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To cite this article: Martin Fautley (2023): The place of music in a semi-devolved system of school improvement – the English context, Arts Education Policy Review, DOI: [10.1080/10632913.2023.2212184](https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2023.2212184)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2023.2212184>



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Published online: 17 May 2023.



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# The place of music in a semi-devolved system of school improvement – the English context

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## ABSTRACT

In England, there is a National Curriculum in place which is intended to outline what will be taught and learned in each of the required subjects in state schools, music being one of these subjects. However, for some years, a right-wing conservative government has been working on systemic change, which removes many schools from state control and lets them operate independently; these schools are known as “academies.” Alongside this academization program, there has also been considerable governmental intervention in the content of the subject of music in schools. This governmental intervention needs to be viewed against a background of promotion of what the government’s own school inspection body has referred to as “cultural capital,” although this is far removed from Bourdieu’s use of the term and is more concerned with the promotion of what can be seen as middle-class virtues, and bourgeois cultural views.

## KEYWORDS

School improvement; music education; England; cultural capital; hegemony; values

This article unpacks the ways in which music is being used as a front-runner in the culture wars that are taking place in England’s school music classrooms. Instances of government education ministers promoting high culture and the reading of music staff notation in ways which tacitly privilege the western classical tradition are discussed. The promotion of a misunderstood version of cultural capital as something which can be “given” to pupils is problematized, and ways in which hegemony and axiology are being weaponized in school improvement are discussed. Finally, lessons are drawn for an international audience as to why these issues are relevant for policy and practice in music education.

## England – The National Context

This article considers the place and role of the school subject of music, and how it interfaces with the notion of school improvement as it appertains in England. In order to fully grasp the importance of this topic, and what is taking place, it is first of all necessary to briefly explain what the systems concerned are in England, what is involved in the teaching and learning of music, how music fits into the school curriculum, and what is taking place with regards to school improvement in the English situation.

When beginning a discussion about England, it is important to locate this into its specific national context. England is one country within the United Kingdom (UK), alongside the nations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Although the UK is a sovereign country with a constitutional monarchy, the various countries within it have different educational systems and requirements. It is therefore important to note at the outset that this article is concerned solely with England, where the music education system, although sharing some similar characteristics with Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, is nonetheless different enough to be worthy of note at this juncture.

In England, there is a National Curriculum in place which is intended to outline what will be taught and learned in each of the required subjects in state schools, with music being one of these subjects. However, the situation is not quite as simple as that, as for some years the Government has been working on systemic change, which removes many schools from state oversight, and lets them operate independently to some extent; these schools are known as “academies.” Academies might be viewed as being akin to privatized bodies, since they are institutions that have been withdrawn from collective democratic accountability and delivered over into the power of individuals and potentially unaccountable institutions (Wrigley, 2009, p. 48).

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This system has many similarities with the charter school movement in the USA and other neoliberal educational reform schemes around the world.

There is some debate in England as to the effectiveness of academization (the process of turning schools into academies) as a tool of school improvement. The government's belief is that academies are the answer to all forms of school improvement, as they say on a government website:

They [academies] enable the strongest leaders to take responsibility for supporting more schools, develop great teachers and allow schools to focus on what really matters – teaching, learning and a curriculum that is based on what works. (gov.uk, 2021)

There is also a voiced assumption that academies are the singular answer to the issue of school improvement, with the word “will” making this clear in this now disappeared-from-the-internet governmental pronouncement of 2004:

We expect that all Academies will make steady upward progress .... Good teaching, excellent facilities and motivated pupils will deliver real improvements in educational standards. (DfES, cited in Gorard, 2009)

However, many commentators believe that the academies program has a political undertone, which is that the ruling right-wing conservative party does not like local authorities, who prior to this had oversight of local schools in their area. A previous conservative minister of education who forged ahead with Academization said that he was doing so in order to be able to free up schools from “the dead hand of town hall control” (d'Ancona, 2014). However, the notion of local authorities (LAs) “controlling” schools is a misnomer:

But LAs don't ‘control’ schools – they haven't done so since Local Management of Schools was introduced more than 25 years ago. I would argue they never did. (Downs, 2016)

Using academization as a lever for school improvement has resulted in debate as to whether the program is effective or not. The place of music in English academies varies considerably, depending to some extent on the priorities of the sponsors; some value music highly, some less so, but this is the backdrop against which a discussion of music education and school improvement needs to take place.

