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INTERVIEW

Interview with Professor Graham Welch*

Entrevista com o Professor Graham Welch

Entrevista con el Profesor Graham Welch

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Graham Welch, Professor at the UCL/Institute of Education, is well respected and known all around the world. His interests in the development of singing in children has shed light on the field of singing in Music Education.

He has been a specialist consultant for Government departments and agencies in the UK, Italy, Sweden, USA, Ukraine, UAE, South Africa and Argentina on aspects of music, education and teacher education. Publications number approximately three hundred and fifty and embrace musical development and music education, teacher education, the psychology of music, singing and voice science, as well as music in special education and disability.

People don't know much about his experience as a music teacher in English schools at the beginning of his career, an important "detail" that really makes a difference and marks his peculiarity in the field. In this interview, conducted on 01/02/2016, he talks about his experiences and other problems related to Music Education.

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Silvia: I would like you to tell us about your teaching in school, your experience with children.

Welch: I spent 14 years as a primary school teacher working in a primary / elementary school in Inner London. I worked in three different schools in South West London with lots of different children; children who, most of the time, lived in very difficult economic circumstances. In one school, there were very high immigrant numbers. One of my classes I remember had 29 children, and 27 had only one parent, with only two children classified as White British. Some of these kids experienced a very difficult life. In my last (third) school, the school population were more mixed, but even here, there were children who found life difficult; they came from difficult family circumstances. I suppose that's where I originally got one of my interests in how we can help children to make sense of the world and help them to learn in a context in which they have experienced a lot of failure. Children can have quite negative feelings about themselves and school may be the only place where they actually have any kind of security, any kind of relationship, as I discovered in my second school. It's the only sensible, sane part of their week. When I first started teaching, I had 39 children in my class. These were quite big classes compared to now, not as big as they can be in some cities in Brazil, but this was big for the available classroom space. After one term as a new Primary school teacher, I had completed my teaching for 12 weeks and I thought about giving up because I said 'This job is impossible, you just cannot do it!' because it was such a large responsibility to help 39 individuals, each with different needs. I have often thought since that, in an ideal world, every child would have their own unique educational programme, as well as opportunities to collaborate and work with others.

As for my general background, I was a mature student when I went into teaching. I already had a young family when I became a teacher. I had had a lifelong interest in music and in singing, but while I was at college I was confronted with this concept of singing as something that could be improved in everyone. I'd assumed that people could sing or couldn't, and I was confronted in my second student year with new graduate research by the tutor, Charles Cleall, which suggested that this wasn't the case, and so that kind of opened my eyes. I observed Charles working with a group of adults and he said, "Anybody in this room can't sing?" – several hands went up! This guy (Cleall) just went over to this person and asked them to say their name and then he sang it back to them, and then within a few moments this fellow student was singing and it was as if someone had lit up a light bulb; as if the sun had suddenly come out; the look on their faces; they were absolutely astonished. So the tutor took their vocal behaviour and gave it back to them, based on the notion that we only have one voice and if we can make a sound in speech then we can use this sound as a basis for singing. This was in October 1968 and I have never forgotten that experience which has shaped my life into researching ways to support singing development, in children especially.

So that encounter, both there and also others when I was teaching in school, led me to understand (as I've written) that I think of musical ability or abilities as plural, and singing is one of them. There is a continuum of behavior and there are some people that are very good at something and some that are not very good; whatever it is, there are lots of continua related to human behaviour and development. With me it's cooking—I am not very good at that! But with singing, all the experience that I had had in school with children was that they were all at different points on a continuum; I could just work with one group that were highly skilled, but then what do I do?, just ignore the others? And they were already having a sense as young children, that they couldn't do music, that music wasn't for them. So two things came out of that. One of these was that in one

school, my third school, I worked at the school as a deputy head teacher (deputy director) and also, as well as being a class teacher for everything on the curriculum, I took all the music across the school. With singing, when I entered the school it was the girls who did it (singing) and the boys played football. And so when I tried to get some music going, the boys wanted to play football. So the following year, I created a boys' chamber choir. I sat in the hall and listened to every child sing, using a simple protocol that had emerged from the research literature from my MA dissertation on children's singing. I literally listened to every child aged 7 to 11 and I created a choir of boys that could sing in-tune and I gave them special opportunities to sing throughout the year. The girls were furious! But the previous year I had tried to have a mixed choir and it was virtually all girls and a few boys, and so this all male experiment this one year demonstrated to the boys that they could sing and that it was cool to sing. The following year we did singing and football, and I had a mixed choir of boys and girls so I only did the all male experiment for one year. Singing had become an acceptable mixed gender activity.

