Are schools in tune with disaffected youth?

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The establishment of the UK government's OFSTED (school inspection service), published league tables, standardised testing, the literacy and numeracy strategy, imposed external targets for improvement, performance related pay and the gifted and talented programme, show the present government's concerns with educational improvement. Schools have tended to concentrate on those young people who will be successful, (Blyth and Milner, 1993; TES, 3-4-98). This is inevitable, for within the current educational climate, emphasis on academic performance leads to local and national credibility. However, for some young people, academic achievement is not always possible. For them, the way forward is to seek attention through aspects of poor behaviour. Such young people can be loosely labelled 'disaffected'.

The present three year study, which started in September 2000 and was completed in July 2003, was conducted in a comprehensive high school in the Midlands (for ages 11-18). It seeks to add to the debate that 'experiential' National Curriculum subjects which include opportunities for practical activity, in this case music, have potential for re-engaging the 'disaffected' young person. Furthermore, it suggests that the drive for academic excellence pursued by the present government is ill-advised if it is seen to be at the expense of more creative subjects.

Introduction

The school is an 11-18 inner city comprehensive, situated within a neighbourhood of a mixture of public housing, owner-occupied and privately rented houses, some dating back to the 1930s. The community is undoubtedly affected by problems and changes within the local economy. There are particular areas that show high levels of disadvantage and unemployment and low levels of educational attainment. It is quite clear that entire families are under considerable stress just to survive each day, let alone worry about the importance of education.

Young people from minority ethnic communities account for 37% of the school population, with a majority coming from Asian backgrounds and a minority of African-Caribbean and other nationalities represented.

The proportion of young people who speak English as an additional language increased to 34.7% during 2001/02 and includes some refugees. Within the population of the school, 30% of the young people are included on the register of Special Educational Needs, including 3.2% who have statements of Special Educational Needs and 41% who are entitled to free school meals.

In such a mixed academic and social setting it is essential to support the young people and their families both in and out of school to raise self-esteem and meet the full range of needs with which they present.

But does music fit into this?

Music is taught in all years from 7-11 (for students aged 11-16), with extra-curricular and peripatetic work, including rock bands and steel bands, that support the class curriculum. The music curriculum is very much oriented towards popular forms of culture and is therefore relevant to the life of the young person. The emphasis is on 'authentic' active participation: young people are involved in planning, developing the task and evaluating their own work, thus making them active in their education rather than mere passive recipients. In a study of a group of rock musicians, Finney (1999) draws attention to the fact

that 'if children learn to act authentically and discover their personal meaning, then their understanding of their creativity and imaginable powers become a source of empathising with the music making of others both near and far' (p241). Certainly, in this present study, it has been observed that when young people get near the source of creativity, self esteem, social development and communication skills steadily grow. However, can this achievement culture exist for disaffected young people, making National Curriculum music relevant and meaningful for all?

How does music work in the National Curriculum?

In the present educational climate of a so-called 'broad and balanced National Curriculum,' the government talks of 'quality education' at the chalk face. This must also mean *total* education and in that sense, all possible ways of teaching and learning must be used to enthuse young people in school. Equally, a National Curriculum must balance both linear and holistic ways of thinking; an argument, though controversial, originally put forward by Howard Gardner in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligence* (1993, second edition), and supported later by Levitin and Bellugi in a study of individuals with mental retardation (1998). Academic and aesthetic are essential halves, although in the government's Green Paper 14-19: *Extending opportunities, raising standards* (2002) this balance is in doubt, due to the emphasis on literacy, numeracy and ICT.

A study by the Mental Health Foundation (1999) showed that there is a growing number of young people who are 'at odds' with the present academic system and that schools need to develop ways to make education a rewarding experience for this group of people. But is this possible with the present academic labelling of 'able' or 'less able'? Surely, a move from the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences, as Gardner (1993, second edition) suggests, to a more multifaceted approach to measure intellectual ability is a more positive stance.

Research (Langer, 1953; Reimer, 1970; Swanwick, 1979; Swanwick and Taylor, 1982; Goleman, 1996) has shown that music is a strong vehicle for promoting contact with an emotional world. It can also produce physical effects that will have a marked effect on behaviour – for example, tapping feet, moving hands and/or legs – and will promote personal contact with other

individuals. Music can also have a stimulating effect on heart and respiratory rate and blood pressure (Lorch et al, 1994). The various musical activities of listening, composing and performing, together or individually, can also improve students' self-esteem and/or enable them to give vent to emotional relief.

