

Music for all: Identifying, challenging and overcoming barriers

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Abstract

A great deal of change has occurred within UK music education over the past decade. There were good intentions behind some of the changes; for example, the government had an ambition to provide everyone with access to music education during their school years. The timing of such initiatives, however, was unfortunate. Within the context of financial austerity and the subsequent cuts to public spending, education budgets came under increasing pressure. This article examines the current challenges facing music education within England and raises questions for researchers to consider as the future direction of research in the field starts to take shape.

Keywords

Challenges, music education, participant voice, research, technology

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We are living in a time where the place of music education feels uncertain, despite a wealth of compelling evidence relating to the value of music in and for our lives. Taking England as an example, there are several factors that have led to this current position. The UK Government's 2010 Spending Review resulted in significant cuts to education (and all) budgets and following a peak in education spending of £91.5 billion in 2011, this spending reduced to around £85 billion each year, where it had remained until a recent increase in 2019 to £89 billion (https://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/uk_national_education_analysis [accessed 22 November 2019]). In 2011 the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced by the government to ensure that students studied the 'Five Pillars' of English, Maths, Science, Modern Foreign Languages and Humanities (History and Geography). The Department for Education (DfE) set a target for 75% of pupils to be entered for the EBacc by 2022 and 90% by 2025 (DfE, 2019). The introduction of the EBacc has led to reduced numbers of students likely to study one or more arts subjects (Carroll & Gill, 2017), a situation confirmed by the recent Durham Commission on Creativity in Education (2019) which highlights that a reduction in the status of arts subjects puts at risk their 'invaluable contribution to the development of creativity in young people' (p. 6).

The National Plan for Music Education was published in 2011 (DfE, 2011) with the clear objective that 'Children

from all backgrounds and every part of England should have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument; to make music with others; to learn to sing; and to have the opportunity to progress to the next level of excellence if they wish to' (p. 7). Whilst this may initially appear to provide increased access to music within schools, this ambition does not sit comfortably alongside the priorities of the EBacc. The National Music Plan is partly implemented via Music Education Hubs through whole class ensemble teaching programmes and singing strategy schemes which provide greater numbers of students with the opportunity to engage in some form of practical musical participation within the primary school curriculum (<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/music-education/music-education-hubs>). Research also suggests that a larger number of learners from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds are accessing music education (Fautley & Whittaker, 2017), demonstrating that the music curriculum changes have fostered greater inclusivity. However, research by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM, 2014) in the UK

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suggests that whilst increasing numbers of children are learning to play instruments, children living in areas of high deprivation are more likely to cease learning because of the costs of sustained musical involvement. This is supported by findings which suggest that this demographic is 30% less likely to take GCSE music at key stage four (Carroll & Gill, 2017). The popularity of particular instruments aligns with the musical interests of young people, with electric guitar, bass guitar and keyboard now in the top ten instruments learned (cf. ABRSM, 2014). The prioritisation of the western classical canon within the music classroom is changing, and Fautley and Whittaker (2017) suggest that this reflects ‘current thinking about music education, such as social justice and pupil voice. It also shows that MEHs [Music Education Hubs] are likely to be reflecting changes within music-making as a part of the Nation’s creative economy as a whole’ (2017, p. 45).

This broad context should give us pause for thought. What is the impact and value of music education in the 21st century? And what are the longer-term implications for the future of school, college and university music education, and perhaps more importantly, for individuals and society?

