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Identity in Music: Adolescents and the Music Classroom

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The music classroom in England: A brief overview

The implementation of the National Curriculum in England in 1988 provided a foundation to a new approach to school music lessons. Its aims celebrated 'music for all' whereby school music was to be inclusive and enabling irrespective of pupil ability. Classroom music introduced all pupils to music as a subject and encouraged engagement with musical discourse. Between the ages of 5 and 14, pupils were to encounter a geographically, culturally and historically wide range of music and be encouraged to actively participate in performing, composing and listening. Lessons, it was decided, should focus on practical skills that enable pupils to create and appraise their own music and the music of others. The pupil should be perceived as increasingly able to participate meaningfully in a widening variety of musical activities and 'in principle, the curriculum should bring music to a wider range of children and make them all more "musical" as they get older' (Lamont 2002).

In later revisions of the National Curriculum, music was described as

> ...a unique form of communication that can change the way pupils feel, think and act. Music forms part of an individual's identity and positive interaction with music can develop pupils' competence as learners and increase their self-esteem. Music brings together intellect and feeling and enables personal expression, reflection and emotional development. As an integral part of culture, past and present, music helps pupils understand themselves, relate to others and develop their cultural understanding, forging important links between home, school and the wider world. (National Curriculum of England 2007: Music – programme of study, 179)

Here, the potential impact of music in the classroom has moved far beyond the aim of simply making each pupil more 'musical'. Music is described as a vehicle through which pupils may explore both themselves (as parts of their identities) and others.

The first three years of secondary education follow pupils through years 7, 8 and 9 of their school careers. Together, these form Key Stage 3, during which 15 different subjects are taught. [1] At the end of Key Stage 3[2], 14 year old pupils are able to choose which subjects to pursue as examination courses (General Certificate of Secondary Education) through to age

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16. Despite the aims previously cited and a widespread acceptance of music as an essential part of the curriculum, school music is not a popular option. When given the choice, 93% of 14 year old pupils opt out of music (Bray 2000). This figure has remained relatively constant over a period of 8 years, with a small upward trend to 8% in 2006 (DfES 2006). Music in school has been officially recognised as a fundamental element to a rounded education and yet pupils continue to opt out as the earliest opportunity. Why?

During Key Stage 3, pupils undergo huge shifts in their perceptions of themselves and others. Music (although all too rarely 'school' music) has a crucial role in this perception, with loyalty to a particular genre or artist being used to define dress, language and behaviour.[3] Musical taste is used to delineate both in and out groups within a population and therefore transcends mere recreational listening to become an important tool in power relations. In choosing those elements of their lives adolescents want to identify with and be identified by, as stated, only 7% of pupils in English secondary schools opt to be officially recognized as musicians within the school context. 'School music'[4] appears to play little part in the majority of pupils' musical identities.

Adolescents, Adolescence and Music

Outside the classroom context, 'adolescents consume music to a great extent and consider music an important part of their lives' (Saarikallio & Erkkila 2007, 89). When asked, adolescents reported that they '…appreciated freedom in their choice of playing, wanted to make their own decisions about the kind of music and volume levels of the music they listened to, and aimed to engage with music because they felt like doing so, not because they should' (94). However, these preferences (although reasonable in an 'other than classroom' context) have proved difficult to accommodate meaningfully as part of the National Curriculum for music. Ross (1995, 189) proposed that 'school music was always going to be struggling in any competition for teenagers' musical attention given the enormous social and cultural investment that the pop scene represented.' Given how crucial music has shown to be to the leisure and social life of adolescents, the link between enthusiastic *consumer* of music and eager *student* of music would for the majority of pupils, seem never to have been forged.

Several points arise from this situation. Firstly, there is evidence that in some schools, for some of the time, the link between consumer and student has been successfully made.[5] In schools where this has not happened, is the apparent lack of engagement by students in

classroom music a consequence of poor teaching, inappropriate content, the perceived status of arts subjects, or simply the nature of adolescence? Should the teacher even attempt to 'enter the musical world of the adolescent within the school context?' (Durrant 2001, 2)

Attempts by teachers to approach the preferred music of adolescents in the classroom context have received mixed reviews; indeed Mills (1996) identified the ownership of specific genres of music by pupils as a problem specific to secondary music education. Green (1997, 146) found that 'it [was] not so much the content of what they teach as the pedagogy itself' that was found to be inappropriate. This view is further supported by Dunbar-Hall (1996, 217) who states that 'music teachers from art music backgrounds automatically know how music of the Western tonal tradition is taught, but lack the same instinctive teaching knowledge for popular music.' Spence (2006, 13) reported that pupils confronted with Hip Hop and Rhythm and Blues in a classroom context were disappointed to find that the tracks chosen were dated, the teacher was embarrassed by the sexual and profane lyrics and the attitude of the teacher towards the music was felt to be insincere.