## School Improvement – The Role of the Inspectorate

The implications for a discussion of what school improvement means for a neoliberal right-wing

government, such as there is in England, are complex and manifold. The process of school improvement often entails making qualitative decisions and judgments about getting better, and this makes it an axiological enterprise with aspects of hegemony also entailed. When viewed from a music education stance, school improvement involves evaluative judgments needing to be made, and requires a mechanism for making them. In the English context, the primary quantitative means for doing this for secondary schools is *via* public examination results, and these exams are usually taken by young people at ages 16+ and 18+ years old. However, for music this poses a number of problems. Only about 7% of pupils take General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) music, the optional public examination at 16+ (Bath et al., 2020), and only about 1% take A-level music, the examination for those aged 18+ (Whittaker et al., 2019). Improvement, then, when involving music education, needs to be measured in ways other than public examination successes. Raudenbush suggests two questions:

One causal question about school impact is of interest to parents: “Will my child learn more in School A or School B?” Such questions are different from questions of interest to district administrators: “Is the instructional program in School A better than that in School B?” (Raudenbush, 2004, p. 4)

This separation of the interests of parents and administrators is both useful and interesting, but in the English context there is a much more important agency involved which needs to be carefully considered, and this is the role of the inspectorate. Jones and Tymms (2014, p. 316) offer an overview of school improvement actions, introducing the notion of school inspection, which will figure significantly in the rest of this discussion:

The systems employed by inspectorates to drive school improvement vary across Europe, ranging from systems involving sanctions with governmental control to systems with few consequences based on peer review, and from emancipatory systems involving self-evaluation to bureaucratic systems involving compliance and regulation.

It is in this arena that there has been considerable pressure placed on schools in England, not only by politicians, but also by the government's supposedly arms-length school inspection organization, the Office for Standards in Education, Ofsted. Ofsted inspects schools on a rolling basis, passing judgment in the form of a graded outcome statement which is publicly presented, with local and national media carrying the results of these inspections, and league tables produced of the highest

and lowest Ofsted graded schools in an area. These inspections can cause significant distress, and it has not been unknown for teachers to commit suicide after a particularly damning Ofsted judgment (Adams, 2015). Such extreme reactions to Ofsted are fortunately rare, but there are also aspects of an Ofsted inspection which have a negative effect on the teachers concerned in a school, as noted by Cullingford, citing too from Jeffrey and Woods:

One effect of Ofsted inspections is well documented, and probably endorsed by the organization itself. That is on the stress levels of teachers. We are constantly confronted by phrases such as ‘stressful and punitive’. The policing of ‘naming and shaming’ is deliberate. As one anonymous person put it—‘A few deaths are a price well worth paying.’ There are many questions about the ethics of such a policy, let alone its efficiency. But even without such extreme outcomes the language used to describe the experience of Ofsted inspections is consistent and telling: ‘confusion, anomie, anxiety, dehumanisation, weakened commitment, loss of values.’ (Cullingford, 1999, p. 5; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996)

These are the significant and adverse effects on morale and wellbeing of school staff which are often involved in an inspection. By way of contrast to this, however, Ofsted themselves say they are a positive agency in school improvement:

Ofsted exists to be a force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation. This is our guiding principle. The primary purpose of inspection under this framework is to bring about improvement in education provision.... (Ofsted, 2021a)

However, research literature does not necessarily support the claims that Ofsted is acting as a force for good in this regard:

At the moment there is a lack of evidence from strong research designs to assess the impact of inspections and the assumption that there is a causal link between inspections and school improvement cannot be clearly supported from the literature. (Jones & Tymms, 2014, p. 328)

Whether this is the case or not, there can be no doubt that Ofsted requirements significantly affect the ways in which schools think about and operationalize teaching and learning.

## Music Education in England

Ofsted themselves have said that “the assumption [is] that a central purpose of good music education is for pupils to make more music, think more musically and consequently become more musical” (Ofsted, 2021a, p. 4/53). The way that this is done is by adherence

to the National Curriculum, which is not, as discussed below, a prescriptive document; neither should inspection results involve feelings and beliefs of individual Ofsted inspectors. Here numerous issues can be posited. There are some schools where every child learns to play an orchestral instrument, whilst in others every child participates in a rock or jazz band, and still more where there is a mixture of these. Then there are some where there is almost no music provision at all. Judging the contribution of music education to school improvement by program evaluation alone seems problematic here. Also to be reckoned with is that, unlike, say, the situation in the US and other jurisdictions, music-making ensembles such as orchestras, bands, and choirs are *not* usually curricula activities, but take place out of school time, and are normally run voluntarily (and unpaid) by the teachers concerned, with no compulsion on the pupils to attend.