As the other articles in this special issue of Music and Science identify, we know a great deal about the value of music in a variety of contexts. We understand that musical participation has many wider benefits on social, psychological and cognitive skills; we learn and develop *through* music. We also know a great deal about how our musical skills develop, how this can be done optimally, and how teachers can stimulate musical abilities; we learn *in* music. Over the past few years there has been much public debate in response to the diminishing presence of music education in the classroom but one overwhelming narrative has been about the value of music for supporting other learning or developing non-musical skills (see, for example: https://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr123.shtml). At the same time, a long-running debate about what should be taught in school music education highlights the benefits of introducing and embedding classical music within a child’s school education in order to avoid its perception as a niche and exclusive artform and instead to instil a lifelong passion for music (<https://www.gramophone.co.uk/blog/gramophone-guest-blog/why-are-our-schools-pushing-classical-music-to-the-margins>). This perspective can often sit in opposition to discussions about how we best equip students for a variety of potential musical futures which may include performance, but might also involve working in the community, as an entrepreneur, in the music business or with technology (<https://www.musichouse.school.com/music-education-out-of-the-past-and-into-the-future>). It is curious that despite the wealth of compelling and high-quality research evidence for the value of the arts and music in education (reflected in the high number of edited volumes relating to music education in the UK and

internationally that have been published over the last decade (cf. Abeles & Custodero, 2010; McPherson & Welch, 2012a, 2012b; Ruthman & Mantie, 2017), explicit acknowledgement or even recognition of this is not forthcoming from key government figures who have the authority and mandate to enact change. This context raises several questions: Who is making the decisions? What is the research evidence upon which those decisions are built? What constitutes compelling and meaningful research evidence for those who are making the high-level policy decisions? What are the different roles of music in education and everyday life throughout the lifespan? What are the implications of changes to music education for different geographic locations and communities? And finally, what is it about music and musical participation that seems to have such impacts on individuals?

Having set this rather broad context, this article raises questions and challenges which relate to music education research and its impact in wider society. In her book *Including Everyone*, Judith Jellison (2015) argues that the goal of music education for all children should be ‘joyful lifelong music involvement’ (p. vii). Young people, too, recognise that music is universally relevant, whilst acknowledging the numerous factors (including the availability of opportunities or resources, or support for continuation at key transition points) that can prevent their access to music education (Creech et al., 2016). Over recent years there has been an increase in research focusing on more diverse populations and their musical learning. For example: Kari Veblen’s (2018) work on adult music learning; Sarah Mawby’s (2018) research on *music education in Special Education settings* (as opposed to music *to support* other educational goals); the various studies which have critically evaluated the value of the *El Sistema*-type approach to music education and social inclusion (cf. Mota et al., 2016); and Tuulikki Laes’ (2015) work on music education in later adulthood. These publications stand out in a research field which more often neglects these types of subject matter; what implicit messages are being transmitted by the kinds of research we choose to conduct, or the populations on which we choose to focus? Whose voices are we representing? Who is receiving which messages? And what are we doing to make the implications of our research clear and powerful?

Insights into first-hand experiences of musical participation in a variety of contexts are well-represented within the literature (e.g., Gary McPherson’s research on learning a musical instrument (2000), Lucy Green’s work on how popular musicians learn (2001), Stephanie Pitts’ research on lifelong involvement in music (2012)). Consulting students about their experiences is one approach, but another might be to adopt a ‘pupil-as-researcher’ approach. Thompson and Gunter (2006) write about the benefits of the latter approach for understanding school culture more generally, and Cain and Burnard’s (2012) chapter on music teachers and pupils as researchers explores the potential

benefits (and challenges) of this approach within the music education context. The approach is relatively straightforward (though undoubtedly time-consuming) with older children and adults, but there could be more research which tries to represent the voices of individuals who are either younger, or who have more complex needs.

Murphy and McFerran's (2017) research into music participation and social connectedness for young people with intellectual disability highlights this challenge effectively; their work suggests that participant voices have only started to emerge in research in this area since 2004. Of the 27 articles included in their critical interpretative synthesis of relevant research articles, 11 aimed to gather data which provided the participants with a voice in the research. Whilst acknowledging the challenges of gathering the perspectives of individuals who are non-verbal, for example, the authors are clear about the value that can be achieved by finding ways to gather the perspectives of those participating in the activity:

Collaborative decision-making in the design of programs, setting agendas and evaluation in research will all provide opportunities for young people to exercise greater choice and control in their lives. There is a need for music programs' facilitators to 'embrace diversity rather than normalcy' (Rolvjord, 2014, p. 16) to contribute to the creation of a welcoming music culture in which people of all abilities can take part and flourish (Murphy & McFerran, 2017, p. 311).