So, we are left with a challenge. Music teachers may feel most comfortable teaching the music they know, in the way that they were taught and in the way that they were taught to teach it. Music and the teaching of music is a strong part of their professional musical identity (Hargreaves et al. 2007). Adolescents have a passionate attachment to music but insist that this must be on their terms, which may imply 'other than classroom' contexts and other than 'school music'. Pupil ownership of specific musical genres may have the potential to make teachers feel personally uncomfortable or professionally insecure and to make pupils feel as though their personal territory has been invaded. However, the delivery of a 'musical canon' may alienate some pupils and further strengthen the perception of school music as 'other' thereby continuing to encourage only a minority of pupils who pursue the subject post Key Stage 3. Given this challenge, how can we best create the context in which pupils can engage meaningfully with music that is both relevant and provoking and yet with sufficient space for creativity? A first step towards understanding the interplay between music in school and a pupil's ability to engage with the music classroom was to ask the pupils about their everyday experiences of the classroom setting.

The research: A very brief overview

The research from which this paper is drawn explored the ways pupils described themselves as musicians, their experiences of classroom music, the potential interplay between those experiences, and their conceptions of musical self. Case studies, following the interpretative paradigm were carried out in three different secondary schools in England.[6] Following the work of Rudduck & Flutter (2000, 75), who describe pupils as 'consumers worth consulting' the research sought to illustrate the pupil perspective through pupil voice, in an effort to unpack the potential relationship between the experience of classroom music, musical engagement and musical identity.

Pupils who described themselves as self taught musicians, repeatedly used negative language to highlight 'code cracking', disengagement, and peer teaching when asked about music in the classroom. When discussing the same subject, pupils who received formal music tuition outside the classroom context more often made reference to issues such as experimentation, creativity and understanding in positive terms. Pupils who described being bored or alienated by school music made consistently negative references to issues including sequential development, 'code cracking' and disengagement. Different aspects of classroom music were studied in isolation to investigate how pupil experience and opinion differed throughout the sample. In total, eight overarching themes were identified in the interview transcripts: (i) the pupils' involvement with music in different contexts, (ii) familial support, (iii) instrumental or singing skills, (iv) perception of curriculum music, (v) sources of praise, (vi) peer group support, (viii) teacher-pupil relationship and (viii) musical status within the school setting.

Across the population, seven patterns of pupil perception were identified. Each pattern incorporated a unique balance of the themes listed above. These seven patterns were given titles that related to the extent to which the pupil described themselves as (i) willing to engage with classroom music and (ii) the level and type of musical competency they described. These titles were:

Disengaged non-musician	(DNM)
Partially engaged non-musician	(PENM)
Engaged non-musician	(ENM)
Disengaged alternative musician	(DAM)
Engaged alternative musician	(EAM)
Disengaged traditional musician	(DTM)
Engaged traditional musician	(ETM)

Broadly speaking, pupils who identified themselves as 'non-musicians', irrespective of their attitude towards music in school reported negative views of their musical ability. Those who identified themselves as 'musicians', irrespective of their attitude towards school music reported positive views of their musical ability. However, some pupils, despite positive views of their musical competencies were negative about music in a school context (DAM, DTM). These pupils are of particular interest as they describe and demonstrate musical ability and engagement with music in 'other than classroom' settings.

Disengaged, disaffected or creatively disengaged?

It is in relation to the dominant school-based genre that pupils form judgements of musical worth, have musical encounters and ultimately decide if the understanding of 'musician' presented in the school context relates to their own understanding of themselves. In the music classroom visited, 30% of the pupils involved self-described in terms of disengagement from music in the classroom, but as stated above, many of the disengaged pupils were musically competent, musically active and musically engaged in settings *beyond* the classroom context. The pupils described behaviours and attitudes towards music *in* the classroom that mirrored models of disaffection (such as that proposed by Nixon et al. 1996). Nixon describes four ways in which pupils are likely to enact differing levels of engagement/disengagement. Pupils who are positive about their own ability and the classroom are 'loyal' with regular attendance, a respectful relationship with the teacher and an accepting of the tasks involved. This description relates to those pupils who felt positive about both their musical ability and school music (ETM, EAM), displayed loyalty to both subject and staff and accepted tasks without question. For these pupils, willingness to engage coupled with high levels of musical ability could result in 'considerable negative feedback from their peers, who consider music activity to be 'weird' or 'sissy'' (Davidson et al. 1997). These pupils have the potential to be creative, to take risks and to extend their understandings of musicality. However, they are also under pressure to recreate that which has been sanctioned as 'proper' music by the teacher and in turn, by their own demonstrated commitment to music in school. They may be more likely to accept and respond to the model of musician as presented by their teacher and less likely to explore or extend their own conceptions of musical behaviour in a classroom setting. Nixon describes such behaviours as being both 'constructive' and 'passive'.

