

## **Improvised Song in Schools: Breaking Away from the Perception of Traditional Song as Infanile by Introducing a Traditional Adult Practice**

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Within the repertoire of songs coming from the oral tradition of Catalonia there is an interesting corpus of melodies that have been used—and continue to be used—for the improvisation of verses. As is well known, this type of oral communication is not exclusive to Catalonia but forms part of a broad tradition deeply rooted in Mediterranean culture (Scarnecchia 1998) and in the Ibero-American world (Trapero, Santana, et al. 2000). And it is also allied to the



Map of *Països Catalans* Marc Belzunces / Albert Casals

rap music that originated in the United States that has had such enormous commercial success (Munar 2005).

In the Catalan-speaking regions, *Països Catalans*, Juame Ayats lists up to nineteen genres or classifications of “songs with lyrics that are improvised over a sole melodic formula” (2007:114-18). Most of them originate in Catalonia. In contrast to this variety, the presence of this type of singing is extremely limited within the current repertoire of traditional songs, and in the school orbit it is practically non-existent. In this article we describe a pilot project that has introduced improvised song<sup>1</sup> in five Catalan schools. The goal of this presentation is not to present a comprehensive picture of the educational project but rather to provide elements for analysis and reflection. Specifically, we focus on the implications of the educational utilization of improvised song with regard to certain deeply-rooted ideas about its use in schools.

### Concepts of Traditional Song in Schools

In previous research—during the 2003-04 course—we analyzed the concepts and traditional genres associated with the construct *traditional song* in the context of primary schools in Catalonia. And we related it to educational policies of an identity-making nature (Casals 2004). On the one hand, we examined the song repertoires proposed by the six main publishing houses that print music books for primary education and, on the other hand, we analyzed the repertoire used in 21 schools. One of the most notable aspects of this research was the discovery of the existence of a process of infantilization that affected the traditional part of the song repertoire present in primary schools. Infantilization may be described here as a process where traditional Catalan songs have become a basic and essential part of primary schooling, but one that has also entailed a loss of presence and meaning in higher courses in favor of other types of songs—traditional songs from around the world, adaptations of classical authors, African diaspora spirituals, and so forth.

According to Casals, this situation may be explained in terms of at least three factors (2004:59-60):

- “The processes of manipulation and reinvention—by folklorists, teachers, and pedagogues—of the meaning and functionality of traditional songs when passing from oral expression to a written version.” Moreover, this phenomenon is accentuated when introducing them into the school curriculum. The causes of these modifications lie in the desire to adapt these songs, in keeping with the notion of “folkloristic products” (Martí 2002:121), to the hegemonic values valid during different sociocultural and educational phases in the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, we refer to the traditional genre in which verses are improvised extemporaneously over a pre-set melody with the term normally used in the traditional context: *improvised song*.

- “The aspiration of anti-Francoist Catalanism—from the 1960s—to introduce traditional Catalan songs into schools as an expression of the mother tongue and as the first musical language to work with.” This aspiration has largely met with success, but because of its serious, symbolic nature other types of traditional song that are more festive and suitable for young people and adults—incorporating humor, denunciation, dramatic narrative, eroticism, and so on—have been neglected. This circumstance has led to the erroneous equation *traditional music* → *simple music* → *music for infants* that often results when the traditional repertoire is being used as a basic introduction to music (Costa 1997).
- “The fact that teaching in schools in Catalonia adopted choral singing as the model of correct singing when choirs and choral societies were already an asset that served to defend an individual tradition.” The choral model was very much conditioned by the aesthetics of European choral music and by a communicative framework that very often entailed a reduction in the large number of verses in narrative songs, thus losing the thread of the story and the original meaning. The world of choral music was an important reference point for a large number of music teachers in Catalan schools during the sixties, seventies, and eighties. It meant introducing melodies and lyrics that were often taken totally out of context and formulated using an academic approach to oral expression. The lack of contextual references is also linked to the sociocultural changes that have alienated part of the repertoire from the meaningful environment of today’s students. The songs about work or trades, with outmoded vocabulary and actions, are a clear example of this phenomenon.

This last aspect is one of the reasons for the lack of functionality of traditional songs in schools (Pujol 2007:110-12). With the songs having lost their original function, the schools search for meaning by treating them as tools for didactic work—mainly but not exclusively music-based—or as play resources linked to festivals and other identifying activities, taking for granted their identity-making symbolism (Casals 2006).

