empathy and prepares children to thrive academically and socially. Music enables children to express themselves, build connections, and develop the skills needed for lifelong success.

## **The role of music in the development of Social and emotional competence**

Music has a profound influence on nurturing children's social and emotional skills, thanks to its collaborative nature (Camerlinga et al., 2022). Children who participate in musical activities – especially in ensemble settings – learn to cooperate, navigate friendships, and manage group dynamics (Bishop, 2018). With teacher guidance, they can practice connecting with others, thus building foundational skills for social and emotional growth. In today's complex world, music education helps cultivate relevant competencies (Weston, 2020):

- **Global Awareness and Cultural Engagement:** Music connects children with their cultural heritage and introduces them to global traditions,

sparkling respect for cultural diversity. Engaging with various musical styles fosters openness to new perspectives and prepares children for a globally minded outlook.

- **Critical and Creative Thinking:** Through listening, analysing, and refining their musical work, children engage in both critical and creative thinking. Activities like composing and improvising develop flexible thinking and problem-solving skills, critical components of reasoning and creativity.
- **Communication, Collaboration, and Information Processing:** Music sharpens communication skills by enabling children to express emotions and ideas through sound. Group music-making fosters teamwork, listening, and responsive interaction. Additionally, encoding and interpreting musical information enhances their cognitive processing abilities.

Music education provides a structured and expressive space for children to develop these vital skills. Exposure to diverse musical traditions broadens cultural awareness, while the creative demands of music strengthen critical thinking. Performing in groups hones communication and teamwork skills, equipping children with versatile, lifelong learning abilities (Bugos, 2016).

In his highly acclaimed and seminal work of more than 50 years ago, Merriam (1964) shows that music is a social

behaviour that can be studied using the methods of anthropology. Merriam's examination of the role of music in child development, which is still relevant today, recognises its influence on emotional growth, social skills and cultural connection. He emphasised that music is more than just entertainment – it helps children develop identity, community and a sense of belonging:

1. **Emotional Expression and Aesthetic Appreciation:** Music allows children to express emotions they might struggle to verbalise while fostering an appreciation for beauty and creativity. This nurtures emotional intelligence as children learn to articulate feelings through rhythm and melody.
2. **Entertainment and Communication:** Music serves as a playful yet meaningful form of communication, helping children connect at a level beyond words.
3. **Symbolic Representation and Physical Response:** Music carries symbolic meaning, which aids children in understanding abstract ideas and cultural values. Physical movement to rhythm further enhances body awareness, motor skills, and coordination.
4. **Social Norms, Cohesion, and Cultural Rites:** Group music fosters respect for social cues, and in cultural or religious settings, it reinforces communal identity and respect for shared traditions.

**5. Cultural Continuity and Social Integration:** Music connects generations, passing down stories and traditions that form a child's cultural foundation. In group settings, it fosters unity and a sense of shared purpose.

Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2013) echo these ideas, highlighting music's role in whole-child development by nurturing intellectual, emotional, and social growth. Whether musically trained or not, educators can incorporate music into daily learning, fostering creativity and focus. Allowing children to experiment with sound and rhythm encourages individuality alongside teamwork.

Children build skills like concentration, listening, and rhythmic control through music, often without realising they are learning. Merriam (1964) and Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2013) advocate for integrating music into education to support the growth and creativity of future generations.

## A Personal reflection

My journey with singing and its transformative power began in my birth country, South Africa, where music is deeply woven into the social and educational fabric. Growing up and later working in this environment, I experienced firsthand the rich choral traditions that are integral to South African schools and communities. During my time as music director of the Drakensberg Boys Choir,

an institution known for its exceptional musical and educational standards, I witnessed how singing can shape young people both musically and holistically. The boys from diverse backgrounds were united through song, building bridges across cultural boundaries and fostering a sense of shared identity. This experience reinforced my belief in the profound impact of singing as a tool for education and personal growth.

