

The Voice as Self: A Conceptual Model of Motivation and Engagement in Chinese Senior High School Vocal Music

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Abstract: *Research on motivation in school music has largely treated singing as one more musical activity, applying general models of motivation and engagement without asking what is distinctive about learning with one's own voice. This conceptual article argues that vocal music forms a separate motivational domain, because the voice is experienced as part of the self, every attempt is heard by peers, and performance anxiety is never far from the learning process. Building on self-determination theory, expectancy-value and self-efficacy theory, and the control-value theory of achievement emotions, the article proposes a model of motivation and engagement for senior high school vocal music in China. The model places vocal self-concept and performance-related emotions at its centre, treats teacher need support and school signals of value as environmental inputs, and adds the examination-oriented and relational character of Chinese schooling as contextual conditions. Seven propositions are derived for empirical testing. The article closes with implications for measurement, research design and classroom practice, including the case for multi-method designs that do not rely on a single self-report questionnaire.*

Keywords: vocal music education; singing; motivation; engagement; self-determination theory; performance anxiety; China; conceptual model

INTRODUCTION

Hallam (2010) gathered evidence that active music making supports young people's intellectual, social and personal development, yet she also stressed that such benefits follow only when participation is sustained and enjoyable. In many senior high school music classrooms in China, the difficulty lies precisely there. Students sit through compulsory music lessons while their attention, and their families' hopes, are fixed on the national university entrance examination. A teacher can hand out a song sheet, play the introduction and still hear a room in which half the class barely opens its mouth, which is a scene many vocal music teachers will recognise.

McPherson and O'Neill (2010) compared students' motivation to study music with other school subjects in eight countries, including mainland China, and found that music tended to be valued less than core subjects even when it was enjoyed. Xie and Leung (2011) reported a similar pattern for mainland Chinese students, whose motivation depended strongly on perceived usefulness within an examination-driven system. Sun and Leung (2014) added that rural schools in Northeastern China often lacked basic resources for music teaching, so the same national curriculum can be lived very differently from one county to the next. Together these studies explain why motivation, rather than provision alone, has become a central concern for Chinese music education.

Most motivation research in music, however, has been built on instrumental learning. Studies of practice, self-regulation and persistence typically follow young pianists, string players or band members (McPherson & Renwick, 2001; Evans, McPherson, & Davidson, 2013), and their findings are then extended to music learning in general. Singing is rarely examined on its own terms. This matters, because a student who plays a wrong note on a violin has made an error with an object, whereas a student whose voice cracks in front of classmates has, in her own experience, exposed something about herself. Abril (2007) documented how a single humiliating episode of being told not to sing could silence a person for decades.

The aim of this article is to develop a conceptual model of motivation and engagement that is specific to vocal music and sensitive to the Chinese senior high school context. Following Jaakkola (2020), the article takes a model-building approach: it integrates several established theories, identifies the constructs that each contributes, and specifies relationships among them as testable propositions. The contribution is threefold. First, we argue that vocal self-concept and performance-related emotions should sit at the centre of any model of singing motivation. Second, we show how features of Chinese schooling (examination pressure, the low status of music and relational forms of autonomy) condition these processes. Third, we derive propositions and research design recommendations that could guide empirical work, including work that avoids the measurement weaknesses common in single-questionnaire studies.

Why Singing Is a Distinct Motivational Domain

The voice as part of the self

Welch (2005) described singing as a form of communication in which the instrument is housed in the body and shaped by the singer's emotional state, physical development and cultural background. Because the sound comes from inside, students rarely separate their vocal performance from their sense of who they are. A wrong pitch is heard as "my voice is bad" far more often than as "I have not yet learned this interval". This fusion of instrument and self means that judgements of singing ability carry unusual emotional weight, and it suggests that vocal self-concept (a student's beliefs about whether she is "a singer") should be modelled as a construct in its own right rather than folded into general musical self-efficacy.

Demorest, Kelley and Pfordresher (2017) provided direct evidence for this point. In their study of junior high school students, musical self-concept, together with attitudes and family music participation,

predicted whether students enrolled in elective music, and self-concept was also related to measured singing accuracy. The finding implies that beliefs about one's musical and vocal ability help decide future participation, alongside skill itself. Abril (2007) showed the long reach of such beliefs: his participant, labelled a poor singer in childhood, carried a lasting anxiety about singing into adult life. For a teacher, the lesson is sobering, since a careless remark in a Grade 10 rehearsal may decide whether a student ever sings in public again.

