

# 'I'm not sure if I can . . . but I want to sing!' Research on singing as a soloist through the art of improvising verses

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*Singing individually is both a necessary activity within the music class and an essential part of the cultural activity of improvising verses through singing. In this article we show how the introduction of this activity in the educational system of Catalonia has made it possible to obtain positive results with regard to participation in singing, especially solo singing. The analysis of the data also shows how this type of singing activity has a positive effect on negative attitudes towards singing derived from western perceptions of who or who isn't competent to sing, depending on gender, age and social status.*

Previously, in music class, when you asked them to sing individually, some of them felt embarrassed or turned up their noses. Not this way. They've all started singing. (Music teacher involved in the project)

Everybody can sing. However, in western culture during the last few decades, the idea that singing is an activity that comes naturally to all human beings has ceased to be predominant. It has become an activity reserved for a chosen few (Mills, 2000) and often associated with inborn talent (Richards & Durrant, 2003). In the context of Spain, the problem has resulted in the disappearance of singing as a common occurrence in the street (Camara, 2004) and it has lost its place as a habitual and meaningful activity in many areas of society. Furthermore, apart from this decrease in collective singing situations, there is the perception – even at a very early age (Hall, 2005) – of singing as a feminine activity (Harrison, 2007).

In education, the age variable must be taken into account as well as the gender variable (Green, 1997). Singing in a group is attractive when one is small, but becomes a more individual activity, valued less positively, as children grow older (Camara, 2004). According to Welch *et al.* (2009), singing becomes more of a private than a public activity, particularly in the case of boys.

Individual singing is often seen as difficult, if not rather unusual, in schools in Catalonia.<sup>1</sup> The most usual approach has been based on the idea of singing as a social

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experience and, more specifically, as a collective singing activity. This circumstance is fruit of the enormous influence of choral singing in Catalan society and music education (Casals *et al.*, 2010), but it is also the consequence of the psycho-pedagogic conception that singing in a group has a positive effect on learning and psychological well-being (Rinta, 2008).

The research presented in this paper carries out a deeper analysis of solo participation in singing by pupils in five schools. These schools were the ones that took part in a pilot project designed to introduce the singing of improvised verses to a given traditional melody.

### **Improvising verses while singing: from an adult practice to an educational tool**

Making up lyrics to a given melody while actually singing is an art present in many cultures, both in the past (Pedrosa, 2000) and around the world (Trapero *et al.*, 2000). Some notable examples are: *décimas* (Central and South America), *bertsos* (Basque Country), *trovos* (Andalusia and Murcia), *gloses* (Majorca and Minorca) and *ottava rima* (central Italy). Furthermore, North American *rap* also constitutes a similar genre, although with substantial differences, partly because of its commercial success in recent years. It is in this respect that some authors have discussed its universal nature:

[...] improvised poetry is not a phenomenon restricted to any particular community, nor any specific ethnic group. Rather, it is a universal art, part of the traditional and popular culture of different peoples, but with different names, different musical forms, different verse structures. (Díaz-Pimienta, 2000, p. 526)

Apart from the different forms improvised poetry takes in each culture, it is always a relevant communicative activity for the participating group (Ayats, 2007), with implications on the level of collective identity (Gross, 2008) and often related to ethnic affiliations (White, 2001). And in addition to this essential aspect there are certain characteristics that are also common to most societies and admit a definition as follows:

- Melodies coming from the singers' own cultural tradition or at least popularised.
- Up-to-date and meaningful lyrics.
- Orality and, accordingly, a product associated with day-by-day experience and without pretensions of permanency.
- Absence of a pre-established discourse and, therefore, adaptability to any theme or context.
- Recreational character and/or social criticism, often related to the community's need for opportunities to express its criticism, ideas and feelings without the usual restrictions imposed by society (Ayats, 2007).

In the case of the *glosa* – activity consisting of singing verses made up extemporaneously in Catalan – there exist diverse melodies and characteristics depending on the area (Ayats, 2007). Their common base is as follows:

- (a) Their social function is related to festive and recreational activities.

- (b) The invention of the lyrics uses the quartet of heptasyllabic lines of verse as a basic model, with the even lines rhyming as a minimum requirement (Box 1).

