

Using Music in Primary Schools to Improve Learning Outcomes

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My paper presents an argument that the greater involvement of music in primary schools could essentially be of great benefit to young children, both in their behavioural skills and potentially contribute to an initiative to improve academic skills generally. Moreover, there has been consistent evidence established by research that music included in schools, could contribute to a greater sense of well-being amongst pupils which is linked to a possible improvement in academic performance. My methodological approach has been an exploration of the context of music in primary schools evaluating results published in this field of study. My current research shows that there are questions to be raised regarding the lack of music in primary schools and that there is evidence that substantiates that there is a connection between children engaging with music and pupil achievement such as numeracy and literacy skills within a pedagogical context. This has implications for establishing educational policy for teaching music within primary schools.

Keywords: primary school music; effect on numeracy and literacy; Durham Creativity Report; pedagogical practice.

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Introduction

This article will present an argument that the inclusion of music in a primary school setting as a creative pedagogical method could assist in improving learning outcomes in connection with academic achievement combined with an objective to improve behavioural skills. There will be specific references to the North East of England and other regions. I will consider the rationale as to why my subject is relevant and consider important theoretical and empirical sources and engage with research in the area of arts education.

I will refer to some of the results of the benefits of using music relevant to learning outcomes that I have explored within my research in connection with approaching a potential EdD thesis. This includes the work of Hallam (2010) whose evaluative research has considered the impact of music on the personal development of children. Overall conclusions will be drawn showing results of outcomes using music such as an improvement in relationships, and a positive effect on literacy and numeracy and behavioural skills.

The rationale and context as to why this topic is so relevant is based on evidence from a number of reports that detail how the inclusion of music in schools has diminished significantly over the years. There has been the Plowden Report of 1967 which referred to the necessity for music specialist teachers and musical equipment and amongst its recommendations refers to the setting up of Educational Priority Areas to inject extra resources into primary schools (Plowden, 1967).

The Gulbenkian Report (1982) laments the exclusion of the creative arts within the National Curriculum which suggests that little progress had been made over a period of more than 10 years. Moreover, the Report raises relevant concerns about the shortage, supply and training of teachers in the creative arts sector. Ken Robinson discussed the absence of creativity within the education sector and emphasises the importance of the creative arts including music and how the creative arts have a case for a more protracted contribution within the education sector. “In universities, research is defined as a systematic enquiry for new knowledge. Surely music, art and poetry, can be regarded as sources of new knowledge” (Robinson, 2011, p. 105). What progress has been made since the findings of the Report? John Savage argues that a closer examination of the organisations that deliver music such as Music Education Hubs, schools

and other private companies is necessary to be more conclusive (Savage, 2020, p. 469). He further argues that schools now have the legitimacy of being able to establish their own curriculum (Savage, 2020, p. 471). A further relevant concern has been introduced by Daubney and Fautley that in the context of re-starting post-Covid 19 mainstream education, there may not be employment for all returning music educators, as the economic implications following Covid 19 become apparent (Daubney & Fautley, 2020, p. 108). Thus, the availability of opportunities for learning music could be limited for pupils and more so particularly if parents were expected to fund a cost for music tuition. Discussions within these studies strongly supports a discourse that there should be a sustainable policy for music education potentially to ensure that music in the classroom does not become marginalised, particularly beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Position of Music within the Educational Setting

Thus, despite the recommendations of the Plowden Report and Gulbenkian Report, there are still questions to be raised about the lack of progression of music in primary school education. Additionally, the Henley Review (2011) has highlighted concerns about the lack of music generally in education and suggests the importance of establishing a National Plan of Music Education as an imperative to improve the inclusion of music within the school. This is particularly relevant since music is a subject within the Primary National Curriculum for children to be taught in Key Stages 1 and 2. It is an ideal objective that Henley outlines in detail, that schools should provide children with a broad music education and that, “Ofsted’s remit should be expanded to include a review of the standards of Music Education.” (Henley, 2011, p. 33).