Exposure and social evaluation

Classroom singing is public by design. Students sing in front of peers, are often asked to sing in small groups or alone for assessment, and know that their voices are being compared. Freer (2009) studied adolescent boys in choirs and found that their decisions to keep singing depended heavily on whether they could imagine a future self as a singer that fitted their peer group, which he captured in one participant's phrase "I'll sing with my buddies". Adolescence also brings voice change, especially for boys, at the very age when sensitivity to peer judgement is highest. These conditions make social evaluation a constant presence in the vocal classroom in a way that has no exact parallel in, for example, learning music theory.

Performance anxiety as part of learning

Kenny (2011) defined music performance anxiety as persistent apprehension about musical performance that arises through specific conditioning experiences and is shown through combinations of affective, cognitive, somatic and behavioural symptoms. Kenny and Osborne (2006) found that such anxiety was already present among young musicians and was linked to their beliefs about evaluation. In vocal learning the effect is especially direct, because anxiety changes breathing, muscle tension and pitch control, so the bodily signs of fear become audible. A frightened singer sounds worse, hears the result and becomes more frightened, which can turn anxiety and poor performance into a self-reinforcing loop.

These three features suggest that general models of music motivation miss something important when applied to singing. In instrumental learning, emotions are often treated as outcomes of motivation. In singing, emotions such as anxiety, shame and pride appear to be part of the mechanism itself, shaping whether a student dares to produce sound at all. Any model of singing motivation, in our view, has to place those emotions near its centre.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Self-determination theory

Deci and Ryan (1985) proposed that the quality of motivation matters as much as its amount, and later work distinguished intrinsic motivation, internalised (identified) forms of extrinsic motivation, and controlled forms driven by pressure, reward or guilt (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2017) argued that autonomous motivation grows when three basic psychological needs are supported: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Evans (2015) showed how well this framework fits music learning, and Evans, McPherson and Davidson (2013) found that young people who felt their needs were met in music were more likely to keep playing. Freer and Evans (2019) extended the finding to secondary school, where perceived teacher support and need satisfaction predicted students' intentions to take elective music.

Reeve (2009) added an important practical point by explaining why teachers often adopt a controlling style, using commands, deadlines and comparison, even when they value student autonomy. Pressure from above, large classes and a belief that control produces results all push teachers in that direction. For vocal music, the theory implies that the way a teacher responds to a weak or nervous voice (with correction and comparison, or with structure, encouragement and choice) shapes whether students' reasons for singing become more autonomous or more controlled.

Self-efficacy and expectancy-value theory

Bandura (1997) identified four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and physiological and emotional states. Zelenak (2015) developed a measure of these sources for secondary school music students and found that mastery experience was the strongest contributor to music performance self-efficacy. The fourth source has special force in singing, since a pounding heart and a tight throat are read by students as evidence that they cannot sing. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) argued that students invest effort when they both expect success and value the task, whether for enjoyment, personal importance or usefulness. Martin (2008) found that self-efficacy and valuing were among the strongest adaptive predictors of engagement among young music and sport performers. In singing, then, expectancy and value are tied closely to the student's vocal self-concept described above.

Control-value theory of achievement emotions

Pekrun (2006) proposed that achievement emotions such as enjoyment, pride, anxiety, shame and boredom arise from two kinds of appraisal: perceived control over an activity and its outcomes, and the subjective value of that activity. High control combined with high value produces enjoyment and pride; low control combined with high value produces anxiety and, after failure, shame. The theory is useful for vocal music because it links the belief systems of section 3.2 to the emotional states of section 2.3. A student who cares about singing well but feels she cannot control her voice is, in Pekrun's terms, a likely candidate for anxiety. The same student, given manageable tasks and a sense of progress, may come to enjoy rehearsals.