Every year, at the beginning of the year, at the beginning of the first class music lesson I would assess the children again to map their current level of competency and to ensure that what I asked them to sing would be a good match. I would get every child to sing and use their voices and I would get some sense of where they were developmentally, and I would then try to design a programme which enabled them to progress from where they were rather than from where I wanted them to be. I can remember one year, I was asked by the head teacher to organise the nativity play, a kind of Christmas story for the parents in December. And my class were not so good at that time I seem to remember, with some of the children poor at remembering lines, and so I got the children to write the Nativity story from their memory of it. The children improvised the story initially and then every time we did it, it was sort of the same but slightly different, but it didn't matter because they worked out what the main events were in the story, and so they improvised the script, and then we improvised music to go with it. Then I said to the kids "Ok, then you are going to put on the Christmas show," which they did. It was their script; their understanding of the Christmas story which was fine. It was traditional, but in their words; they were acting it and in each performance the words may not have been exactly the same, but they remembered 'I'm the inn keeper, this is what I'm kind of thinking about', or 'I'm a shepherd', or 'I'm a king', or 'I'm a sheep', or whatever.

And one of the other things I did during my experience as a school teacher was that I was always in early in the morning, just to get the classroom ready, to get the day organized, and you know you'd have an assembly in the hall for the whole school to start the day and I would have to sort out the music, or I'd been teaching some English or Maths or some Science or something, and I would have a big box – it's still in my office, a box of percussion instruments – and I would have it in the corner of the classroom by the door. The children in my class used to sit in groups around a set of tables, not by ability, just in friendship groups and I'd just say, 'OK, it's your turn this week' to that group, 'Your turn to play some music in assembly on Friday, and as all school walk into the whole school assembly, as the children walk in, you're gonna play, and as the children walk out, you're gonna play'. "What do I play?" "I don't care! I'm marking, I'm getting the day ready". And so if it was their turn, they had to come in before school early each day and work out what they wanted to do with their instruments and on Friday mornings, they performed. I didn't teach them anything, absolutely nothing, yet they actually made music every week and that was reinforcing my conception that people are musical; they just need the space; they need the opportunity and also they need not to fail, that's the critical element. If you experience failure, you don't want to do it. I mean, why would I keep doing this thing that makes me feel bad?

Silvia: For me, these questions were very important because you are very well known and respected for your research. But we don't know much about your experience in schools.

Welch: It was unusual. I mean, I had, during my own undergraduate preparation to become a primary school teacher, I had a music input. Our head of music was one of the pioneers of music psychology in this country, Desmond Sergeant, still alive, and he got his doctorate on 'absolute pitch' whilst I was a student and he demonstrated that absolute pitch, in fact, related to certain cultural, social factors. And it wasn't either, or; you have absolute pitch or not, it was something that could be developed, and there were lots of factors to develop it. And so he built up a big research library. He set up and became the first editor of 'Psychology of Music.'

