

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

The Assessment Results Manual for 1996 stated that “tasks are designed to assess what students are able to do, and are not restricted to gauging their abilities against stated curriculum goals for their class level.”<sup>1</sup> In the singing tasks, it was apparent that “Vocal Sizzle” allowed students to demonstrate “what they are able to do” far more than “Sing Song.” By restricting the responses to a vocalised vowel in “Vocal Sizzle,” this allowed the students to concentrate on remembering the tunes of each phrase. The phrases were also fairly simple in structure without complex rhythms. On the other hand “Sing Song” demanded reading skills as well as vocal abilities, and very few students were successfully able to marry the two. So many students resorted to reading phrases that the question arises as to what the task “Sing Song” was really trying to assess. An ability to read, to retain a tune, or ability to sing correct pitches? It was such a complex task that it possibly did not provide a good reflection of students’ abilities. Perhaps if the same students had been asked to participate in both tasks, the results may have revealed a more accurate picture of students’ abilities.

The majority of students in this sample were comfortable about singing in the “Vocal Sizzle” task since they all participated in the exercises except for one student at the year 8 level. However quite a different picture emerged in the “Sing Song” task. Students’ responses were gauged according to how many attempted to sing four or more phrases. The figures reveal only 55% at the year 4 level and 78% at the year 8 level. Among those students who attempted to sing, in both tasks, it was cause for concern that so many experienced difficulties with the tessitura of phrases. The results revealed that the number of accurate responses per phrase on both tasks was less than 50%, except for phrase one in “Vocal Sizzle” at the year 8 level, which had a 54% response. As has already been discussed in the previous chapter, many students were able to give an accurate rendition of a phrase at a lower tessitura. The starting pitch was often a third below the actual pitch which leads one to conclude that the most comfortable singing range for many of the students was from about an A below middle C to an octave above.

The Assessment Results Manual for 1996 published the overall results of questions in the music survey. In response to the question regarding how often singing is done in music at school, the majority of students at both year levels reported “sometimes” out of a choice of four categories. (42% at year 4 and 43% at year 8).<sup>2</sup> It is possible that if students were given more opportunities to sing at school, there might be a higher incidence of accurate renditions of phrases. Horner, quoting the research of Wolner and Pyle (1933) and others “reported that vocal instruction... resulted in considerable and rather immediate improvement in aural and vocal pitch discrimination.”<sup>3</sup>

The Ministry of Education Handbook for Music in New Zealand states that “until the 1950s, school music consisted almost entirely of singing. Massed singing in extended assemblies was the main component in many school music programmes.”<sup>4</sup> Arnold Bentley writes: “One unfortunate result of the advent, in the last fifty years, of recorded music and classroom instruments is the relative neglect of singing.”<sup>5</sup> While Bentley’s statement describes the music education programmes in English schools, the same situation pertains in New Zealand. Currently many schools have singing assemblies once a week or once a fortnight (in a survey

conducted in 1997 by this researcher in seven primary and two intermediate schools in Auckland, singing assemblies were held once a week in six primary schools, once a fortnight in the seventh primary school, and once a fortnight in the intermediate schools). More regular opportunities to sing in assembly might be beneficial to many students in helping them to improve their vocal abilities.

In the NEMP survey, students were asked how much they enjoyed singing at school out of a choice of four responses. At the year 4 level, 44% and 39% responded respectively to the most positive and second most positive options while at the year 8 level, 31% and 43% responded respectively to these same two options.<sup>6</sup> It is evident that students at the year 8 level are less positive about singing than the younger students. This is in accordance with many studies that have been conducted pertaining to students' attitude to music. (See chapter three).

However many students enjoy music-making activities. The Ministry of Education Handbook states: "The social aspect of practical music-making is...significant. Young people like being part of an active performing group. Their motivation will be high when there are regular and frequent opportunities to meet with friends in a programme which is challenging and interesting, with a function which they understand and believe in."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the key words in this statement are "challenging and interesting," particularly at the year 8 level when many students are affected by the onset of puberty and issues such as self-esteem become significant.

Some schools have choirs which regularly perform in concerts or participate in festivals, while other schools have Barber Shop Quartets or cultural groups which meet regularly. Students need to be encouraged to sing in existing choral groups or possibly even start their own vocal group singing contemporary songs, or composing their own songs and performing them. A stimulating music-making group might motivate students to want to sing as often as possible. Chapter two discusses the importance of singing and the need for it in many communities.

## **Recommendations**

NEMP has launched an ambitious programme of student assessment. The fact that so many schools agreed to participate is testament to the care in which the programme was implemented.

### **1. The singing tasks**

1. If a task with words such as "Sing Song" is to be included in the next year of assessment, it might help students if they were given an opportunity to become more familiar with the words during the course of the assessment. Two methods are suggested:
  - (a) The student reads the words of each phrase aloud prior to the rendition of that phrase on the instruction video. If there are any pronunciation difficulties the T/A can be of assistance.
  - (b) The T/A reads the words first for the student, as was observed during some of the videos in this sample. This is particularly helpful for those students who have already been identified as problem readers.