This approach to research is far from straightforward but it could be argued that we have an ethical obligation to embrace and represent diversity and to dedicate careful thought to how this might be achieved; such an inclusive approach to research may also have a more pronounced impact in the real world too.

Longitudinal studies have a great deal of potential value in music education (Aróstegui, 2016); as someone who has tended towards longitudinal research (Burland & Davidson, 2002; Burland, 2005; Burland et al. (in press); Burland et al., 2018)) I fully understand the challenges this presents – particularly in terms of participant attrition which can vary greatly (5%–70%) according to the focus of the research (Marcellus, 2004) and is partly a symptom of the research taking place over a long period of time (it requires considerable commitment from participants, contact details change, people change location, individual circumstances change). The richness of insight longitudinal research can provide is very powerful (it allows us to explore the emotional, psychological and behavioural impact of activities over time) and allows greater understanding of the complex and interconnected network of factors that influence musical learning – for example, understanding how the roles of teachers, schools and caregivers interact with changes in identity, motivation and access to opportunities throughout the course of musical learning (e.g., McPherson et al., 2012; Miksza, 2007). An

equally important aspect of longitudinal research is that it can also help us to understand why people discontinue their musical engagement over time, which can, for example, offer a different perspective to the evaluation of musical interventions and activities. A further rationale to engage with longitudinal research is that individuals undergo important changes across the lifespan which have a significant effect on their sense of self and identity, which in turn has a marked impact on the lifestyle and behavioural choices those individuals may make. The application of longitudinal techniques has the potential to enable us to understand this complexity more fully, and to situate the individual within a broader, and increasingly complex, social context.

'Social interaction' no longer implies face-to-face human contact, but also includes our online lives and personas, enacted via an increasing variety of social media platforms, facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies. These technologies 'take full advantage of the network nature of the Web: they encourage participation, are inherently social and open' (Ullrich et al., 2008, p. 1) and research highlights the benefits of social media for connecting individuals to communities (O-Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), to accessing additional support networks (Steinfeld et al., 2008) or for enabling collaboration with others (for example in a university context, Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2013). However, research also suggests that social media use can lead to increased perceived social isolation (Primack et al., 2017) and a reduced quality of life (Leung & Lee, 2005). Given that social media is almost unavoidable, it is necessary for us to continue to explore its role within our lives as social beings as well as in our musical pursuits; how does it impact on the way we learn, or seek out new information? How do we 'perform' ourselves on such platforms and how does this impact on our other social relationships? What is the role of technology in our musical learning, engagement and participation?

Of particular interest here is the potential for Web 2.0 technologies to expand the classroom and offer alternatives for us to express our creativities and identities in new ways (Greenhow et al., 2009). What does this mean for music education and understanding the ways in which we learn about diverse musics and musical cultures? Of course, the impact of technological developments on our musical behaviours has already become second nature for many of us – online streaming, for example, has been shown to increase the quantity and diversity of our consumption as well as allowing new musical discoveries (Datta et al., 2017). There are positive examples of online music collaboration, including: a recent Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded online orchestra project, aimed at increasing accessibility to musical participation for those living in remote communities (<http://onlineorchestra.com/>); Renee Crawford's (2013) work on *Project Music X*, which aimed to enable pupils in remote or rural communities to use music technology to compose or create soundscapes; and

Michele Biasutti's (2015) work on developing collaborative online environments for musical composition. Technological developments such as these have implications for the music classroom and may inspire motivation to engage with music, but they may also offer alternative ways to use music to connect with others.