As stated above, in England there is a National Curriculum (NC) in operation, and music is one of the subjects on it. The NC is, however, a fairly brief document, for high school students aged 11–14 years old. Known as Key Stage 3 in the English system, the entire curriculum only runs to about 200 words. It is, however, important to acknowledge the effect that the NC has on those teaching the subject in schools:

... music teachers in England have never had legitimized control of their curriculum, which has instead rested with official bodies to whom teachers are accountable. Curriculum design as a political driver in music first began to emerge in England during the 1980s, where directives about music education transitioned from flexible guiding frameworks ... underpinning musical activity, to a set of policy documents for whose implementation music teachers held statutory responsibilities... (Anderson, 2022, p. 3)

This placing of, as Anderson puts it, “[c]urriculum design as a political driver” is important to an understanding of how school improvement policies and practices have impacted upon the teaching and learning of music in schools. This is because alongside the academization program, there has also been considerable governmental intervention in the subject *content* of music.

The National Curriculum for music in England is predicated upon three main areas of study, composing, listening, and performing. The inclusion of composing renders music education in England somewhat different from those national systems which are built around more of a musical performance focus:

The so-called triumvirate of wind band, choir, and orchestra, the omniscient conductor/pedagogue, and the associated Western Art music repertoire still reign supreme in many other music education contexts. (Butler & Wright, 2020, p. 100)

The English situation is not like this at all, with composing, listening, and performing all occupying more-or-less equal strands of musical activity. These three aspects of musical learning may all seem to be entirely reasonable, even to those from very different teaching and learning traditions, but it is important in this discussion about school quality and school improvement to ask questions of what is actually going on in English school music classrooms, and what the reasons for this might be.

Music education is not a value-free endeavor. There are different types, styles, and genres of music, and a question for music educators is which of these should be included, and which excluded. Time frames for curricula implementation are too tight for there to be much by way of in-depth exploration of a range of musics, and so the choice has to be limited to make teaching and learning programs manageable. When considering the effects on music education in schools, one aspect of Ofsted profoundly affecting what is taking place in classrooms is the way in which Ofsted have appropriated the terminology “cultural capital” and applied it in ways which in some instances are forcing schools to reconsider their curricula and teaching and learning programs with this being foregrounded.

### Ofsted and Cultural Capital

What happened is that in the 2019 iteration of the Ofsted *Handbook for Inspecting Schools in England* this phrase appeared: “...inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life” (Ofsted, 2019, para 203). This utilization of the term “cultural capital” has several ramifications, and in order to investigate these it is appropriate to try and unpick what Ofsted actually meant by their employment of this terminology.

The origins of the phrase “cultural capital” come from the work of Bourdieu, for example in his 1979 publication *The Inheritors*, he writes of

...the socially conditioned predisposition to adapt oneself to the models, rules, and values which govern the school system, in short, the whole set of factors that make pupils feel and seem to be ‘at home’ or ‘out of place’ in the school, result...in an unequal rate of scholastic achievement between the social classes. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 13)

In later works (Bourdieu, 1973, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) Bourdieu developed this theme, arriving at a definition of cultural capital, which in Bourdieu’s work is linked with the background of a pupil’s family, that in turn is related to both social

capital and economic capital to privilege certain social class advantages. One of the purposes of Bourdieu’s description was to account for the ways in which society does not treat people equally, as Edgerton and Roberts (2014, p. 193) stated:

Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural reproduction is one of the most prominent attempts to explain the intergenerational persistence of social inequality. Bourdieu contended that the formal education system is a primary mechanism in the perpetuation of socio-economic inequality, as it serves to legitimate the existing social hierarchy by transforming it into an apparent hierarchy of gifts or merit [...]