Seen in this perspective, the infantilization of traditional songs should not be considered a deformation or a problem but rather a reinvention: a new conception that this repertoire has resorted to in order to be relevant and find a place among the growing “competition” represented by the diverse globalized world, in schooling in general and school singing in particular. In other words, traditional Catalan song has managed to gain—through the introduction in Catalonia of approaches such as the Kodaly method and identification with the concept of the mother tongue—a very notable presence during early childhood and especially with regard to the learning of the basics of language and music. The positive result is that, thanks to this new functionality, this type of song continues to be sung.

Alongside this infantilization, traditional song is conceptualized in the educational context in conjunction with other ideas that do not adjust to its historical and social reality. Very broadly speaking, we can mention two aspects: the separation of the languages and the association of traditional with old. The academic world is organized on the basis of the compartmentalization of knowledge. Consequently, the specific studies on songs carried out by scholars from different fields have separated out the different languages that make up a song

(Laborde 1996). The existence of two types of writing—music notation and letters, as if this form of expression had a dual nature—has reinforced this idea of duality in a Spanish educational system where oral expression has been neglected (Garzía 2007:69). On the other hand, in their oral origins traditional songs were not divided into musical, verbal, and corporal expression, but rather, as explained by ethno poetic theories (Oriol 2002), they were experienced as a comprehensive social and communicative activity that could not be understood by merely summing together the different forms of expression. Moreover, singers of traditional music affirm that what they do is really only a way of speaking. In this sense, and without wishing to go deeper into the matter at this point, it may be well worth taking into account the studies that claim that the differentiation between singing and talking is cultural and not natural (Mang 2006), and also the examples of cultures where the differentiation between different types of vocal expression is not based on separate notions of language and music (Ayats 1996).

As affirmed by Ruth Finnegan (2003:84), the word *tradition* or *traditional* has deeply ingrained social connotations, in particular as regards the association with old products. From this standpoint, it is understood that the use of traditional song in Catalan schools often has more to do with museological concepts—heritage conservation—and “folklorization processes” (Martí 2002:121) than pedagogical concepts.

Lastly, the analysis of traditional song in schools—as a habitual repertoire when learning to sing—cannot ignore more general considerations reported by various authors on the decline of singing and pupils’ lack of motivation to sing in schools. In this respect, Aintzane Camara (2004:1) and Maria Antònia Pujol (2007:111) agree that people sing less and less in Spanish society. Faced by this situation, many people are calling for schools to take responsibility for an activity that is closely linked to the work of historical-cultural transmission; like so many other tasks, this responsibility is now being delegated to schools and the media instead of the family (Garzía 2007:69). However, the fact is that singing decreases in schools over the course of primary education, and from starting as an attractive and enjoyable resource it degenerates into a rather dull activity (Camara 2004).



*Corrandistes* singing after a special lunch. Photo by Oriol Clavera.

### The Tradition of the Improvised Songs in Catalan Language

The *Gloses* in Majorca and in Minorca (Balearic Islands), the *Cant d’estil* in País Valencià, and the *Jotes* and *Corrandes* in Catalonia are some of best-known types of improvised song in the Catalan language. As Ayats (2007:64) says, all this diversity of traditional forms of expression has to be put in the context of festivals and other collective celebrations important to a community.

And they have a common base that is always “a melody that the soloist repeats with newly invented lyrics.” Regarding the members of the community in attendance, “sometimes the people listening participate, by singing the repetition of one or two of the soloist’s verses . . . or even a set refrain that at times may also be only instrumental.” The responses—singing the refrain or chorus, laughing, or applauding—reflect the degree of acceptance and legitimacy conferred on the event by the community.

On a functional level, the gatherings around improvised songs have traditionally served to develop and express a socially shared point of view using satire and humor and also as a formula for explaining collective and personal problems. In this setting, the singers—people with excellent memories and numerous creative and communicative strategies<sup>2</sup>—tend to have a certain charisma and are held in high respect by the



Carles Belda, a leading singer from the new generation of *corrandistes*. Photo by Sergi Palau.



Lo Teixidó, one of the last traditional singers of *Jotes de l'Ebre*. Photo by Sergi Palau.

community. The conclusion to be drawn from these elucidations is that it does not make much sense to develop theories strictly limited to the subject of discussion—improvised song. Instead, it becomes essential to analyze and explain this phenomenon using a more global communicative approach, as propounded by the approach known as Ethnopoetics.