Box 1 *Examples of the formal structure of gloses (not literal translations)*

<i>Corrandes son corrandes i cançons en són cançons, i no hi ha millor barreja que minyones amb minyons.</i>	Songs are songs, and rhymes are rhymes And the jokes are always jokes And there is no better mix Than pretty girls with the blokes.
<i>Qui del meu cantar se'n burla jo no li vull gens de mal: xarampió, pigota i ronya i dotze anys a l'hospital!</i>	Who sniggers at my singing I don't wish them ill at all: Measles, fleas and chicken pox And twelve years in hospital!

*Specific conditions in Catalonia*

In Catalonia, the circumstances of this singing type of communicative activity are conditioned by two related factors: the break in the chain of transmission from one generation to another and the revival of this genre among a part of the younger generation in Catalan society (Casals *et al.*, 2010).

In the past, the figure of the *glosador* – the singer of *gloses* – and the activities surrounding the improvisation of verses were very common in many towns and villages (Serrà, 1999). The transmission of this art occurred spontaneously, outside regulated education and often without any conscious desire to ensure its survival. The last representatives of this chain are a handful of singers of advanced age from rural backgrounds. This state of affairs looked as if it would lead to the disappearance of the *glosa* (Pujol, 1985). But, surprisingly, this type of activity has experienced a revival in another part of the broad spectrum of Catalan culture: in urban environments and at the hands of young people with a good academic background, often university graduates. Thus, since a little over a decade ago, the number of *glosadors* has been increasing and also the number of performances based on the improvisation of sung verses (Serrà, 2005; Ayats, 2007).

The whole process has led to changes in the make-up and use of this cultural practice (Casals, 2009). From the standpoint of our research, the following three points should be underscored:

- The *glosa* – singing improvised verses in Catalan – has made a notable reappearance as a new and attractive feature within the range of festive and cultural activities. It appears associated with cultural alternatives within the recreational offer for young people.
- In relation to singing and the associated instrumental accompaniment, there is now greater freedom in their use and in the aesthetics they require. The lack of surviving

models and the sensation the generation of singers who lead this movement have of being newcomers in the world of the *glosa* might be the explanation.

- This activity is encouraged as a practice for everyone (Casals *et al.*, 2010) (see supplementary Fig. 1). A formulation where it might become the exclusive reserve of a few specialists at a high level is avoided. The counterpart, here again, is the absence of clear models that provide guidelines to help its practitioners improve the quality of their performances.

#### *The glosa as an educational tool*

Although not much mention is made in the literature on the subject, this poetical-musical activity has also been used as an educational tool in other societies akin to that of Catalonia. One of the most noteworthy examples is the Basque Country (Garzia, 2007). It has been used there for over 20 years in schools and is closely linked to language learning and the construction of the cultural identity. Similarly, we know of specific experiences and interests in very different societies, especially within the Mediterranean and Ibero-American areas.

As stated by Casals (2009), this repertoire provides communicative activity of an interdisciplinary nature (music, language and poetry, dramatic arts) with important attitudinal aspects of a cross-disciplinary nature within education (individual character development, work on social relationships in the class group, affirmation of collective identities). In the current school system, interdisciplinarity and learning through a holistic approach are becoming two primordial requirements (Torres, 2002; Lacueva, 2008). Both these aspects are also essential to the singing of the *glosa* or similar repertoires (Laborde, 1996).

In the Catalan context, the pedagogical application of the *glosa* stems from its aforementioned revival on a social level. It is interesting to observe that the attention it has received from the educational sector has a particularity well worth taking into account: the first experiments and research on the *glosa* in schools were promoted as part of music education and were directed by teachers specialised in music (Casals, 2009). The lack of interest shown by the language departments – at the forefront in other societies where it has been used as an educational tool – may be explained, on the one hand, by the excessive delegation of responsibility to specialist teachers as regards everything related to music and singing, and, on the other hand, by the lack of confidence in singing and its infrequent practice in broad sectors of contemporary Catalan society. It should be noted that this process is completely in line with what we have outlined in the first part of this article on the subject of singing in western cultures (Mills, 2000; Richards & Durrant, 2003).

