

Teaching music unmusically: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on secondary school music curricula in England

Anthony Anderson 

Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

Correspondence

Anthony Anderson, Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education, Birmingham City University, Westbourne Road, Birmingham, B15 3TN, Birmingham, UK.

Email: anthony.anderson@bcu.ac.uk

Funding information

Birmingham City University

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged during 2020, had a wide-ranging impact on all forms of social engagement in England until February 2022, when all COVID restrictions were lifted. Schools were widely affected during this time in both tangible and tacet interactions. The impact of COVID restrictions on curricula for 11–14-year-olds in the Key Stage 3 secondary music classroom in schools has been among the more hidden educational impacts, and research in this area has been limited. This article discusses research conducted between November 2020 and June 2021, which took the form of an online survey with 59 classroom music teachers and semi-structured interviews with 12 music teacher participants. Adopting a methodology of descriptive coding and thematic analysis for interviews and open-response survey questions, the findings reveal 10 unintended consequences of COVID-19 safety measures for curriculum music teaching in schools. The article concludes by developing the concept of the ‘funnelling’ of music teaching during this time and explores the lasting impacts of such treatment, tracing the implications for the future of music curriculum in school and policy contexts.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, funnelling, music curriculum, music education

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INTRODUCTION

On 16 March 2020, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Boris Johnson, stated: 'Now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel' (Institute for Government, 2022, p. 1). Within a week, this had become the first COVID-19 lockdown in England, during which the Prime Minister ordered people to 'stay at home' (Institute for Government, 2022, p. 1). What followed over the proceeding year were multiple measures significantly reducing social interaction. Social gatherings were prohibited in an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and the public were permitted to leave home only for the purpose of buying food, or for medical reasons (Brown & Kirk-Wade, 2021).

Among the multiple impacts that such lockdowns and restrictions had on society, schools were among those severely affected. Whilst some observers understood educational responses (including school closures) to be part of the 'traditional public health measures used in reaction to pandemics' (Fotheringham et al., 2021, p. 3), disruption to school education was thought by others to be 'the most disruptive period in children's education since at least the start of the Second World War' (Timmins, 2021, p. 4). Data snapshots from the lockdown period (2020–2021) indicate the scale of the problem. For instance, according to UNESCO (2022), on 20 April 2020, 81.8% of pupils in 151 countries were affected by school closures. The duration of suspensions of in-person schooling during two calendar years (February 2020–February 2022) ranged from 82 weeks in India to 6 weeks in Papua New Guinea and nowhere in the world was unaffected. In the United Kingdom, schools were closed for 27 weeks (UNESCO, 2022), during which time a differing educational model of remote schooling was swiftly adopted. This prolonged period of disruption made it problematic to track the hours teachers were working (ONS, 2021), and as a result, some commentators noted that 'nothing is new, but everything has changed' (Novóia & Alvim, 2020, p. 35), and suggested that this period of COVID disruption may ultimately result in 'the death of the school' (Novóia & Alvim, 2020, p. 36).

Teaching modalities were increasingly online in their nature, and assessment approaches were similarly implemented in a virtual space. This created complexities for music, which were felt internationally and not only in England. In Scotland, projects, focused primarily on instrumental learning (such as *We Make Music Online*), described assessment approaches as enabling 'flexibility' (Moscardini & Rae, 2020, p. 34), but few of the respondents to the research for this study described online learning as making music easier to understand or learn (13% for students, 6% for teachers, 4% for organisations and a startling 0% in the case of parents), indicating some of the difficulties for music modalities. Although some studies in Ireland reported that online assessment compared favourably with more conventional means during the COVID pandemic, it was also reported that the ability of schools to cover practical work was considered to be worse, with the abrupt transition to the online form particularly acute in subjects including music (Mohan et al., 2020). Where making and creating music form a large part of classroom engagement (composing and performing forms 50%–75% of Ireland's Ordinary Level Leaving Certificate, for instance), the impacts of COVID on musical assessments are likely to have been significant.