However, where researchers have tried to understand the ways in which digital technologies are incorporated in the music classroom by teachers, findings suggest that there is 'limited transformative change in the teachers' practice and the students' learning' (Wise et al., 2011, p. 132). Crawford's (2013) findings demonstrate the positive impact of technologies on pupil learning and engagement, though she highlights the need to address the threats of digital technologies through education and government policy rather than simply preventing access outright. More work is needed on the reality and implications of adopting Web 2.0 technologies – there are justifiable concerns about the safety of online communities, particularly for children – and the longer-term consequences of this kind of online musical engagement are still to be fully understood. What are the potential benefits of new technologies and musical engagement? In what ways do these differ for different age groups across the lifespan? What is the right balance of traditional and new approaches to music education? How are different approaches to musical engagement experienced by the children? What additional training and support would be needed for the teachers and parents/wider support networks? Would new technologies significantly enhance teachers' abilities to teach the music curriculum or would they get in the way?

As a university professor who has supervised numerous music education research projects, I am reminded frequently of the challenges that research in this field presents: gaining access to schools, working with teachers who are already time-pressured and experiencing high levels of stress, and within an education system which seems to be in a constant process of change and transition, where pressure on teaching core subjects seems to create additional tension for arts subjects. There are also questions about who is best placed to carry out research in the music education classroom; the insider perspective and the teacher–pupil relationship are undoubtedly valuable assets, but with increased pressure on teachers, opportunities for them to design and conduct research studies themselves may seem like a distant hope. There is no doubt that working in close collaboration with schools is vital to the music education researcher; for schools to agree to participate in a research project its value must thus be clearly articulated. This raises questions about how the benefits of research, and being part of a research process, might be convincingly articulated to teachers and Headteachers. How might collaborative working between researchers, teachers and pupils be encouraged?

Part of the challenge in answering these questions relates to the ease with which educators are able to access the latest research findings; costly subscriptions are

undoubtedly a barrier and hard to justify to schools which may have small music departments. Hopefully, moves towards open access publication of research might increase the dissemination of research findings, but the research community should not be complacent; we need to think about the applications and implications of our research findings for the particular contexts we are investigating and be proactive in how we share our research findings with key stakeholders. How can we ensure that teachers, policy makers and government officials, read the valuable research that is being published? What are the best channels for sharing the practical applications of our research with educators and what do they need in order to integrate new ideas within their classrooms?

We know with greater certainty than ever that music is important to individuals and their communities, and there is a growing body of evidence that confirms the capacity of music to make a difference to our lives. Music education plays an important role in providing all school children with an opportunity to experience some form of musical participation which may stay with them for a life of musical engagement and interest (Pitts, 2012), as well as providing potential benefits for wellbeing (cf. MacDonald et al., 2013). However, it is hard to move away from the external pressures that seem to be facing music education and the arts more generally; the ongoing need to justify its place in the curriculum and the competition for resources amidst so many other deserving causes and initiatives. This is a broad field of study, and so it is difficult to propose a coherent approach for future research, but I'd like to conclude with a few questions that have current meaning for me, as a result of my own engagement with the discipline – as a researcher and educator.

- Whose voices are we trying to represent, and how successful are we in doing so?
- Whose priorities are we trying to influence and change?
- Which barriers can prevent the research from taking place?
- How do we ensure that research embraces diversity?
- How can we create environments where the outcomes of educational research might be tested and applied in a timely fashion?
- How might collaboration between educators, researchers and pupils benefit music education?
- Who does the knowledge belong to? How does it engage stakeholders? How is it shared and stored?

Whilst these questions arise from my own experiences, they reflect themes arising from the research literature which are pertinent and timely. The first version of this paper was originally written before the advent of Covid-19 and it is sobering to see the extent to which the creative and performing arts, and their practitioners, have been so negatively impacted by the pandemic, to the extent that

they feel more under threat than ever (House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2020). As researchers and educators, one of our ethical responsibilities lies in supporting the industry to thrive again; part of our role is to ask the right questions and to conduct meaningful and impactful research that explores its value and impact on individuals and society.


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