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A cross-cultural comparison of music education experiences and ambitions in two Spanish and English primary schools

Abstract

A small-scale comparative study of music education provision in two Spanish and English primary schools was carried out in 2013-14, using questionnaires, interviews and observations. The study investigated the musical experiences of the children in the two schools, their ambitions for their musical futures, and the classroom practices and policy contexts that shaped these encounters with musical learning. Through thematic analysis and comparison of the data from the two schools, we examine music in children's lives, music in the classroom, and musical ambitions and values, and consider how well the music curriculum serves the children in each setting.

Setting the scene(s)

Despite the growth in interest in comparative research in music education in recent decades (Cox & Stevens, 2010; Hargreaves & North, 2001), opportunities for detailed qualitative studies across multiple settings are still rare, dependent as they are on accumulated or shared knowledge of diverse educational settings. This paper reports on a fortuitous collaboration between a student who undertook a language teaching placement in Seville while studying Music and Spanish at the University of Sheffield, and the two professors of music education who supported her work in England and Spain. As a language teaching assistant with musical expertise and an interest in education, the first author was uniquely positioned to carry out data collection in the two countries, and so to gain a rich understanding of children's contrasting musical

worlds. Our paper reports on the findings from this study, and sets them in the context of current debates on the place and purpose of music education in these two countries.

A comparison between primary school music education in England and Spain is made interesting by the differences in the historical and current practices in the two countries, and in particular the way in which specialist music education, delivered in conservatoires, is a much more prominent part of Spanish musical training than is the case in England. Conservatorios, offering training in keyboard skills, harmony, history of music, choir, and instrumental lessons, have been a feature of Spanish musical education since the late 1800s, with significant further expansion in the mid-1990s (Longueira, 2011). The region of Andalucía alone has over 200 conservatorios (Checa, 2012, p. 28), while in the UK, by contrast, there are eight conservatoires in the whole country, mainly operating at degree level (Scanlon et al., 2012).[1]

Both countries underwent curriculum reforms in the late 1980s/early 1990s that made music education compulsory in primary schools (ages 5-11), supporting a shared premise that 'a basic arts education should be available to all children' (Rusinek & Sarfson, 2010, p. 95). However, confidence to teach music has been consistently reported to be low in the UK (Hennessy, 2000) and the debate over whether classroom music should be taught by generalists or specialists has never been fully resolved (Mills, 2009). In Spain, where provision for music teacher training is similarly lacking, specialist teachers are responsible for the delivery of music in primary schools (Rusinek & Sarfson, 2010), but the problems of inadequate resources

[1] There are similarities in the focus of both types of institution upon elite performance and training for professional musical careers; however, the conservatorios in Spain, as in other central European countries, focus their attention on younger students, and we retain the Spanish term in this article to distinguish between this and the UK system.[2] The focus group method was not employed in the English school, partly due to limitations of time, and also because of unfamiliarity with the children and the school, which had contributed to the effectiveness of the method in Spain. Nonetheless, the English children provided extensive and insightful questionnaire responses, sufficient to enable effective comparisons.

and low status in the curriculum are shared by both countries (Díaz, 2002; Welch et al., 2004).

Our research is located, therefore, in two contexts with different priorities and expectations for music education, but a shared dissatisfaction about its status in the curriculum. Through detailed case studies of two primary schools, we have been able to investigate how the curriculum requirements and research rhetoric of each country are played out in the classroom, so responding to the call for an increase in 'genuinely comparative studies' (Tate, 2001, p. 224).

The status and provision of music in England and Spain

The history of music education has been more thoroughly researched in England (e.g. Pitts, 2000; Cox, 2002) than in Spain (Rusinek & Sarfson, 2010), but the available evidence shows some similarities in the foundations of a universal music education. Both countries focused initially on collective singing in the secondary school classroom, with Spanish schools in the 1950s drawing on patriotic songs for explicitly nationalistic reasons (Carabaña, 1988, p. 213), while English schools from the start of the twentieth century had followed the work of folk song collectors in promoting choral singing in schools (Rainbow, 2006, p. 257). In England, the range of musical provision in schools widened over the following decades to include music appreciation, the proliferation of extra-curricular ensembles including school choirs and orchestras, and the creative, child-centred musical learning promoted by John Paynter and other composer-educators (Paynter & Aston, 1970), which would become arguably the UK's most distinctive contribution to worldwide music education (Finney, 2011). In Spain, by contrast, the music curriculum remained narrowly defined, and a belated broadening to include use of instruments and composing in

primary schools in the 1990s was hampered by economic constraints (Rusinek & Sarfson, 2010, p. 99). Alongside this minimal provision of music in mainstream schools, the conservatorio system flourished, with high quality performance as their central aim, achieved through provision of instrumental and aural training (Longueira Matos, 2011, p. 243). The two countries, therefore, diverged in their emphasis on high standards of performance outside the mainstream curriculum (Spain) versus accessibility and diversity within it (England), resulting in implicit differences in the status, focus and ethos of music education in schools.