Our research is based in the context described above and focuses on the work of solo singing and the fact of possessing personal criteria with regard to vocal performance. This research decision is justified for five reasons.

Firstly, the improvisation of the song lyrics while singing implies an individual activity, which can only be accomplished by singers on their own. Accordingly, it necessarily implies solo singing.

Secondly, it should be remembered that *pure* improvisation does not exist (Laborde, 1998). Rather it is the product of the reformulation of an important stock of knowledge at the

singer's disposal. Consequently, persuading the pupils to participate as soloists necessarily implies having acquired certain skills and resources.

Thirdly, and as we stated earlier, the *glosa* is a communicative activity, a conversation held through singing. We are speaking about the sum of many people who perform as soloists in a dialoguing group, in other words, individual actors who take the lead role while the group is acknowledged at the same time. Consequently, it is not a question of individualism, but, instead, individualities that are logical because they stand out in a social group.

Fourthly, a change in the habitual paradigm of work on singing in schools is proposed. In the case of the *glosa*, the melody is easy and the main interest lies in the lyrics (Serrà, 1999). Consequently, instead of giving priority to melodic aspects, this repertoire provides an opportunity to work on the principles, possibilities and rhythmic flexibility of vocal expression (Casals, 2010).

Lastly, this repertoire is associated with festive and recreational moments with a public in attendance (Ayats, 2007). This functionality makes the work on performance skills and techniques obligatory in order to ensure that the pupils are capable of singing as soloists outside the music room, in front of a crowd of people who may be strangers.

To sum up, the present research focuses on a very specific situation of solo singing: the *glosa* as an individual act of communication that occurs in a social and public context and that always supposes a personal challenge. This entails bringing into play and combining a range of individual competences (in relation to singing, language control, performance on stage).

On continuation, we detail the characteristics of the research project and then move on to report the main findings.

### **The research project**

During two years a qualitative research project was developed with the goal of experimenting with the possibilities of the *glosa* at primary school level. One of the most important specific aims was to find out if the *glosa* could become an efficient educational tool for achieving high percentages of voluntary participation with regard to performance as a soloist in front of a class group and, above all, in front of a wider public (other classes and other teachers from the school).

The research was conducted in two stages, and involved 14 teachers. There was a total of 208 participating pupils.

During the 2006–07 course a pilot scheme was carried out in a school. A researcher, a music teacher and a generalist teacher worked together to apply a cross-disciplinary didactic proposal for 3 months in a class group of 10–11-year-olds. Basing our approach on the methodology of *collaborative research* (Lieberman, 1986; Desgagné, 1997), a researcher took on the teaching role while the teachers observed the sessions and compiled the data needed for the research (see Casals *et al.*, 2008).

During 15 sessions (lasting 45 minutes) the children were immersed in the art of improvised verse through song, working on specific aspects (music, language, physical expression and social relations), but always interrelated within the global context of the activity required by this repertoire. The session that closed the project was planned as

an exceptional moment that would make it possible to give the completed teaching-learning process its maximum significance: beginning with an introductory warm-up by two professional *glosadors*-instrumentalists, the children performed in front of other class groups and teachers from the school (see supplementary Figs 2 and 3 and video 1). The children from the class group of 10–11-year olds dialogued among themselves and addressed the public through singing, first with pre-prepared lines and later improvising the lyrics.

In the second stage (2007–08 course) the didactic proposal was extended to four more schools. Unlike in the first phase, the researcher did not take on a teaching role but instead focused on supervising the adaptation of the proposal to each centre. With this end in mind, a working group of teachers was set up – music and language teachers, coordinated by a researcher. Through discussion among the teachers about the sessions in progress in their schools, this team contrasted the findings obtained during the preceding course with their own findings. Three variables were considered significant, in line with the theoretical contributions mentioned at the beginning of this paper:

- Age (see Table 1): taking the pilot scheme as a reference (10–11-year-olds), trials were carried out with children of the same or similar age, ranging from 8–9-year-olds to 11–12-year-olds.
- Gender: all the schools involved provide mixed-sex education. The selected class groups were fairly evenly balanced as far as this variable was concerned.
- Predominant language (see Table 1): the proposal was tried out in centres where the pupils have a wide knowledge of the language the proposal works with (Catalan), in schools where Spanish predominates as the mother tongue or habitual language, and in a school with very similar index of use of the two languages.<sup>2</sup>

### **Data collection**

In both stages the data came from three different sources: the sessions with the pupils (teaching-learning ambit), the meetings with the teachers (work ambit: planning, debate and discussion), and the semi-structured interviews with the teachers (ambit of deeper reflection).

