

*Singing
histories*

Teachers' notes

Folk song in schools

The gathering of many voices

Children love to sing – but what should they sing? These booklets – and the songs in them – introduce children to the diverse heritage of the country in which they live.

How does this help teachers?

Singing has been shown to have a positive influence in schools. The Sing Up programme indicates a national appreciation of its educational value.

Listening skills are enhanced and children of all abilities can succeed in a shared activity. It has been shown that short spells of differing activity in the classroom can increase subsequent concentration. Singing is ideal for this as it is immediately available. Children 'own' the songs they sing, stimulating further interest and research.

The topic web provides an imaginative focus for cross-curricular links, such as geographical locations, historical events, social perceptions, the interplay of vocabulary and the mathematics of tune.

Adding folk song to the musical mix children encounter every day broadens their musical appreciation and widens their perspective of the world.

What resources do we need?

Very few! We are surrounded by all kinds of music we can sing along to already. All that is required is the ability to listen, ten minutes a day to practise and the nerve to sing as confidently in the classroom as we might in the shower – or on a night out...

Where do these songs come from?

Some of the folk songs in this series are very old, sung from generation to generation without being written down. They were remembered because they had a good tune and because the words meant something to the people who sang them. Some songs told the story of how people lived and worked. Often songs began with an actual event, a great battle, a local quarrel or a notable occasion like the opening of a railway. When many people could not read, they were a way of passing on news, or good advice.

Then as now, when life was hard, people wanted excitement. Ballads of murder and fantasy spread. They had heroes and villains. Singers added fresh thrills to their performance, or altered words which might offend the local lords. Gradually songs changed as new twists were added. The story might change, but the song went on.

Every song was new once. Someone might tell a balladeer their life story, or a good joke, or a tale of lost love to make into a song. Maybe someone was whistling or humming a tune while they worked. Someone, somewhere, first put the words and tune together. Over and over again they would try to think of better words and maybe change the tune so that it sounded right to them.

Then, when they were happy with their song, they sang it to someone else. If the other person liked it, he or she tried to remember it too. So, from person to person and town to town, the song was passed on. If it was well liked, it might be carried all over the country by people moving around for work. Someone, somewhere, might try to write it down so that more people could sing it.

Practically every culture in the world celebrates its past in song, and these songs have their place in the patchwork of which our modern country is made. They are interesting to research, but it is important to remember that passing on the sheer joy of singing is sufficient in itself. These songs have been chosen so that new generations can sing enthusiastically and with pleasure.

Singing the songs

All of these songs can be sung on their own without accompaniment. Instruments and harmonies can easily be added to them. However, there is something very moving about a song sung simply.

You may find that the notes on the stave work very well for the chorus or first verse, but that you have to shorten or lengthen one or two for later verses to make the words fit. Every good folk singer does this, for it is the words which are important. The most important thing is to keep the story flowing naturally.

To help you hear the tunes if you don't read music or have access to the Sibelius database, most budget MIDI studio programs now have a Score window with Playback. It might look daunting, but if you can use a spreadsheet or Word you'll soon pick it up. You can write the score in and listen to it. If you find that the notes are too high or too low for you to sing, look for Transpose in the Help window. Usually you can illuminate the score and move it up or down until it suits your voice. Don't worry about all the b and # marks which will appear at this stage – the tune will play perfectly. Once you have the tune in your head, a pitch pipe, harmonica or recorder might help just to confirm the starting note when you begin to sing it out.

Learning a song by heart can be a great help. It's not essential, but it encourages better involvement with the listener and stronger singing. Children seem to find this less daunting than adults often think they will – after all, these folk songs have survived by being memorable.

Folk harmonies are usually made up on the spot by singers who try them out gently against the melody. This is well worth trying if the singer has pitched the song out of your range! Here it is important that the harmony singer listens carefully and does not dominate the song. Children can be encouraged to try this, once they have the tune fixed. The challenge is for them to sing their harmony again...

Where to find out more

In print

The English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) publish collections of folk song and have a database of authenticated lyrics. You can access folk music at the British Library's sound archive: www.bl.uk/sounds.

County reference libraries may have texts and associated recordings.

Increasingly, small lyric websites like Digital Tradition are flourishing – these are as reliable a source as the compiler. Often verses have been added or altered... just as they always have been. Otherwise, in a search engine, type in a few words of a song you've heard and you can usually find a version with notes (both musical and historical).

Recordings

Folk is usually tucked away with Country in major music shops. Finding recordings by unaccompanied or local singers can be difficult. Veteran CDs issue field recordings of older singers. If you join the EFDSS you can access their extensive collection This includes many of the professional revival singers who took folk song forward to suit modern tastes – which may be more suitable as an introduction for younger children. Or search 'Traditional English Song' and go from there...