Engagement as the outcome

Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) defined engagement as behavioural, emotional and cognitive involvement in learning, and Reeve and Tseng (2011) added a fourth, agentic dimension: students' constructive contributions to the flow of instruction, such as asking questions or suggesting ideas. Skinner, Furrer, Marchand and Kindermann (2008) showed that engagement and disaffection are linked to students' motivational experiences and to teacher support. Agentic engagement deserves attention in vocal music, where students who propose a song, ask to try a solo line or suggest an interpretation are changing the classroom itself. Whether that dimension appears in teacher-led Chinese classrooms is an open question, and it is one reason the context needs its own discussion.

The Chinese Senior High School Context

Curriculum aims and examination pressure

The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2020) curriculum standard for senior high school music organises the subject into modules, singing among them, and frames its goals in terms of core competencies such as aesthetic perception, artistic expression and cultural understanding. On paper, the standard asks for exactly the kind of expressive, student-centred singing that self-determination theory would endorse. In practice, music competes with subjects that count toward the national university entrance examination. Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) described how exam-oriented schooling in China narrows classroom activity toward tested content and places heavy pressure on high school students. Xie and Leung (2011) found that Chinese students' motivation to study music was shaped by its perceived usefulness, and in senior high school usefulness is measured largely by the examination. When a Grade 12 timetable quietly replaces a music lesson with mathematics revision, students learn something about the value of singing that no curriculum document can undo.

Resources and regional inequality

Sun and Leung (2014) surveyed rural primary schools in Northeastern China and found wide gaps in teacher qualification, facilities and the regularity of music lessons. Although their study concerned primary schools, it points to a structural pattern likely to persist into senior high school in less developed regions. In a model of singing motivation, school resources do more than enable activities. They act as signals of value, telling students whether the institution regards their singing as worth a practice room, an accompanist or a place in the school concert.

Teacher-led classrooms and relational autonomy

Watkins and Biggs (1996) challenged the stereotype of the "Chinese learner" as a passive rote memoriser, showing that repetition and teacher direction in Chinese classrooms often coexist with deep understanding. This warning applies to music too. A rehearsal in which the teacher selects repertoire and models every phrase is not necessarily controlling in the self-determination sense. Iyengar and Lepper (1999) found that Asian American children were often more motivated when trusted others, such as their mothers, made choices for them than when they chose themselves, whereas Anglo American children responded best to personal choice. Bao and Lam (2008) reported a related pattern among Chinese children: choices made by people with whom they felt close could be as motivating as their own choices, though autonomy still mattered when relatedness was weak.

Chirkov, Ryan, Kim and Kaplan (2003) argued that autonomy, understood as acting with personal endorsement, should be distinguished from independence and individualism, and their cross-cultural data suggested that internalised motivation was associated with well-being across cultures. Taken together, these studies suggest that autonomy support in a Chinese vocal classroom may look different from Western models. It may lie less in letting students choose every song and more in helping them understand and endorse why a song matters, within a warm relationship with the teacher. This reading also helps explain why a strong teacher-student bond may be the precondition for any form of choice to work.

Collective singing and face

Choral singing has a long history in Chinese schools, and much of the vocal curriculum is delivered in unison or part-singing. Collective singing can protect anxious students, since a weak voice is hidden in the group. The same setting also raises the stakes of individual exposure, because being singled out to sing alone in front of classmates risks a loss of face. These two sides of the choir, shelter and stage, give the Chinese vocal classroom a particular emotional texture that a model of motivation needs to capture.

The Proposed Model and Propositions

Overview

The model, which we call the Voice-as-Self model, links four groups of constructs in a sequence. Environmental inputs (teacher need support and school signals of value) shape students' appraisals of control and value, centred on vocal self-concept and singing self-efficacy. These appraisals generate achievement emotions, which in turn influence the quality of motivation, and the quality of motivation drives four dimensions of engagement. Two contextual conditions, examination pressure and the quality of the teacher-student relationship, are expected to moderate key links. A feedback path runs from engagement back to self-concept, because students who sing more gain the mastery experiences that Bandura (1997) identified as the strongest source of efficacy, and because Reeve and Lee (2014) showed that engagement produces later gains in motivation.

The model departs from general music motivation models in two ways. Emotions are placed between appraisals and motivation, rather than treated as by-products, which follows Pekrun (2006) and reflects the bodily, audible nature of vocal anxiety. Vocal self-concept is separated from general musical self-efficacy, which follows the evidence of Demorest et al. (2017) and Abril (2007) that beliefs about the voice can determine participation in their own right.