The sessions with the pupils were reported in the researcher's field notes, and the teachers contributed other complementary data. While giving priority to obtaining the maximum of data, all the observations were recorded as narratives without any preconditions, thus discarding data compilation using a previously established schedule. With a view to deeper analysis, the final sessions at each school and some ordinary sessions were recorded on video. The video recordings were sorted and the footage where the children sang alone was selected. These fragments were the ones transcribed to facilitate their analysis.

The meetings of the collaborating team (researcher, music and language teachers) were reported in the field notes immediately after they finished. These meetings were also recorded in audio files for later analysis. After that, a first review of the audio was carried

Table 1 *Research project data*

• Length of project:	November 2006 – July 2008		
• Primary schools:	5		
• Researchers:	3		
• Teachers:	14		
• Students:	208		
Distribution of pupils by age groups			
Level	Groups	School	Number of pupils
8–9-year-olds	1	C	27
9–10-year-olds	3	C & D	78
10–11-year-olds	3	A & B	52
11–12-year-olds	2	E	51
Total	9		208
Pupils per school and predominant language in the centre			
School	Number of pupils	Predominant language	
A	19	Catalan (>80%)	
B	33	Catalan (>80%)	
C	52	Spanish (>60%)	
D	53	Catalan and Spanish in equal proportion	
E	51	Spanish (>80%)	

out in order to select and transcribe those fragments that had a specific bearing on the subject of the research.

To favour reflection and analysis, two semi-structured interviews – one at the beginning and the other at the end of the process – with each pair of participating teachers were conducted as a complementary approach. Through these interviews we were able to establish the teachers' expectations and final opinion. It was the researcher who conducted the interviews and took notes. Subsequently, the most significant fragments were transcribed.

### **Data analysis and findings**

In the analysis of the data obtained in relation to pupil participation as soloists during the performances, we mainly focused on the findings from the last sessions, in view of the fact that this was the end of the process and they took place in a more demanding context.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 Solo participation by schools and age groups

Individual participation	Age group			
	8–9-year-olds	9–10-year-olds	10–11-year-olds	11–12-year-olds
<b>School A</b>			100%	
<b>School B</b>			75%	
<b>School C</b>	71%	92%		
<b>School D</b>		52%		
<b>School E</b>				48%

Firstly, it is important to emphasise that the teachers on the project rated quantitative participation as excellent in all the cases studied.

We value very positively the fact that all the pupils participated in this activity and really enjoyed themselves; they saw it as more of a game than as schoolwork. (Teachers from school C; April 2008)

In order to contrast this teacher's perception with specific data, we counted the number of times each pupil sung a verse as a soloist in the final sessions. The results (Table 2) show that in three of the schools the percentage of participation exceeded 70% while in the other two it was around 50%.<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind the initial expectations of the teachers on the project (around 20% of participation), these general percentages may be considered as very high.

In a further analysis certain data deserve special attention. These concern the pupils' motivation to participate and the differences generated by the variables of age, gender and mother tongue.

### **Pupil motivation and progress**

In the last sessions, pupil participation flowed smoothly without the need for intervention by the adults (teachers and *glosadors*) to encourage it. These performances occurred especially in the case of pupils seen as less talented or who expressed prejudices with regard to singing:

The only boy who decided to improvise is a rather poor singer. Before, when I tried to make him sing alone, he refused or it made him uncomfortable. However, in these circumstances, he goes ahead. Because he has something to say and he says it singing. (Music teacher from school B; April 2008)

Another point worth highlighting is that all the final sessions finished when the time ran out: the teachers had to bring the activity to an end while many pupils were still asking to sing more *gloses*. The teachers in one school summed the situation up as follows:

In general they like it a lot. [...] They were all highly motivated and we had a great time. (Teachers at school E; June 2008)



This commentary also reflects a collateral result: the growth in awareness and interest in singing on the part of generalist teachers in particular and the teaching staff in general. So much so that some teachers not accustomed to singing accepted it as another form of expression, both in the teaching-learning ambit and in the ambit of personal relationships among the staff:

[Regarding teachers] it has been a way of saying strong things to each other without hurting anyone's feelings.

