



PLAY ON

GREATER INTEREST IN MUSIC AT SCHOOL CAN BE ACHIEVED – AND WITH IT THE POWER TO REENGAGE DISAFFECTED PUPILS, ARGUES MATT GRIFFITHS...

As I set about writing this article, I reflected on the current state of play regarding music education in England. It's not surprising that in many ways, we're the envy of the world: a National Plan for Music Education published in 2011; a statutory national curriculum for music in Key Stages 1, 2, 3 with new programmes of study starting in September 2014; a diverse range of opportunities for young people in and out of school through ambitious partnerships between schools, arts organisations and the music industry; the National Foundation for Youth Music (the charity I run) dedicated to ensuring young people with least opportunity and facing challenges in their lives have the chance to make music too.

Successive governments have thankfully taken music education seriously. Witness the £171m funding from the Department of Education, ring-fenced initially up to 31st March 2015, for the formation of the 123 new Music Education Hubs. Music seems to grab our government's attention. I'd surmise that this is largely due to its unique power and its role in developing the skills, team-work, confidence, self-esteem and enquiring minds of children and young people. Certainly, the evidence we have gathered at Youth Music



DON'T MISS OUT

'Exchanging Notes' will be launched on 11 November on the Youth Music Network: (youthmusic.org.uk/network). The deadline for receipt of applications will be 3rd February 2014.

since 1999 corroborates these positive outcomes.

Young people's appetite for music is huge. They throng in their hundreds of thousands to sell-out summer music festivals such as Reading or Glastonbury every year. Music forms a big part of their everyday life, creates a sense of belonging, a togetherness, a leveller. So at face value, the 'market' for music as a school subject, unlike perhaps other subjects, should be significant.

So, all is good I hear you say. Well, not quite..

We continue to operate within an environment of educational change, budget cuts, and high levels of youth unemployment. Within the school day, music activities are being squeezed as they compete for precious time with what are regarded as more 'important' subjects. In 2011, only 7% of young people opted to take music as a GCSE subject with only 1% taking music A Levels. Yet young people's innate passion for music continues, albeit not always in school – so how can we overcome this contradiction and apparent disconnect? Here are a few of my thoughts:

In terms of the music curriculum in school, it is often the case that the content is 'supplied' to young people. Better outcomes can occur where this is turned on its head – where an environment is provided that gives space and flexibility for greater input from the young people themselves but with less 'teacher talk'. Pupils then feel they 'own' their music (just like they do outside school)

without feeling they're simply regurgitating someone else's.

This approach is more akin to that of working musicians, where the group are collaborating together to create music for a specific purpose, rather than purely for the tick box requirements of a music 'lesson'. Our Communities of Music Education research (<http://bit.ly/SdZBpu>) is worth looking at in terms of young people's perceptions of music-making in and out of school. They often perceive music lessons as an academic process, rather than a 'learning by doing' activity, which is one of the features of out of school music-making.

I read a great, reflective article recently by Anna Gower, a secondary school music teacher who plays a leading role in the Musical Futures initiative (The Guardian (Teacher Network), 29th September, 2013). Anna talks about how she changed her approach to teaching to one where she predominantly takes the lead from the young people she works with, focusing on their own particular interests in music as a starting point for their curriculum activity. As she says: "It was truly mind blowing what happened to the first group that went through this. The atmosphere was electric. The students were totally engaged. They realised they needed some skills and wanted us to help them. As teachers we had to change how we worked, we were told to stand back and let the kids find their own objectives and then to help them facilitate it, to help them get to where they want to be."

Conversely, I also read an article recently where the acclaimed violinist Nicola Benedetti argued that young people should be "made" to study classical music (The Independent, 20th September, 2013). There's no doubting Nicola's passion for music or her commitment to music education. However, her suggestion that all young people should be made to study classical music is unhelpful broadly for two reasons: First, it assumes, wrongly, that classical music is the only pinnacle for which young people should aim and, secondly, it has the effect of dismissing other sorts of music, the very sort of music that young people will indeed be passionate about. From our point of view, music is music, with similarities and differences inherent in all genres. Creating a hierarchy of genres takes us all a step backwards. To be absolutely clear, classical music is fantastic, but it really shouldn't be pushed at the expense of not taking seriously the music young people love.

At Youth Music, we know that music making by young people can be life changing. We currently invest in 352 organisations in England providing music-making opportunities for young people with least opportunity. Most of the activities we support take place out of school. However, we are really keen to see greater integration between school music departments and organisations providing music activities outside school. We're now doing something about this through our new funding module



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Matt Griffiths is Executive Director of the National Foundation for Youth Music, bringing a wealth of experience and leadership in the music education sector to the role. Since his appointment in June 2012 he has overseen a significant restructure, with the charity's support for music organisations now running at its highest level ever. Founded in 1999, Youth Music aims to ensure that access to life-changing music-making is available to all young people in England. It currently reaches out to 90,000 young people, providing them with opportunities to make music and helping them to overcome the challenges they face in their lives. Working across all music genres, the projects Youth Music supports help young people to develop their creative and social skills and make positive contributions to their community. The charity also undertakes on-going research to identify ways to use music to re-engage young people.

called 'Exchanging Notes', which we have developed as a result of the Communities of Music Education research (2011).

Exchanging Notes will fund ten projects in England comprising partnerships between in and out-of-school music providers, backed up by a longitudinal action research study over four years. We will be seeking applications from secondary schools and music education organisations working in partnership to explore how the distinctive educational approaches of in and out-of-school music making could be combined and built upon. The aim is to bring about extended benefits, both musically and educationally, for young people at risk of low attainment, disengagement or exclusion. Amongst the music projects we have funded, there have been many examples of students in pupil referral units or at risk of exclusion where, by harnessing their passion for music, they have developed greater self-confidence which has re-ignited their engagement with school study.

We are seeking innovative applications that have at their heart a determination to think differently about how music education can be delivered, making best use of the collective skills and expertise of teachers in school and musicians and music leaders out of school. Effective partnership working and an agreed shared goal amongst the partners will be key.

The opportunity I see is to harness the passion for music young people have outside school and bring it into the school day. This doesn't mean 'dumbing down', but making a closer relationship between young people's involvement in music in their daily lives to avoid the disconnect in school that can exist. Access to music making would increase, as most young people attend school, and perhaps then the current decline in demand for GCSE and A Level music could be reversed? And along the way, we hope that some pupils who are under-achieving may find a new path back into successful mainstream study.