And then they started an MA programme. It was at the University of London, Institute of Education, but they were allowed to teach it also in Roehampton. And so I was a part-time MA student. And from my academic graduate work, my literature review that he forced me to do, I then published two articles in Psychology of Music, which were 1979, from my MA. And so that kind of began that process of linking research and practice because I was researching whilst also being a classroom teacher which I continued with my PhD as a teacher. Many years later, I went back to Roehampton as the Deputy Dean and then the Dean of the Faculty of Education with over 2000 students. I was awarded the UK's first major research grant to look at children's singing development and I employed my former tutor, Sergeant, to work for me as my senior Research Officer. In one sense, he never really worked for me, even though I was paying his salary! I was always his pupil. And he always went through my academic writing with a red pen; you know, always, every word. I couldn't get away with anything as a student. I was doing my MA and my PHD while I was a school teacher. So there was this constant collision between wonderful academic "My God! Isn't that exciting" and the day job of dealing with ordinary things and children's learning. And I began to realise that there wasn't a need for this separation, because I'd just got my master's degree. I'd just got my PHD and someone said to me, "Why don't you write for a popular music magazine?" So I did and the editor wrote back and said 'Can you now write it in English?', because I had written it as academic, as from my thesis. So I had to translate it back into day-to-day language for teachers. You then realise that there are different audiences and one of the disconnects that we find as universities, researchers and practioners, anywhere in the world, is that the language for the audience needs to be different, so that was that.

Silvia: In a her thesis "Music schools in England during the 20th century" Eileen Bentley (Bentley, 1989) demonstrates how music in schools has expanded from being an activity almost exclusively concerned with the singing of songs, to becoming a discipline which by the 1980's embraced instrumental work, musical appreciation, creative music makers, examination work and electronic music. Do you agree that it has happened? How did that affect the singing in schools?

Welch: Music was always part of the curriculum, but it was dealt with in different ways. As in Brazil in the 20th Century, the initial focus on music in the UK was singing, because singing is not expensive. So you would get everybody to sing, but you weren't really interested in making this musical. Singing was part of giving the children a sense of a collective identity, of socialising them, of giving them language, so that they also became more moral and able to sing religious songs rather like the Villa-Lobo's program in the 1940s in Brazil. It was using singing for other (musical) purposes and in the 20th century, there became an understanding from various Government

Education Acts of Parliament from the late 1920s onwards that having the learner doing something was legitimate. This really took off after the war, when through pioneering work of followers of people like Orff, we began to see percussion and unpitched percussion instruments appear in Primary schools. We began to get a sense of instrumental work that was possible in a Primary school class. You suddenly saw other instruments appearing as well. The curriculum did become potentially more enriched, but most teachers didn't have any background in what to do with music, so provision was still very uneven and accidental. I think it's much better now. How did it affect the singing school? That is an interesting question. I think in church schools there would always have been singing, because you would always have this religious component, but that would have been collective (usually whole school) singing. The BBC transformed the music scene, if you like, from the 1930s, led by a pioneer of music and movement, Ann Driver. The BBC in the 1930s began broadcasting programmes for schools, music and movement, music and dance. So when I was a kid I experienced this; and when I started teaching I would put on the radio and you'd go at a certain time, your hall time, and we had in the radio on, proper music; with instructions to dance and things. As a teacher I used two sets of broadcasts for years: with the younger children 'Time and Tune' and with the older children 'Singing Together.' And the BBC sent me booklets, me and the rest of the country, with all these songs laid out, still in my office, and broadcast each week. With the advent of cassette tape recorders, we were able to record these and play them at our own choice of time, rather than sitting in the hall at 10 o'clock, waiting to turn the radio on. Once you recorded it, then you could give a tape recorder to every other teacher in the school and everybody could do that week's singing class, and the books would be passed around from class to class, so you didn't have to be the music/singing expert. So children, through the BBC, encountered an enormous range of music and musical traditions and also lots and lots of singing from their own culture. One downside of that was that, again, this was reproductive music, recreating music that was in the book, songs would appear that would be taught to you and often these songs would have simple little accompaniments (for example, rhythmic clapping), like this [clapped example], and this would be written out. And I wasted years of my life trying to teach kids these little rhythms. We'd be singing and I'd say "Your turn, here's the wood blocks", and of course, they weren't physically coordinated– just like my three-year old son, Alex, now if I ask him to clap, he just claps – [*If I ask:]* "Can you clap in time? What's a pulse?" [He probably will answer:] "*I'm a musician. You have let me down!"* So that doesn't work. But as soon as you say to the children, "We are going to sing. Here are some wood blocks. Play whatever you like", you can't fail and whatever they improvise will fit. "You do whatever comes into your head. It doesn't matter if you are in time or not." Suddenly, there's success.