Further afield, in Canada, for instance, emergency remote teaching (ERT) was adopted in a context where no in-person air-based music-making was permitted, including humming, and problems with access and functionality of technology interfaces led to the 'common experience amongst music educators of not being able to do the things that music educators, well, do' (Menard, 2023, p. 4). In a similar vein, some commentators articulated the view that 'music cannot be assessed' in online learning (Pace, 2020, p. 261), whilst others highlighted the manner in which digital assessments were being used, which ran contrary to their original design, but were caused by the pandemic pressure to find solutions, such as online assessment models (Krach et al., 2020). Such tensions of pedagogical ideological approach

and the need to continue educating, no matter how challenging the circumstances, were felt in many differing spheres, including health education, where 'educators...[were] feeling exhausted and overextended' (Cleland et al., 2020, p. 774). However, the responsive nature of assessment and interaction inherent in music curricula made these difficulties particularly acute. The enaction of curriculum through in-person classroom music teaching is responsive to pupil music-making and creating, requiring music teachers to respond through music as well as in conventional dialogue. The music teacher has therefore been described as a learner and facilitator as well as a teacher, who 'encourages pupils to engage in music actively, rather than a transmitted knowledge of music' (Kinsella & Fautley, 2021, p. 65). Assessment of pupils' music during classroom music lessons requires engagement with musical processes and this has frequently been conceived as integral to its construction: 'assessment should be about that which is intrinsically musical in music, no matter how tough that task is' (Philpott & Evans, 2016b, p. 194). During the COVID-19 pandemic, music teachers were required to transfer from these familiar interactions into online modalities. Such a transfer was conceptually challenging and mentally fatiguing for teachers, as it was not only activities which required restructuring, but also curriculum itself, which had to be fundamentally re-imagined. The characteristics, which had formerly shaped meaningful teacher interactions and given meaning to musical learning exchanges, therefore, underwent fundamental shifts in a sudden and unanticipated manner. As a result, thinking about how to enable young people to develop their musicality in online educational settings was extremely challenging and, for music in particular, required more than a translation of paper resources into digital formats.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ENGLISH SECONDARY SCHOOL MUSIC CURRICULA

Most of what is currently known about the impacts of COVID-19 on classroom musical learning, and modified curricula in England have emerged from policy contexts and organisations that have commissioned reports. Between September and November 2020, the school's inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), produced monthly briefing notes. From the outset, these signposted the strain that curriculum access to music was under. The outcome of School Leaders' 'concerns about safety', was that 'they were struggling to work out how to include practical subjects such as PE, design and technology and music fully in the curriculum' (Ofsted, 2020a, p. 7). This meant that 'practical aspects of subjects such as physical education and music were sometimes not being taught' (Ofsted, 2020a, p. 3). By October, the situation had worsened, and according to Ofsted, 'many leaders had made the decision to suspend singing and instrumental work for the time being' (Ofsted, 2020b, p. 5). At this time, Ofsted also highlighted what they termed as 'gaps in learning' (Ofsted, 2020b, p. 10) 'in more practical subjects such as in PE, design and technology and music' (Ofsted, 2020b, p. 10) and the same report also drew attention to Ofsted's perspective that composing in music curricula was an area which had particularly suffered (Ofsted, 2020b, p. 14). By November 2020, Ofsted was reporting that music was 'doing less practical work, because leaders had prioritised Key Stages 4 and 5 to use, for example, the science, art and music rooms'. (Ofsted, 2020c, p. 6). The outcome of this emerging hierarchy of subjects, with its associated 'high status' and 'low status' knowledge types (Young, 1971), was one in which music was most definitely trailing behind.

Around the same time as the second Ofsted briefing, the arts charity Youth Music produced their report on how COVID-19 was affecting music-making. The focus here was on young people, so not exclusively on schools, but nevertheless, they reported that 63% of arts organisations were working with fewer young people (Youth Music, 2020). As a key

strand of the work of arts organisations is to work with schools (Artwork, 2019), it is reasonable to assume that young people's access and engagement with music curricula were notably impacted by schools' responses to COVID-19. More specific research and figures came from the Incorporated Society of Musicians, whose report *The heart of the school is missing: music education in the COVID-19 crisis* was published in December 2020, the month following the final Ofsted briefing series. This reported a serious decline in music education, with a 39% reduction in music provision, where 66% of secondary schools were also unable to offer musical activities (their usual programme of extra-curricular music-making) outside of lessons (Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2020). This decline was potentially also impacted by gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children, where some families were unable to use technology to access lessons in schools, or where this was limited due to economic disadvantage. Such difficulties had the potential to have severe and long-lasting impacts and is an acknowledged problem of a 'digital divide' (Coleman, 2021, p. 3). Although beyond the scope of this article, such difficulties were part of the climate within which classroom music teaching took place and may have added to the anxiety that teachers, parents and pupils experienced during this period, as the Arts Council England commented during this moment: 'There has rarely been such a time in living memory when the cultural sector has felt such strain, and when the lives of the children and young people we work with have been so profoundly affected' (ACE, 2021, p. 3).