A similar comparison of contemporary music education debate and discourse in the two countries reveals that despite these substantial historical differences, there are many shared challenges facing music educators in Spanish and English classrooms. The low status of music, overshadowed by the 'core' subjects prioritized by both governments, means that the Spanish description of there being 'not much space for music and arts' (Aróstegui, 2014, p.38) sounds all too familiar to English researchers and practitioners. The UK Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) has criticised the 'wide differences in the quality and quantity of music education' across England (Ofsted, 2012, p. 4), demonstrating that musical provision is still heavily dependent on teachers' skills and enthusiasm, and the support of school management (Welch, 2001). Rusinek and Sarfson (2010) report a similar situation in Spain, of music 'being taught by a few highly motivated primary school teachers with some musical background and by music specialists employed in some private schools' (p.94).

Clearly these are challenging times for music education in both countries, and a comparative study afforded the opportunity to examine the two systems of provision and address the following research questions: 1) How is music education experienced in English and Spanish primary schools by the teachers, pupils and parents involved?

2) What are the strengths and weaknesses of each system, as evidenced in the case study schools? and 3) What lessons can Spanish and English music educators learn from one another?

Research methods and participants

The research was conducted in two primary schools: one located near Seville, Spain, where Eli Hardcastle carried out her language teaching placement, and the other in Sheffield, England, where a local school was selected to be as similar to the Seville school as possible, to facilitate comparison. Both schools are state primary schools of a similar size with a specialist music teacher; both have two to three classes of between 25 and 30 children in each year group. Questionnaires were conducted with children from Years 2–6 (ages 6 to 11 years) in each school, and were administered in class by the first author, to provide opportunities for clarifying questions as necessary. This method aimed for a large-scale overview of children's experiences of music in school, and generated 130 responses in Spain and 136 in England. A range of closed-questions (rating-scales and yes/no answers) was used to provide easily comparable data, with additional open-questions to allow free expression of ideas (Kumar, 2010, p.153). The anonymity of the answers was emphasised to avoid sociably-desirable answers (Rovai, Baker & Ponton, 2014, p.348).

In the Spanish school, two groups from each year were selected to participate in focus groups: one group consisted of students who played an instrument or attended a conservatorio, and the other of students who did not play an instrument. The focus groups facilitated a natural, conversational format (Neuman, 2011, p.460), encouraging the children to elaborate on their thoughts in discussion with each other. A notable limitation, however, was the potential for children to copy others, or be

influenced by stronger characters, and so the prevalence of specific ideas was treated with caution in the analysis.[2]

Interviews were undertaken with the Spanish and English music teachers, using a semi-structured interview style with a prompt sheet of questions. Care was taken to avoid 'interviewer bias' such as leading questions, which could have been the drawback of the researcher's knowledge of the two settings (McNeill and Chapman, 2005, p.62). Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full (and where appropriate, translated) with the written permission of the participants, who were assured of their anonymity, in line with the ethical approval granted by the University of Sheffield. A series of observations also took place in every year group in both schools: over 20 observations in Spain and over 30 in England, with a main focus on classroom activities supplemented by observations of activities such as choir, orchestra and assembly. This method sought to provide a context for the children's and teachers' responses, and a greater insight on how music was experienced in each school. Extensive fieldnotes were taken at the time and written up afterwards, in order to provide a detailed ethnographic account of each setting.

The questionnaires, transcriptions and fieldnotes were then subjected to a process of thematic analysis through repeated reading of the data to identify key ideas (King and Horrocks, 2010, p.152). These were highlighted, evidenced through quotes, and presented in tables for comparison and ongoing analysis. Quantitative results for the questionnaires were converted into percentages to facilitate comparisons through use of descriptive statistics. Initial analysis identified three key themes that will be

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addressed in the discussion that follows: (i) music in children's lives, (ii) music in the classroom, and (iii) musical ambitions and values.

