Primary Music Education; Creativity, Challenges, and Controversies

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Abstract

This paper looks at the various challenges apparent for primary level music education. Drawing from publicised material and official documentation, it will be seen how a redistribution of funding and services has affected the quality of music teaching across Key Stages 1 and 2. Key issues are given which include an argument for creative practice in the classroom, linking creativity and play and evidence of the benefits is given showing the value of providing musical experience in learning environments. A comparative assessment of curricula guidelines highlights a change in responsibility of learning, and the reduction in Government set support. The development of Music Education Hubs and partnership working strategies, designed to support schools and aid in the implementation of music curricula are shown to be underperforming, mainly through lack of finance and provisions. Concluding the paper sees the various areas brought together providing an assessment of the current situation primary music education is in.

Key Words: Primary education, music curriculum, creativity, finance.

Introduction

As a result of music education support having been removed from primary curriculum in 2013, the redistribution of finance and services has provided new challenges in allowing children to access quality music teaching. With the Government introduction of a guiding National Plan (Gov UK, 2011), applied in effect until 2020, collaborative effort and partnerships between schools and local music services have been promoted. The setting up of Musical Education Hubs (Arts Council, n.d.) attempted to decentralise the
running and management of music education, though in effect has been underfunded and left with a lack of provisions. (Widdison and Hanley, 2014)

Beginning with a brief explanation of the creative process and the environment in which creativity may flourish, the importance of a well-supported music curriculum in early primary education is argued for. Utilising ideas from play and music therapies supports this, providing evidence of developmental benefits and its importance in positive mental functioning in adulthood.

Part two of this paper deals with key issues and challenges regarding music education. Outlining controversies and challenges (Bredekamp, Isenberg and Jalongo, 2003) and drawing from up to date documentation gives an overview of how music is viewed and applied to the curriculum. Subsequently a section focusing on finance and services in the local area attempts to define the current status of music education, and plans for the future of these services. (Halsey, 2015)

The Creative Process

Creativity is defined as the quality of being creative and having the ability to create, where something new and somehow valuable is formed. Going beyond the simple dictionary definition creativity is linked to an ability to perform creative or divergent thinking. The primary traits of this include fluency, flexibility and originality. Fluency deals with the ability of oral and written language, flexibility involves being able to produce a range of ideas and adaptable solutions, and originality allows old relationships and interpretations to be processed in new ways. (Cheung-shing, n.d.)

This ability to think creatively (an internal process) must then be matched with expertise and motivation (Iowa State University, 2011) the results of which are creative application. Expertise is the technical and intellectual knowledge, built up around study of a chosen subject. Motivation is the personal drive of the individual, and may arise from personal goals or societal influence. Motivation can also be attributed to self-confidence and persistence during the creative process.

Carl Jung describes art as an “innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him.” (Dell, n.d.). In ‘Modern Man In Search Of a Soul’, Jung outlines the idea of a ‘collective conscious’, an area of thinking that all humans have ability to access. This idea is used to imply that any creative works can only be realised when they are in the waywardness of the general outlook. The artist is putting into reality a generalised feeling or worldview. This would suggest that linking an individual’s ability to think creatively (internal) with a constructed knowledge (external) and societal influence (external) creates a process that leads to creativity.

Value of Creativity in Education
During early development children find great value in play. Play, although a seemingly purposeless activity provides a preparation into adulthood, allowing a chance to learn and rehearse the skills they will need for the rest of their lives (Henig, 2008). Play as a function is performed in a stress free environment; this ensures actions have little consequence so can be experimented with. The individual involved must have other basic pre-requisites met, such as food and warmth for play to take place. This suggests play is a luxury function, and diminishes when basic needs arise. Early schooling provides this environment and allows children the necessary tools in order to be able to play and experiment.

The connection with music in individuals begins before even the development of language. The sounds and music around us from infancy become associated to the comforting relationships provided by mothers and the diminishing of distress as the internal processes of the infant are brought into the external world (Butterton, 2004). This early connection and process is sought in later life and is suggested as a cause of psychical sublime reactions to music. Due to sounds abstraction and ability to connect to our inter-personal selves it can provide a way to express complicated emotions, especially children moving through transitional periods.

In an article appearing in the New York Times, play in the playground is linked to improvisation in music:

“Players riff off one another…As in jazz, the smoothness of the improvisation matters as much as the gestures themselves. Ability to use and switch…may be as valuable as getting a lot of practice at the most effective sequences” (Henig, 2008)

When linking play with music an individual becomes involved in a creative process. Problem solving, idea generation, modification and evaluation become an essential byproduct (Cheung-shing, n.d.). Alfred Balkin, an educator, recognised that creativity in childhood develops into creativity throughout adulthood. Allowing a nurturing of musical creativity in an educational environment under the guise of play grants children periods of non-evaluative practice. This encourages them to learn from previous actions and gain a self-awareness of the implications of cause and effect. Self-evaluation becomes focused on appropriateness and context rather than judging the rights and wrongs.