At Christmas the teachers sung some garrotins [glosa] to the children (...). And the children were really taken aback. (Music teacher from school E; April 2008)

As this teacher clearly states, the fact that the teachers sung some *gloses* together to the pupils caused considerable surprise because it is not very usual in schools in Catalonia for generalist teachers to perform music.

These data show that this repertoire – or, better said, this communication game – becomes a source of motivation for both pupils and teachers. But the consequences go beyond this first general effect, because the teachers also observed unexpected results in the case of certain pupils. Among the trends shared by the different schools special mention should be made of three:

- Shy pupils, who were not expected to pluck up the courage to sing alone, started singing and improvising spontaneously. There was a paradigmatic case at the pilot school (school A) in relation to a boy and a girl whom the teachers mentioned when affirming that it would be really difficult for some of the pupils to sing on their own, and even more so if they had to improvise the lyrics:
- There are some who definitely won't want to improvise: CR, IM ... children like them who are so shy ... (Music specialist at school A; January 2007)
- CR and IM were precisely two of the six pupils capable of improvising in front of the whole school.
- Pupils who were low or average-to-low academic achievers turned out to be soloists capable of participating abundantly in sessions based on oral improvisation. The most extreme case was that of a boy in school B who was capable of singing 27 *gloses* in two sessions of 45 minutes, 11 of which he improvised in just 13 minutes.<sup>5</sup> Teachers from other schools reported as follows:
- Many of them [the pupils] surprised us with star performances when they are normally pupils who do not stand out. They were praised and it increased their self-esteem. [...] Pupils with good academic ability were challenged by others less so. It put them on an equal footing. (Generalist teacher at school E; April 2008)
- Children with academically brilliant results (including music and languages) were incapable of participating in the singing or only participated very occasionally. For example, in school C the teachers underscored the case of a 9-year-old girl with good results in all subjects, but who had difficulty in plucking up the courage to improvise verses, even in front of her own class group. The teachers proposed the theory that in view of the fact that the girl was used to controlling everything and always being successful, the feeling of personal insecurity generated by improvisation represented too great a risk for her. The risk of making a mistake could, in her case, end up being

detrimental to the good reputation she had built up. On the other hand, it was not a problem at all for pupils with a poor standing (this would explain the trend described in the previous point).

These trends indicate changes in what we might refer to as *the academic map* – who succeeds and who doesn't in the class group – that existed prior to the project.

#### *The variables of age, gender and predominant mother tongue*

In relation to age, the 10–11-year-olds were those who registered the most positive results. This finding refers both to the number of participating pupils and the quality of their performances (intonation, singing in tune, vocalisation of the lyrics, expressiveness).

This finding concurs with the analysis presented above, in Table 2. We evaluated the percentages from two schools where work was carried out with 10–11-year-olds (schools A and B). And we also observed that the lowest percentage corresponded to the school that worked with 11–12-year-olds (school E). Similarly, in the case of 8–9-year-olds (school C) the percentage – which looked satisfactory at first sight (71%) – was well below the results of the 9–10-year-olds (92%).

The teachers were in general agreement that 10–11 years old is the optimum age and that, despite being older, 11–12-year-olds did not perform any better. On the one hand, they pinpointed personal maturity and language skill development as two key factors that serve to explain the higher participation in this activity of 10–11-year-olds than younger children. On the other hand, they mentioned the pre-adolescent self-consciousness of 11–12-year-olds as a factor that explains the drop in participation at this age.

We observe that the gender factor emerges as a significant variable. The fact that girls mature earlier than boys may explain why the available data indicated that the girls were a little more participative in younger age groups, while the boys participated more in the singing in the last year (11–12-year-olds) of primary education.

