

Making more of music – An evaluation of music in schools 2005/08’ (Secondary perspective)

The aims of the resource and the key findings

The section of the report relating to secondary music education is based on evidence from the inspection of 95 secondary schools in England. It is reassuring to read that there is some outstanding provision and that pupils enjoy music but it is disappointing that achievement and standards in 13 of the 95 secondary schools was graded as inadequate and that the standards in 91 out of 354 lessons observed were substantially below average. It was also reported that not much has changed over the last three years.

There were some obvious areas of weakness. Singing was highlighted as an area of relative weakness and in over three in ten secondary schools it was reported that ‘no singing took place at all’. With the government aiming to develop a ‘singing nation’ with substantial funding for the ‘Sing Up’ initiative in primary schools, it seems that there will need to be a major shift if, in the near future, secondary schools are to build on pupils’ sustained prior experience of singing.

The report states that assessment remains one of the weakest aspects of teaching. Music teachers are struggling to meet whole-school requirements for data and this has led to teachers having to provide assessments every half-term in relation to artificially sub-divided National Curriculum levels. Although the only mandatory requirement is to report levels in the secondary school is at the end of Key Stage 3, teachers are erroneously using the level descriptions to assess isolated activities. An example is given where pupils were told: ‘Level 3: clap a 3 beat ostinato; Level 4: maintain a 4 bar ostinato; Level 5: compose an ostinato’. It is also reported that audio recording tends to be used only at the end of a unit of work rather than as a means of continuing assessment. With the growing affordability of portable digital recording equipment, this is an unacceptable finding, especially since the playback of pupil work can make such a powerful contribution to ‘assessment for learning’.

On another technological note, the report highlights insufficient use of ICT in music, even though it is a statutory requirement in Key Stage 3. Pupils are seeing and even using music technology outside of school, and ICT in school is consequently appearing outdated. Even schools with appropriate resources are not using them musically and, at Key Stage 4, ICT is mainly used as a notational tool. The positive work of Becta and whole school initiatives such as ICTAC (ICT across the curriculum) seem to have had little impact. It is also disappointing that music teachers do not even seem to be making effective use of free software (e.g. Audacity).

Secondary music teachers are reported as being unaware of national initiatives or as having given limited thought to their impact on practice. It has already been suggested that secondary music teachers will need to move quickly to capitalise on pupils’ vocal experience developed through the ‘Sing Up’ initiative, but they will equally need to consider how to build on pupils’ instrumental experience, since the government has pledged that every primary pupil will have an opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument. In almost every area of the country successful large group and whole class projects (sometimes designated as ‘Wider Opportunities’ projects) have been run for several years, and yet secondary music teachers are often unaware of their pupils’ prior instrumental experience.

Pupils taking music as an optional subject at Key Stage 4 are reported to be achieving well. Attainment in music at GCSE is above average when compared to all GCSE subjects. However, this is probably to be expected since only 8% of pupils took GCSE music in 2008, suggesting that only pupils with a real interest in the subject are pursuing it beyond it being a

compulsory foundation subject at Key Stage 3. (There is only limited evidence about the achievement and standards in vocational courses, such as BTEC courses, and the evidence is mixed.) However, interest in the subject has not resulted in high standards at A level with overall standards remaining below the national average. The grades attained in A level music technology are even lower, with only 9% of pupils gaining an A grade as opposed to 23% in music. This may be a direct result of the finding that few of the schools visited had a scheme of work for Key Stage 4 or post-16 music.

It is quite possible that the majority of these findings result from something else that the report highlights, namely that, overall, teachers in the survey received little continuing professional development.

How can secondary music teachers begin to improve their practice? The report does try to outline the features of effective teaching in a set of bullet points:

- the teaching had a clear musical learning focus
- teachers had high expectations: there was an emphasis on musical quality and students were clear how to improve their work
- practical music-making activity was at the heart of the work
- teachers made excellent use of demonstration
- the work was related to real life musical tasks
- questioning was effective

It was noted that in the very best lessons, where the pupils made rapid musical progress, there was an emphasis on increasing the depth of their musical response.