Almost without exception, there are choirs in South African schools. Singing is more than a musical activity; it is a communal expression, a means of storytelling and a vehicle for cultural preservation. Even outside of a formal setting, singing often thrives in families and communities, serving as both a celebration of heritage and a spontaneous act of joy. Like many other traditions worldwide, singing has been diminished by modern distractions and changing priorities in education. This decline worries me as it risks losing an invaluable medium for developing musicality, communication, empathy and cooperation.

In my current role as a professor of music education in Italy, I continue to advocate for the integration of singing into children's lives. In my work with children aged 8 to 14 and as the director of a youth choir, I experience how singing can promote children's emotional, social and cognitive development. Singing in a group teaches attentive listening, empathy and teamwork – skills

crucial to their holistic education. Through a carefully selected repertoire, I aim to help children connect with texts that promote their emotional growth and cultural awareness. Inspired by Zoltán Kodály's philosophy that singing is a child's birthright and a gateway to their cultural heritage, I incorporate folk songs and music with integrity into my lessons. Kodály's belief that every child deserves access to the music of their cultural roots resonates strongly with my own experiences and practises.

Singing provides an unrivalled platform for developing children's communication skills. It bridges the gap between self-expression and social interaction, helping children to articulate feelings and ideas as they learn to listen and harmonise with others. The communal act of singing fosters a sense of belonging and community, a quality that I believe is particularly important in our increasingly fragmented world. In addition, singing promotes cognitive development by improving memory, language skills and musicality. In my classrooms and at choir rehearsals, I see music's impact on children's confidence, creativity and resilience.

Reflecting on my journey, I realise that singing has always been more than just an artistic activity for me – it is a means of nurturing the whole child. Whether in South Africa, where music is a vibrant part of the national tapestry, or in Italy, where I continue to explore its

educational potential, singing remains a profound force for development and connection. It is a privilege to contribute to the preservation and innovation of this tradition and to ensure that the next generation carries on the legacy of singing, enriched by its power to educate, unite and inspire.

## Conclusion

The decline of singing in schools is influenced by several factors, both internal and external, which require careful study. One crucial factor is the role of digital technology in reshaping music education by shifting students' focus from traditional singing to electronic music production. As Cain (2004) notes, children's growing interest in digital instruments may reduce their enthusiasm for singing, a change that is likely related to evolving musical tastes and pedagogical practices. The proliferation of popular genres such as rock and pop, favoured by digital access, further adapts music teaching to today's listening habits, influencing both students and educators, and could lead to singing traditions taking a back seat.

Despite this trend, singing still has a high cultural value and is essential for personal and social development. It contributes to emotional resilience, social bonding and even national identity, as studies by Tekman and Hortaçsu (2002) and Bohlman (2002) show. European cho-

ral traditions, in particular, have long strengthened cultural cohesion (Gorski, 2016), but paradoxically, the importance of choral singing in schools has declined in recent years (Huisman Koops, 2008; Gustafson, 2008). Educators are working to emphasise the benefits of music for children's development, although research shows that many young people prioritise other academic subjects over music when they enter secondary school (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010).

Educators are challenged to pursue innovative approaches that make singing attractive and relevant in today's digital landscape to counteract this decline. By reintroducing singing as a core component of music education, schools can preserve their national musical culture and promote the overall development of students. Educators must develop contemporary teaching strategies that combine children's digital literacy with

traditional singing practices to provide a balanced, engaging musical experience.

In conclusion, singing is an effective and engaging tool for developing children's communication skills. Through singing, children learn a rich vocabulary, rhythm, and natural flow of language, which helps them understand pronunciation, intonation, and expression better. Songs often contain repetitive patterns and simple melodies, making it easier for children to memorise and practise new words, improving their receptive and expressive language skills. In addition, singing in a group encourages social interaction and cooperation, boosting self-confidence and a sense of belonging. By incorporating singing into early learning environments, educators and parents can create a fun and effective way for children to build foundational communication skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.

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