Silvia: How were the teachers in England prepared to teach singing in school?

Welch: Well by and large, it was through the BBC who would come with these pre-packaged programmes. So, you wouldn't have to think about the pedagogy. Someone at the BBC was thinking about it. But that didn't necessarily help you. One of the things that you found was, if the BBC had sufficient time, they would get a children's choir to be the vocal model for the broadcast materials. You could hear the children's choir, then your kids, so it was children's voices as models for children's voices. But not every week, because the BBC couldn't afford it. So what they'd do instead was they'd hire a soprano or a baritone and he would sing, and my inner city kids would go "What's that?". This was foreign.

Silvia: Nowadays how are the teachers prepared?

Welch: Well one of the things that happened in the late 1990s, nearly 20 years ago was that we had a new socialist (Labour) government that was elected in 1997 and whose central plank was education. We had a Minister of Education for Schools and his boss, the Secretary of State for Education, both of whom where married to instrumental musicians. So there was a lot of emphasis on music politically that was filtering into the school systems. And in 1994 two Ministers— culture and education— got together to create a Music Manifesto[1]. They asked the music community, including the music industry, if we were going to do music, what should it be like? And then when they got together as a working group, they said well the first and simplest thing that we can do is something about singing. That is why in 2007, the National Singing Programme 'Sing Up' came about, which ran for five years as a publicly-funded programme, freely available for all schools in England. The organisation which set it up is now a 'not-for-profit' private organisation[2] and continues to reach many thousands of schools. There is still much more singing now than there ever was before.

Silvia: Is music mandatory on the British curriculum? Could you explain how it works and what challenges teachers have to face?

Welch: Music is mandatory in the sense that in the pre-school and nursery, in the early years, music is part of the creative curriculum, and so there are examples of children making and playing with sound. From the ages of five to fourteen, music in schools is compulsory, and each week there is meant to be a musical activity for every child, each class. Then at the age of 14 to 16, where students are preparing for their 16 year old examinations, music then becomes an option, and at that moment you move from 100% at age 14 doing music to, at 14 +, to somewhere around 8 or 9 %, who opt to do it as examinable subject. This is an enormous variation, and when we looked at 14-16 year old music in just the local schools area around the Institute of Education, in some schools there were 35% children opting to do music because music was important to them and to the school, so it was a natural thing to carry on, but in others it was between 6-8% of pupils, that is, a tiny minority. With the current Conservative (right-wing) government, with their emphasis on the English baccalaureate in which there aren't any Arts examinable, there's lots of pressure on secondary schools to not do arts subjects because these are not publicly examined and so not used in the judgement of the quality of teaching and learning. Schools are rated publicly on the basis of how well they do in 'core' subjects, such as English, Maths, Science and one or two other things that have been added to this so-called English baccalaureate, which means that post 14+ onwards there is much less music in some schools. The interesting paradox is that in the private sector, in the independent sector where parents pay for their children's schooling (10% nationally), , there is usually music all the way through; there is always music, because the independent sectors sees music as part of the culture and music is something that is valued and seen as worthwhile. So you see some musical activities in independent schools but not all state schools, and that is why there is continuing pressure on various sectors to try to make sure that music is better represented in every school, for every child. It is there from 5 to 14, but it could be better.

[1]<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DfES%20D21-0604-72.pdf.pdf>.

[2] <https://www.singup.org/about-sing-up>.

Silvia: I would like to talk about the difficulties in schools, because in Brazil there are schools that don't have an appropriate room or even musical instruments, and your colleague Dr Jo Saunders told me that here in England, in some schools, they are the same condition; they don't have musical instruments. I would like you to explain, because in Brazil we think that in England thinks happen without this kind of problem.

