

Music Teachers are Curriculum Designers

It is fair to say that the Model Music Curriculum has caused quite a stir in music classrooms in England. A National Curriculum already exists for music, and whilst it is only statutory for around 23% of schools (DfE, 2021), it has been widely implemented since 1992. However, no other subject has a Model Curriculum as music now does.

The Model Music Curriculum was first proposed by the Secretary of State (Education) in England in January 2019, but by October the same year, was “indefinitely delayed” (Gibbons, 2019). Nothing more was heard of the curriculum in the public sphere until March 2021, when it was eventually published.

Responses to the Model Music Curriculum have been mixed. Chris Cobb, Chief Executive of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, the body contracted to develop the new curriculum in partnership with an Expert Panel, described it as “compelling” and maintained that it gave “teachers an understanding of what is required” (Cobb, 2021, p.1). Others have described it as “tokenistic” and “impoverished” (Daubney, 2021), or as having a “paucity of pedagogic content” (Lydon, 2021, p.1).

Do we need a Model Music Curriculum?

This question is pertinent because research shows that music teachers are already experts in curriculum design (Anderson 2021a). Music teachers design curricula which are tailored to enable young people in their musical development, and this procedure requires a high level of often unacknowledged teacher skills. Research shows that music teachers were sophisticated curriculum designers before the Model Music Curriculum (Anderson, 2021a) and ongoing research (Anderson, 2021b) indicates that this remains the case. However, understanding the processes with which teachers engage and how they valorise curriculum conceptualisations remains relatively uncharted territory.

What we do know is that music teachers sequence the topics they choose to enable musical progress. Some topics (such as the Blues) appear to be used more often as a bridge into further specific types of learning. The Blues is most often taught in Year 8 (12-13 year olds), whereas the Model Music Curriculum places it at the end of Year 9 (13-14 year olds). Understanding the reason for the Model Music Curriculum’s sequencing and why this differs from the musical practices of many teachers, is an area which requires further thinking and research to unpick.

The music curriculum in English schools at Key Stage 3 (11-14 year olds) is highly complex. Teachers manipulate their resources in music classrooms in line with their own conceptualisations of what curriculum is, and how they are required to formulate it in their school contexts. There are many multi-dimensional ideas in play at any one time, as music teachers seek to create valuable moments of musical experience which enable their pupils to develop.

Teachers were responding to curriculum demands in this way long before the Model Music Curriculum was conceived and developed. Music teachers are the experts in their own classrooms, already facilitating multi-faceted learning engagements. Following a Model Music Curriculum is unlikely to enhance this. Time and space for teacher reflection, the sharing of pedagogical approaches between music teachers, and amongst teachers in other subjects too, and agency which permits teachers to operate as curriculum designers is, however, long overdue. Research-informed dialogue is therefore critical in enabling teacher practices to continue to develop. Curriculum does not lie within the pages of government

policy documents, but with the capacity, agency and tenacity of teachers and young people as they engage in musical learning together.

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