

The benefits of music activity for disadvantaged children



Findings from Voices Foundation's Singing Schools programme

Foreword

Across the UK, the quality and reach of schools-based music education is unacceptably variable and inconsistent. Overwhelmingly, it is children from poorer backgrounds attending schools facing additional challenges or with fewer resources who miss out.¹ Given that children in disadvantaged contexts are at particular risk of poor access to music education, Voices Foundation prioritises its resources to ensuring that these children have access to a high-quality music education.

We do this by working in partnership with the teachers and school communities that support these children. We provide focused Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) programmes that equip and empower all school staff to participate in and lead music activities, both inside and outside the classroom. Our accessible and inclusive whole-school music CPDL programmes aim to transform in-school music learning so that all children have access to a high-quality music education that enables them to find their voice.

Research shows that participating in music activities can be hugely beneficial for multiple areas of children's lives – increasing their learning, supporting their health and wellbeing, and fostering vital social, emotional, and cognitive skills.² However, less is known about whether children benefit equally from participating in music activity. For example, do children experiencing disadvantage (broadly defined) benefit more, less or the same as their more advantaged

peers? Could taking part in music activity mitigate some of the challenges that children experiencing disadvantage face?

In collaboration with the pupils and staff at six David Ross Education Trust (DRET) primary schools based across Hull, Grimsby, Northampton, and Kettering, Voices Foundation sought to explore these questions. From 2018 to 2021, we delivered and tested our Singing Schools model with these schools. The Singing Schools model is an intensive teacher development programme that supports schools to embed daily singing into school life. This work was generously supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and our programme activities were evaluated by Sound Connections and Birmingham City University.³

As part of this evaluation, we explored the impacts of the programme on children experiencing disadvantage. Our evaluation indicated that the Singing Schools programme could support the language and communication of children experiencing disadvantage, as well as providing a tool for learning that is accessible to them. However, we were unable to establish whether this translated into improved educational attainment, or whether children experiencing disadvantage benefitted more, less or the same as their more advantaged peers. Working together as a sector and sharing the results of our evaluations openly gives us the best chance of understanding more about the impact of music activity for children experiencing disadvantage in the future.



Defining disadvantage

To explore the effects of music activity for children experiencing disadvantage, we must first specify what we mean by 'disadvantage'. In a 2015 House of Commons briefing paper,⁴ it was noted that:

"There is no one definition of who constitutes a 'disadvantaged' child... When Ofsted assesses schools and reports on how they are improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, it refers to 'disadvantaged pupils' as those pupils for whom the Pupil Premium provides support ... [this includes] pupils who have been eligible for free school meals during the past six years, or who are or have been in care." Long & Bolton, 2015, p.4

Within the context of the Singing Schools programme, the term disadvantage was defined more broadly by the schools, Voices Foundation, and leaders at DRET. Voices Foundation consider disadvantage as 'any child who has experienced long-term and systemic circumstances that create barriers to learning', including socio-economic factors, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and English as an

Additional Language (EAL). Leaders at DRET described disadvantage as socio-economic, geographical, and cultural disadvantage, and pupils who have unsupportive families.

Across the six project schools, the numbers of pupils qualifying for Pupil Premium funding ranged from 13% - 60%. However, most of the senior leaders at the schools considered the majority of their pupils to be disadvantaged in some way, noting the limitations of the currently used measures of disadvantage. For example, eligibility for Free School Meals is a binary indicator of disadvantage based on income - children are either eligible or they are not.⁵ There is little difference between children on either side of the threshold. Furthermore, it doesn't account for all contextual factors. Children from multi-child families who are just above the threshold, for example, may experience greater relative disadvantage than children in single-child families who are just below it.

"If you look at our pupils - even those who aren't 'disadvantaged' in our area are still disadvantaged. None of our pupils have music lessons outside of school."

