

Theme

A Sign-language Choir

An all-inclusive fellowship-in-songs with a focus on students with hearing loss



Sign language means that one uses signs to speak. Using signs to speak is a simplified form of sign communication with the use of one or two signs in each sentence. Using signs to speak is a form of communication that helps interplay and communication between individuals and within groups. In a choir it may be used to enhance the ensemble's understanding of texts. The use of signs in a choral composition may be compared with the use of other types of choreography.

When working with children in choirs, song and movement both have a natural place. Experience shows that it is easier to learn texts through the use of sign enhancements and visualizations.

When it comes to children with hearing loss, one of the challenges is to arrange for speech stimulation. Sound, rhythm, and movement (Bjørkvold, 1999) are important elements. As early as 1916 Alexander Graham Bell pointed out the connection between language, speech, and rhythm in working with children with hearing loss. Important elements are speed, stress, breathing patterns, and pauses. The conscious application of sign language in choral performance can promote the awareness of the factors mentioned above. In a choir this can develop in a joyful way, in fellowship with other children and adults alike.

The background for this activity

We have been using signs with the choirs at the Nyborg school for many years. In 2000 the choir "Kor Læne" was established at the school as a joint effort between teachers, parents, and school administration. Based on

experiences with hearing loss and hearing devices at our school, we wished to offer a choir where all could participate. How this was to be implemented was thoroughly discussed beforehand. It is still an important topic at our meetings. What does it mean to organize a choir for all? In order to answer that we have used the following definition from music therapy: "Music therapy is a conscious use of music to obtain certain motives (Ruud, 1990). Such is our intention as we focus on creating an inclusive choir fellowship! This means that a positive rehearsal experience is more important than the performance, even though performing well is also highly valued (Lundereng 2003).

Other choirs refer to our choir as The Sign-Language Choir. It is a voluntary after-school activity that now has seventy members. The choir includes members with different levels of hearing loss. One has a cochlear implant, another uses a hearing device and has significant hearing loss, and there are two with just minor hearing loss. They all make good use of sign enhancement.

Organization

The choir directors also teach the hearing-impaired students in other classes at the school. In addition, there is a third teacher who gets time off from his other after-school duties to participate in choir practices. All three teachers know sign language. Thus we can practice the same pieces during school hours as during choir practice, which may be important for the personal feeling of mastery during practice. Mastering something and succeeding are important for one's motivation. Therefore it is important to create a choral culture that focuses on the positive aspects of multiplicity (ref. approving communication, Bae, 1992). Approval is essential not only in choir rehearsals, but also in connection with different performances.

The choir practice is generally organized in two parts, one for the candidates and one for the main choir. The candidates range from age 6-8 and those in the main choir from age 9-12. Sometimes we combine the choirs so that the children can experience fellowship in a choir of a variety of ages. The big choir sings familiar children's songs, canons, and songs suitable for a mixed-age group. The songs are then divided into different categories: (1) signs only with instrumental accompaniment, (2) song only with instrumental accompaniment, or (3) a combination of song, signs, and instrumental accompaniment. Signs