Around Catalonia the revival of

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<sup>2</sup> One of the more notable examples of these strategies is that of delaying the introduction of the main idea until the last verse despite the fact that it is the first aspect to be worked on.

improvised song by a younger generation of singers has occurred without direct inheritance from the older singers who preceded them and among whom few are still active. The new generation of singers is much better educated—many have university degrees—and very few of them experienced the phenomenon in a family or rural setting.

Instead, they seem to have become interested later in their youth. Thus, although they respect the basic parameters that determine the techniques involved in improvised song, new forms of interpretation have developed, new spaces and functions have been created, and performance is no longer an activity associated with the rural ambit. It is not a revival movement looking back at the past but rather a modern activity, although restricted to very small sectors of society.



Anyone can become the soloist. Photo by Sergi Palau.



A *corrandidista* singing *Cançó de pandero*. Video by Albert Casals.  
[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/casals#myGallery-picture\(6\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/casals#myGallery-picture(6))

Among the characteristics incorporated in recent years, the participative element stands out, in which the public and the performers merge into a single body: everyone sings the refrain, but, in addition, anyone can become the soloist. Moving away from the old spectacle of one or a few recognized singers who captivated their audience, the new dynamics permit audience participation led by more or less anonymous singers.

Another element that differentiates Catalan singers from those in other regions and communities—a good example are the *bertsolaris* in the Basque Country—is that in Catalonia the *corrandidistes*<sup>3</sup> follow the custom of singing with an instrumental accompaniment: accordion, guitar, tambourine, and many others.

Finally, the most popular types of improvised songs in Catalonia at this point in time should be specified: the *corrandes*, the *garrotin*, the *nyacres*, the *jotes*, and the *cançons*

<sup>3</sup> In Catalonia, the term *corrandidista* is often used in a general sense to refer to anyone who sings improvised verses even if they are not strictly speaking *corrandes*. This is the meaning we use here and elsewhere in this article.

*de pandero*.<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that the majority of these genres have an associated dance reinforcing the festive atmosphere at the origin of these melodies.

### Improvised Song in Primary Schools

Although in Catalonia improvised song cannot claim the same importance or prestige as that enjoyed by the *bertsos* in the Basque Country, the conclusion that Joxerra Garzia comes to may also be considered valid for the Catalan-speaking regions (2007:74):

In the Basque Country we have and enjoy a highly prestigious form of oral expression that transmits both emotion and tradition effectively and economically. As we have discussed, the capacity to communicate, especially orally, is vital in contemporary society. Thus it seems important to emphasize that Basque improvised verse has proven to be a highly effective tool for achieving just this goal, a tool from which our modern “information society,” in my opinion, could learn quite a bit.

All things considered, the different nature of the *corrandes* as compared with the *bertsos* did imply planning out different strategies for their application and use in schools. Aspects such as group participation in the refrains, the breakdown of the audience-performer dichotomy where all the listeners have the chance to be the soloist, or the possibility of instrumental accompaniments are examples of elements that had to



The arrangement of the participants in a circle encourages communication and participation as soloists. Photo by Col·legi Mare de Deú del Roser (St. Vicenç de Castellet).

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed information on each of these genres, see Ayats 2007.

be given consideration during the process of adapting the *corrantes* to the school environment.

### *Objectives*

Leaving aside its enormous educational potential—which Garzía (2007:75-76) details at the level of content—this repertoire was used in an exploratory project that contributed solutions to the problem of offering an alternative in schools to the idea of traditional songs being infantile. The project was implemented during the 2006-07 and 2007-08 courses with the goal of developing a cross-disciplinary teaching proposal—music, language, and social interaction—based on improvised songs. This proposal was applied in several primary schools with the aim of evaluating the results in relation to various problematic initial aspects—structure, didactics, and musical didactics—some of which have been explained in the first section of this article.

Specifically, the proposed aims were as follows:

- Investigate the pedagogical possibilities and implications of the introduction of improvised song in Catalan primary school education.
- Design and test out a cross-disciplinary didactic proposal based on improvised song, which makes it possible to generate social and school spaces where singing and dialogue have a meaning based on their functionality.
- Analyze the results of the project in the context of general educational problems and the problems specific to traditional song in schools.

