

Music Education in England

Mind the music gap

Foreword

A wide range of research shows that engagement with music can have a profound effect on children – from improving their educational attainment, to supporting their health and wellbeing and fostering vital social, emotional and cognitive skills (e.g., Hallam, 2010; Welch et al., 2020). Yet we face a situation where music’s place in the curriculum has deteriorated, where music makes up just a few hours of Initial Teacher Training, and where relevant Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) is hard to come by. As a result, we are doing our children a gross disservice.

Voices Foundation believes that every child should have access to a high-quality music education. We are committed to transforming music education so that every child can find their voice. We work alongside teachers and school communities, providing focused CPDL and delivering accessible and inclusive singing programmes.

From 2018 to 2021, we participated in the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Teacher Development Fund

programme in partnership with the David Ross Education Trust (DRET). Guided by evidence that school improvement programmes are most effective when they are fully integrated into school culture (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2019), we sought to test our Singing School model – an intensive teacher development programme that supports schools to embed daily singing into school life, both through the curriculum and through extra-curricular choral enrichment. By delivering whole-staff training, in-classroom coaching, and one-to-one mentoring, our specialist music practitioners supported staff at all levels to develop the skills and confidence to provide a progressive and high-quality music education for pupils, in the classroom and beyond.

Our programme evaluation, delivered by Sound Connections and Birmingham City University, evidences that our targeted, whole-school CPDL can make a difference to teachers' skills and confidence to integrate music activities into daily school life, but that systemic change within the education sector is also required to ensure that no child is left behind.



Music's Place in the Curriculum

Although there is a National Curriculum in place for music, academies and free schools are not statutorily required to follow it. As a result, 46.8% of pupils receiving state-funded education in England attend schools where there is no requirement to provide music education. The National Curriculum itself is also not prescriptive – indeed for primary school music it amounts in total to a little over 125 words.

At the same time, accountability measures for maths and English results have placed pressure on other areas of the curriculum, leading many primary schools to deprioritise music education or fall short of delivering their planned music provision. In a recent survey carried out by the Incorporated Society of Musicians, more than 50% of primary schools who have music as part of the curriculum reported not meeting their curriculum obligations to Year 6, citing the pressure of statutory tests as a significant reason (Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2018, p.9).

This results-focused environment creates a situation where music education is often neglected, and children miss out:

“The most conspicuous casualties are the arts, the humanities and the kinds of learning in all subjects which require time for talking, problem-solving and the extended exploration of ideas. A policy-led belief that curriculum breadth is incompatible with the pursuit of standards in ‘the basics’ has fuelled this loss of entitlement... The result is a primary curriculum which, as Ofsted has confirmed, is often two-tier in terms of quality as well as time” (Hofkins & Northen, 2009, p.22)

The problem exists not just at primary level. The introduction of the English Baccalaureate – a government-recommended combination of GCSE subjects that does not include music or arts subjects – has contributed to a decline in the number of pupils receiving music education at secondary school. In 2012/13, music was compulsory for all Year 9 students in 84% of schools. By 2015/16, this had dropped to 67%. In 2016/17, it decreased even further to 62%. In many schools, students start their GCSE studies in Year 9 rather than in Year 10. This results in a complete cessation of all subjects that fall outside the student's own GCSE choices (Savage and Barnard, 2019, p.12).

Initial Teacher Training

The context of Initial Teacher Education with regards to music in England is complex. In recent years, the Government has overseen an increasingly fragmented system, with universities, schools, and other organisations all playing a role. Music teaching, along with all other subject-specific pre-service training, is not certificated separately. Instead, Qualified Teacher Status enables the holder to teach any subject, in any phase of education.

We have known for some time that music training for primary teachers is often insufficient. Back in

2011, Darren Henley, in his review of music education noted that:

“The amount of time dedicated to music in most Initial Teacher Training [ITT] courses is inadequate to create a workforce that is confident in its own ability to teach the subject in the classroom. It is recommended that a new minimum number of hours of ITT for primary music teachers be spent on the delivery of Music Education” (Henley, 2011, p.23)

Sadly, this did not come into fruition. The recent All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education report on music education noted that:

“...trainee teachers linked to a higher education provider usually have music as part of their course, but this time is extremely limited. For those on a general postgraduate primary course, this will be between two and eight hours in total. This is insufficient to prepare them to plan, teach and assess music” (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education *et al.*, 2019, p.27)

This is often compounded by their experience on placement:

“When student teachers are in school on placement, they are likely to see a similar emphasis on Literacy and Maths and very little music taught by class teachers. Those student teachers who are confident in their own subject knowledge and skills and feel strongly about music are more likely to negotiate time to teach music and make it part of their professional identity. Those who are less confident will not be challenged to try, and may conclude that music is a subject that class teachers do not teach.” (Hennessy, 2017, p.689)

The Department for Education’s decision not to include music in Initial Teacher Training funding for the 2021/22 academic year is likely to further exacerbate the problem.