A House of Lords briefing (Scott, 2018) similarly makes definitive recommendations to further policy development regarding music education in primary schools and also to ensure funding is more prevalent. Additionally, the briefing calls into question the introduction of the English Baccalaureate as a qualification standard of measurement since GCSE Music is not included in the list of subjects used as a standard of measure of attainment (Scott, 2018). The House of Lords Statement also reports that whilst music education hubs were developed from 2012 onwards, Ofsted indicated in their November 2013 report that only a minority of pupils were being reached and there was clearly much more progress to be made (Ofsted, 2013).

In connection with the challenges and difficulties that are evident from these reports, resources were still somewhat inadequate for the creative arts generally and clearly there was a case for music to be included in schools. Music along with other art forms such as drama, dance and art have been described as creative and cultural activities. Based on this description it is understandable that education specialist Mike Fleming emphasises the significance of creativity in education, stating that it involves using the imagination to use innovative ways of engaging with knowledge, thus leading to effective learning (Fleming, 2012). He suggests that creativity is originality rather than tradition, and innovation rather than discovery. This is an apt definition for modern times and it is relevant that creative arts generally are discussed within the recent Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019) which indicates that there is still much work to do within the education sector, including music.

The findings of the Report were developed from data collated from a series of questionnaires that included headteachers and governors. The Report published in 2019 found that, “there is great interest in teaching creativity and its creativities across the education cycle” (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education 2019, p. 7). Referring to re-establishing the creative arts the report states that, “Drawing on its research, the Commission has developed a vision for promoting creativity in education within the Durham and North East region. All schools from Early Years through post 16 education, should be better enabled to establish and sustain the conditions in which creativity can be promoted” (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019, p. 14).

The Report also asserts an admirable argument that music as well as creative arts should be available especially to disadvantaged children. Recommendation 9 of the Report affirms that the Arts Council should work in partnership with youth sector organisations so that Music Education Hubs should be developed to support ‘out of hours’ activities echoing the recommendations offered within the House of Lords statement (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019).

It is understandable that the Report also substantiates that it is important to emphasise music in primary school education and provides examples of benefits and indicates that creativity is linked to higher standards, and can also improve mental health and well-being. Thus it is recommended that art and design, dance, drama and music should be a significant part of the school curriculum (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019). Based on current trends, mental health and well-being are high on the agenda, and if an inclusion of music for

children substantiates well-being, then there is a greater case for including music in primary schools.

It is also outlined that exposure to a creative learning environment helps children to learn cognitively and emotionally (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019). This viewpoint is underpinned by the teachings of Piaget who introduced a theory that experiential learning is connected to the development of cognitive skills (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education Report certainly has a case and based on its findings, there is an identifiable rationale for focusing on selecting music as an art form to use as a pedagogical tool.

Studies and Theories

To explore the position of music in an educational setting is important because this establishes the rationale of looking in a more focused way at educational research that concerns the argument that music can be a contributory factor to a child's cognitive development. In connection with this there is further evidence discussed amongst educational psychologists who theorise that responding to a musical experience can contribute to an enhancement in learning skills. John Dewey, states that engaging in music affects the whole body (Dewey, 1958) and moreover has written extensively on how the external interaction of a child to its environment can contribute to their cognitive development. He ascribes to a functional psychology which he develops and publishes in *Reflex Arc Concept of Psychology* (1896).

According to Piaget, cognitive development occurs through the interaction of innate capacities within the environment around them (Gross, p. 528). Moreover, Mike Fleming argues that, "a use of art could help in reading skills" (Fleming, 2012, p. 72). Fleming suggests further that 'learning through' is a term which describes engaging with the rudiments of music, which could help in the teaching of maths.

There are also claims that listening to music can contribute to learning achievements such as numeracy. Crncec et al. (2006) explore results from studies that offer a case for and against this claim. Their article confirms that there is further indicative research from a number of studies concerning possible benefits of listening to music and include references to the so-called Mozart effect. It is purported that after listening to the 1st movement of a Mozart Sonata (K448), which lasts for 8 and a half minutes, performances of spatio-temporal abilities may be

improved (Shaw, 2000, cited in Crncec et al., 2006). Tests however have been carried out which have not been conclusive and four studies are referred to that have directly examined the Mozart effect in children and summarily these studies have found no evidence from the Mozart effect on children. In contrast to these studies Crncec et al. refer to the work of Hetland. Whilst his research could be regarded as equivocal, Hetland (2000, cited in Crncec et al.) performed a meta-analysis of experimental studies examining the effects of music lessons on spatio-temporal and other abilities, involving 701 children within 15 studies aged 3-12 years undergoing a programme of music lessons. An improved mean effect size was recorded in spatio-temporal abilities.