Educational establishments can allow the external process of creativity to be nurtured, a technical knowledge to be built up around the idea of play and creative thinking, and motivation is provided by offering a stress free environment for it to occur in.

Benefits of Musical Creativity in Education
Encouraging musical creativity throughout a child’s education has multiple immediate positive attributes and benefits reaching into adulthood. Playing music in a group classroom environment encourages social interaction, communication and imaginative skills (Butterton, 2004). Relationships are created as the children improvise against each other, referring back to the improvisation in play; this grows into an additional form of communication as different emotions can be expressed through changing musical dynamics. The abstraction helps to encourage divergent thinking and to come up with imaginative solutions to problems. These processes can be immediately transferable to other areas of the curriculum. The core subjects, English, Mathematics and Science all require differing balances of creative thinking. The connection with music in individuals begins before even the development of language. (Henig, 2008).

Formally assessed progress has shown various improvements in areas critical to development (Ockelford, 2008). Language and communication shows progress in listening to others, creating dialogues, memory recall, vocabulary, language and concept development and responding to sounds. All of these aspects are critical in forming the fluency in creative thinking. Behavioural, emotional and social development sees a vast range of benefits including showing enjoyment, self-awareness, sense of pride, relaxation, working as a group, participation and sharing experience. This all feeds into the motivation required for creative output. Sensory and cognitive developments can be seen in increased memory and concentration and the ability to greater discern cause and effect.

Physical movement is also said to improve, “with finer motor control and precision, as well as a stretching and more controlled movement” (Ockelford, 2008, p.23). This plethora of skills gained through musical play directly perpetuates the areas required for creativity. Creative thinking is then a result of the child’s setting and mental state. Thinking about the multitude of interactions and communications we traverse in adult life, with careful social and inter-personal relations, it is easy to see how the benefits offered from music can be instrumental in preparation for children’s development.

From these studies and monitored progress in children we can gather that music has a great value in development and when it is performed in the context of education it can be used as a tool of self-expression and awareness.

**Key Issues in Music Education 2014**

As a result of changes to teaching policy shaping teacher assessment to a quantitative scheme based on text book marking (McConville, 2014), rather than a qualitative scheme based on observation, emphasis has been placed on core subjects, English, Mathematics and Science.

As a result of this shift “foundational subjects have become secondary to some extent” (Lawson, 2014, p.26) with musical education taking a figurative ‘back seat’. The
decline of central support for music, culminating in the removal of the set curriculum in 2013, is apparent when comparing the national curriculum of 1999, to 2014 (Devaney, 2013).

Analysis of language employed in the introductions reveals intentions of the document. In 1999, the document is titled “The Importance of Music”, in 2014, “Purpose of Study”; there appears to be a clear disconnect emerged, distancing the document from its classroom intentions. Further on in 1999, “Music is a powerful, unique form of communication…brings together intellect and feeling…integral part of culture, past and present…encourages a sense of group identity and togetherness.” (Devaney, 2013, p.7).

Although only a selective paraphrase, creative expressive language is employed, and there is a clear connection to the benefits of music education. Compared to 2014, a decidedly more objective explanation: In 2014 “A high-quality music education should engage and inspire pupils…and so increase their self-confidence, creativity and sense of achievement.” (Devaney, 2013, p.7).

Also note the implications of the usage of ‘should’ and the lack of ‘ensure’ in the 2014 document: In 1999 “Teaching should ensure that ‘listening, and applying knowledge and understanding’, are developed through the interrelated skills of ‘performing’, ‘composing’ and ‘appraising’.” (Devaney, 2013, p.1). In 2014 “A high-quality music education should engage and inspire pupils…As pupils progress, they should develop a critical engagement with music, allowing them to compose, and to listen with discrimination to the best in the musical canon.” (Devaney, 2013, p.1).

This change of language is derisive of a change of responsibility from Governmental support of a set curricular to teach children, to the children, who ‘should’ be educated in music.

Possibly the most enlightening comparison is that of the Attainment Targets (Devaney, 2013, p.4). In 1999 a nine level system was applied, each described with an exhaustive set of criteria. In 2014 we see “By the end of each key stage, pupils are expected to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study.” (Devaney, 2013, p.7).