This notion of cultural capital as described by Bourdieu seems a long way from Ofsted’s notion of schools “giving” cultural capital to pupils *via* the curriculum. Beadle puts it very bluntly: “[w]hat if the little that Ofsted knew about cultural capital was entirely wrong, confused with another concept, based on an utterly inadequate reading of the area” (Beadle, 2020a, p. 11). One of the points that Ofsted possibly may have confused is that of cultural capital getting somehow embroiled with Hirsch’s (1987) writings on cultural literacy. Some of these confusions may be traced back to the conservative government’s former secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, who said of Hirsch’s work,

Shared access to the intellectual capital we have built up over the years helps bind society together. The American thinker E.D. Hirsch has highlighted this crucial aspect of educational policy in his work on Cultural Literacy. A society in which there is a widespread understanding of the nation’s past, a shared appreciation of cultural reference points, a common stock of knowledge on which all can draw, and trade, is a society in which we all understand each other better [...]. (Gove, 2009)

This view of a shared culture, one on which societal foundations can be based is explored later. The issue at this juncture is the confusion of two different phrases whose main commonality is that they share the same first word, namely “cultural”:

...education policy’s debt to Hirsch fails to explain Ofsted’s (2019) adoption of cultural capital as a key term. Given that the ideas associated with Bourdieu are alien to Ofsted’s way of thinking, one might imagine that an alternative version of cultural capital has been derived from Hirsch; in *Knowledge and the Curriculum*,<sup>1</sup> for example, cultural capital is mentioned ten times, as though the connection with Hirsch is obvious. However, this concept hardly ever features in Hirsch’s own work. (Nightingale, 2020, p. 237)

One of the reasons that this utilization of cultural capital as a school improvement construct and

terminology is that in Ofsted's version it situates itself very nicely into the playbook of a conservative right-wing government. Instead of blaming society, which famously a former leader of the conservative party said does not exist (Thatcher, 1987), and which would require funding and action to address, instead the task—and, importantly, the blame—can be handed over to schools. But it is more insidious that this. As Beadle (2020b) notes: “In terms of music, cultural capital exalts the classical over the modern or the popular.” Beadle then goes on to further observe:

[...] what Ofsted is trying to do, if one is feeling generous, is to democratise “high” or “refined” (or “legitimate”) culture and to bring a greater exposure to this for children so that they might have “an appreciation of human creativity and achievement”. (If one wasn't feeling generous, one might point out that this is really just elevation of the old over the new, and the white tradition as above all others). (Beadle, 2020b)

It is here that this becomes a front-line issue for classroom music teachers. The education minister previously mentioned, Michael Gove, had already explained that in his opinion, some music was better than others:

...I am unapologetic in arguing that all children have a right to the best. And there is such a thing as the best. Richard Wagner is an artist of sublime genius and his work is incomparably more rewarding - intellectually, sensually and emotionally - than, say, the Arctic Monkeys. (Gove, 2011)

Whilst it may be the case that for some politicians, policy makers, and educationalists, as well as possibly a number of music educators internationally, this is an entirely uncontentious statement; nonetheless for classroom music teachers working with 14-year pupils, there is the possibility that any discussion of relative musical values can easily descend into a “mine is better than yours” slanging match. But more than this, it immediately places a cultural superiority onto certain types of music. Writing of language, Cushing and Snell make very pertinent observation concerning a similar issue, which is translatable directly into music education:

...raciolinguistic ideologies are deeply embedded into the sociopolitical culture of the inspectorate, and ... these ideologies translate into systems of sonic surveillance in which the nonstandardised language practices of students and teachers are heard as impoverished, deficient, and unsuitable for school. (Cushing & Snell, 2022)

It is easy to see how the music of non-western classical cultures can also be seen, or rather heard, as being “impoverished, deficient, and unsuitable for school,” as Cushing and Snell put it. In order to see an instance of how this way of thinking about school

improvement privileges a particular high-art view of the types of music-learning in England, it is appropriate to start with the National Curriculum, and then move the more recent publication of the governmentally promoted “model music curriculum” (DfE, 2021).