Live music

To find your nearest folk venues – and to reveal useful local links – search (*your chosen town*) *Folk Club*. Many feature guests from all over the country and hold regular singers' nights where new singers are welcomed. We all remember singing our first song in public!

And you

People sing for many reasons – to make themselves feel better, to make a joyful noise, to pass on their experiences to other people or just to have a good time. The best songs are stories too – they pass on the singer's heritage and tradition to all who listen and all who sing along. We hope that these booklets will help you to do this too.

Folk song in the primary curriculum

Children love to sing – but how can we justify spending valuable educational time on folk song? We need to show that using folk song as a resource meets the requirements of an 'interlocking, well-planned, vibrant' curriculum.

Why folk song?

Folk song is particularly well-placed to deliver a range of learning objectives. Culturally it provides a strong basis for historical, geographical and moral comparison. It 'deepens and widens children's understanding' of the country in which they live. It provides a sense of 'identity, diversity and belonging'. Parents recognise the need for schools to have 'flexibility to make the curriculum relevant to their children'. What could be more relevant than a song about their home town, a local event or an industry... or even a story with parallels today?

The topic web – an introduction

Current thinking leans towards an imaginative, multi-discipline approach. One way of encouraging thorough coverage and resourcing is to begin with a topic web. Links from the six areas of learning identified in the Rose report arise naturally, and the cross-curricular connections are easily visible. On the sample web overleaf each strand leads to a potential lesson or area of study. One advantage of the topic web is in ensuring that over time children do study a range of options rather than pursuing a single strand to the exclusion of others.

Recording & assessment

Parents expect it, let alone Inspectors! We need to show that adopting a cross-curricular approach generates genuine progress across the areas of learning. Coverage of the topic web, differentiated by specific objectives or by outcome, helps to demonstrate this. However, as all teachers recognise, many of the benefits of the arts are not quantifiable: how can you assess how joyfully a child is singing?

Folk song and the Rose report

The Rose report recommends that 'schools should capitalise on the powerful contribution of the performing arts'. It recognises that learning skills which become 'automatic' gives children confidence: they will expect to succeed.

Children should be taught about 'right and wrong, fairness and unfairness, justice and injustice – to understand the way in which laws are made and society governed'. Traditional songs such as 'The False Knight On The Road', 'Long Lankin' or 'Marrowbones' have offered moral guidance over the centuries: 'story forms' which increase the 'ability to infer and predict'.

'When cultural traditions and the feelings of others are never experienced, there is less understanding of how people feel'. 'Elements of belief, sources, ways of life, forms of expressing meaning, identity, diversity, meaning, purpose of truth and values & commitments' are well explored in folk song. Primary children can easily follow a storyline like 'The Dark-Eyed Sailor', with its emotional twists and turns.

Folk song offers ample opportunity for the development of ICT skills. Research has never been easier than on the Internet, and children can quickly begin to compare alternative versions of songs and to check sources. This fits well with the 'love of learning for its own sake'.