Lastly, to finish defining the project, it must be pointed out that improvised song—although it has experienced a slight revival socially—was an unprecedented activity in the school curriculum in Catalonia.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is important to stress that it was also introduced as part of the renewal of the primary school curriculum in general and the music education syllabus in particular (Malagarriga, Valls, et al. 2008:9):

Music must also be understood, experienced, and assimilated in relation to other areas of knowledge, to other fields of experience or contexts beyond the music class, and it must share with them just as much the cultural aspects as the didactic and pedagogical ones. The education system is extremely compartmentalized and, especially in primary schooling, the fact that the responsibility for music education is assigned to a specialized teacher does not favor the probability of linking it to the development of the whole set of basic skills. The focus of the new curriculum requires . . . a decided spirit of cooperation among all the teachers in a team, in such a way that each of them contributes what he or she is most expert in, but without losing sight of the fact that education should consider the child as a whole.

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<sup>5</sup> The only references to primary education we have found are a few isolated experiences, almost always individual initiatives by *corrantistes* who work as music teachers. All in all, in no case was there a clearly prepared, ongoing project.

*Project Development*

The project was developed in two phases. In the first—during the 2006-07 course—a pilot scheme was implemented in a school center, using “collaborative research” (Lieberman 1986; Lowe 2001). This action-research methodology was chosen for its suitability to a pilot project involving the university and the schools, for its past record in the interdisciplinary field, and as a source of joint work between specialized and non-specialized teachers (Casals, Vilar, et al. 2008). In the first phase, a researcher, a music teacher, and a non-specialized teacher worked together to apply a cross-disciplinary didactic proposal for three months in a class group of ten- to eleven-year-olds. During fifteen sessions the children were immersed in the art of improvised verse through singing, working on specific aspects—musical, linguistic, corporal, and social—but always interrelated within the global context of the activity required by this repertoire.

In the second phase, during the 2007-08 course, the didactic proposal was introduced in four more schools by a teaching group set up for this purpose. This group, made up of music teachers and language teachers and coordinated by a researcher, contrasted the findings obtained during the preceding course with their own findings, on the basis of the varying age groups, social context, and mother tongues of the pupils. Bearing in mind the goal of this article, the project design and the findings presented below (Table 1) are restricted to the age factor.

**Table 1: Project data**

<b>Table 1: Project data</b>		
▪ Length of project:	<i>November 2006—July 2008</i>	
▪ Primary schools:	<i>5</i>	
▪ Researchers:	<i>3</i>	
▪ Teachers:	<i>14</i>	
▪ Students:	<i>208</i>	
<b>Distribution of pupils by age groups</b>		
<i>Level</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>Number of pupils</i>
8-9 year-olds	1	27
9-10 year-olds	3	78
10-11 year-olds	3	52
11-12 year-olds	2	26
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>9</i></b>	<b><i>183</i></b>

During the two phases of the project, it was decided to work on two genres, the *garrotins* and the *nyacres*. One of the main reasons was that these are two of the melodies most frequently used in the circles of young improvisers in Catalonia. Another reason was that they were considered the most suitable for an initial presentation at primary school level (see Table 2).

Table 2: Criteria and elements used to select the melodies		
Characteristics of the selected melodies		Pedagogic Criteria
<i>Garrotins</i>	<i>Nyacres</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Structure: verse + participatory refrain.</li> <li>▪ Less rigid heptasyllabic meter compared to other melodies.</li> <li>▪ More rhythmic melody, a feature that makes it more attractive to pupils.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Structure: verse + participatory refrain.</li> <li>▪ Structured verses organized in quatrains, but with the repetition of the third line by the audience.</li> <li>▪ Simple melody on a melodico-rhythmic level but with refrain that encourages multi-part singing in parallel.</li> </ul>	<i>Bring about collective participation.</i>
		<i>Flexibility of rhythm to make the adaptation of the lyrics easier.</i>
		<i>Little musical difficulty but with melodico-rhythmic and multi-part appeal.</i>

### Findings

We interpreted the general findings as very satisfactory. With regard to the aspect dealt with in this article, the following points are of particular interest:

- The best quantitative results—the greatest number of improvisers capable of performing in public—and qualitative findings—the most correct use of language as regards structure, rhyming, richness of vocabulary; rhythmic adaptation of the melody; melodic precision; and communicative capacity—were observed in three groups of ten- to eleven-year-olds:
  - All the children in these groups were capable of singing *corrandes* as soloists, although sometimes with previously prepared and memorized lyrics.
  - In two of the three groups of ten- to eleven-year-olds, there was spontaneous improvised participation by 70% of the pupils in the final special session open to



Children improvising verses in a special school event. Video by Albert Casals.