With the notable exception of two editorial research articles which appeared in the British Journal of Music Education (Daubney & Fautley, 2020, 2021), which discuss COVID impacts on classroom music education and work teachers were doing, music education researchers have generally chosen to consider other related dimensions distinct from curriculum music. A number of these studies focus on the intersectionality between online learning and music. Writing from a New Zealand context, Yates et al. (2020) was one of the first research papers to consider online learning as an emergency measure and linked this to ideas of supportive pedagogy, as they pointed out, 'online and distance learning are not new, this was a novel and sudden experience for students who normally attend school' (Yates et al., 2020, p. 2). This sudden shift has also been considered by others in an international context; Hash (2021) also considers this lack of teacher preparation in the USA, whilst discussing the remote learning for School Bands. He describes the quest for meaningful musical interactions in an online format and the significant challenges that this presented. Outside of the school context, the possibilities which technology offered during the COVID-19 pandemic have been a research focus for group and community music-making. Kinsella, 2021, p. 11) writes about online music-making and highlights the power of music to 'bring people together and to heal, connect and soothe in times of difficulty'. Digital technologies have also been researched from the viewpoint of the instrumental teacher, with one study examining instrumental practices of Spanish teachers during the pandemic (Pozo et al., 2022). This study focuses on whether instrumental practices have been transformed or adapted through the adoption of digital media during the 'period of crisis' (Pozo et al., 2022, p. 2). Some studies have combined considerations of digital platforms with discussions of the consequences of lockdowns on professional musicians and their motivations for practice routines (López-Íñiguez et al., 2022). This research has emphasised the manner in which 'economic fragility...threatened [professional musicians'] health and well-being' (p. 1). These studies are important and add to our canon of knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on musical experiences that young people were able to access whilst the pandemic was at its worldwide height. Whilst international studies continue to consider the impacts of COVID-19 on music in schools (Menard, 2023), there remains a lack of research considering the impacts that arose from measures that schools took in England, as they sought to interpret government guidance on creating a 'safe' educational environment, particularly as represented through music teachers' curricula. It is this gap in knowledge which the research presented in this paper seeks to address.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research aims and questions

The research which this article discusses was undertaken in order to better understand the impact of schools' interpretations of COVID-19 restrictions on classroom music curricula. Whilst the wider implications of COVID-19 on education, particularly for examinations, were frequently in the public eye during 2020 and 2021 (Camden, 2021; Lightfoot, 2020), the COVID impacts on the ways schools managed their response to COVID-19 for arts subjects such as music received less public discussion. Research is therefore important to understand the impacts at the time and to contribute to knowledge for future research in exploring whether COVID-influenced practices have continued, or alternatively whether schools have returned to a pre-COVID curriculum status for music in schools. Whilst examined courses in music continued throughout the pandemic, albeit in modified form, the Key Stage 3 (KS3) curriculum provision for 11–14-year-olds was more susceptible to reduction, as Key Stage 4 was prioritised in school decision-making. This tendency has been recognised in existing research and policy pronouncements, where a simple lack of evidence for what happened at Key Stage 3 has also been acknowledged, underlining its potential neglect (Howard et al., 2021; Twist et al., 2022).

The research question under exploration for this current research paper was therefore: *What impact has the COVID pandemic had on the Key Stage 3 music curriculum as interpreted and implemented by music teachers?*

Research methodology

The research was based on a sequential explanatory mixed methods methodology (Ivankova et al., 2006), using qualitative data to further elucidate the quantitative data set, thereby seeking to draw on the strengths and reduce the weaknesses of both approaches when used discretely (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), and facilitate research reliability. The research consisted of an online survey, the first source of data, which was then followed by semi-structured interviews, and it is the interviews which will be primarily discussed, as these contain the richest insights. In addition, the interviews allowed for additional investigation where participant responses were unclear (such as the details of the physical arrangement of classroom spaces during the pandemic), thereby reinforcing the trustworthiness and validity of the data collected. The research survey for this project was conducted between November 2020 and January 2021. Online Surveys was the instrument used to gather survey data, with 59 participants, who were invited to take part in the survey research through open calls on social media. Responses to the survey question were analysed in two coding cycles, thereby allowing themes to emerge. Follow-up interviews then took place with 12 participants as a means of developing a deeper understanding of the themes emerging from the first data set. Each interview took place on Microsoft Teams between April and June 2021. These interviews were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing areas of consensus and recurring themes to emerge. Interview data was then transcribed and descriptive coding analysis (Saldaña, 2009) applied to look 'beneath the surface' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 174), to further contribute to research reliability. This process of analysis facilitated conceptual mapping, as teacher responses were compared with the established paradigm in the literature of music education of teaching music musically. The themes that this research reveals were recurrent and evident in many of the participants' responses and have been arranged into overarching domains (see Table 3). It is such mapping that has enabled themes to become apparent and facilitated findings exploring transformed curriculum

