

## Melodic and vocal performance of school-aged children from disadvantaged backgrounds

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### Theoretical background or Context

Singing is a musical behaviour that is present across all human societies (Blacking, 1995). Developing singing skills is a complex and dynamic process, which results from interactions between individuals' musical abilities, maturation of brain and body, and socio-cultural contexts (Welch, 2016). Singing skills are amenable to change and can be developed. Therefore, children may be at different phases of their vocal development (Welch, 2016), which may be accelerated by formal musical training.

### Aims

This study investigated melodic and singing performance skills of disadvantaged school-aged children. In Portugal, research on this topic is scarce. Previous studies have evaluated middle-class children or children attending specialist music schools. A scale was used to evaluate children's singing and vocal development: the *Vocal Pitch-Matching Development* – VPMD (Welch, 1986; 1998; 2016), which proposes four phases of a developmental continuum, focusing on singing accuracy and precision in melodic contour.

### Methodology

Participants were 168 seven- and eight-year-old children (83 girls and 85 boys) from disadvantaged backgrounds, attending the second year of public primary schools that do not offer music education, either curricular or extra-curricular. Children's performance of a children's song was evaluated, as well as their learning process. Data gathering of children's musical performance occurred in a similar context to that of learning a song in their classroom. A melodic-vocal test was devised by two experienced music teachers, which consisted of individually learning a song by ear, through imitation: (1) listening to the whole song; (2) learning the song's four phrases successively with a neutral syllable ("du"), and (3) with the words; and (4) singing the whole song. To check for the degree of difficulty of the song, a pilot test was previously carried out with disadvantaged children from a similar primary school, who did not participate in the main study.

### Results/Findings

The mean of the participants' scores of their vocal performance on Welch's VPMD scale (from 1 to 4), was 2,35. Out of the total number of children, 17 (10%) achieved a score of 1. According to the VPMD scale, they are in the initial phase of vocal development, characterized by a focus on the song text, rather than the melody, and singing as chant-like, employing a restricted pitch range; 80 (48%) children were rated in phase 2. They perform a melodic contour close to that of the original melody, and they can expand their voice, albeit within a limited range; 46 (27%) children were rated in phase 3. The melodic shapes and intervals are mostly accurate, but some changes in tonality may occur; 20 (12%) children were rated in phase 4. They can perform

simple songs with no significant melodic or pitch errors. Five (3%) participants did not perform the required tasks, achieving a final score of 0.

### **Conclusions/Final considerations**

Children's melodic performance was like that found in other studies with children of a similar age. Further research is needed to better explore the possible influence of their background in their skills.

### **References**

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