Similarly, the features of less effective teaching are outlined:

- learning objectives were unclear, unmusical or both
- expectations were too low – illustrated, for example, by praise that was unwarranted
- work was not matched to the needs of students of different abilities or, if it was, this was achieved only by increasing the difficulty of the task rather than giving attention to increasing the depth or quality of students' responses
- no links were made between different activities and there was insufficient integration

Whilst the elucidation of these points is useful, it is likely that many less effective teachers may not understand how to devise schemes of work that address these issues. For example, if teachers do not understand or have the chance to observe 'musical quality', how can they improve their practice? Meetings to disseminate the Key Stage 3 Strategy for music and involvement in Musical Futures provided opportunities for teachers to meet and reflect on their practice, but other examples of effective continuing professional development were limited.

A more controversial section of the report is Part B, which aims to consider 'the essential components of effective teaching in music' in both primary and secondary schools. The terms 'musical intelligence', 'musical imagination', 'aural imagination', 'musical creativity' and 'musical progress' litter this section of the report but only 'musical progression' is defined. It would have been useful for the report authors to have established what *they* meant by these terms, since a term like 'musical intelligence' is open to so many interpretations.

That said, this part of the report does aim to discuss some of the most crucial evidence from the survey in terms of five areas which, it is suggested, are inter-related:

- Awakening musical intelligence – the language of music
- Developing musical creativity – releasing musical imagination
- Increasing musical progress – seeing the wood for the trees

- Ensuring continuity – achieving longer-term impact
- Building coherence – increasing effectiveness

This section opens by establishing that music is a language with its own syntax and structure and states that progress in music was rapid where teachers used music as a 'target language' and made effective use of demonstration. It is suggested that "pupils' aural imagination was rarely developed" and an example is given of pupils internalising sounds. This is slightly confusing since aural imagination can undoubtedly be developed through pupils experimenting with sounds. The main conclusion from this section is "the need for music education to give more emphasis to engagement of musical intelligence as a starting point for the development of musical understanding". Examples are given of how musical intelligence can be developed. However, it could be suggested that musical intelligence is innate and that it is actually musical knowledge and understanding that is being developed.

It is subsequently established that pupils must use sound as the medium if they are to develop musical creativity. However, this is immediately contradicted by reiteration of the point that pupils rarely developed their musical imagination by 'hearing' and creating music in their heads. A strong point made is that teachers need to help pupils to broaden their understanding by going beyond asking 'what' and 'how' and exploring 'why'.

The major weakness in the provision observed was the lack of musical progression. It is suggested that the big picture of why music should be part of every child's education, as elucidated in 'the importance of music statement' in the National Curriculum, is not being realised, except where teachers focus on increasing the depth and quality of pupils' musical responses.

A number of solutions are suggested to ensure continuity within and across key stages. To ensure continuity from Key Stage 2 to 3, it is stated that more effective partnerships between primary and secondary schools must be established. To ensure continuity from Key Stage 3 to 4, music teachers need to see that GCSE music can be regarded as a natural extension to work in key Stage 3. Musical Futures is highlighted as a good example of effective continuity, but the reasons for this are not clearly established. It is reported that "while the progress of pupils is not always linear or obvious in every lesson, the real musical experience and the focus on the quality of re-creation enable pupils to make musical progress".

To develop coherence, it is recommended that teachers should integrate musical activities and make links between pupils' own musical experiences and those that the school provides so that pupils' interests can be developed.

The secondary components of this Ofsted report serve two purposes, to summarise inspection findings and to offer constructive advice. It is disappointing that many of the weaknesses that this report identifies have been raised previously. It seems important to consider how it can be ensured that the same findings do not come out of the next report in three years time. This report does offer advice but the advice is not always clear, with some controversial terms, such as musical intelligence, being used as if there is shared understanding of its meaning. It is useful to read the mini 'case studies' which are highlighted throughout the report. However, it is a different thing to give examples of good practice than to ensure that music teachers understand how to develop similar practice. Annex B outlines the criteria for judging music provision in an Ofsted inspection, but it could be hard for an inexperienced or less effective teacher to understand what this means in reality. For instance, the first criterion is "a constant emphasis on musical quality and aural development, and practical music-making helps learners learn how to respond musically". There will be many interpretations of what is meant by musical quality. The report makes an

explicit recommendation that “the Training and Development Agency for schools should provide continuing professional development for music teachers in secondary schools”. Teachers need to observe and experience musical quality in such continuing professional development if they are to be able to maintain it in the secondary music classroom.

Reviewed by:

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