There is another factor that should be taken into account in relation to gender. The boys' participation, unlike the girls', increased noticeably in the final sessions as compared with the ordinary sessions in the classroom, at least in the case of 9–10-year-olds and older boys (see Table 3). The explanation may lie in their slightly more competitive character – who will win the dialectic that sometimes ensues between singers? And in certain attributes – courage, daring, spontaneity – culturally and socially associated with the male gender. On the other hand, because of the gender image of preadolescent girls, the desire to make an impression, required for improvisation, is seen as less fitting. Nevertheless, there was a high level of participation by both sexes in all the schools.

The third variable, the predominant mother tongue, is another factor worthy of consideration. The two schools under evaluation that obtained the best results (schools A and B) are schools with a majority of Catalan speakers, while those who obtained the poorest results were the Spanish-speaking pupils.

All told, there is another aspect that should be highlighted in this general panorama. The teachers on the project draw attention to the fact they secured the participation of many pupils for whom Catalan is not their first language (Spanish speakers), and that, above all,

Table 3 *Synthesis of gender predominance (+) – if it existed – in relation to participation in different performance contexts*

Age group	Class sessions		Final session		School
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
8–9-year-olds					C
9–10-year-olds		+		+	D
10–11-year-olds		+			A B
11–12-year-olds			+		E

this facilitates integration, language output and singing in public by pupils culturally remote from Catalonia (specifically pupils coming from the Maghreb and China).

### Discussion

What follows focuses, on the one hand, on singing at school and, on the other hand, on the interest in introducing the *glosa* or other similar phenomena into educational contexts.

#### *Individual singing: work on music and social implications*

The research project was developed around the difficulties and lack of presence of individual singing activities in music education in Catalonia (see supplementary video 2). On the basis of the results it can be safely affirmed that the activity of conversation through singing constitutes a motivating resource for participating pupils. This may well be linked to the fact that the repertoire has a predominantly recreational and communicative character. On the one hand, in the face of a more pressing need – communication – the pupils forget their prejudices and the difficulties involved in singing. One teacher summed it up very well: ‘The pupils say: ‘I’m not sure if I can ... but I want to sing!’ (Generalist teacher at school E). On the other hand, the more recreational and festive atmosphere in which the final session – which served as a meaningful goal – took place, helped to convince pupils that they were not being judged, so that they would not feel inhibited by *what they might say about me*.

The process will always prove positive provided that teachers do not lose sight of the educational perspective. In relation to the specific case of music education, it should constitute a step towards achieving the goal of *normalising* the activity of singing on a social level, so that it belongs to the community rather than just a well-trained musical elite (Mills, 2000). In addition, it should be understood as an opportunity to generate positive experiences at school with regard to solo performance, which remains a basic issue from a psycho-pedagogic standpoint (Abril, 2007; Rinta, 2008).

As stated by Mills (2005, p. 49) ‘taking part in performances of which one feels proud’ is important in music education. Furthermore, despite the secondary role of musical

expression in this communicative activity, work on the quality of the vocal delivery should not be ignored. Making the most of the pupils' new motivation, attention should be paid in the classroom to all those elements likely to improve the final result of each singer's contribution, with the advantage that the teacher will have been able to identify difficulties individually, pupil by pupil. In other words, it becomes a formula for avoiding the 'I can't sing' cultural myth (Richards & Durrant, 2003) and for working on the problems of singing by focusing on what can improve it: practice under the guidance of an expert.

Lastly, one aspect of great interest must not be ignored: the solo singing of lyrics made up by the soloists themselves introduces the task of helping each pupil to acquire his or her own musical criteria while singing, without depending on a conductor as in the case of group singing.

*Conversing while singing: from the social activity to the educational possibilities*

The *glosa* is a social activity, for adults, but also for children (see supplementary Fig. 4 and video 3). For this reason, it emerges in the school environment as an opportunity to stage the relationships existing among group members and understand the role of each individual in the group. Music is a fundamental element in this dramatisation because it creates a special framework where one can say what perhaps would not be acceptable in other situations (Ayats, 2007). At the end, what has been said remains part of the game, part of a not-so-serious conversation, but which provides the educators present with many pointers: from the role of each pupil in the group to the latent conflicts in that group. Moreover, the educational benefits of working with repertoires of a recreational nature should not be ignored because 'the best of many people's genius is devoted to hobbies and spare time interests which owe nothing to formal education' (Woods, 1993, p. 11).