### School Improvement – Hegemony and Axiology

We have long known in music education, certainly in England, and in many other countries too, that there are hegemonic influences at play in what is taught and learned in the classroom (Butler & Wright, 2020; Shepherd et al., 1977; Spruce, 2001; Wright, 2017). The conservative party former secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, was a fan of the writings of Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth century poet, cultural commentator, and an inspector of schools. In his 1896 work *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold had written (p. viii) “[culture is] the best which has been thought and said.” Interestingly, though, Gove seems to have skimmed over the parts of Arnold's writings where he makes it clear that access to culture is *not* for the masses of the populace, but only for the rarefied few who can appreciate it:

The highly instructed few, and not the scantily instructed many, will ever be the organ to the human race of knowledge and truth. Knowledge and truth in the full sense of the words, are not attainable by the great mass of the human race at all. (Arnold, 1896/1993, pp. 43–44)

This seems to be a long way from Ofsted inspecting schools to “give” cultural capital to children and young people. But perhaps this is the intention of a right-wing government, to try and remake society in its own image of privilege, where the majority of cabinet ministers attended fee-paying schools; and, what is possibly worse, they did this without giving a second thought to the societal and cultural implications thereof. This stance can be traced back to the early days of the National Curriculum in England, concerning which Wright and Davies observed:

Power and culture intersected to insert into the National Curriculum for Music a compulsory consideration of Western Art music irrespective of pupils' or teachers' musical interest or enculturation, so as to ensure that in England... pupils “continued to know and appreciate their own cultural heritage and traditions” (O'Hear, 1991), a statement of effortless superiority of the cultural traditions and heritage of this particular, right-wing conceptual analyst in assigning those of his social group to all others. (Wright & Davies, 2010, p. 47)

This takes us to heart of what school improvement often means in the English context when music is involved. It is the music of high western art, of Wagner,

not the Arctic Monkeys, of concert hall and opera house. This has, as Butler and Wright noted, “far reaching societal effects” way beyond the unthought-through preferences of right-wing politicians:

...the implications for students from different class backgrounds of the inclusion or exclusion of popular music in or from music education at all levels has far reaching societal effects. These include, but are not restricted to, who may access higher education and at which institutions, who may enter the music industry, who may become, for example, a professional performer, composer, conductor or producer, and who may become a teacher or professor of music. The ways in which entry to these fields is couched within taken-for-granted musical rules, and expectations skewed in favor of Western Art music abilities and understandings, represents a form of misrecognition within which members of society believe that success in music is due to aptitude and application, when it is in fact subject to classed and cultured factors that are highly unequally distributed throughout society. (Butler & Wright, 2020, p. 98)

Music in school improvement, in this worldview, becomes about making school music lessons espouse and enshrine more middle class values. Or, thinking of critical race theory, to entail more whiteness. As Hess observes, “Music education currently operates through an ideology of white supremacy, and this ideology has historical roots in our discipline” (Hess, 2017, p. 20). The English music educator Nate Holder (Holder, 2020) wrote about this in his poem “If I were a racist”, from which these are a few selected stanzas:

If I were a racist,  
I'd teach children that talking about music means,  
Texture, timbre and tempo.  
If you can't use these words, you're not a musician.  
...  
If I were a racist,  
I'd call all non-white music  
'World Music'  
After all, it's them and us.  
...  
If I were a racist,  
I would insist that children learn western music notation,  
Forgetting that many civilisations,  
Flourished without it for centuries. (Holder, 2020)

This powerful writing of Nate Holder comes as stark contrast to another former conservative party

education minister, Nick Gibb, who oversaw the production of the non-statutory government guidance document the “Model Music Curriculum” (DfE, 2021). As a child, Gibb (briefly) had piano lessons (Gibb, 2017) and possibly felt himself to be something of an expert on the subject of teaching and learning in music as a consequence. He established a working party to produce a model music curriculum, which would include amongst its aims Gibb's personal wish that “I want every child to leave primary school able to read music, understanding sharps and flats...” (Gibb, 2019). This sits uneasily with the last stanza of Holder's poem, above, as the placing of Gibb's attention on *reading* music situates the musical style he valued clearly in the western classical tradition.

## Discussion

School improvement is complex systemically, and within it the place of music is not necessarily clear cut. What we are seeing in England is, to some extent, the weaponization of middle-class cultural values being used against the dominant musical cultures of many children and young people. This is not to say that this is a bad thing *per se*, but we need to be very aware of esthetic and axiological judgments predicated on personal preferences. Swanwick (1994, p. 169) counseled some wariness in this regard:

The idea of the arts as a cultural heritage in which children have to be initiated is not necessarily pernicious but it does need watching. The Third Reich in Germany was in many ways rooted in European high culture and its leaders were certainly very conscious of the importance of the concept of heritage.