Welch: It's still official Government policy and has been for the last three Governments,, that every child has an opportunity to learn an instrument for at least one term; ideally for one year. In some parts of the country, children are learning an instrument for up to two years and longer, provided by the school, but this comes down to the values of the school leadership, as it does if I explored this issue in Germany, or if I went to Korea, or if I went to Brazil. If the people that run the school value music, you see music in the curriculum; you see music happening; and those that do it are so convinced by it, they wouldn't dream of not doing it because they find their school, their children are transformed by the arts in general and by music in particular. So in every country we can find fantastic examples of musical activities. In São Paolo for example, you've got one of your programmes of working in music with young children, and this is seen as a social intervention program. There are 50,000 children and young people on this programme, where you've got social workers and musicians working together hand-in-hand to use music, celebrate music, enable the kids to be better at music and at the same time to have a wider, socially inclusive and positive experience, to get them out of some of those negative experiences and mindsets that I was talking about earlier – that rich musical experience we can find in any culture if the people in charge value music and support it. One of the difficulties, one of the challenges that we have in the UK at the moment is not just the diversity of ethnicities, because we've always had that. But now there is a range of different beliefs and a sense of separatism in some parts of the community, and a sense of difference, that we need to address in education, including music education. Another example that I have in my limited experience of being in Ireland as a Visiting Professor for the last decade, is that when the economy is very rich, when the economy is going up and booming, everybody is so busy that they are all occupied and they're happy and they've got money and the amount of argument, the amount of trouble that there was in Ireland was much reduced. This was one of the side effects of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy. All the people that were fighting and killing each other over the last 20, 30, 50,100 years, suddenly there was less of it, because it didn't make any sense, because everybody was participating in a successful society. But as soon as the 'Tiger' economy in Ireland, as part of the 2008 world financial crash happened, then there was a sense of tension; a sense of blame. In England, for example, it's "You people coming and stealing our jobs," from France or Germany or Poland or Arabian refugees. In the recent past, West Germany was a kind of engine room for the whole economy of Europe. Suddenly, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, West Germany has become Germany and includes West Germany and East Germany. There is this incredible social transformation that needs to go on. The West Germans began to look inside their borders as well as outside because they suddenly found themselves in a completely different situation and in all of those things, education, if you're not careful, suffers, because what the children and young people bring into the school system, they suddenly find that they are perhaps being labelled, that they are being discriminated against. Therefore, one of the issues that we have at the moment, according to the statistics, over the last 30 years, in a report that came out last week that such children are at the greatest disadvantage; the gap between them (the people on the margins of society) and everybody else in the last 30 years is still the same. The population is not the same across this period, because we have a much larger mix in the population of people from across the world. This gap and its educational correlate doesn't need to happen, because the evidence is that some of the best education

in the whole of the country, and in Europe, can be found in Inner London where you have the most deprived and also the greatest mix of peoples. There are over nearly 200 different ethnic groups and languages. Where you have parts of London, such as East London, where they suddenly decide to do music, or to emphasise literacy, then standards rise. This has happened in Tower Hamlets, for example, which is a very poor area in East London with large numbers of immigrant children or second, third generation. The schools and local politicians are very strongly committed to a whole variety of different, inclusive values. Nevertheless, despite poverty and ethnic variety, the educational performance of these children is very high compared to similar children elsewhere in the country because it's just what the local school system and parents expect. The whole culture is geared up to be more effective because everybody is at a disadvantage. However, this weekend the reports are that if you go to Oxford or Cambridge, where two of the world's leading top five universities are – if you are from the wrong side of the sticks, if you are poor working class, you are highly unlikely to get into these universities, less than 1% or not at all. So the quality of education for children who are severely disadvantaged, in these truly highly privileged cities – with more money than most other countries would dream of just locked up in these universities – the disparity in educational experience and opportunity is extraordinary. Oxford a decade ago hired an American fundraiser. He raised a billion pounds – just in private donations. There is this enormous economic disparity all over the world and I, personally, believe that music can make some small difference. In part, just by doing music, if you get it right, music is fun. It makes people feel good. It makes them smile. It brings positive emotional experiences, and it brings lots of other things as well, such as improvements in children's self – identity, in their cognition and health, physical and mental. You don't have to step outside music to do the other things. Just doing the music will bring many of the other things anyway; as long as it's fun; as long as it's enjoyable.

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