Thematic discussion

(i) *Music in children's* lives

All children from both schools expressed that they either 'like' or 'love' listening to music – an activity they enjoyed with their friends or families. In contrast, almost none mentioned school music upon explaining when they listen to music, so confirming the separation of musical engagement within and outside the classroom that has been noted in previous studies (Lamont et al., 2003). In both countries, children were conscious of the influence of family and friends on their musical life, and examples of musical experiences all referenced contexts and people outside school, including parents and siblings:

> Well for me, if it wasn't for my dad I wouldn't be playing an instrument, he always tells me to study to learn more songs. (Guido, Y5S[4])

> My sister [influenced me], she was really good at playing flute, and I thought I could beat her. (Thomas, Y5UK)

However, despite reports from all of the instrumental players in the Year 6 focus groups in Spain that at least one family member played an instrument, the school music teacher reported that parental support for music in school was extremely low. Some children were also aware of these limits on their musical ambitions, and of the

[4] Responses are presented with pseudonyms, followed by a year and country code e.g. Year 6, Spain [Y6S], Year 5, UK [Y5UK]

possible reasons for them: “Because my parents don’t have any instruments, and with the crisis…” (Eva, Y2S). In the English school, the music teacher described how “on the whole here the parents are really supportive”, citing examples of parents attending concerts helping out with activities such as recorder club, though this will by no means be universal across schools in England, and music teachers in the UK face similar challenges of asserting the subject’s role in a comprehensive education. Further evidence of parental support could be seen in the extent to which children participated in the optional instrumental lessons that were available in school (England) or through the conservatorio (Spain). Differences in access were strongly evident, as 24% of the Spanish children reported playing an instrument other than the recorder, while in the English school the response was 55%. Managing vastly differing abilities in the school music classroom created difficulties for both the more experienced children, who “know the pieces and the others don’t, so I get bored” (Lucía, Y5S), and those who felt pressured by the superior skills of their classmates: “I don’t do well in music and I get flustered and when that happens, well, I don’t do well” (Belén, Y6S). The effects of a separate conservatorio system on musical confidence, competence and engagement are evident in these examples; though the counter-argument, that having fewer children reaching a higher standard in music is a more effective use of resources, is not represented here, and would require further investigation in the conservatorios themselves (cf. Scanlon et al., 2012).

Differences between the two systems were also evident in the opportunities for extra-curricular musical participation, such as voluntary ensembles and choirs, which has historically been a strong element of UK school music provision (Pitts, 2011). The English school in our study had an orchestra of around 20 children, and a choir with 60-70 members, each rehearsing together weekly. In the Spanish school no

extra-curricular musical activities were offered, despite the abundance of options such as English and dance classes. Those who did not attend extra-curricular activities in the English school provided reasons such as time constraints and other commitments, although 35% stated that they would like to attend. In the Spanish school, 63% of children would like to participate in extra-curricular activities: their reasons for not doing so included not being allowed to by their parents, ability, and costs – all linked to the fact that such opportunities would be situated in the conservatorio rather than the school. Similar imbalances were seen in the number of school performances being offered: in the last year the English primary school had performed a musical, a choir concert, and carols at an elderly care home, while the Spanish children had contributed a few musical acts to 'culture week', at performances within school time rather than to an external audience.

(ii) Music in the classroom

Observations of the Spanish and English music classes revealed some similarities and differences in resources, lesson length and musical activities[5]. The Spanish classes were longer and with fewer children, but these advantages were outweighed by lack of resources and limitations on making noise due to proximity to other classrooms. In the English school, a specialist music room afforded more opportunities, but lessons were shorter and classes larger, and the available resources were not much used in the lessons that were observed during the research project.

Both countries have a national curriculum for music, which in England (DfE, 2013) focuses on the use of voices, playing of instruments, experimentation, listening skills and historical background, while the Spanish curriculum (Jefatura del Estado,

[5] These are summarised in Table 1 in the online version of this article

2013) places particular emphasis on listening and interpretation. In each country, the full ambitions of the curriculum are greater than the available time and resources, and observations in these particular schools suggested that many aspects remained incomplete, such as a lack of composition in both settings.

For the children in the music classes, day to day interactions with their music teacher are more important than the official requirements of the curriculum. The encouragement and enthusiasm of both teachers were appreciated by their classes, demonstrating the effect of teacher attitude on pupil motivation. The music teacher in England was explicit in his aims to make music fun – "it's just trying to make it as enjoyable and as fun as possible" – while his Spanish counterpart commented more on her aim of giving children a good grounding in recorder playing, and ensuring that they are not only enjoying themselves, but learning. She reported that music lessons were too short and therefore often pressured, so explaining one pupil's sympathetic observation that "when she gets annoyed she is really shouty, but she always has a reason" (Cristina, Y6S).