Teacher

A programme for all

In our survey, 66% of school staff felt that the Singing Schools programme had had an impact on pupils experiencing disadvantage. Those who agreed gave the following reasons: it provided an opportunity that pupils wouldn't have otherwise had; it was inclusive; it enabled pupils to thrive in music where they don't elsewhere; and it increased confidence and communication skills.

"The Singing Schools programme has allowed pupils of disadvantaged backgrounds to become involved with music they would not otherwise experience. It has allowed them to begin working together as a team, improving their relationships with each other."

Teacher

However, given that many school leaders felt that most of their pupils experienced some form of disadvantage, isolating the impact for 'disadvantaged' pupils in comparison to

their more advantaged peers was frequently seen as unnecessary or impossible. The Singing Schools programme is not a targeted intervention for a particular group of pupils, and school staff were keen to point out that a strength of the programme was that every child could participate.

"It really envelops them in a whole class 'we are working together' ethos. Everybody can participate, no one is left out, you can all join in." Senior Leader

It's perhaps not surprising therefore that the programme partners and evaluators couldn't necessarily distinguish outcomes for 'disadvantaged' and 'non-disadvantaged' pupils.

"I think it is a good opportunity for them [disadvantaged children] but can't say about impact." Teacher

“It’s interesting to talk about how the Singing Schools programme is focused on or is aiming to increase attainment [and] impact on disadvantaged pupils, but it’s the same programme for all pupils. These things benefit all of our pupils, but the assumption we make is disadvantaged pupils would have less opportunity to access those things.”

Senior Leader

In universal and inclusive teaching environments, it can be challenging to focus on pupils experiencing disadvantage. Moreover, in contexts where new approaches are being introduced to teachers for

integration into already challenging teaching, learning and curriculum experiences, there is an understandable tendency to focus on the new practices and skills, and the experience of the whole class.⁶ Zooming in on a subset of pupils at this stage can feel counter-productive.

Whilst it’s difficult to quantify the impact of the programme for pupils experiencing disadvantage, the qualitative data collected through our evaluation highlighted two areas where the Singing Schools programme appeared to be of particular benefit to these children: first by providing an accessible tool for learning, and second by supporting their language and communication skills.

A chance to shine

School staff regarded singing as an activity that pupils experiencing disadvantage could succeed in, where elsewhere in school they may struggle. For pupils who lack confidence in core curriculum subjects, or for whom more traditional learning approaches create a barrier, the Singing Schools programme created a ‘way in’. One school leader described this as ‘providing a more accessible avenue of success’.

“Because of the simplicity of singing they can just dive in. [There] isn’t the barrier there of reading, writing, maths, they just have to open their mouths and they’re doing it. They put their hands up to volunteer, [it’s] their way of showing they can contribute to the class. They don’t feel that in other lessons.” **Teacher**

“[There are] certain pupils, whether Pupil Premium or SEND who really came to life. Sometimes they struggle with the academic side of things. This gives them a really good opportunity to be themselves.” **Senior Leader**

“Pupils who don’t find academic subjects easy have been able to shine in Singing School lessons.” **Teacher**

The inclusion of music-based learning into daily classroom activities may therefore increase engagement and motivation and facilitate active participation – creating an environment where learning can take place. Songs about counting or times tables, for example, may help children with their maths. Teaching through music could therefore in turn increase pupils’ learning in non-music subjects. Across all schools, the proportion of pupils who were predicted to achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths did increase throughout the duration of the Singing Schools programme. Whilst this is very positive, DRET were simultaneously implementing four other initiatives to support reading, writing or maths. It’s therefore difficult to conclude whether any of this change can be attributed directly to the Singing Schools programme.

Improving language and communication

School staff explained how the Singing Schools programme supported children’s language and communication. This was particularly helpful for children experiencing disadvantage. Research shows that children from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds have significant disparities in language

processing efficiency compared to their more advantaged peers.⁷ They are predicted to have been exposed to as many as 1.4 million fewer words than more privileged children by the time they start school.⁸ Singing is a way of introducing pupils to new words that they may not have encountered at home.