practices resulting from school adaptations to a COVID-19 educational environment, which in turn affected the form of music-making permitted in classroom spaces.

Participants and research context

The research project was funded by Birmingham City University and consisted of two phases: an online survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews. The online survey was distributed through an open call on social media targeted at secondary music teachers in England. Responses were received from a wide range of English regions, including the East and West Midlands, the South West and South East, London and the North West and North East. Teachers at all different career stages were included from Early Career Teachers to those planning their retirements. From the research sample, 57 teachers had been working at their schools for 3 years or more. The online survey received 59 music teacher responses, from a range of different schools. School profiles are given in [Table 1](#) below.

Although data were not gathered on the specific location of these schools in order to maximise participant anonymity, the participants for the second stage of the research (semi-structured interviews) were drawn from the same sample. The regional profile of these interview schools was gathered, and these show a wide divergence (see [Table 2](#)), so it is reasonable to assume that the survey contains at least a congruent variety of school locations.

There were 12 participants for the online interviews drawn from a wide range of English regions, including the East and West Midlands, the South West and South East, London, and the North West and North East. These teachers had also participated in the online survey and were selected for the second phase based on school type, age range, number of pupils on roll and geographical area, in order to facilitate equitable sample representation. School types were diverse and included faith schools, independent and sponsored academies, and local authority-maintained schools. School sizes ranged from the largest with 1380 pupils to the smallest of 450 pupils and school age ranges were predominately 11–18. All of the schools in the research sample included Key Stage 3 (11–14-year-olds). [Table 2](#) sets out these school characteristics in more detail.

The research was conducted by a music education researcher, formerly a secondary music teacher, enabling music curriculum themes to emerge from enhanced insider knowledge. Such insider perspectives were captured in reflexive notes, which accompanied research interviews as part of data collection procedures (Denscombe, 2001). Ethical procedures were based on British Educational Research Association (2018) guidelines for educational research and ethical approval was granted by Birmingham City University's Faculty Academic Ethics Committee for Health, Education and Life Sciences.

TABLE 1 Survey research school contexts.

School type	Participant numbers
Academy	31
Multi-academy trust	16
Local authority controlled (maintained)	8
Independent	5
Grammar	1
Free school	1

TABLE 2 Interview research school contexts.

School type	Age range	Approximate number on roll
Secondary faith school	11–18	1380
Secondary academy	11–18	1310
Secondary academy	12–18	1250
Secondary academy	11–18	1210
Secondary maintained	11–18	1170
Secondary faith school	11–18	1140
Secondary academy	11–19	950
Secondary academy	11–18	930
Secondary faith school	11–18	900
Secondary academy	10–14	770
Secondary academy sponsored	11–16	643
Secondary free school	11–16	450

FINDINGS

Online survey

The online survey considered aspects of curriculum development at Key Stage 3, two of which were particularly relevant to the impact of COVID. The first of these questions asked teachers what had the most significant impact on the Key Stage 3 curriculum in their school between 2017 and 2020 and this produced the following types of responses (see [Figure 1](#)).

This 3-year view still includes the influence of COVID, but from teacher responses, it appears no more significant than other impacts such as staffing, funding and curriculum realisations (represented here by teachers in what they termed a 'knowledge' curriculum). The influence of the English Baccalaureate and a reduction in classroom time were identified by teachers as slightly less prevalent, but nevertheless significant impacts. By far, the biggest impact in this time range was described by teacher participants as the impact of GCSE courses ('changes'), which analysis from free text responses describe as schools requiring a clearer progression pathway between GCSE courses and Key Stage 3 provision in each subject.