More in-depth reporting on the benefits of music has also been referenced by Hallam (2010) in connection with further details on the impact of music on the personal development of children. The article discusses evidence that music can impact positively on a child's personal development referring to the research explaining the science as to how brain activity is linked to engagement with music. There are also references to a range of extensive studies substantiating that music contributes to numeracy, literacy, and well-being. Hallam states that musical skills correlated significantly with phonological awareness. Relevant improved outcomes have been found to be linked to reading skills in a large sample of 4-5 year old children (Anvari et al., 2002 cited in Hallam, 2010). Some studies have focussed on children who are experiencing difficulties with reading. Nicholson, (1972, cited in Hallam, 2010) studied students aged between 6 and 8 categorised as slow learners. Those receiving music instruction had significantly higher reading scores than students in a control group who received no music instruction. Research by Geoghegan and Mitchelmore (1996) showed that musical activities involvement on pre-school children resulted in a higher score in a maths test as compared to a control group. However, the article is not entirely conclusive, since they note that musical accomplishment may have been accounted for by a home musical background.

Although some research may have been open to interpretation, theorists such as Eisner maintain that the Arts effect consciousness positively and states that there is substantive evidence that creativity is connected to improving cognitive skills and behavioural attitudes. He concludes that, "the effects of the arts appear to be greatest when the arts are intentionally used to raise academic achievement in reading and writing" (Eisner, 1998, p. 38). "They promote the use of our imaginative capacities so that we can envision what we cannot actually see, taste, touch, hear and smell: they provide models through we can experience the world in

new ways” (Eisner, 2002, p. 19). This theorising is also consistent with the views of Dewey and Fleming.

Further relevant research includes Constantin Koopman’s article quoting Reimer (1989) who suggests that the arts help us to get hold of our feelings. This is a relevant argument and could explain why music has a significant place to play in focusing a child’s mood towards learning (Kloopman, 1996). Based on the studies and research I have outlined, there is a strong case for the inclusion of music as a pedagogical tool that contributes to pupil achievement.

An Example of the Benefits of Music within an Early Years Setting

The significance of music to a child’s mood is observed and verified in *Teaching Music Differently* (Cain & Cursley, 2017). An observer makes reference to the work of Imelda, a peripatetic music teacher. Visiting the school, she sings songs such as the *Hello* song and *Jack and the Beanstalk* and the children can join in the actions. The author of the article notes the enthusiasm of the children which highlights the effectiveness of the music on the children’s well-being. There is a notable reference to the CHIME programme (Creating, Happy and Imaginative Music Experiences), where there is an intent to engage the children’s interest in pitch, rhythm and beat and an integrated objective to improve their literacy, “and relate to the emotional content of music” (Cain & Cursley, 2017, p. 96). Whilst there are no published results on this within the chapter to evaluate an improvement, this however, is a worthy inclusion of music in primary school to see how music can address the well-being of the children, and the article reveals a positive setting in which music can contribute.

My research has shown that SALTMusic based at Great Yarmouth is a community project that has assisted the end goal of promoting language amongst Children of Early Years (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019). Funded by children’s music charity, Youth Music, SALTMusic is a research project that seeks to connect Early Years music practitioners with speech and language therapists. This is one example of a music-making charity involving primary school children with an end goal of achieving results (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019). Their objectives are based on research that has shown musical communication forms the foundation for language development.

As such each session is music-based using tuned and un-tuned percussion instruments. Each session is broken into two halves - a free-play activity which is then followed by a group-led

activity. The children amongst other activities had the opportunity to take part in a song and join in with the sounds and interactions to engender dialogue. SALTMusic reports that, “speech and music therefore share components and particularly ones that are stressed in infant and caregiver interaction. We strongly believe that the skills required to understand language are inherently musical” (Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019, p. 49). These are credible claims as there have been a number of studies which demonstrate a link between music and speech and language such as the research from Trevarthen and Malloch (2000) who produced a report which suggests that the use of pitch and sound is inextricably linked to assisting the cognitive interaction of infants. Results of the SALTMusic project found that young people became more confident and increase vocalisations in a relaxed musical and playful space which is a demonstrable positive outcome (Pitt & Anculus, 2018).