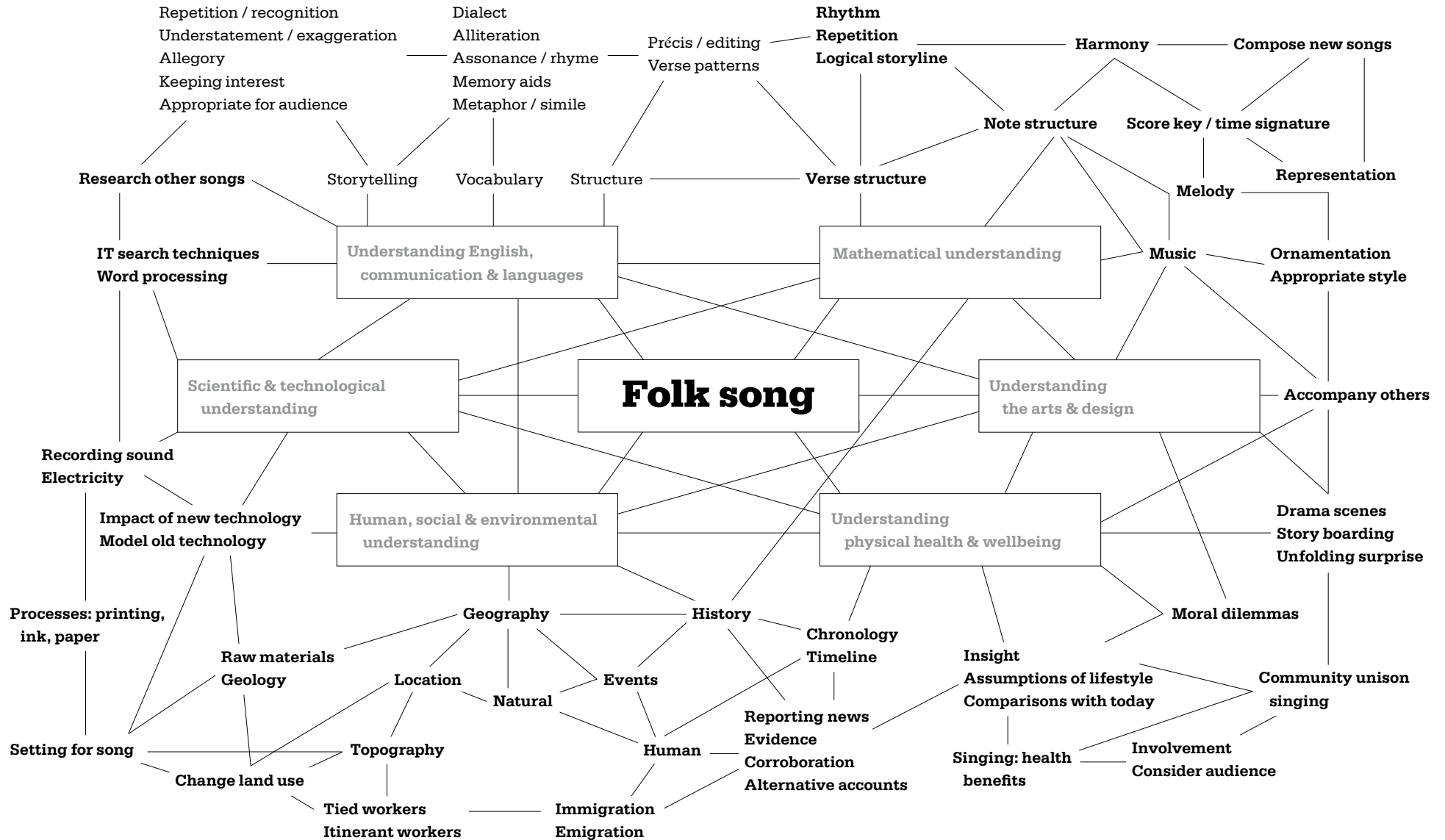
Programmes of learning

Annex B recognises that breadth and cross-curricular studies enhance children's knowledge and develop their emerging skills. Using folk song imaginatively helps us to teach to these recommendations enjoyably.

Helpful references

Summary & Recommendations: Paras 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31
Recommendations 5 & 9
From the report: Paras 1.16, 19 / 2.19, 22, 34, 35, 37, 40, 41 / 3.5, 6, 9, 12, 19, 29, 44, 51, 60, 62, 66, 67 / 4.48, 49 / 5.1, 7 / 6.1 / 7.3, 4, 7, 10

Folk song: a cross-curricular web



Summary for teachers

Children love to sing – but what should they sing? The songs in this booklet introduce children to the diverse heritage of the country in which they live.

How does this help teachers?

- Singing has a positive influence on schools – the Sing Up programme indicates a national appreciation
- Listening skills are enhanced, and children of all abilities can succeed in a shared activity
- Short spells of differing activity in the classroom can increase subsequent concentration
- Children 'own' songs they sing. Inquiry is stimulated. Singing is immediately available
- Folk song broadens children's musical appreciation and widens their perspective of the world
- Topic webs have a focus for cross-curricular links: geographical locations, historical events, social perceptions, the interplay of vocabulary and the mathematics of tune

Where do these songs come from?

- Songs were remembered because they had a good tune and because the words meant something to the people who sang them
- Many passed from generation to generation without being written down
- Every song was new once
- Someone, somewhere, first put the words and tune together
- From person to person and town to town, the song was passed on
- If it was well liked, it might be carried all over the country by troubadours or workers
- When many people could not read, songs were a way of passing on news or good advice
- People wanted excitement too – ballads of murder and fantasy / heroes and villains
- Singers added fresh thrills or altered words which might offend local lords
- The story might change, but the song went on

Singing the songs

- All of these songs can be sung on their own without accompaniment
- The notes on the stave work very well for the chorus or first verse – you may have to shorten or lengthen notes for later verses to make the words fit
- The most important thing is to keep the story flowing naturally
- Once you have the tune in your head, a pitch pipe, harmonica or recorder might help to confirm the starting note when you begin to sing it out
- Learning a song by heart is not essential but it encourages better involvement with the listener and stronger singing
- Children seem to find this less daunting than adults often think they will – after all, these folk songs have survived by being memorable

What resources do we need?

- Very few! We are surrounded by all kinds of music we can sing along to already
- Practically every culture in the world celebrates in song – it's so direct
- All we need are the ability to listen, ten minutes a day to practise and the nerve to sing as confidently in the classroom as we might in the shower – or on a night out...

These notes have been compiled by Bob Kenward whose experience includes 15 years working in primary education. He has a particular interest in making folk songs accessible to all.

You can find out more about Bob at <http://www.tonbridgefolkclub.org/bobkenward>



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