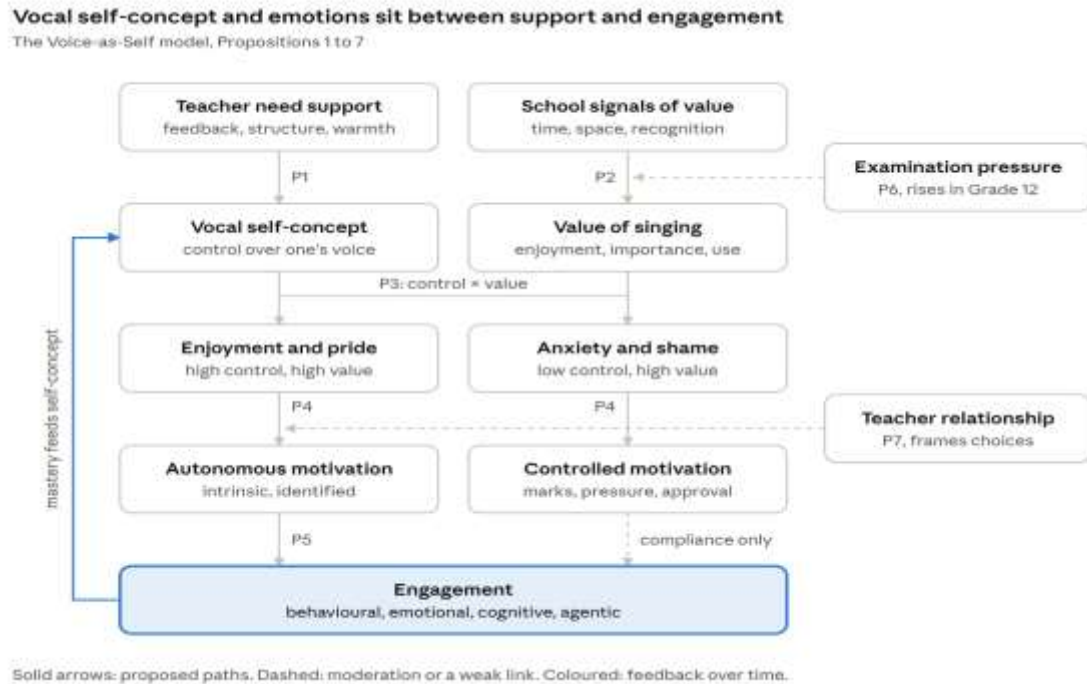


Figure 1. The Voice-as-Self model of motivation and engagement in vocal music

Figure 1 reads from top to bottom: classroom and school inputs shape appraisals, appraisals produce emotions, emotions colour the quality of motivation, and motivation drives engagement, which in turn feeds back into vocal self-concept.

Propositions

Proposition 1. Teacher need support in the vocal classroom (structured, achievable tasks; specific and encouraging feedback; a warm relationship; and explanations of why a song or exercise matters) is positively related to students' vocal self-concept and singing self-efficacy. The mechanism is the accumulation of small mastery experiences, which Zelenak (2015) found to be the leading source of efficacy among secondary music students.

Proposition 2. School signals of value (protected timetable time, usable rehearsal spaces, accompaniment and public recognition of student singing) are positively related to the value students attach to singing. Following Xie and Leung (2011), we expect perceived usefulness and institutional status to weigh heavily in this value judgement for Chinese senior high students.

Proposition 3. Perceived control and value jointly predict achievement emotions in singing. Students with high vocal self-concept and high value will report more enjoyment and pride; students with low vocal self-concept and high value will report the most anxiety and shame (Pekrun, 2006). Students with low value will report boredom, whatever their self-concept.

Proposition 4. Positive emotions in singing are associated with more autonomous motivation, whereas anxiety and shame are associated with controlled motivation or amotivation. Emotions partly mediate the relationship between appraisals (Propositions 1 to 3) and the quality of motivation.