Pupils who self-identify as 'non-musicians' (DNM, PENM and ENM) are more likely to display 'neglect' or 'exit' behaviours (Nixon 1996), either absenting themselves (through physical absence or lack of engagement) or displaying antisocial behaviours.

By contrast, those pupils who describe high levels of musical competency (DAM, DTM) but respond negatively to classroom music are more likely to display challenging behaviour that further questions the status of school music as 'other'. Nixon describes these behaviours as 'constructive' and 'active', as the pupil is likely to test otherwise accepted notions of musical worth and ways of working. These pupils offer perhaps the most interesting interaction between self as musician and identification of school music as 'other'. They are able to create music in a wide range of genres (both officially sanctioned by the music teacher and not) and, with peer support, will do so in a classroom setting. However, these pupils are also capable of working in parallel to and sometimes in conflict with the musical content and pedagogy embraced by the teacher. They may minimise public displays of effort or emotional investment and instead 'opt out in the guise of displacement activities' (Harkind et al. 2001, 67). For the teacher who is willing and able to harness this rejection of 'school' music, such creative disengagement offers an alternative approach to tasks and processes in completely new ways, bringing together different working methods, learning strategies and genre specific knowledge. Recent work by Green (2008) has explored the use of informal learning techniques in the classroom context, which allows pupils greater freedom of choice and encourages the music teacher to adopt the position of facilitator in relation to the pupils. These musically able, questioning and confident pupils (DAM, DTM) have the potential to act as peer experts within specific genres.

Conclusion

Creativity (as opposed to recreativity) in the Key Stage 3 music classroom may be most strongly linked to those who reject the dominant musical model proposed by the teacher, musical content, or pedagogy and instead seek to carve out their own interpretation or understanding. By so doing these pupils explore and extend their own conceptions of musical behaviour and creativity in musical settings. Unfortunately, these settings will not always include the music classroom.

Engagement in classroom music is not simply linked to musical competency. Musical competency *and* the desire to demonstrate a personal relationship with music or identity in

music would seem more likely to foster engagement and through this, creative behaviours, processes and outputs. Displaying a personal relationship with music in the classroom setting involves taking risks, and pupils need the explicit support of peers and teachers in order to achieve this. Where this support is perceived to be missing or partial, pupils may avoid situations that require for them to display their musicality and creativity, disengaging from classroom music. Disengagement in the music classroom may take many forms and those pupils who fail to find a niche within school that suits their musical tastes will exploit 'other than classroom' contexts in order to push the boundaries of their musical creativity. However, this is a loss to the musical breadth of the classroom setting, which further perpetuates the notion of 'school music' as a separate musical genre and actively supports only the minority of pupils (7%) who pursue the study of music in the English classroom post Key Stage 3.

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Notes

[1] The statutory subjects that all pupils must study are art and design, citizenship, design and technology, English, geography, history, information and communication technology, mathematics, modern foreign languages, music, physical education and science. The teaching of careers education, sex education and religious education is also statutory.

[2] The National Curriculum for England is divided into Key stages. Key Stages 1 represents primary level learning (ages 5 to 7 years), Key Stage 2 represents upper primary (ages 7 to 11

years), Key Stage 3 is lower secondary (ages 11 to 14 years) and Key Stage 4 represents upper secondary (ages 14 to 16 years).

[3] See North et al. 2000; Zillmann & Gan 1997 for further description of the centrality of music in the lives of adolescents.

[4] 'School' music was a term used by many of the pupils involved in this research to describe almost any piece of music encountered (and consequently dissected) within the classroom. There was little difference to the pupil involved as to the type of music encountered, simply that it had been taught in a lesson and was therefore a musical artefact and far removed from their musical experiences outside the classroom.

[5] Spence, S. (2006) *Expectation and Achievement of Black Caribbean Children in Secondary School Music Education.* Unpublished MA Thesis University of London.

[6] The following discussion is based on the findings from as overall population of 147 Year 9 pupils (aged 13 to 14 years old) in one secondary school in rural England.

About the Author

Dr. Jo Saunders is a researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London. Her work focuses on musical identity during adolescence and singing development.