DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 939 RC 019 206

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TITLE Learning by Singing.
PUB DATE [Jan 91]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizenship Education; Culture; Educational History; Elementary Education; *One Teacher Schools; Rural Schools; *Singing; *Songs; Teaching Methods; *Values; *Values Education

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses singing as a method of learning cultural values and the types of songs sung in a midwestern one-room country school in the 1930s. Singing and memorized poetry were major mediums for education in values. School children learned many songs with themes of patriotism and citizenship, such as "The Star Spangled Banner," "America the Beautiful," and "America." Militant, militaristic songs such as "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Columbia, Gem of the Ocean," and "Marching Through Georgia" brought images of war to the students. Some negative cultural values were taught through songs such as "My Old Kentucky Home," "Solomon Levi," and "La Cucaracha." Other songs such as "Annie Laurie," "Comin' Through the Rye," and "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes" were also sung. The daily routine of the opening singing sessions instilled many values in the school children of that era. Both students and teacher sang without a conscious awareness of indoctrination as the songs reflected the American history that they knew. (ALL)

LEARNING BY SINGING

This morning I went to visit school, the second grade, which was attended by a foster-grandchild. As luck would have it, we drew a music class. Rhythm band was the feature, along with body movements to music and just a bit of singing. I wonder how singing contributes today to the transmission of values in the elementary schools; not, of course, in the second grade but on through sixth, seventh, or eighth grades, and if it does.

When I attended grade school in the upper midwest, the Great Plains, or more precisely, to use Garland's term, "the middle border", singing was the only public school music, and consciously or not, it was a major medium along with memorized poetry for our education in values. A one-room country school with all eight grades and an average of 2.3 children in each grade was the venue for all this. By the time we had finished grade two or three, we knew all the songs of all the grades because we sang, all grades together, every morning in "opening exercises". We were used to singing. There was singing in Sunday School and again in church week after week, and any number of adult-oriented social events, which children attended with parents, featured community singing. I'm not thinking about standing and mumbling as the band played the national anthem before a football game. I am remembering full-voiced singing, commonly in two, three, and four-part harmony. But, back to school and education in values.

Operating entirely from memory of school sixty years ago between the great wars, I can still recall the words, the music, and the ideological content of scores of songs - no pun, numbers. Beginning with "The Star Spangled Banner", and that's what we called it, not the

"national anthem". We knew the words. All the words. All the verses. Those were the days when free men stood "between their loved homes and the war's desolation". Days when we had to conquer in presumably always just causes.

"America, the Beautiful" had words to be remembered and we did. Garrison Keillor has written of alabaster cities. We knew them well. We hoped and prayed that God would "refine our gold" until all success would "be nobleness and every gain divine". Every flaw in this beautiful country was to be mended. And then there was "Our Country 'tis of Thee" or "America". All the verses were in our ken and for variety's sake, we learned a completely separate set of words on the same theme: "God Bless Our Native Land"...."firm may she ever stand". O, we did learn to be patriots.

There was a more militant, militaristic set of songs, too. "Columbia, Gem of the Ocean", "whose banners make tyranny tremble." In Australia, recently, I heard a Uniting Church congregation singing "Battle Hym of the Republic", and wondered if they felt the implication of "the watch fires in a hundred circling camps" where "they had builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps". We knew even as small children. (After all, we'd read Abraham Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Bixby and some of the girls wept along with the teacher and some of the boys wanted to do so.) "Marching through Georgia" was fun, putting the rebels down with righteous fury. Rapine, although we didn't know the word, exalted. "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" came all too soon. Before that we had to experience the bitter sadness of "Tenting Tonight on the Old Camp Ground" and even "The Vacant Chair" in remembrance of a Johnny who wouldn't. O, we did learn the glory of war, of the Civil War, and of a more recent one fresh in the memory of every parent and even of the students in the upper grades.

There was a lot of sadness in songs like "Til We Meet Again" and "My Buddy". My father, who served in France in that war, called my mother "Buddy" for years after, and as a very little child, I did, too. "Keep the Home Fires Burning" was more up beat, for in spite of the yearning, there was a silver lining in each cloud 'til the boys come home. It's the vital optimistic quality that comes through in the memory of W.W.I songs, not the sentimental, sad element. "Over There" where the Yanks would make short work of the Kaiser. Then there was "Soldier Boy". ("Soldier boy, soldier boy, where are you going, waving so proudly the red, white, and blue; I'm going where my country and duty are calling me; if you'll be a soldier boy, you may go too"). "Where Do We Go from Here, Boys?" with its ever so slightly risque "when we see the enemy we'll shoot him in the rear" had a victorious ring to it, and there was good military humor in "Some Day We're Going to Murder the Bugler". O, we learned that war could be fun!

With all these war songs, especially Civil War songs, in our background, one could hardly account for a set of songs glorifying the ante-bellum South and, yes, even slavery. We felt sad indeed that "Massa" was "in the cold, cold ground" with all those darkies weeping and singing down in the cornfield. How nice it would be to be carried back to ol' Virginny, or to "My Old Kentucky Home", where "de darkies are gay". Gay it will be remembered once meant light hearted and happy. "Oh, darkies, how my heart grows weary, far from de old folks at home". What a yearning we darkies had for the good old days. But darkies weren't all sad and sentimental, you know. There were the singin' and dancin' coons of the minstrel-show type as well. About 1925, at age eight, I sang in the school Christmas program and brought down the

house. Everyone, I think, knew "Oh Tannenbaum", but we were not yet using the German words. The war was too recent... that war, you know, when major orchestras quit playing Beethoven. We had parody words to the song telling of Christmas present and goodies. I, hidden in the back of the singing group which had just finished "there won't be any work to do", stepped forward in black-face, of course, belting out "Dere'll be some gifts for dis coon, too". Laughter, applause, joy! O, we learned racism by singing!

