

Pupil attitudes to music during the transition to secondary school

Dimitra Kokotsaki

This Nuffield-funded project aimed to explore which components of school music lessons seem to contribute to pupils feeling happier about music at school by allowing their voices to be heard at the beginning of secondary school. Burnard and Björk (2010) highlighted the benefits that can be gained if pupils are allowed to voice their experiences of musical learning and school life and argued that teachers can be more responsive to individual learners' needs, interests and aspirations by taking seriously what pupils have to say about their music in school.

The potential benefits that good quality music education can have on children may be compromised during an important part of their emotional, intellectual and social development if the transition to secondary school is not supported effectively. Marshall and Hargreaves (2007), in particular, found that many pupils in their study changed their positive attitudes to music to negative ones when expectations of secondary music gained through open evenings and school visits had not been met.

A mixed-methods approach was used to gauge pupils' attitudes to music during the transition to secondary school. Six project schools at the North East of England were selected to take part in the study. Firstly, a questionnaire measuring pupils' attitudes to music (comprising a *liking music* and a *making music* subscale) was administered to 182 pupils (92 boys and 90 girls) three times during the first year of the project (at the end of Year 6, in November of Year 7 and at the end of Year 7). Pupils' attitudes to music showed a slight improvement at the beginning of secondary school but fell significantly at the end of year 7 (see Figure 1: $p < .01$ from time 2 to time 3). However, the drop in attitudes was not significant for males and females from the end of Year 6 to the end of Year 7. When the two subscales of the attitudes to music scale were considered separately, pupils' attitudes presented a significant decline for the *liking music* scale ($p < .05$ from Time 2 to 3) and for the *making music* scale ($p < .01$ from Time 2 to 3).

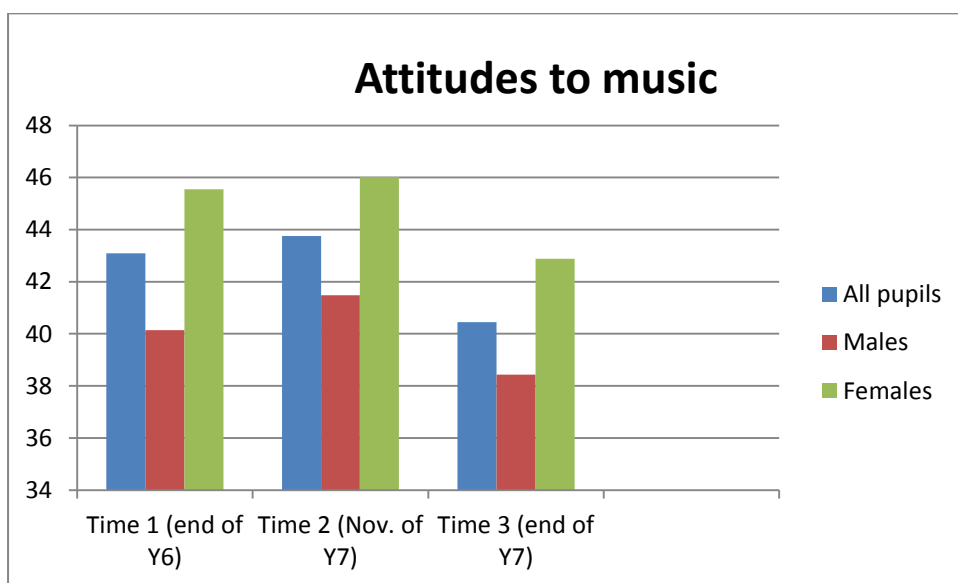


Figure 1: Attitudes to music overall and by gender (end of Year 6, November of Year 7 and end of Year 7)

Secondly, 97 semi-structured focus-group interviews were conducted with two different cohorts of pupils (at the end of Year 6, at the beginning and end of Year 7). The phenomenographic approach to data analysis (Marton & Booth, 1997) was adopted to explore pupils' views on the factors that seem to increase or reduce their enjoyment of music in Year 7.

The analysis of the interviews helped elicit ten themes that, when considered as a whole, were found to represent these pupils' attitudes to music during their first year in secondary school. Figure 2 presents these themes as they interact with one another to show the conditions under which pupils report the highest satisfaction with their music lessons in Year 7. The key emergent theme was pupils' desire to be actively involved musically by doing practical and interactive work as opposed to 'sitting and writing' and carrying out assessments which they felt was often the case with other subjects. Their desire to be musically involved was also exemplified in their comments as *performing, composing, singing, playing a variety of instruments, working in groups and forming bands*, and getting familiarised with *different types of music*. The *teacher* was perceived as being the key determinant of the nature of pupils' musical involvement as decisions on how and to what extent pupils would be musically involved in the lesson would lie with the teacher. Pupils

also reported a desire to be somehow involved in this decision-making process where they would appreciate an element of *choice* regarding the content and nature of their musical involvement. However, just being musically involved is not enough by itself to draw a complete picture of these pupils' attitudes to music. The study findings show that between being musically involved and reporting full enjoyment of their music lessons lies the pupils' desire to learn and make good progress. In other words, just making music is not enough. The musical tasks need to be carefully planned so that adequate learning and progression are taking place.