However, the politician Nick Gibb, mentioned above, observed in his introduction to the Model Music Curriculum (MMC):

The Model Music Curriculum is designed to introduce the next generation to a broad repertoire of music from the Western Classical tradition, and to the best popular music and music from around the world. (DfE, 2021, p. 2)

Here he lays his cards very firmly on the table. Gibb sees the purpose of music education as being the promotion of cultural capital, with a nod to Matthew Arnold and “the best,” which is here tacitly assumed to involve a shared, unquestioned, and unquestionable understanding of what that best might be, but with a reluctant recognition that possibly music from outside the Western Classical tradition might be considered by some to be quite good too. The “othering” (Philpott, 2022) which the MMC establishes involves an antagonistic dichotomy between

Western Classical music, “the best,” and everything and everyone else’s “the best,” with othering being part of hegemonic and axiological value systems and assumptions that again are assumed unproblematically shared, in a way redolent of Hirsch’s work. Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is evidenced in the way that this is automatically presumed superior, and yet Ofsted’s translated version will require teachers to deliver, not to recognize that society and home culture might play a part in it.

By way of contrast to this, and stepping back from what she considers to be an Anglo-American set of concerns, Alexandra Kertz-Welzel has no problem in considering that classical music has a place in contemporary school curricula:

Classical music is in fact not an outdated genre in music education. Its significance rather depends on the teaching approach or the kind of musical experiences offered. This reveals the Anglo-American discourse about classical music in music education as rather shortsighted and certainly not representing international discourse. The global discourse on classical music in music education is rich and encompasses many ideas, approaches, and methods. It also supports the notion that classical music is just one musical tradition among many others—although connected to a controversial discourse. (2020, p. 250)

Many music educators in England would, anecdotally, probably support this stance. Toyne (2021, p. 116) makes the sensible observation that

A quest to please students through spending a term focusing on the music a teacher imagines they will like is almost always doomed to failure, more often than not because the music chosen offers limited scope to teach the musical content of the curriculum framework. Equally, there are many areas of classical music that, though extraordinary, would not be effective as a vehicle for musical learning at Key Stage 3. Certainly, an essential aspect of music teaching pedagogy must be sparking interest in music that students have never previously experienced, but that is not the principal focus of the curriculum – which is to develop students’ musical understanding in a thorough, organized manner.

And this observation takes us to the heart of the matter for music educators, certainly in England, and possibly elsewhere too, that the main focus of teaching and learning in the music classroom should be to develop musical understanding, and to do so, as Swanwick (1999) put it, by “teaching music musically.”

Yet the question still remains: is teaching music musically likely to satisfy policy makers? Will it be possible for Ofsted to say that school A is teaching music more musically than school B? Or that school C is now teaching music more musically than it was

the last time it was inspected five years ago? These are difficult questions for school improvement decision makers to consider when legislating for raising school quality. The people pulling the school improvement policy levers, the policy makers and educational administrators, are extremely unlikely to understand intricate details of music education. Often, as a former schools music inspector remarked in an off-the-cuff comment, such people are just impressed, for example, to see lots of children singing on the stage. The quality of teaching and learning which took place in the classroom was of no concern, lots of children were singing, and this was a good thing. But this view is trying to be changed, as more recently the current head of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, said in 2021:

Music is part of the curriculum but simply “doing” music is not enough. We shouldn’t be satisfied with just having music on the timetable. We need to be ambitious about what we expect for music in the classroom and make sure that time is well used. (Ofsted, 2021b)

Which leaves us with the same dilemma concerning how this is operationalized for practical purposes for classroom music education’s role in school improvement. Counting children on a stage is easy, undertaking program evaluation is not. For music education in England this is a current and very real issue. What good music education is has as many opiated proponents as there are classrooms, some, admittedly with vested or financial interests. Politicians, especially those of a conservative leaning, can be keen to see a music education which more-or-less replicates their experiences many years ago at exclusive fee-paying schools, whereas those teachers and music educators working in contexts of urban or rural deprivation are often more concerned about experience and inclusion (Kinsella et al., 2019). This means that a unitary measurement scale of school improvement based on music is unlikely to be successful. We know about the problems with value added measures of education, and they teach us that this is a complex issue (e.g., Berliner, 2013; Kelly & Downey, 2010).