The Kodaly Music Method

An empirical study of a primary school in the North East was recently undertaken using the Kodaly Music Method delivered as an RCT (Randomised Control Trial) to children of Early Years. Beng Huat See and Lindsay Ibbotson undertook a study of the Kodaly-inspired music programme and indicated that there has been increasing interest in the potential benefits of music on pupil achievement in schools (See & Ibbotson, 2018). The Kodaly Method is a fun and interactive way to introduce music to young children and, “research suggests that to be effective, music training needs to be introduced at an early age” (See & Ibbotson, 2018, p. 11). The Kodaly method has its variations, but essentially it involves the singing of nursery rhymes with interactions. The main aim of the intervention was to use a Randomised Control Trial (RCT), such that participants are chosen at random and one group becomes a control group and the second group receives the intervention. The method was to assess the impact of the Kodaly Music Method on the developmental outcome of children in reception years 4 to 5 including literacy and mathematics and behavioural skills in a school in the North-East of England. The assessment was an RCT of 56 children from a reception class. N=28 for the intervention and N=28 for the control group.

The intervention involved the Early Years children singing of nursery rhymes with group musical interaction. The Kodaly Method uses 4 concepts: pulse, rhythm, pitch and structure. Using the singing of nursery rhymes such as *Hot Cross Buns*, *This Old Man*, *Mrs White had a Fright in the Middle of the Night*, the notion is such that children can gain an element of social

interaction and as such, the sessions involved pedagogical methods such as visual, audio and kinaesthetic techniques (See & Ibbotson, 2018). A benefit of this musical approach was that it could be particularly helpful for non-music specialist teachers, since there was no need to use equipment or specialist instruments and thus a helpful method to use in teaching the class without specific resources.

Improvements in learning were measured using the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework using 7 Developmental areas sub-divided into ELGs (Early Learning Goals). The individual ELG assessments were made based on teacher's observations of the child in their everyday interaction and marked with a value according to criteria. The pilot initially ran for one term and involved two reception classes in one school. The session was delivered by the same specialist in Kodaly training on a daily basis. Tuesday to Friday each week over 10 weeks at 09.30 for about 15 minutes. One term with the control group and RCT treatment group and then a second term was to follow. Data collection was achieved using the ELG method and marks awarded in 7 areas. Statistical methods were used to generate an Effect Size. Overall results (See & Ibbotson, 2018) compares positive effect sizes after both one term and two terms of exposure. The evidence shows the positive effect on the initial treatment children maintained in the second term indicating an overall positive effect of the music across key Early Learning Goals, including self-confidence, behaviour, relations, reading, writing numbers, shape and imagination. Overall, these are very positive results.

Based on this collective interaction, there is great merit in improving learning outcomes such as numeracy, literacy and behavioural skills using music in the primary school classroom. This substantiates discussion raised by theorists such as Dewey and Eisner. The Kodaly Method is one method to consider in making use of music in primary schools.

Further Outcomes and Support Services

Another example to refer to indicating success in the use of music relevant to learning outcomes is Feversham Primary School (Holliday, 2017), where the school introduced Music, Drama and Art up to 6 hours a week. Each child receives at least 2 hours of music a week, a 30 minute music lesson, a 30 minute follow up, and 1 hour music assembly. By 2017, during this period of intervention of creative arts, 74% of its pupils achieved the expected standard in reading and writing as compared to a national average of 53%. However, the most recent performance

tables show for Feversham, a further improvement to 80% in Reading and Writing, against a national average of 63%, and an overall outstanding Ofsted Report for 2019. (Ofsted, 2019).