Its educational possibilities can be taken even further. The *glosa* breaks down certain prejudices that teachers harbour about pupils and, ultimately, about the *academic map*: new academic roles and changes in social relationships emerge in the face of a challenge that requires skills that are – there is no doubt about it – scarcely developed at school.

Within this scenario, two aspects of great value for school music education must be underscored. Firstly: the fact of having managed to motivate and give pre-adolescent boys a greater role in a singing activity in a society where the conception of singing as a feminine activity predominates. And secondly: the need to make space in the music room for activities that demand different skills, attitudes and aesthetics; this heterogeneity will no doubt result in a change in the academic roles and a fresh conception of error as a necessary step in the learning process that everyone has to follow.

Regarding this last point, it is necessary to spotlight other aspects that can modify and enrich music education in Catalonia and the greater part of Western society. As maintained by Green (2006) it is vital that the introduction of so-called popular music into the classroom is taken further than merely introducing a repertoire: above all, it should succeed in modifying the educational strategies in use. Some aspects worth mentioning in the case of the *glosa* are:

- The work on another style of singing, from the vocal delivery to the type of expressive resources used, including body posture and positioning in space (Scarnecchia, 1998;

Cunningham & Aiats, 2001): sitting in a circle, singing from the chest, and a style akin to speech are imperative in order to *converse by singing*.

- The change in the Western conceptualisation that considers rhythmic and, above all, melodic accuracy, to be the central goal of singing work in schools. While some important studies on singing competency (Mang, 2006; Welch *et al.*, 2009) exhibit a predominance of aspects related to melody and attitude when making an evaluation, in this case, the clarity of articulation, the vocal timbre, the intensity, and the expressivity of the singing become the most important features.
- The main role taken by the pupils when learning (Lebler, 2007): motivation and facilities to help the children progress autonomously and learn to identify the most effective resources.
- The break with the implications of the idea of *traditional* as applied to song (Casals *et al.*, 2010): disappearance of the traditional connotations of an old repertoire destined for the first years of schooling.

Lastly, there is an essential aspect of music education through singing that must not be overlooked. Singing competence is the result of holistic development that encompasses ambits far-removed from music – linguistics, dramatics, relationships and physical expression. Despite the specific interests of these subjects, they should converge in two important accomplishments: the ability to express oneself through singing, and its enjoyment, in both cases individually and as a group. As the music teacher from school B remarked, the fruits of this proposal are that ‘people who say they don’t like music or they don’t like singing, here you get them to join in again’ (Music teacher from school B).

### Supplementary material

The supplementary figures and videos mentioned in the text can be found at <<http://journals.cambridge.org/bme>>

### Notes

- 1 Catalonia is a region in the northeast of Spain with a clearly differentiated identity, language and culture. It enjoys an important degree of autonomy and the autonomous government is currently responsible, in the greater part, for education (Ferrer, 2000).
- 2 Catalan is the vehicular language in compulsory schooling in Catalonia, as a way of favouring it in the face of the stronger language – Spanish – with which it coexists (Ferrer, 2000).
- 3 These final sessions consisted of performances in front of a public made up of pupils and teachers from other classes in the school, as well as other adults who the performers had not met before the session (professional glosadors, researchers). Consequently, we have used the term *demanding* in view of the fact that the participants had to take the leading role in a show presented before a public containing adults and, as often as not, older children.
- 4 As with all quantitative data, these percentages have to be valued according to the context. One key aspect is the relation between the number of potential singers and the time available for singing in each school. In all the cases the allocated time was between sixty and ninety minutes, but the number of participating pupils varied. At the two schools with lower percentages (D and E) the final session was organised jointly and 104 pupils participated as potential singers. On the other hand, at

the other schools the number of participants ranged from 19 and 52. At schools D and E the reiterated participation of certain pupils meant that others did not have an opportunity to perform.

- 5 It needs to be understood that each round of a glosa lasts approximately half a minute, so the boy sang almost half the possible number of gloses in 13 minutes.

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