A second question revealed the evident shift that occurred between this longer time period and more recent changes, when teachers were asked to comment on the most significant impact on the Key Stage 3 curriculum in their school between 2019 and 2020 (see [Figure 2](#)):

Within this timeframe, staff changes and funding remain causes for concern, and alongside the impact that Ofsted's definition of curriculum has had (Ofsted, 2019), these aspects continued to feature in teacher participants' evaluations. However, COVID is by far the largest area that teachers identified as impacting curriculum in their school between 2019 and 2020. Considering the impacts of COVID on education and society already discussed in this article, this is perhaps unsurprising. However, what is also of significance and is not widely known is that these survey results reveal that COVID safety restrictions not only impacted music-making in schools (as indeed they did outside of schools), but also that COVID safety measures prevented teachers and pupils from even accessing spaces for music-making. This meant that music teachers were required to reformulate what music-making might look and sound like in these new circumstances, where music sessions were taking place in science laboratories and other such school spaces not intended or designed for musical interactions. The pressures that these broader findings revealed were further explored in the

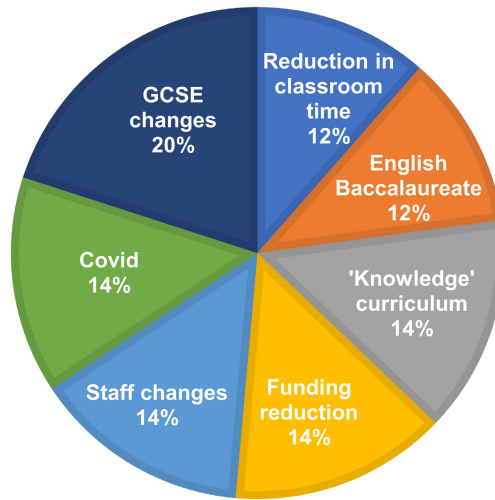


FIGURE 1 Most significant factors impacting Key Stage 3 Curriculum 2017–2020.

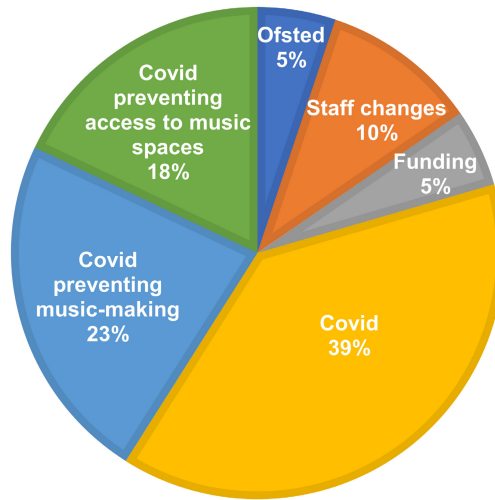


FIGURE 2 Most significant factors impacting Key Stage 3 Curriculum 2019–2020.

semi-structured interviews, which also reveal previously unknown reformulating and rethinking of classroom spaces and activities for music.

Semi-structured interviews

Follow-up semi-structured interviews explored the impacts of school environments on music curriculum design. This included the impact of COVID-19, with the aim of gathering data on music teachers' reflections on how the pandemic may have been affecting the constitution of classroom musical experience in schools, according to music teacher perspectives. This is an area for which data is only just beginning to emerge, and as previously discussed in the literature review for this article, this is often constituted around

instrumental rather than classroom learning and associated pedagogies. During the interviews, teachers were asked, 'What impact has the Covid pandemic had on your Key Stage 3 Music Curriculum?' Follow-up questions were used where necessary, when teachers used context-dependent terminology based on their school's curriculum frameworks. These interviews revealed a wider range of impacts on classroom education from school practices implemented as part of COVID-19 safety measures as interpreted by schools. These impacts are here analysed as unintended consequences of such safety measures, in that restricting music education was not, in any sense, the aim of these practices, but such consequences were, nevertheless, a direct result of their introduction. The research revealed 10 previously unknown unintended consequences of COVID-19 safety measures and these are summarised in [Table 3](#) below. The table is arranged in the core domains within which these themes emerged: musical impacts (changes to musical practices and music-making and creating opportunities); structural impacts (changes due to COVID-safe requirements as understood by the school and permitted in classroom spaces); and teaching impacts (transformed pedagogies, alongside pupil and teacher identities).

A discussion of each of these characteristics is beyond the scope of this brief paper; therefore, four of the most frequently occurring themes emerging from interview coding, which are also representative of each of the core domains, will be explored (nos 1, 4, 5 and 8) in the results analysis which now follows.