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Pupils improvising *corrandes* in a final special session. Photo by CEIP Dr. Ferrer (Artés).

the rest of the groups and teachers in the school.

- In all three groups under study, several *corrandistes* emerged who were capable of improvising with ease and employing good communicative resources. It is important to point out that the best *corrandistes* are not necessarily pupils with good academic records. A very clear example is that of a ten-year-old boy who did not stand out in any subject—in fact, his teachers graded his results as poor to middling—but who became the most active *corrandista*, capable of improvising ten *corrandes* in less than twelve minutes. The teachers suggest that one of the key factors here may be the fact that this is oral work that breaks away from the entrenched culture of writing.
- In these groups many communicative and social traits were observed that are usual in the world of adult *corrandes*: the use of gestures and other body movements to emphasize and enhance oral communication, constant questions and answers, critical and comic dialogues, an awareness of the playful and fictional components of *corrandes* based on exaggeration and criticism, and the possibility of drawing attention to sensitive issues difficult to cope with in a normal conversation.

- On the other hand, only strictly technical results were recorded—language structure and melodico-rhythmic precision—in the performances by eight- to nine-year-old pupils. Expressive elements that support the communication of the message were not detected, and bidirectional communication hardly emerged at all. In the sense of a theatrical presentation, instead of being group performances the sessions of improvised song were reduced to a succession of more or less thematic monologues.
- The links between genres and the comparison of classes and age groups were the most commonly recurring themes in the various groups studied. Issues related to the circumstances of the students themselves were also addressed: neighborhood, school, teachers, and class group. In short, the songs mixed general themes—also habitual in adult contexts, but from a point of view appropriate to the age group—with other themes that are specific to each educational framework.
- In all the schools, activities were carried out in which improvised song had an objective that went beyond its potential use as a tool for work on language or music. In this respect, a variety of applications outside language and music classes were identified: school festivals, retreats and outings, and festivals in the neighborhood or town.
- The conclusions of both the non-specialized teachers and the music teachers involved in the project were very positive, and this result has encouraged us to broaden the scope of the working group during the 2008-09 course. The teachers will place particular emphasis on the efficient contribution of oral language to learning, as regards fostering group cohesion and personal development. With reference to the latter, they highlighted the potential of this repertoire to help pupils overcome shyness and the fear of making mistakes, and to learn to accept criticism. There was even a paradoxical case in one group of children in which only 30% improvised in front of the whole school. The teachers, when outlining their expectations prior to the project, had stated that “there are some pupils who certainly won’t want to improvise: CR, IM . . . children like them who are so shy.” And precisely these two children improvised *corrandes* in the final session in front of the audience!

## Discussion

In the first part of this article we explained the problematic aspects detected around the presence and use of traditional song in schools. Now that this two-year project has come to an end, we can draw certain conclusions. With regard to the aforementioned phenomenon of infantilization, improvised traditional song emerges as a living repertoire on an adult level with very clear social functionality and shows itself to be particularly effective after the age of ten because of the aptitudes it requires. It is precisely the skills that need to be brought into play—

language, but also music and social skills—that make its infantilization impossible and, at the same time, justify its importance as an educational tool of a holistic nature.

<b>Table 3: Aspects denoting interest in improvised song by Primary School pupils from 10 to 12 years old</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High participation by all the pupils in improvised performances of songs.</li> <li>▪ Among the reasons given by teachers and students for the interest it provoked, they mentioned in particular:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The use of meaningful subject matter by the performers themselves.</li> <li>- Pupils as protagonists when learning inside a process of socialization.</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Easy application to pupils' school and social experiences</li> </ul>

Particular mention should be made of the fact that during this experiment of transferring *corrandes* from the traditional adult world to the school ambit, the ethno poetic concept has prevailed, by and large, over ubiquitous and severe educational compartmentalization: it was conceived as an integral project for the pupils, of a communicative and entertaining nature, and not as a set of language and music tasks. In addition, this use of this repertoire apparently makes it possible to challenge the growing lack of functionality and interest in singing as the pupils get older, as shown in the summary of observations in Table 3.