Children in both schools offered both positive and negative views of the content of their music lessons, being most often disappointed when they perceived there to be a lack of variety in their lessons. This problem was acknowledged by the Spanish teacher with regard to "children who don't really like the recorder, who could express themselves through another means". Ratings for liking of music lessons fell sharply amongst the older English children, suggesting that the emphasis on singing and fun might be inadequate in comparison to the substantial academic content of other subjects at that stage of school. In Spain, dissatisfaction most often related to the frequent 'tests' undertaken by playing solo recorder pieces in class, which for the less confident or able children was a struggle: "I get the notes wrong quite a lot so the

song comes out badly" (Marina, Y6S). Being challenged musically in this way could, however, have positive effects on children who succeeded against their own expectations: straight after singing a solo, one Year 2 boy in the English school declared "I've got braver since I was trying to sing the song over there!".

When asked what they would change about their lessons, around half the Spanish children mentioned playing more, or different, instruments: "I would like to learn something other than the recorder" (Nerea, Y4S). The few percussion instruments in the school rarely emerged from the cupboard in the observed lessons, and the teacher reported similar frustration with this situation, describing how when teaching in another province of Spain, she had two hours a week of music plus a music room – comparable to the 'patchy' provision across England noted by its inspectorate (Ofsted, 2012). A theme also emerged of wanting to perform in public – another important aspect of music that in our study was only available to those who attended the conservatorio.

In the English school, despite the plentiful supply of instruments in the music room, the children's desire to play a greater variety of instruments was also present. This suggests that the instruments were perhaps not being used to the extent described by the teacher; the observed lessons included instruments including chime bars, but the focus fell mainly on singing. A desire to study contemporary pop music also surfaced in the children's stated wishes to "learn pop star songs" (Alice, Y5UK) or "well-known and interesting songs" (Katy, Y6UK). While the aims of education are not always to cater exactly to the children's wishes, the desires expressed in both countries to play more and different instruments are striking, and suggest an eagerness on the children's part to connect 'school music' more closely with the rest of their musical experiences (Ross, 1995). It is also notable that although the Spanish

children's opinions came across more negatively, their overall rating of the importance of music was actually higher than that of the English children. By a small margin, fewer Spanish children (20%) mentioned not wanting to continue with music than English children (23%), and more of the Spanish children expressed a desire to take music on to university level.

(iii) Musical ambitions and values

The status of music within the school and within children's lives is closely intertwined with the shaping of children's future intentions as musical learners, and their ambitions for continuing with music throughout their education and into adulthood. The teachers' encouragement and enthusiasm reported earlier were therefore important not only for their impact on children's motivation, but also for in providing advocacy for the subject in a context where it is at risk of being undervalued. The Spanish music teacher was particularly aware of this mission, feeling herself to be the single influential figure within the school fighting for her subject. Wider surveys demonstrate that such difficulties arise within some schools in both countries, due to the similarly minimal time dedicated to music during teacher training (Ofsted, 2012), and the insufficient resources, time and money given to music in compulsory education (Aróstegui, 2016).

The teacher in England showed a surprisingly high level of acceptance for the low status of music, viewing 30–40 minutes of lesson time a week as sufficient, in contrast with the Spanish teacher's frustration with one hour of class time. The English teacher emphasised the transferable benefits of music learning – including team work, creativity and concentration (Hallam, 2015) – rather than musical knowledge for its own sake. Likewise, the Spanish teacher reported benefits for

confidence and personal development, citing examples of how "for the timid children it is great to allow them to find other ways to express themselves, it is fundamental". Such arguments are often used to secure support for music, but they do risk undermining the intrinsic benefits of the subject, and the Spanish teacher, particularly, balanced these broader claims with a sense that music was valuable for its own sake – to "awaken parts of the mind that probably doesn't happen through other subjects".

The children's awareness of the benefits of musical learning related closely to enjoyment and achievement, and conversely their dissatisfaction was illustrated with examples of boredom or failure. The friendships and social opportunities afforded by music were of importance, so that a typical motivation to join the choir in the English school was that "I just come to have fun, and lots of my friends come too." In the circular format of the English music room, these opportunities for interaction were built into the lesson, as 'call and response' activities between sections of the class taught communication and listening skills, and children learnt to respect others' solos. In the Spanish school, the opportunity for social interaction was lessened by music taking place in the regular classroom, behind desks, though there was still a strikingly positive effect of music lessons on the children's behaviour: one boy who had been disruptive during language classes was contributing, concentrating and involved, most likely because music connected with his own interests as a conservatorio student.