There are other supporting services such as music-making offered by out-of-hours Music Education Hubs such as Musical Futures. Further support for non-specialist music teachers could be available from involvement with a local music hub such as the Durham Trust and music-making via local support could also support disadvantaged children. Whole Class Ensemble Tuition (WCET) may also be an option. Recent empirical research, justifies the inclusion of music for Key Stage 2 as a pedagogical method via Whole Class Ensemble Tuition (Fautley et al., 2019). An example of WCET is tuition offered by Durham Music Trust, lasting 10, 20 or 30 weeks in length. Essentially this is a service offering continuous professional development and shadowing of teachers who were non-specialist music teachers which would have the benefit of developing their leadership skills. WCET could be offered in primary schools with an objective to be inclusive using simple, musical instruments such as a ukulele, glockenspiel, maracas or exam music technology from Charanga software for Key Stage 2 to experience with sound and rhythm.

A few good examples of an ideal situation for Whole Class Ensemble Tuition is an initiative from Make Music Gloucestershire. Philip Cowley, musical leader who teaches Whole School Brass, states that for Key Stage 2, “music is a first step and the first steps are most important.” (Make Music Gloucestershire, 2020, 0:46). Richard Gasser, headteacher of Park Junior School states that using Whole School Ensemble, “we are providing the children with life skills such as listening and learning” (Make Music Gloucestershire, 2020, 1:25)

This connects to the Henley Review in connection with the notion that all children at Key Stage 2 should have the opportunity to learn music through Whole Class Ensemble Tuition (Henley, 2017, p. 11). A possible trial could be that the researchers in co-ordination with a primary school could organise an RCT for a Key Stage 2 group of pupils so that there could be an intervention group receiving WCET. After one or two terms, comparisons can be made against a control group and assessments can be made of literacy and numeracy attainments, before and after the trial to see if this made a difference to pupil’s performance and behavioural skills.

In Harmony is a national programme that aims to inspire and transform the lives of children in deprived communities, using the power and disciplines of ensemble music-making. Schools participating in the In Harmony programmes include London, Nottingham and Newcastle. All schools commit to curriculum hours each week. Hallam and Burns (2017) report extensively

on the In Harmony programme referring to its provision of a musical therapy to socially disadvantaged children in preparing a WCET. Essentially, they indicate that when learning outcomes are negative, it is difficult to keep up the motivation (Hallam and Burns, 2017). It is important to carry on using music to act as an incentive and overcome barriers. In Harmony received positive evaluation from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This supports the relevance of the Durham Creativity Report Objectives.

Ofsted have also produced reports extolling the virtues of the contribution of music to the well being and ethos of primary schools. One example of such a report refers to a Primary School in the North East of England, in which they state that “your work to promote pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exemplary. Opportunities for pupils to participate in a myriad of cultural, musical, theatrical and sporting opportunities are the norm” (Ofsted, 2018). The observations of the inspectors identify the [positive outcome of children enjoying singing and making music, confirms the importance of music within the school ethos.](#)

Conclusion

The results of my research based on the Plowden Report, the Gulbenkian Report and the Henley Review recommendations show that there are questions to be raised regarding the lack of music in primary schools. More essentially, the Durham Report on Creativity has outlined the areas where music amongst young people have been linked to improvement such as language skills

Theorists such as Eisner and Dewey, and education specialist Mike Fleming have indicated that music has great benefits as a pedagogical tool. Although equivocal in some cases, studies, described by Crncec et al. (2006) and Hallam (2010) nevertheless have shown overall positive evidence that music within the curriculum contributes to pupil achievement. The Kodaly-music method substantiating the potential benefits of music on pupil achievement in schools is another area of research (See & Ibbotson, 2018). Examples of music education support groups that have generated results worthy of further exploration include SALTMusic, and In Harmony indicating improvement in behavioural skills amongst Early Years children. Ofsted also indicate that the presence of music within the primary school evidentially shows that the children enjoy singing and indicates the hard work of teaching staff bringing the music to a high standard of performance.

Music Education Hubs, and the example of Feversham Primary School and the inclusion of Whole Class Ensemble Tuition additionally show the research and essential results along with supporting evidence linked to improved communication and well-being and in some cases, enhanced academic performance. The evidence presented in this paper substantiates my argument that the inclusion of music in primary schools shows promise to the enhancement of pupil performance.

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