This decentralisation of responsibility may also be seen in the Department of Education’s published ‘National Plan for Music Education’ (Gov UK, 2011). This sets out guidelines for any institution or body that is involved with music education. The plan extends to 2020 and stresses an importance of collaboration for schools, local authorities, national, regional and local music/arts organisations, private music teachers and other educators, and new Music Education Hubs (Gov UK, 2011, p.6).

The new system places demands on schools to “make their own decisions about how they teach music” and in collaboration with Music Education Hubs “determine what high quality music education looks like” (Gov UK, 2011, p.14). Emphasis is placed on
creating a feedback loop, “Schools will want to hold hubs to account for the services…hubs will be able to challenge and support schools.”

By placing all the responsibility for Key Stage 1 and 2 music (primary school age of 5-7 and 7-11 years old respectively) with children and teaching staff, the Department of Education have successfully managed to retain overall control, yet have no part in the actual workings.

**Challenges**

New means of gathering financial support for hubs, via application to the Arts Council funding body, has contributed to the ‘privitisation’ effects of how schools are (indirectly) funded. Applications are now in the form of a business plan requiring the applicant to assess budgets and governance (Arts Council, 2012, p.3). This provides the information for a ‘risk assessment’, the results of which determine the funding amount, and the amount of ‘intervention’. Are these requirements a perpetuation of current teacher assessment methods? The onus is given to quantitative reasoning. As a result of this, music requires assessment tools that provide sufficient data if it chooses to apply for funding.

One challenge will be whether to develop material using a curriculum reminiscent of creative learning, as in 1999, or introduce new methods of holistic learning, and learning informed by healthcare knowledge. An emerging ideal could be for education to build an argument for holistic music education, and provide methods of assessment that exemplify qualitative reasoning.

Bredekamp, in the book ‘Major Trends and Issues in Early Childhood Education’, a collected edition of reports (Bredekamp Isenberg, and Jalongo, 2003), initiates discussion on the philosophical standpoints behind thinking in education, impressing how they may framework progressive education. An appreciation for the Vygotskian notion is given, this states “learning is fundamentally social in nature, that all of us—children, families, caregivers, classroom teachers, and teacher educators learn from one another.” (Bredekamp, Isenberg and Jalongo, 2003, p.7).

With consideration this creates the argument to “…consider the other direction—the many ways in which teachers can and must learn from children and families”. (Bredekamp, Isenberg and Jalongo, 2003, p.7).

By examining social environments and inter personal relations holistically, and examining learning as a multi-faceted process, including introspection and review on the behalf of the practitioner, early childhood education may evolve new approaches:

“…the importance of human relationships through which learning occurs…all the authors call in their unique voices for meaningful
collaboration, establishing a sense of community, promoting educational enquiry, and reforming early childhood education in ways that put children’s need first.”
(Bredekamp, Isenberg and Jalongo, 2003, p.7)

Is Music Education Facing Privatisation Effects?

Prior to 2012 school music services were funded through the Education Services Grant (Halsey, 2015). As of September 2012 the Department of Education (under Michael Gove) reshuffled support for music education. Curriculum support for music at Primary level (Key Stages 1 and 2) was stopped, with schools still expected to provide high quality music education. This new direction was outlined in a ‘National Plan for Music Education’, a 54-page document that will stay in effect till 2020 (Gov UK, 2011).

As a music curriculum must stay in effect (without government support) the responsibility now relies on individual schools to address any shortfalls. The plan also outlined music budgets; schools may spend budgets on outside services and any funding toward additional services must come from Music Education Hubs. The Department of Education announced it would still continue to fund music services for three years following April 2012 with £77m, £65m and £60m each year respectively (Gov UK, 2013).

One school in Newcastle explains how they get an allowance from Newcastle Music Service to purchase lessons, workshops and performances from them (Service Level Agreement). Following on from this however, “there is little or no official material to say this is what to teach, this is how to teach it or this is how to assess it” (Lawson, 2014).

Newcastle Music Service is part of a Music Education Hub, consisting of a partnership with Gateshead Music Service, North Tyneside Music Education Hub, Northumberland City Council Music Service, Newcastle College and Sage Gateshead (Northumberland County Council, n.d.). Hubs were appointed with the task of providing curriculum support for schools music, as set out in the ‘National Plan’ and through guidelines set by Ofsted to challenge and support schools to improve their curriculum (Gov UK, 2011).

The changes in support, from a central government funding body setting out a required curriculum, to schools applying to local hubs:

“assumes that the hubs have all become self-sustaining models of public-private finance, and that they are all generating enough revenue not to need the money the music services formerly received from Local Authorities – and that simply isn’t the case.”
(Service, 2014)

Hubs, in turn, must either generate enough money from their services to support
schools, or apply to the Arts Council for funding.