When these factors were perceived to be present in the pupils' musical learning at school, higher satisfaction with school music was reported in contrast to the more limited musical learning that occurred in the absence of these factors. Overall, very positive experiences were heard as pupils shared some of their satisfying musical experiences. However, it is worrying that negative perceptions of music were also heard, especially when the same pupils were very enthusiastic and excited about music at the end of primary school.

References

- BURNARD, P. & BJÖRK, C. (2010) In J. Finney & C. Harrison (Eds), *Whose music education is it? The role of the student voice* (pp.24-32). West Midlands: National Association of Music Educators.
- MARSHALL, N. A. & HARGREAVES, D. J. (2007) Crossing the humpback bridge: primary-secondary school transition in music education. *Music Education Research*, **9**, 65-80.
- MARTON, F. & BOOTH, S. (1997) *Learning and awareness*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

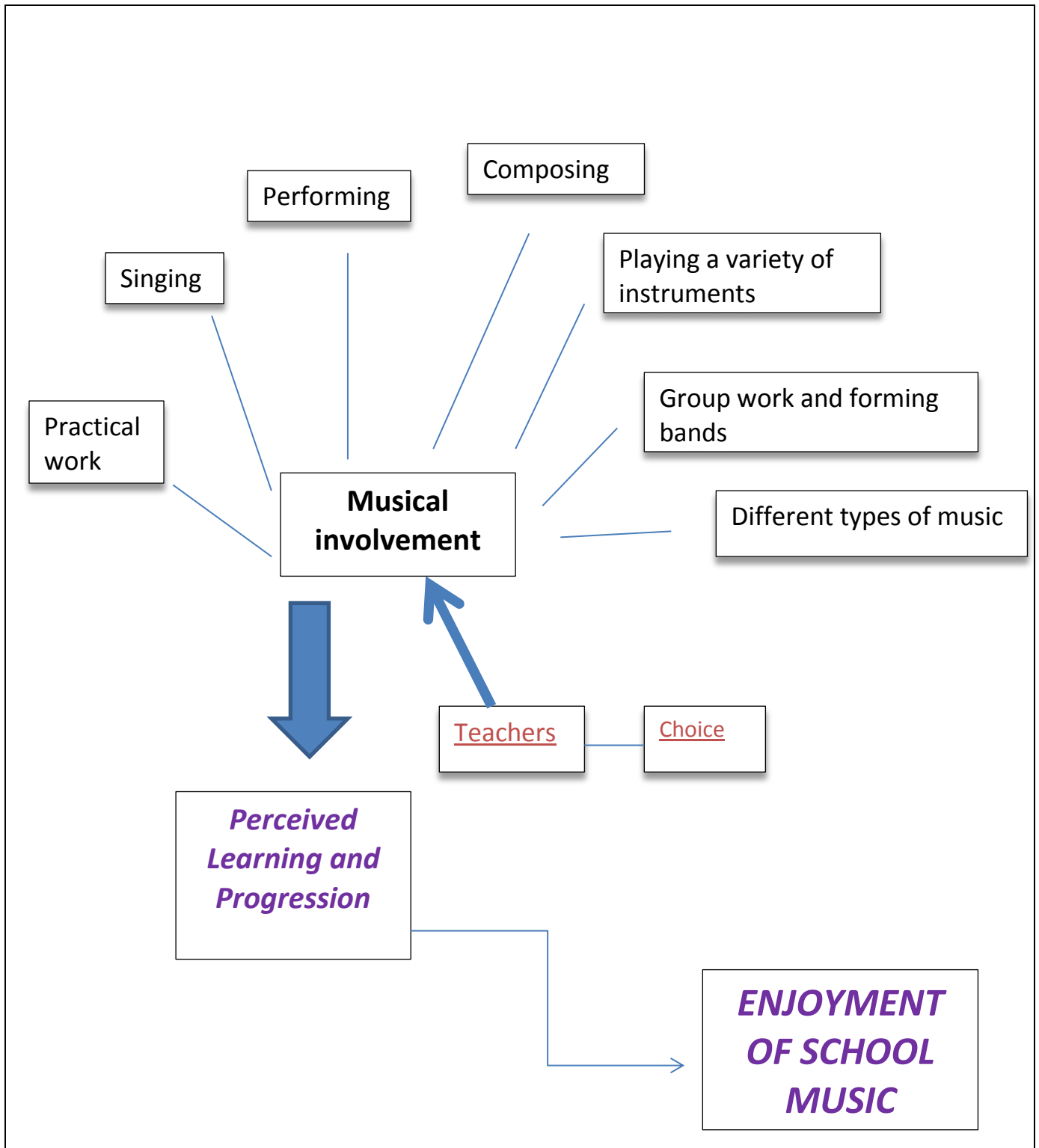


Figure 2: The factors that increase pupils' enjoyment of music at the beginning of secondary school