The National Curriculum publication *Music – Key Stages 1-3* (Department for Education and Skills, 2000:14-15) clearly states that 'music is a powerful, unique form of communication that can change the way pupils feel, think and act. It brings together the intellect and feelings and enables personal expression, reflection and emotional development' (p.14). But in reality, is school music actually changing 'the way pupils feel, think and act'? Certainly, the present study indicates that in music class, all young people have the opportunity to develop knowledge, feeling and creativity. In a recent article (*Times Educational Supplement*, 14-12-01) a schools inspector is quoted as saying that more time should be spent on the 'technical aspects of the subject rather than promoting enjoyment'. Yet, in the same edition, there is a 'Wannabe Pop Idol' who describes how he immersed himself in music to overcome the bullies who tormented him at school. All the other parts of the school curriculum involving reading and writing were a struggle to him.

Enjoyment is clearly a prerequisite for a successful curriculum experience, irrespective of the subject. However, music offers the opportunity to deal with 'real engagement' in self-expression, creativity and self-esteem, important for all students as they enter the new world of secondary school and especially so for those who are particularly vulnerable. The question is: will it benefit those who are perceived to be disaffected, or will it merely give them further opportunity to fail?

The Research
Evidence, Method and Data Collection

The longitudinal study follows 21 disaffected young people as they start their Year 7 (first year of secondary school) music lessons for the first time. Progress regarding social, behavioural and emotional problems has been monitored for nearly three years and will culminate with each young person's option choices for GCSE (exams taken at age 16), before they embark into the upper school in years 10 and 11.

A variety of methods including classroom observation, researchers' diaries, semi structured interviews, collections of young people's work and their diaries, questionnaires for young people, staff and parents and monitoring lessons in other subjects are all used to collect the data and ensure that the evidence is both reliable and valid. Each young person recognised as being at risk of disaffection was independently identified by their primary school before they started their secondary education. They have since been monitored carefully to observe and identify what (if anything) affects their approach to learning in school and whether music in school has any influence over their subsequent performance.

Background

The research method is modelled on those used by Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1970). Both studies were concerned with the impact of streaming on young people's achievement and motivation. They found young people acting out their role within their given characterisation in each stream. Although there have been further studies, (Ball, 1981; Abraham, 1989) being labelled, as the present study suggests, is associated with a range of emotional disturbances and the development of an anti-school sub-culture including truanting, rudeness, detentions, non-completion of work and smoking. Membership in this culture leads to more failure (Lacey, 1970).

In School X it is noticeable that in practical subjects, the students are treated equally; all have the opportunity to participate. In the 'academic' areas more emphasis is placed on those young people who will achieve the results, that is, the students who will help the school achieve external government targets. In the core subjects, differentiation is quite specific. The young people are given specific places to sit in the classroom depending on their attainment. This makes the management of the classroom easier for the teacher and classroom assistant, but impacts in different ways on the self-esteem of the students. Those who are labelled less able often cause disruption. Interestingly, in drama, music and physical education the young people both sit and work with whom they wish; the teacher does not set an artificial boundary based on attainment. In these subjects, the young people themselves set the boundary.

In a visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors to the school in 2001, an inspector remarked that 'pupils should not attend extra music lessons [peripatetic instrumental lessons] when they have to leave core subject lessons'. Yet in a local education authority inspection in the same year, the inspector responsible for music said: 'Practical rock music sessions were ideal for all pupils in the school. They should be given the opportunity and encouraged to attend at all times'.

The above view has caused various problems in the school. Although a recommendation, it is used as an excuse by some teachers to stop some young people leaving the classroom for peripatetic instrumental lessons. This problem is particularly apparent in the core subjects and specifically in English. The need to meet external tests and specific targets is, in some cases, now at odds with the 'broad and balanced curriculum' originally intended.

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, initially introduced into primary schools in 1998 and 1999, are causing 'shortcomings in meeting the full programmes of study' in many foundation subjects. (OFSTED, 2001:30) It is becoming difficult to maintain a curriculum that has breadth and balance. Unfortunately, the school inspection services are pulling schools in different directions, one with an emphasis on more 'academic' subjects, the other valuing an arts-based curriculum not directly addressing the government's national targets.

Interim Findings
Music Content

Interviews and recorded evidence indicate that the use of a cross-curricular approach to understanding some musical concepts is useful for disaffected students. For example, songs can be used as a vehicle for information, not necessarily musical, which relates to the curriculum. Such an approach allows students to enter a world in which they are interested and with which they are possibly already familiar. Composing and performing are difficult media; the cross-curricular approach lends a prop to support successful delivery. However, successful curriculum content needs to be placed within their immediate experience with clear, definable goals that are not only achievable but are authentic in outcome.