The Arts Council was set up by the Department of Education (outlined in the National Plan) as a funding body and regulator for hubs. Hubs must now apply for funding using a thirty thousand word bidding document and be subject to quarterly risk assessment, based on the Arts Councils own assessment (Halsey, 2015). The plan must include: “needs analysis, risk assessment, key performance indicators/milestones and financial information” (Arts Council, 2012). Failure to meet these targets can result in funding being immediately withdrawn. The quarterly reviews require large amounts of working time. Music services are at danger of having to prove quantifiably that they are deemed worthy of receiving funding. This has led to an ‘interest in data’ and some creative juggling of numbers, the Musicians Union report of hubs effectiveness states:

“We have seen music services making the whole of their teaching staff redundant only to re-engage them on casual and zero hour contracts or as self-employed teachers. We have even seen a contract called an ‘As and when contract’ which means teachers do not know what commitment of work they have on a weekly basis.” (Widdison and Hanley, 2014, p.5)

Further problems have been outlined in the report by the Musicians Union, stating that hubs have not been integrated well enough with schools, and a failure on the part of the Department of Education and the Arts Council to notify schools sufficiently of changes has fragmented funding and led to distance between hubs and schools. Local Authorities also saw this as a way of decreasing funding.

The announcement of continued Department of Education funding for three years gave many Local Authorities an excuse to:

“…withdraw their investment as they are under pressure to make significant savings themselves. As Government has withdrawn the power and influence of Local Authorities and cut their expenditure music services have, unfortunately, been one of the many casualties of this process.” (Widdison and Hanley, 2014, p.4)

Many staff are now paid hourly rather than a salary agreed through a contract (and in turn, hourly paid work has become zero hour contracts). There is simply not enough staff to complete the administration required to initiate salaried contractual agreements (Halsey, 2015).

The introduction of zero hour contracts, and the lack of training and support available for new tutors have had a knock on effect on morale and any further dissemination of services will ultimately result in a decline in music education at a national
level. The new funding schemes are already providing an imbalance in the quality of education available, and a lack of specialised music educators entering the profession will leave schools unavailable to provide a coherent curriculum. The decentralisation of government support has seemed to cause a privatisation effect on music services in schools, and a lack of communication and disorganisation is turning potential teaching staff away from education.

Amidst all this, the Government has announced a further £17m in funding, intended to be given direct to music hubs. Halsey (2015) explained that this would cover any gaps until 2016, an additional two years added to the original plan. This will allow further changes to the organisational structure of hubs working in the area. Plans are to combine the management of partnership members. As a result of a merger, a centralised management system can be created so work is not being carried out multiple times independently.

The unrolling of the National Plan (Gov UK, 2011) will certainly see many changes for primary music education, though perhaps the flexibility of the National Plan and the guidelines surrounding it offer music educators a chance to collaborate with hubs and schools to provide a worthwhile curriculum.

Music as a subject is considered a mainstay in the educational curriculum, most other subjects (excluding the core curriculum) have been ‘dissolved at some point’ (Halsey, 2015). It can be assumed music has an importance to the Government, and will be included in the educational curriculum for the foreseeable future.

Efforts on part of the Musicians Union have seen the creation of a Music Education Hub pack (available at musiceducationuk.com/hubs), designed to allow music educators to see how hubs may develop their careers. By building an awareness of the services available, for both private educators and schools, a wider network of support and development possibilities should arise. New methods of assessment for funding that take into account the wider benefits of a musical education must be argued for, providing a consistent tool for measuring the importance of primary music education.

Conclusion

Drawing upon official documentation and interviews with professionals working in the field has allowed a summarisation of music’s current status in primary education. Assessing language employed in Government set plans highlighted a change in responsibility from a centralised position to individual hubs and services. The changes in finance, and application for funding, mirrors this shift with individual schools now the source of many major decisions.
Suggestions for changes have been highlighted, the current quantitative assessment measures are proving cumbersome and a move back toward a creative curriculum would provide many benefits for children. The research into creativity and play provide a sound platform for experiential learning, merging aspects of education with music therapy and healthcare initiatives.

Early music education is arguably an important inclusion in the curriculum providing many necessary skills and attributes that feed into the core subjects. The removal of support from the curriculum has required schools to majorly reform their practices and funding opportunities. The formation of Music Education Hubs, although not performing as well as intended or documented, has allowed a focusing of services in local areas. With plans to bring together the various hubs, increasing support and offering services that range beyond only music education in schools, the future of music education looks set to remain a vital part of early education.
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