Continuing Professional Development and Learning

Poor access to music-related resources, training and professional development opportunities mean that teachers also do not receive adequate support to deliver music activities once in post:

“Only small proportions of teachers have access to a professional network for music education (16%) and have regular opportunities for professional development (15%). This minority experience is hypothesised to be related to a likely dominant view within the sector’s Primary school senior leadership of the perceived relative importance of music in terms of current Government (including Ofsted) curriculum policy compared to other ‘core’ and ‘STEM’ areas of knowledge. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the head (or senior) teacher is not often seen in a singing role model by pupils and colleagues (36%)” (Zeserson et al., 2014, p.60)

Despite successive Ofsted reports pointing to the correlation between a lack of CPDL and poor classroom practice, more than nine in ten teachers reported facing barriers that prevent them from

accessing CPDL (Department for Education, 2018). This is a problem across the board, but for music, it is made more acute by the lack of initial training that teachers receive.

“...teachers are more isolated and engaged in less and less CPD, and a misplaced focus on literacy-based assessment and feedback strategies inappropriately imposed on music pushes music-making itself right out of the classroom. Many teachers are disempowered and under-confident as a consequence of these challenges, and the less confident teachers feel the less likely they are to take a risk on music making.” (Zeserson et al., 2014, p.14)

Considering limited Initial Teacher Training and poor later access to CPDL, it is not surprising that only a very small minority (8%) of primary colleagues report that all teachers in their school are confident to teach music (Zeserson et al., 2014, p.60). This is a tragedy for teachers and pupils alike.

The impact of Voices Foundation's Singing School model

Against this backdrop it was a pleasure to work with DRET to test and develop our Singing School model in six primary schools based across Hull, Grimsby, Northampton and Kettering. DRET recognise the importance of music in their schools:

“An academy that embraces music is not just an academy with a good music department. It is one where the underlying principles of high-quality music-making; of listening, adapting, exploring, persevering, problem-solving, thinking laterally and performing without fear, are seen in every student and every teacher” (dret.co.uk)

Even in this context, when we began our work together teacher confidence was very low:

“Music is one of those things you either have it or not. I do dread teaching it in all honesty. Just need a lot more training. The last time I did music I was in Year 8, other than that I haven't touched it since I was 13. That was 15 years ago.” (Classroom Teacher)

Some teachers held long-standing beliefs that music was not for them, and experienced barriers to leading singing activity, such as feeling that they could not pitch musical notes correctly or sing in tune, which may stem from a lack of musical support in their Initial Teacher Training. We were also fighting the effects of a system that has deprioritised music education over several years:

“We have quite young teachers, they haven't grown up in schools where singing has been part of what they do. They've grown up with literacy and numeracy hour – [they] didn't necessarily go to schools themselves that did enjoyable singing.” (Senior Leader)

Finally, even in a Trust where music education and singing are prioritised, the amount of time given to music in the timetable was a barrier for many. Fitting singing into the school day was often viewed as problematic.

“I'd like it to be [a priority] but in the current climate it is literacy/numeracy, and brand new topic curriculum and it has to all fit in. There is no time in the morning to fit any singing in, there just isn't time to do it. We know we have to deliver it in the afternoon but there are lots of other things in so [it's] really difficult to fit in.” (Classroom Teacher)

Over the course of 18 months, the delivery of our Singing School programme had a marked increase in teachers' skills and confidence to integrate music activities into school life. The percentage of teachers who felt confident to lead music activities rose from 69% in January 2019 to 86% in June 2020.

“At the start I was really anxious about it, don't have a musical background, didn't feel I had any skills to offer, I didn't feel like an expert. Now I've done singing assemblies, conducted the choir in a concert. I use singing most days. Behaviour management every day – I sing 'are you listening, are you ready'. The pupils just join in, singing gets their attention immediately, and creates a nice classroom environment. Because I'm more confident at teaching music they enjoy it more - sessions just flow.” (Classroom Teacher)

It also had a significant impact on teachers feeling that they had the skills to sing and lead singing activity. Of those surveyed, 72% felt they had skills in singing by the end of the programme in June 2020, compared with only 44% in January 2019.

“Confidence, subject knowledge... has all increased. And my technical vocabulary, pitch, dynamics – [I] now understand what they mean fully by seeing students use them.” (Classroom Teacher)

Critically, participation in the Singing School programme made a significant difference to the way that music activity was viewed in daily school life. In June 2020, 88% of survey respondents agreed that singing was embedded in their school culture, compared to only 49% in January 2019.

“When you walk around day to day – we have doors open, singing is always going on to the point where pupils go for lunch, putting coats on and they’re singing. Pupils are always singing.” (Classroom Teacher)

It is clear that targeted, whole-school CPDL such as Voices Foundation’s Singing School programme can make a difference to teachers’ skills and confidence to integrate music activities into daily school life. Yet, it is only with significant changes to the positioning of music within the curriculum, and improvements to teacher training and ongoing professional support, that we will really be able to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality music education.

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