

## **A TIMELY SNAPSHOT**

### **Where does Workforce Reform leave Music in Primary Schools?**

*David Whewey adds to the heated debate about the effects on primary music of workforce reform.*

I was interested to read Helen Bretherick's letter in Name Magazine in Issue 15 asking for other views and experiences regarding Workforce Reform.

My concern, linked to Helen's letter and my own experience, is that although there have not been particularly large steps made in primary music curriculum provision, we are at a point in time when we could damage any progress that has been made, and scupper any future progress. Abandoning the principle that generalist teachers can teach music would be a return to music as a lottery, with only a small number of schools providing anything like a broad and balanced music curriculum.

#### **Listening to BAQTS/PGCE students**

For the past 17 years in schools and advisory services, part of my work has been as a visiting lecturer in five universities, working with primary BAQTS and PGCE students. The irony will not be lost on readers when they read on. Yes, I am a *visiting* lecturer, rather than a full member of staff – not a good model for what I am about to say, but better than none at all.

I always start the first session by asking students to recall their childhood experiences of primary music, which we then list on a table with no headings (these are entered after the list is complete). Discussions are usually lively, and the conversations punctuated with laughter and groans.

#### **In 1989**

17 years ago when I first conducted the survey with students at the University of Leicester their recollections included: recorders, singing, music to walk in/out of assembly (one reason why 'Listening' is still a heading), violin, guitar, BBC radio and TV, school productions, triangles, 'Peter and the Wolf', 'Carnival of the Animals'. Students recalled a curriculum where some children could do music and others could not. Those who could were offered extra support including instrumental lessons. Those who could not were often asked to mime when singing, told they were 'tone-deaf' or their abilities criticised. Many had taken this slight as a cue to give up – and felt they were as incapable as they believed themselves to be as children.

This was, of course, prior to the implementation of the national curriculum. Many had been taught by music specialists.

#### **In 2006**

How have things changed in the intervening 17 years, bearing in mind that some students left primary education as recently as 1998?

One would expect and hope to have a far greater proportion to have fond recollections of music lessons, with more performance and creative opportunities. However, only one student, in one group, out of over 350 students this academic year recalled doing any composing at all. (He remembered playing a xylophone and making up tunes.)

This year, therefore, I have asked students to indicate what they have seen on their school visits to demonstrate that things have changed.

Guess what?

Common observations include a lot of singing, some percussion but mainly rhythm games and very little composition. Hymn practice is too often the main opportunity to sing, and children often go to another teacher for their music. Music is nearly always in the afternoon

and is often squeezed out (accidentally/on purpose) because other lessons go on longer than timetabled. Resources are often poor. In fairness, some students do see good lessons – but not that many.

For example, in a recent survey, BAQTS Year One students at Northampton University came up with this list:

*Q: "What music experiences can you recall of when you were a child in primary school. Talk to each other, then share your recollections with the whole group."*

Performing	Composing	Listening	Appraising
Recorder		Peter and the Wolf.....?	
Singing			
Choir		BBC TV and Radio	
Triangle			
Christmas production		Assembly	
Nativity			
Violin			
Keyboard			
Teacher playing piano			
Teacher playing guitar			
Tambourine			
Clarinet			
Clapping games			
Making shakers, etc.			

### Assumptions and misconceptions

*Who can teach music in primary schools?*

I know many teachers, headteachers and instrumentalists believe that only someone with a formal musical background and/or developed instrumental skills can teach music. This becomes even more of an issue in upper key stage two.

The danger of this perception is that schools are only too ready and willing to abandon developing their teachers' music skills for something potentially less satisfactory. Before such a move takes place I think schools should consider the following:

- Many music teachers received poor training (I include myself) in how to teach curriculum music
- There are not, and never will be enough trained music teachers to cover the music curriculum in all primary schools
- Musicians do not necessarily make good teachers
- Music teachers move on – and leave the school with no-one confident enough to take over their role because the rest of the staff have not been involved
- By handing over this aspect of the curriculum to another person, the school is de-skilling its teachers who will be at a disadvantage when applying for new posts in other schools
- The school is also providing a model to pupils of music being something one doesn't have to be able to do