With regard to the perception of

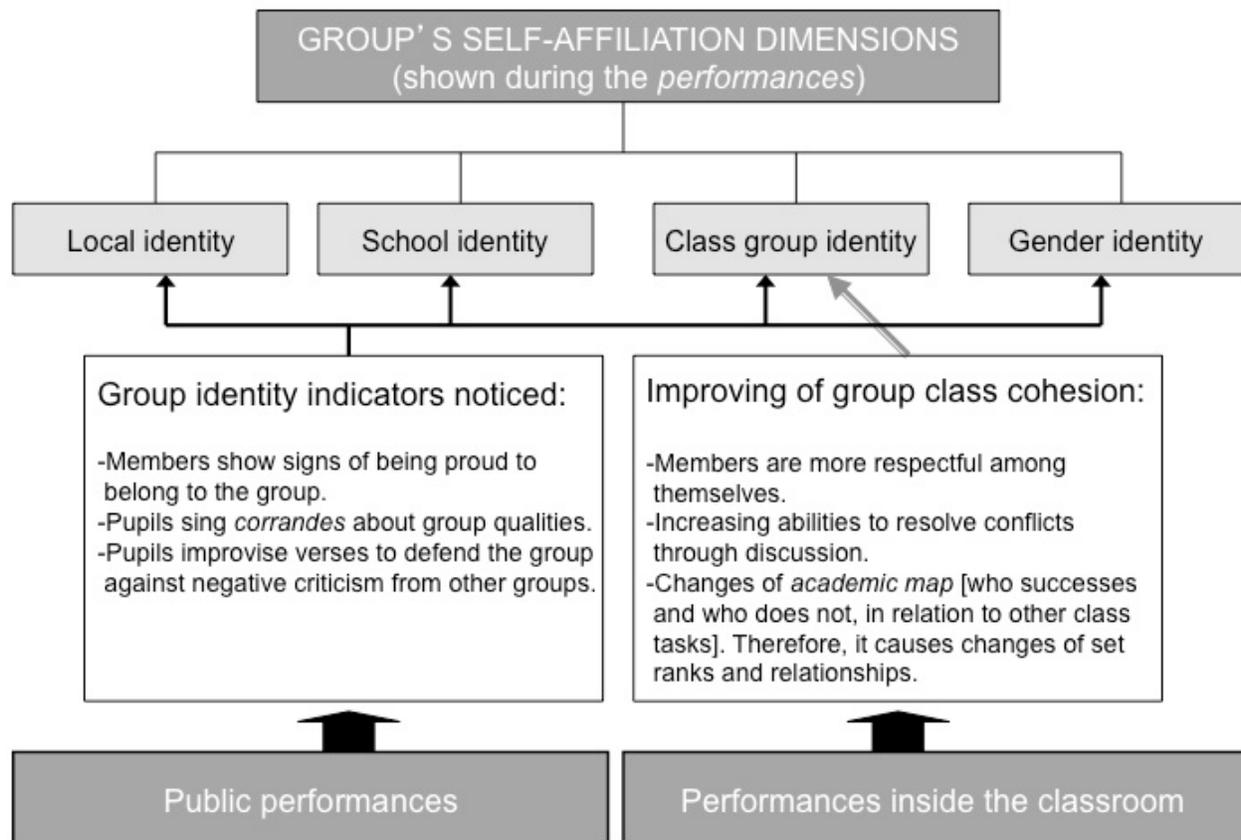


Figure 1. The building of group identity.

*traditional* as *old*, obligatory improvisation in the here-and-now demonstrates the falseness of this association that is so deeply rooted in society, and it also checks the tendency towards *folklorism*. On the other hand, the melodies and associated creative techniques have origins and features that define them as traditional: in the school framework they echo the main aspects present in adult singing in the region.

An interesting theme worth further exploration is the change in the use of this medium as a statement of identity. While a large part of traditional song used up until now in schools contained a great deal of identity-making symbolism, though highly disfunctionalized, improvised song has shown itself to be a generator of group identities (see Figure 1) and modifications in individual identities, with clear functional weight.



The atmosphere in a class during an improvised song performance. Video by Albert Casals.  
[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/casals#myGallery-picture\(11\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/casals#myGallery-picture(11))

In conclusion, this pilot project has provided new data and opened up new approaches in the field of the possibilities of improvised traditional song in Catalan schools. From analysis of the results, it has been possible to draw conclusions that confirm the viability of improvised sung verse as a contemporary educational tool, as also illustrated by other similar experiences in neighboring regions—Majorca, the Basque Country, and Murcia—and as described by various authors (see Munar 2001; Garzía 2007). On the other hand, in the context of Catalan schools, not only does this program help in the work on oral language by improving social and communication skills and aiding the survival of a particular historical-social heritage, but it also turns certain ideas about traditional song in schools on their heads and opens the door to the habitual presence of singing as a social activity in the school environment.

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