The first method is preferable as it allows the student to be self-sufficient. Possibly both methods could be adopted depending on the T/A's prior assessment of the student's reading ability.

2. If words are to be included in any phrases, students' cultural backgrounds need to be considered, particularly as New Zealand is a multicultural society. Many students had difficulty with words such as 'Belfast' and 'Sligo Bay.' It would have been more appropriate to use names of places in New Zealand.
3. If both tasks are to be included in the next assessment year, students should be given the opportunity to participate in both. This would provide a more realistic picture of their vocal abilities as there would be a means of comparison between the two tasks.
4. Since a number of students had a difficulty with the treble voice as a model on the instruction video, a female adult singer might be a more appropriate model. The reason is that an adult voice has a more developed tone than a boy's treble sound. It may be easier for students to match their own vocal sound with the fuller tone of an adult singer.
5. Most singing activities at school are conducted with groups of students, or an entire class. Students are seldom asked to sing solo. The singing tasks may have been intimidating to many students and this may have affected their performance ability. In chapter three there was discussion about Roger Buckton's 1983 study "Six a song of six year olds" in which recordings were made of individual students' singing ability in a group singing class with the use of ten microphones. If the NEMP wish to assess students' vocal ability, Roger Buckton's method is possibly the fairest means as the students would be in a non-threatening environment surrounded by their peers.
6. If the NEMP want to only assess students' vocal ability, it would be more beneficial for students to sing phrases that are familiar to them. This would obviate the students' having to also remember a tune, which may be an added burden in an assessment situation.
7. In the video sample, some boys at the intermediate level had deep voices, which affected their ability to sing in certain tessituras. It might be more appropriate to choose boys to participate in singing tasks, whose voices have not yet changed.

## **2. The role of the Teacher/Administrator (T/A)**

At the start of the preceding chapter, the role of the T/A was discussed in relation to the video sample. It was evident that particularly in the task "Sing Song," the T/A played a key role in a number of ways. The T/A needed to assume the role of facilitator and instructor and demonstrate a sensitivity to the student beyond the normal requirement of the other tasks. It is recommended that the T/A's are made aware of the special circumstances of this task, and that they adapt their interactions with the student accordingly. It is also recommended that the T/A be thoroughly versed in the nature of the instructions prior to the commencement of the activity.

### **3. Extraneous noise**

A criticism already stated in the previous chapter was that extraneous noise was a feature during some of the singing tasks. It is recommended that in the future, separate rooms are used for the assessments, particularly for activities that require sound such as music tasks.

#### **Concluding Remarks**

The majority of students examined by the researcher at the year 4 and year 8 levels who were able to sing in tune, but often in a lower tessitura than the original. Students may have experienced some of the difficulties which were described in chapter three. It is also unknown whether the students were used to singing solo, and this has to be borne in mind, or indeed whether they were used to doing any singing because of a lack of opportunities during assemblies or school music classes.

Michael Ellsworth commented: "The voice is still a bit of a Cinderella. I believe it is still the least worked on area of personal development. So fixated has society become with keyboards, computers and the necessary skills to operate them that voice has suffered. It is no wonder that we get so many upper chest breathers. People have forgotten how to use their voice from the centre which promotes health and well being."<sup>8</sup> While this statement is concerned primarily with the speaking voice, there was discussion in chapter two about the importance of developing the vocal mechanism for both speaking and singing, as the one affects the other. The technical world that we inhabit may be a significant fact why vocal development is no longer viewed as important. This may account for the lack of more regular singing opportunities in the schools.

Chapter two highlighted the many areas in which singing features as an integral part of people's lives. When students are helped to see singing as an enjoyable and fun activity, a positive response to singing could engender a greater desire to want to participate in singing activities, leading to developing students' musical ability.

Evaluations are the means to assess a student's progress and level of achievement. The NEMP criterion reference tests were a useful way of examining the national patterns of achievement in New Zealand.

## REFERENCES

1. *Music Assessment Results 1996*, Terry Crooks and Lester Flockton (National Education Monitoring Report 4, Ministry of Education, New Zealand. Printed and published in New Zealand by Educational Assessment Research Unit, 1997), p.55.
2. *Music Assessment Results 1996*, p.46, 47.
3. Cited in *Vocal and Instrumental Instruction: A comparison*, Roger Buckton. Unpublished thesis, University of Auckland for the degree of Master of Arts in Education), p.16.
4. *Music Education in Secondary Schools* (Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand, 1994), p.10.
5. *Music in Education*, Arnold Bentley (NFER Publishing Company Ltd. Windsor, Berks. Great Britain, 1975), p.32.
6. *Music Assessment Results 1996*, p.46.
7. *Music Education in Secondary Schools*, p.17.
8. *Christchurch Star*, article on Michael Ellsworth, May 20<sup>th</sup> 1998, p.A12.