Not all racism involved blacks. We happily sang "Solomon Levi", making fun of Jewish merchants who, even in our limited range of experience, ran second-hand stores. There was stereotyping here and one nasty epithet, "Sheeny".

Our developing racism was pretty parochial, really. It could deal with blacks and, to a very limited extent, Jews. We had songs that made gentle fun of other ethnic groups, the Irish, for example, and I don't know when we branched out to touch the Mexicans. Early on I knew "La Cucaracha" but I don't think anyone had the temerity to try the Spanish words and we would have been shocked to understand the import of "marijuana que fumar". Looking west we could see the Philippines and China; we had missionaries there, but no songs that I can remember mentioned them. A bit closer to home lay the Hawaiian Islands which would soon provide Americans with a whole class of songs. But in our public schools in the "twenties", we knew only "Farewell to Thee", composed, we were told, by the last Hawaiian queen.

What songs treated cultures other than our own with respect? Off hand, I remember Scottish songs ..."Annie Laurie", "Comin' through the Rye", "The Campbells are Coming", "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton", "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean", and "Auld Lang Syne". The Harry Lauder

songs were well known by our parents and by a few school children, but they were never sung in school, probably because most were too new to be found in school song books which weren't. The English, in my recollection, came off less well. "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes" was often sung and we sang "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" with gusto. The kids who spoke German and the Scandinavian languages at home had their own songs, naturally, just as they had separate ethnic churches. But such songs were never used in the public schools although they would have enriched and expanded our thin musical knowledge, and might well have expressed some values we could approve. Just not done. As war memories dimmed, we did come to hear and sometimes sing "Silent Night" in German. At least, we did at our house and I think in school as well. O, we did learn to be ethnocentric by singing in the public schools.

Citizenship was another theme which was drilled into us, not with a rich musical heritage but by means of a school marching song, used daily. Yes, daily! It was the theme song of the Young Citizens' League, meeting for business weekly, or perhaps monthly; I forget. The business was forgettable too, choosing next week's cleaner of erasers and blackboards, for example. The song was unforgettable. "We march and we sing; our voices ring; young citizens are we, leagued in a host whose watchwords are youth, courage, loyalty..." Now that's inspiration, and we "sang citizenship" lustily.

Yes, you can teach values by singing. You can teach militarism, patriotism, racism, ethnocentricity, and citizenship. You could also teach altruism, compassion, pacifism, co-operation and even environmentalism, but these values would require different sets of songs, some of which are not yet written.

The songs not sung are as important as the roads not taken. We didn't sing Christian songs except at Christmas and then they were pretty securely Protestant in origin and nature. Our attitude towards Catholics was peculiar. They were among us and frequently well-respected, even loved, friends and neighbors. Even though we might occasionally sing "Onward, Christian Solders" or "Fairest Lord Jesus", you may be sure that there were no explicitly Catholic songs alongside them in the school songbook. This was WASP America even in communities with Catholic majorities. We knew that Catholics had mysterious rites and loyalties going beyond Bismark, Pierre, and Lincoln and even Washington, to Rome.

The radical songs of the labor movement were unknown to us. They wouldn't get past publishers into a school songbook. We might hear about the I.W.W. (the "Wobblies") at harvest time, but they were never around in an obvious way. Certainly their songs and those of labor in general never got near the public schools and I'm sure they didn't even in areas such as mining and factory towns where organized labor was strong.

The currently popular songs from "Tin Pan Alley", songs of the June-moon-spoon-croon genre, didn't make it either. I think for two reasons:

(1) they were too new and available only in expensive sheet music, and

(2) their subject matter was almost exclusively romantic love between adolescence and marriage.

On the first point, we should remember that a one-room country school had no piano and likely no players of one, and on the second point, that the material was unsuitable for kids under the age of fourteen years.

Nor were we given what might be called "our own music", that of the Western frontier. Although the "Strawberry Roan" and "Frankie and Johnny" had been around for years, we didn't get to sing them at school. Where then? Perhaps in an intermission at a barn dance where a man with boots and a guitar entertained, or at a house party, of which there were many. "Home on the Range" had achieved status in school songbooks and that was just about the extent of the recognition given the American West in our public school singing.

Have I reported subtle conspiracies of inclusion and exclusion, or a conscious plan of indoctrination? No, of course not! We sang daily, pupils and teachers, in a state of innocence. If we sang a Negro spiritual, like "Steal Away to Jesus" or one with the phrase "the people keep a-comin' but de train done gone", it was without knowledge that these songs had a second level of meaning for slaves planning to escape. Besides, why would those happy darkies want to?

We were innocents in the process of indoctrination, both teachers and pupils. Our songs reflected American history to a large extent. That we knew. We did not know whether it was true history or false, complete or incomplete, warped or straight.

In fact, we learned unconsciously both the good and the bad. We learned as a child learns a language, along with mother's milk, in happy ignorance of declension of pronouns or conjugation of verbs. It is this kind of learning, though, which tends to survive over the years.