
# Music education is out of tune with how young people learn

By focusing on exams, and undervaluing informal approaches to music, we are preventing young people reaching their full musical potential

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What's the best way to learn music? For many, progression is best measured by the formal exam journey - from the treasured early prize of grade 1 through to the proficiency and skill of a grade 8. It's a time-honoured route: easy to understand and evaluate, and effective, but it only tells a small part of the story.

The established music education sector remains fixated on formal learning (an area that draws an alarmingly narrow demographic) and in doing so fails to reflect the diversity of young people, the ways in which they engage with music and the achievements of those who learn away from the exam system.

In recent years, much has been done to encourage early engagement in music. Group instrumental lessons for young children are now a regular feature in schools, with Music Hubs (introduced under the National Plan for Music Education), often in partnership with other music providers, working with around 80% of primary school children.

But the progression from that point becomes fragmented - a bit like a first date without a follow-up - and there's a whiff of snobbery towards those who provide routes to musical progression that aren't measured by a pass, merit or distinction. Those who wish to follow the formal exam route should be encouraged and welcomed, but so too should the child who wants to play in a band, sing in a choir or learn an instrument just for the hell of it. Progression - that is, getting as good as you can - is an important part of all routes.

It may come as a surprise that almost half the children who currently play an instrument presently don't have lessons and almost a fifth of them never have done. That's a large slice of our musical youth who are choosing non-formal routes, for example through the participatory work of our professional ensembles, or by providers trying to meet the need of their local communities.

Musical Routes, a report into musical learning for children and young people in England that I produced in partnership with the Royal Philharmonic Society, identifies significant inequities of opportunity that are preventing many children from reaching their full musical potential.

The fault lies not so much with the range of provision on offer - our report celebrates excellent practice from a deeply committed profession - but in the way that it's articulated. Away from the school setting, many eager young musicians simply don't know about the varied opportunities to participate and learn. Economic and social barriers to learning, and a postcode lottery exacerbate the problem.

While the National Plan for Music Education has laid the ground plan for collaboration, it has not yet succeeded in providing an infrastructure that knits together the many and various strands for delivery. Many musicians, teachers, practitioners and

organisations recognise that inequalities of opportunity exist and are devising ways to fill the gaps, but the current structure for music education is widely acknowledged as complex.

Music education and professional music organisations don't coordinate effectively, making it difficult for children and their families to navigate the musical landscape. At a local level, individual organisations often work in isolation, and examples of good practice that could be replicated in other areas of the country, especially those with a traditional lack of musical provision, remain firmly rooted to the spot.

Music Hubs (previously local authority music services) have long provided a traditional framework, including instrumental tuition and ensembles, through which the keen child musician can progress. They provide a crucial bridge between schools and music professionals. The learning and participation programmes of professional ensembles are also the backbone for the research and development work that will grow the musicians, listeners and audiences of the future. But in some quarters, there's still a sense that broader musical learning is a side issue. Like confetti, you can sprinkle music across the community, so long as it's brushed away before the "real" concert begins.

The most successful and enlightened ensembles and organisations - and there are many world leaders in the field in the UK - recognise that the driving force for creativity, understanding and engagement is learning and participation. It's central to their artistic output. The transformative effect of these learning experiences, whether intimate or dazzlingly ambitious, individual or communal, is recognised and championed by many musicians (though sadly, rarely reported). Professional musicians performing and working in a school setting offer an important catalyst; the more that children experience the world of music close-up, and musicians understand the educational environment, the better.

The key to lifelong engagement in music is enjoyment, whether young music enthusiasts ultimately become professional musicians, amateur music-makers or keen listeners. The challenge is to ensure that every child has the chance to realise their potential.

Conductor Marin Alsop put it nicely in her Last Night of the Proms speech, describing the children of Baltimore Orchestra's OrchKids programme: "listening to each other, responding to each other, making beautiful music together, they're proud of themselves, they're proud of their community, when I see them it gives me great hope for the future."

We need to focus less on the "best" way to learn and more on the fundamentals of engaging children and young people in excellent music of all kinds - in all settings. The starting point is to define clearly the building blocks of musical learning, which are, to my mind: singing; reading music; access to instrumental tuition (both formal and informal); digital technology; attending live performance; creative involvement in composition; improvisation and performance of their own work.

The music profession needs to work harder to articulate clearly what musical progression and success looks like in terms that are relevant and applicable across different genres and traditions. It needs to better value all areas of provision and signpost more clearly to children and their families the diversity of musical routes open to them.

It's our responsibility to articulate the impact that music can have on a child's learning and wellbeing to education leaders, teachers and parents - and to build diversity in music, so that children see people enjoying and participating who reflect their communities and the world around them.

Quite simply, we need to get much better at telling people about opportunities for musical learning - and where to find them. Why not have a national online music education map and resource centre to improve communication? How about a network of national musical mentors and champions from all ages and backgrounds to widen diversity in music? Funding is tight, but there are opportunities to realign available resources to encourage a more inclusive approach.

If we don't close the fault line between formal and informal approaches to learning, then the inequities will prevail and we will fail many young people with musical talent.

*Sarah Derbyshire is author of Musical Routes: A Landscape for Music Education, which you can download here*

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