From a policy perspective, the political steering of ministers described above finds its outworking in how schools interpret and apply those policies. Many academies are to be found as part of multi-academy trusts, MATs. These MATs can vary in size from just a few schools to many. Often these MATs enact their own localized policies regarding school improvement procedures, sometimes involving common curricula requirements, and similar time allocations for subjects. Some of the MATs pride themselves on tailoring their offer to the wants and needs of the localities they serve. England has a range of socio-economic differences in locality, and



the differences between them in terms of opportunities can be stark. The music curriculum for an urban multicultural school can be very different from one in a leafy shire county, but the essence of National Curriculum is supposed to be similar in each.

Another key area of contention in English music education currently is that it is not clear what the purpose of classroom music actually is (Philpott, 2012; Toyne, 2021), and this is reflected in policy confusions. The politician mentioned earlier who wanted all children to be able to leave primary schools able to read music is an example. The National Curriculum for primary school aged children says that “Pupils should be taught to...use and understand staff and other musical notations” (DfE, 2013, p. 219). This is the policy document, a government minister can put his own spin on this to try to make it about reading music (whatever that may mean), but the policy document is the official version. So, for some primary schools, trying to second guess what Ofsted might be looking for from ministerial pronouncements, they might think it appropriate to concentrate on music staff notation and drilling children and young people into writing notes on the treble clef. In England such second-guessing can be especially problematic as very few primary schools have specialist music teachers on the staff, or in many cases anyone with any form of significant musical knowledge. Thus well-meaning, diligent but unprepared teachers can do things they think should be done, but still not be working in ways that others would think musical. For such a teacher, if the government minister says he wants all children to be able to read music, then this is where they believe their labors should be placed.

Alongside the lack of clarity as to the purpose of music education, there is a concomitant lack of clarity as to what the contents of an improved music curriculum for classrooms should be. The recent model music curriculum (DfE, 2021) has been both welcomed and criticized (Anderson, 2021). One of the many issues with the model music curriculum (MMC) is that it takes as its mode of construction the notion that content should be privileged. This means, that, as Philpott observes, the MMC has

...attendant lists of potential works to be studied, concepts to be learned, glossaries to be understood, and notations to be read. While all of these are sold as suggestions, the “model” does itself model a reified epistemology for those that will be most likely to use it, namely, music teachers. The accompanying metaphor is one in which knowledge is seen as object and commodity... (Philpott, 2022, p. 8)

There is a danger that a curriculum can become, as Philpott notes, little more than a list. This has all

the attendant problems for inexperienced or unprepared teachers. Any list, especially in music education, can be only a shallow reflection of the lived experience of music making and music learning. Anderson (2022, p. 1) unpicks this a little further: “The relationship between curriculum, assessment, teacher evaluation and how teachers are managed is therefore complex and intertwined and laced with power dynamics, where the negotiation of curriculum ownership is a constant tension.” This brings us back to the tensions involved in thinking about music education and school improvement from an English perspective, in that it is a slippery and elusive construct, with multiple meanings, and multiple interpretations of those meanings.

### Concluding Remarks

This article has tried to show how music in the school classroom as a part of school improvement is a problematic area. Whilst much of this may seem to involve peculiarly local sets of concerns, nonetheless for an international audience there are many issues that warrant thinking about. The type and genre of music that figure in educational programs, indeed, the very nature and content of those programs, might seem obvious in terms of school improvement in that more children and young people, more participation, more enjoyment might be all that matter. But questions need to be asked about who is not being represented. Which children are invisible, which musics inaudible, and what are the reasons for this? School improvement is not a neutral or value-free process, and attempts to make it seem so can simply whitewash in many senses of the word some quite significant cracks. If dominant cultures take on the principle of using schools as scapegoat for societal problems, and music educators become front-line troops in culture wars, then there are likely to be problems ahead. One of the tasks that music education, not just in England, but internationally needs to think about is what it is for, and addressing this will go a long way toward knowing what to do to get better at it. As we can see from the English case, politicians can be both keen and quick to get involved in these discussions, and legislate their way into getting their own ideas into statute. Music education needs to be in a strong position to resist.

### Note

1. ‘Knowledge and the Curriculum’, (Simons & Porter, 2015) a book to celebrate Hirsch’s lecture appearance in England at the right-wing think-tank ‘Policy Exchange’

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