“Pupils come into school with a high language deprivation. Way behind pupils from middle class families. Exposure through Voices Foundation to different words and being able to apply them, [we] have seen that transfer in reading and writing. Pupils [are] explaining words to parents.” Senior Leader

“Really powerful for EAL students... for them to be able to take part... [it's] really impacted their reading, writing, vocab knowledge and comprehension.” Teacher

There were also particular benefits for children with speech and communication difficulties. Whilst teachers couldn't attribute change fully to the Singing Schools programme, they did feel that it contributed.

“Definitely for the pupils in my areas, [it] helped with communication and vocab. A song flows better than how they would say a sentence - [they] can express themselves through singing but with speaking they are more rigid.” Teacher

“I have a child who has ASD [autism spectrum disorder] and he loves to sing. At the beginning of the year he would hardly communicate. Since Singing Schools he stands in front of the class and sings. He's got that confidence and it's really helped him to feel part of something.” Teacher

“One pupil in my class had speech and language difficulties. Singing was one of those things he loved... For him it gives him something that he can do, that he doesn't have to be worried about. The comparison [with other pupils] isn't there - in maths and English he can't do all the work, whereas in singing it gives him a feeling of equality. By the time we finished [the programme] his behaviour was so much better, concentrating better in lessons. [I can't say] whether or not [it was] entirely due to singing - but it will have been a part of it. His self-confidence was increased. He normally would struggle to remember things but with singing he seemed to be able to learn it better.” Teacher

Summary and final thoughts

In sum, our evaluation indicated that the Singing Schools programme provided an accessible method through which children experiencing disadvantage could learn. Furthermore, it played a key role in supporting their language and communication skills. We were unable to conclude whether the benefits observed translated into improved educational attainment for disadvantaged children, and if so, whether they progressed more, less or the same as their more advantaged peers. Such questions are difficult to answer. Pre- and post-project test measures showing positive change should be treated with caution – as children get older, you would expect their attainment to increase. As schools often run multiple interventions, distinguishing the effects of one over another is also tricky. Whilst comparative studies that look at differences between pupils who do and do not take part in a project are considered to provide high-quality evidence, they are often fraught with logistical and ethical challenges.

At Voices Foundation, we feel there is a need for our sector to be realistic about the types of evidence that we can provide and to affirm the value of the evidence that we have. In the case of this work, it is very encouraging to see that music activity created an environment where pupils experiencing disadvantage could participate, as a child cannot learn if this is not in place. Going forwards, we aim to further explore how music can be used to facilitate effective learning environments and promote positive behaviour for learning. Impact measurement can be challenging, but by working together as a sector and sharing the results of our evaluations openly, even when they are inconclusive or negative, we stand the best chance of learning more about the impact of our work for pupils experiencing disadvantage. It is only by doing this that we will be able to fully harness the value of music activity to support these children. If you have explored the questions raised in this paper, we would love to hear what you found out.

¹ Savage, J., & Barnard, D. (2019). *The state of play: A review of music education in England 2019*. Brighton, UK: University of Sussex.

² Hallam, S. (2010). The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people. *International Journal of Music Education* 28, 269-289.

³ D'Amore, A. et al. (2020). *Evaluation of The Voices Foundation Singing Schools Programme*. London: Sound Connections and Birmingham City University.

⁴ Long, R., & Bolton, P. (2015). *Support for Disadvantaged Children in Education in England*. London, UK: House of Commons.

⁵ Jerrim, J. (2021). *Measuring Disadvantage*. London, UK: Sutton Trust.

⁶ Cordingley, P., Crisp, B., & Araviaki, A. (2021). *CUREE PHF TDF Interim Report*. Cumbria, UK: CUREE.

⁷ Fernald, A., Marchman, V., & Weisleder, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental science*, 16(2), 234-248.

⁸ Logan, J., Justice, L., Yumus, M., & Chaparro-Moreno, L. (2019). When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 40(5), 383-386.