*Can generalist teachers teach music?*

The answer to this question is a definite yes, and I say so with such confidence because I have seen it time and time again. In Leicestershire in the late 1980s/ early 1990's I belonged to a very strong advisory team. In the mid 80s before most other people were doing so, Leicestershire's bold initiative was to introduce a set of materials closely linked to support (through free inset) for every primary school in the authority (around 350 schools). I provided a good broad curriculum with clear targets pre-dating but covering similar ground to the National Curriculum. The materials were non-threatening to generalist teachers but offered ideas to develop rhythm, pitch, movement, listening and exploring skills. The ideas were punctuated with small scale, manageable music projects for year 1 to year 6. Other authorities of course eventually developed similar strategies. The initiative was very

successful – and the advisory support often entailed working with a teacher and their class for up to 10 sessions.

What I observed was that the success of the music sessions had much more to do with the openness, enthusiasm and teaching skills of the teacher, than any previous musical knowledge, skills and understanding. In fact, it was sometimes the teacher with a formal music training that found it most difficult to accept that all children could take part in music and that a child didn't have to be gifted (sorry – talented) to perform and compose.

*What enables generalist teachers to teach a subject of which they were often terrified?*

An emphasis on skills development (rhythm, singing, listening, co-ordination, etc.) where the skills were within the grasp of the teacher as well as the child was important. These skills developed with constant repetition and practice – later termed 'on-going skills' by QCA. More emphasis on creativity – and 'sound' rather than 'music' as the medium meant that soundscapes and sound stories, recording using symbol notation or improvisation - were recognised as valuable and deliverable by anyone with good teaching skills. (Incidentally, because all primary teachers had the potential to teach in such ways, a serious lack of traditional music teachers and instrumental opportunities became less of an issue in Leicestershire.)

An ability to read western notation or have elementary instrumental skills (vocal, recorder, keyboard, guitar) was not a priority – although there were many inset opportunities for teachers to develop these skills if they wished to.

Older teachers in Leicestershire still enthuse about those days, and view the materials and support (and the team now long-disbanded) as heady days for music education.

However valuable it was then, and it is still being used now, we have moved on. We now recognise how necessary the development of specific musical and technical skills is as well for children to become confident in music. But let us not forget the great value of the model described above.

### **Curriculum music – perceptions**

Those responsible for appointing staff often have little understanding of the music curriculum. Therefore, decisions are made to appoint part-time staff, teaching assistants or visiting musicians on the basis that if they do some singing and/or can play the piano they must be good. Is appointing someone to take care of all the music in the school a way of abrogating responsibility? Why appoint a music curriculum caretaker if it is going to create extra work? Head teachers and governors often want to put a tick next to this curriculum area so that they can concentrate their energies elsewhere. No need to select a scheme. No need to use up valuable inset time encouraging reluctant teachers.

Not having a knowledge of the music curriculum or a desire to understand it can lead to some hasty decisions. I am concerned about the worrying current trend in a good number of schools to ask their classroom assistants (or HLTAs) to take music lessons. 12 out of 150 schools in a recent survey of local schools reported that their TAs or HLTAs took whole class music lessons whilst class teachers had PPA time. This hasn't been reflected by a massive influx of teaching assistants coming on music courses.

I find such a trend worrying for all sorts of reasons. Some I have already listed – to do with de-skilling teachers and a lack of rigour by senior management. Can anyone provide encouraging answers to these questions?

- Will schools provide support and training for their music providers?
- Will head teachers ensure there is sufficient funding, accommodation, resources and time for their music providers to do a sound job?
- Will teachers support their music providers - ensuring music is a valued part of the school curriculum?

- Will head teachers resist pressurising their music providers into developing music as a showcase for the school rather than a curriculum subject?
  - Can we not find a good balance eventually between an inclusive curriculum for all and developing specific skills/

### **Just for fun**

Just for fun, look at the logic behind this trend.

- Teachers may be happy to pass on a task they lack the confidence and expertise to lead themselves.
- Why not pass on other subject areas?
- Why not employ more teaching assistants?
- Why not get rid of expensive teachers?

This must sound very appealing to a school governor. Or perhaps a local business.

Now, all we need is a government white paper.....

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