Proposition 5. Autonomous motivation predicts all four dimensions of engagement (behavioural, emotional, cognitive and agentic). Controlled motivation predicts behavioural compliance, such as attendance and singing when required, but shows weak or no relationships with emotional, cognitive and agentic engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Proposition 6. Examination pressure moderates the model. As pressure rises, especially in Grade 12, the link between school signals and the value of singing weakens, and controlled reasons for participation (marks, avoiding teacher disapproval) become more common (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011).

Proposition 7. The quality of the teacher-student relationship moderates the effect of teacher-directed choices. Where relatedness is strong, repertoire and tasks chosen by the teacher support autonomous motivation about as well as student choice; where relatedness is weak, teacher-directed choices are experienced as controlling (Bao & Lam, 2008; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999).

Taken together, the propositions describe two possible spirals. In the first, encouragement and small successes build vocal confidence, confidence turns rehearsal into enjoyment, and enjoyment brings the student back to sing more. In the second, a cracked note in front of classmates confirms a fragile self-concept, anxiety tightens the voice, and the student learns to sing as quietly as the teacher will allow.

Implications

For research design and measurement

Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003) showed that when predictors and outcomes are measured with the same self-report instrument at the same time, shared method variance can inflate or distort the relationships observed. Much survey research on music motivation is exposed to this risk, and studies built on newly written items, tested only in a single sample, add a further risk that scales do not measure what their labels promise. Testing the present model well therefore calls for several safeguards. Established instruments should be adapted where they exist, with forward and back-translation and cognitive interviews, and new vocal-specific scales (for vocal self-concept and singing anxiety) should be validated in an independent sample before use. Engagement should be measured by more than student report, for example by teacher ratings, structured rehearsal observation or recordings of how often and how fully students sing. Emotions are best captured close to the moment, through brief ratings after a rehearsal or before and after an individual singing assessment.

The propositions are also temporal. They describe spirals that build over weeks and months, which a single cross-sectional survey cannot show. A design with three waves across a school year, ideally including the transition into Grade 12, would allow the reciprocal paths between engagement and self-concept to be tested and would show whether examination pressure changes the model over time. Because students sit within classes and schools, multilevel models are needed to separate classroom climate from individual

appraisals. Qualitative interviews with students who have stopped singing, in the tradition of Abril (2007), would add the personal stories that explain why certain paths are strong or weak.

For classroom practice

The model points to practices that a vocal music teacher can adopt without extra resources. Singing tasks can be graded so that students move from full-class unison to sections, small groups and, only when they are ready, solo lines, which offers the mastery experiences that build vocal self-concept while keeping the shelter of the group. Feedback can address the task rather than the voice ("the vowel on this note is closing" in place of "your voice is flat"), which keeps errors separate from identity. Brief breathing and warm-up routines can lower the physical signs of anxiety that students otherwise read as proof of incapacity.

In line with Proposition 7, teachers in Chinese classrooms need not abandon teacher-chosen repertoire to support autonomy. They can explain why a song was chosen, connect it to students' lives or regional traditions, and offer bounded choices, such as which of two songs to prepare or which verse a group will lead. Schools, for their part, can send signals of value at little cost, by keeping music lessons on the Grade 12 timetable, naming student singers at assemblies and giving every class a chance to perform. Each of these acts tells a hesitant singer that her voice belongs in the school.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that singing is a distinct motivational domain, because the voice is felt as part of the self, every attempt is public and anxiety acts directly on the sound. Drawing on self-determination theory, self-efficacy and expectancy-value theory, and the control-value theory of achievement emotions, it proposed the Voice-as-Self model for Chinese senior high school vocal music and derived seven testable propositions. The model places vocal self-concept and performance emotions at its centre and treats examination pressure and the teacher-student relationship as conditions that shape how environmental support becomes motivation and engagement.

The model has limits. It is built from studies conducted mostly outside mainland China and outside the vocal classroom, and several of its links, particularly the moderating role of relatedness on teacher choice, have not yet been tested with adolescent singers. It also leaves out factors that may matter, such as family attitudes to music and the role of popular music and media in students' vocal identities. Its value lies in giving empirical researchers a clear and falsifiable set of expectations. If it is right, the most important moment in a vocal lesson may be the few seconds after a student's voice breaks on a high note, when the teacher's response decides which spiral begins.

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