Children tended to see class music as being relatively unimportant in their general education, making unfavourable comparisons with other subjects: "it isn't as important as writing or maths" (Alice, Y5UK). Some of the English children had already decided against continuing with music – a bold decision to make at such a young age, which illustrates Barnes' (2001) assertion that 'if we have not won children's hearts for music by the end of the primary school, there is very little chance

of changing them in secondary school' (p.99). In Spain, 29% classed music amongst their top two most important subjects, while 30% placed it within their three least important subjects. This ambivalent attitude was summed up by one Spanish girl, who stated that "If there weren't music classes, although I love them, it wouldn't matter" (Alba, Y4 S). A prominent theme also emerged in Spain of having to drop music to focus on 'real work' at secondary school, and although similar attitudes were not reported by the English children in this study, they have been found in previous research (Lamont et al., 2003).

This potentially bleak picture of the low commitment and value attributed to music in both countries illustrates that the differences in curricula, teacher style and resources are not the root cause of children's musical attitudes: these stem as much from their comparisons of music with other subjects, their evaluation of its usefulness, and their evident lack of awareness of their own future musical potential. Parents clearly have a strong role to play in shaping these attitudes, and the Spanish teacher in particular was battling with negative perceptions of music and minimal support for learning from her pupils' parents. More worryingly, she reported that the only parents who valued music were those who played an instrument themselves or attended a conservatorio – so identifying a spiral of decline that could result as negative or indifferent attitudes are passed from one generation to the next.

Conclusions

This study began with an implicit bias (for at least two of the researchers) that the greater access and opportunity in English music education would prove to be superior to the provision in Spanish mainstream schools. Instead, we have found that – at least

in these two representative schools – neither country fulfils its curriculum aims, nor exploits music's benefits to their full potential.

The English school did demonstrate a greater provision of opportunities and inclusivity, with some evidence that music was more highly valued by the government, school, parents and the children themselves. In the Spanish school, while the children's overall early music education was positive, this was reliant on the dedication and determination of their teacher, who delivered successful classes in constrained circumstances. This evidence for the importance of excellent teaching is a crucial finding of our study, illustrating the way in which children's opinions of music are shaped by the attitudes and activities that are present in the music classroom. We have demonstrated also, however, that negative perceptions from other influential adults in children's lives, and lack of resources and opportunities, are a strong counter to the music teacher's efforts. For truly effective music education, there need to be multiple routes into musical engagement, and support for children to begin and sustain their involvement. Previous studies would suggest that the 'have a go' culture of English music education lays strong foundations for sustaining musical engagement into adult life, recreationally or professionally (Pitts, 2012). Further research is needed to see how lifelong musical engagement is manifest in Spain, both for the conservatorio students who are expected to reach high standards of musical performance, and for the mainstream school students who are not.

Our findings suggest that each country has something to learn from the other, so demonstrating the usefulness of comparative research for shedding new light on established systems and practices. Although our data collection did not include a detailed case study of a conservatorio, the potentially damaging effects of the stratified provision of musical education were evident in the responses of children in

the Spanish school, both from those who were receiving instrumental tuition there, and those who were unable to owing to lack of ability, resources or parental encouragement. The ethnomusicologist Christopher Small envisaged a new, more inclusive use of the traditional conservatorios, as places for learners of all ages 'where formal instruction goes hand-in-hand with informal musical interaction' (Small, 2010, p. 289). Our research endorses this need to rethink formal structures of musical provision, while cautioning that the English, 'all-comers' approach to music has its flaws too: ready access to music appeared to have generated indifference in some of the English students, and if progress in learning is slow – as it can be in the whole class or small group settings of some UK instrumental provision (Bamford & Glinkowski, 2010) – this can lead to demotivation and drop out during adolescence (Hallam, 2002).

In both countries, there is a need to advocate strongly, reasonably and realistically for the role of music in education – and not only by promising the riches of transferable benefits, but by arguing for the place of music in a creative, comprehensive education. Claiming too little for music, as seemed to be the case in the English school, potentially lowers children's expectations and those of their parents. Recognition of the lifelong impact of good music education is essential – not just for the generation of children currently in school, but for the influence that they will have in the future as potential parents and future supporters of the arts.

This foray into comparative music education studies has provided rich material for comparison and discussion, while highlighting the pitfalls and limitations of a two school case study approach. Talking about music education across geographical boundaries remains an essential challenge for researchers and practitioners, since it prompts a questioning and critique of both the known system and the unfamiliar one,

so foregrounding deep philosophical and practical questions, and encouraging clearer definitions of music education, its purposes and effects.

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