The boundaries of music need to overlap with other art forms and/or even non-creative subject areas. Music should not be viewed in isolation. Teaching is successful when the outcome has initially been negotiated rather than imposed, that is, when the young people are given more responsibility for their

learning. In listening, for example, they like to discuss and follow their own ideas and ask one another questions. They become active in their learning. In contrast, in some non-practical subject areas little contribution to their own learning meant that some lessons were described as 'boring' 'difficult' and 'tiring'. Too much teacher talk and writing added to lack of motivation and poor quality of work. However in music, that initial negotiation increased motivation and determination to succeed.

It is important to provide success, so that each young person has the chance to develop greater self-esteem and the confidence to continue. It is clear from this study that open-ended tasks allow each individual success at their own level. Disaffected young people find their own level of competence; and a sense of self-determination is inherent in their attitude to learning. If they make judgements and decisions, it follows that they must also have some form of self-assessment, which in turn can be opened up for discussion within the main group.

Analytical listening allows young people to feel competent and have the confidence not only to contribute to discussion, but to argue their point as an equal. Some of the young people have in-depth knowledge of the club scene or heavy rock which they use quite effectively. These sessions require concentrated effort. In interviews, students indicated that they liked these classes because 'they were easy' or 'they could do them'. The sessions gave immediate success and a way to compete with those who 'can play'. It is interesting that these young people also verbally developed their musical vocabulary from a limited knowledge of concepts, to, in some cases, quite an operational understanding.

In September 2000, the disaffected students viewed the composing and performing elements of the music curriculum as elitist in nature, making music a subject in which only the musically inclined would succeed. Critical listening at that time was not associated with musical competence.

During personal interviews in 2002, most of the young people felt that this is was no longer the case: you do not have to be 'musical' to enjoy and contribute to this subject and listening was acknowledged as an integral part of music. However, achievement was still linked to skill development, which meant that you had to be able to play an instrument. Yet, seven out of the 21 disaffected young people became involved in extra musical activities and have performed to an audience with confidence and success.

Relationships

Music is a shared experience, where responsibility can be about collective judgements. As a close-knit group, it was observed that each individual had and felt the support of others, increasing the feeling of self-worth within the main body of the group.

Performing music naturally lends itself to social contact. The curricular areas of composing, performing and listening endorse all the virtues necessary for this. However, for the disaffected young person who may be unable to make contact and socialise, such group sessions, particularly in performing and composing can be totally demotivating. While this was at first viewed sympathetically by members of the music group not classed as disaffected, there was evidence to indicate that the sympathy diminished with time, and the disaffected student became once again a distinct and separate social group.

However, while those identified as disaffected initially stuck together, as time went on they developed new friendships within the group with those not necessarily disaffected themselves. These new friends supported their disengaged peers by encouraging them to 'have a go' at composing and performing. This encouraged the latter group to move out of their 'safe' personal musical environment and to become conscious of a wider musical perception. It also gave them the opportunity to develop confidence and self-esteem to survive on their own, within their distinct sub-group and culture, when the sympathy vote collapsed within the classroom.

Behaviour and enjoyment

It is clear that the disaffected young people went through three stages. Initially, at the start of year 7 we had a *passive* interest in the subject. They would listen, but contributed very little in composing and performing elements of the course. The next stage was a form of *recognition*; that is, they felt confident to contribute in areas where they had particular expertise. The final stage, *interest*, involved some of the young people in rock band sessions and steel band rehearsals, where they would be fully involved in the process of music-making. Entertainment was a key to their involvement and they felt cheated if they had not

been entertained. This was echoed at a parents' meeting, where someone suggested 'give 'em karaoke – they like that'. Teachers need to be aware of the implications of assuming a more traditional educational style that ignores the wider musical environment that their students inhabit: they risk the disaffected student becoming alienated and more likely to cause problems in behaviour.

It is clear from video evidence that disaffected young people learn in short phases, i.e. brief periods of concentration followed by a short rest. Such short-term goals, when followed by immediate success, raised achievement in all areas of music. The process of interaction, particularly within group work, adds to the enjoyment of the subject and an enhancement of self-esteem and confidence through this way of working.

Analysis

Clearly music has a great deal to offer. Not only can the subject improve self-esteem and self-belief, but it also has the potential of providing a positive learning experience. It is a channel of communication in which the disaffected can 'speak'. This research points to alternative methods of teaching and learning, where a mutually constructive environment enables disaffected young people to learn. However, care should be taken that this environment is not predicated on 'academic respectability' but rather on creating a language which young people can assimilate with 'a sense of commitment, purpose and delight' (Plummeridge, 2001: 28).

In music lessons, students spoke of 'enjoyment', 'freedom', 'saying what we feel' and of having a sense of belonging. When delivered sensitively and flexibly, music promotes responsibility and leadership and gives the opportunity for students to acquire self-recognition.

The classroom assistants talked of 'lack of formality', 'bonding' and the 'opportunity for the disaffected to express themselves in a non-judgemental way'. This is in direct contrast to the academic subject experiences these young people have had, where, according to the classroom assistants, they perceive the subjects as 'boring', 'dull', 'uninteresting' and where they are left being being labelled 'thick' (stupid). The assistants pointed out that some of these disaffected young people will deliberately cause trouble in order to get themselves removed from the classroom to escape the

non-practical lessons they variously describe as 'tedious', 'un-adventurous' and 'monotonous'.

In music the essential teaching strategy is cross-curricular, which encourages the development of students' creative abilities. The emphasis is music, but the knowledge and understanding is taught through a variety of cross-curricular forms and themes. Music at this level is literally about general development and is not viewed solely in terms of musical achievement. As Aaron, a student, pointed out:

> When the film work were done, I knew about it.
> I liked the silent films, and stories of Hollywood.
> Them gangsters were tough, weren't they?

He goes on to say:

> ... in the library me and Gareth found other places where gangsters sold alcohol
> [you mean Speakeasies?]
> Yeah, them.

Such experience enables the disaffected some measure of success and the opportunity to explore issues, other than musical ones. Moreover, such young people lacking in personal achievement need standards which are obtainable.

David comments:

> ...Maths, I hate it. It's too hard. Yeah, I weren't good – ever.

Music can be their means of learning factual information in a pleasurable way. The emotional content and expressiveness these young people may have inside them can't be overestimated. Their verbal inexpressiveness should not be mistaken for vacuousness.

Several young people remarked on demotivating comments they receive from some staff because of their lack of attainment, particularly in the core subjects. Such comments can be related to music, where it is assumed by some staff that 'anything goes' because of the lack of pressure to get them through a SAT test (standardised attainment tests given at regular intervals throughout children's school careers). Similar comments have been made regarding drama, physical education and art. In core subjects there is a danger that pressure on staff to recognise academic achievement is at the expense of rewarding effort.

Little wonder that some of the disaffected young people have such a low opinion of themselves in some subject areas.

Outside of school, parental support can be lacking, not necessarily due to the lack of understanding of the importance of education, but for economic and /or family reasons. Mrs. M informed me:

Nathan does well, I am proud of him. I work a lot and he sort of gets on with it.

She goes on to say:

He is late 'cause Natalie goes to school and she is not going on her own.

and then points out:

...and he's not stopping after school.

He doesn't stay after school for activities because he has to collect his sister from school and get on with other domestic jobs. From the selected 21 young people, only five are from a background of living with their own mother and father, with a further two living with their either their mother or father plus a partner. The remainder are from single parent families, of which eleven are mothers and two are fathers.

The majority of these young people mainly like rap and rave music. Similarly, their parents are from a background of punk and Heavy Metal; some of them still attend clubs and listen with interest to the music of their son or daughter, though only two parents are actively involved in music: one is a DJ and the other organises karaoke evenings.

Roberts *et al*, in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (1998), looked into the relationship between music and 'risk-taking behaviours'. The study of adolescent emotional response to music found that the more intense the music, the greater the risk-taking behaviour. A similar study is reported in the journal *Adolescence* (Took and Weiss, 1994). The study reports that young people who preferred heavy metal and/or rap were found to have more behavioural problems, be sexually active, be involved in drugs and alcohol and be arrested by the police more often. Although caution should be used in interpreting the findings of these two studies, they do indicate a possible link between behaviours and types of music. The present study supports this link: when comparisons are made between types of behaviour and styles of music, the more anti-social the young person was, the stronger the link with Heavy Metal, rap and rave music appeared to be. This link may not be directly with the young person concerned, but indirectly, from a family background of listening to such music.

It is worth noting that 14 of the young people feel that classroom music is relevant to them. As well as helping them to develop personal values such as co-operation, communication, trust and self-confidence, it enables them to understand their preferred music. However, it is also clear that extra music activities outside the classroom – such as youth club opportunities – are *more* highly valued because of the authentication of style via appropriate equipment e.g. DJ turntables.

In conclusion, the disaffected young people in this study were unsure of music at the start of year 7. However, as they progressed, their self-confidence grew and with it, a sense of understanding of the subject and, to varying degrees, the experience of success.

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