Teaching music unmusically

Teaching music musically has long been a well-established philosophical underpinning of classroom musical practices (Adams, 2001; Mills, 2005; Philpott & Evans, 2016a; Swanwick, 1999). Swanwick argued for music as a discourse, which impacted how we live and respond to musical experience, claiming that 'implicit in teaching music musically is a strong sense of life holding its shape or even *finding* its shape'. (Swanwick, 1999, p. 59). Such an approach to music teaching in a secondary context, places such musically based practices, which enable and facilitate musical development, as a central tenet. However, COVID-safe music teaching offered limited types of musical engagement and this significantly impacted pupils' opportunities to learn from musical experience. Music curriculum was thereby significantly reformulated and reinterpreted by music teachers as a result of the largely unprecedented pandemic circumstances.

During the research study, teachers often related instances where they were working in spaces that were not suited to music-making, or music-making became reduced to making keyboard chord shapes on a plastic mat which made no sound, or using utensils not designed for music-making in a creative fashion to offer opportunities to develop musicality. Often music lessons consisted of the completion of worksheets, after some kind of visual or auditory stimulus was used to remind students what music looks and sounds like in more conventional times. Whilst a creative response to difficult circumstances, such engagements were also a source of frustration to teachers:

We've been teaching a class of 30 with 15 guitars in a French or History classroom and using a mat that doesn't make a sound. (Teacher A)

I'm a firm believer in the chopstick. We each had a chopstick, we had a rhythm clock on the wall and we'd do songs to it. (Teacher A)

They would watch a video on YouTube and answer questions. (Teacher D)

TABLE 3 Unintended consequences of COVID-19 safety measures for classroom music education.

	Unintended consequence	Summary explanation
<i>Musical impacts</i>		
1	Teaching music unmusically	Music teaching opportunities for active and inter-active musical experiences were inhibited by COVID-19 restrictions
2	Music appreciation replaced music-making and music-creating	Listening and talking about music replaced opportunities to perform and compose
3	Barriers to musical enrichment	Extra-curricular music-making activities were prohibited
4	Inequity of access to musical opportunities	Critical mass of pupils participating in extra-curricular music-making and opting into music courses reduced, consequently impairing future access for the next cohort of pupils
<i>Structural impacts</i>		
5	COVID-safe inhibitors to learning	Structural barriers were introduced due to school timetabling options or classroom spaces deemed suitable for music
6	Impacts of economies of scale	Falling numbers on music courses during COVID means that music courses are no longer offered by some schools post-pandemic
7	Activity and concepts dissonance	Musical experiences in the classroom became subsumed by the requirement for pupils to articulate uniform definitions of keywords as a result of increased written work during COVID
<i>Teaching impacts</i>		
8	Destabilised pupil collaboration	Pupils struggled to know how to engage with their peers, when asked to work in a group
9	Transformed pedagogies	Permitted pedagogical approaches were revised to a transmission-only modality
10	Music teacher identity shift	Music teachers re-defined music teaching to fit with their revised rationales necessitated by teaching conditions during the COVID pandemic

Frustrations were sometimes even more pronounced than these examples in the teacher responses. Teachers expressed bewilderment at what meaningful activity could take place whilst physical movement was restricted, regarding this as a barrier to musical communication and expression:

There's a lot of people panicking about what you're going to do for 7 more weeks sitting at desks. I don't know what you do for music. Not much. (Teacher E)

Some teachers referenced the concept of teaching music musically, regarding the challenges that this presented in a COVID-safe environment as creating wider disparity and inequality of music curriculum access, to pupils of all backgrounds and dispositions:

Teaching music musically has been very difficult and it's widened the gap: the kids who have instruments are going to do okay, the ones who don't are going to get further behind. (Teacher F)

Whilst it could be argued that the COVID pandemic presented opportunities to engage with music in the classroom in new ways, and this is likely to be the case considering the musical pedagogies described by the music teachers in these interview extracts, the musical centre of these approaches is described by them as arising from necessity, rather than innovation. It would therefore appear to be the case that the creation of what was perceived by schools as COVID-safe environments significantly disrupted, rather than enhanced the curriculum embodiment of music as a subject in school classrooms.

COVID-safe inhibitors to learning

COVID-safe restrictions had the additional tendency to create physical barriers to curriculum music-making. COVID-safe restrictions made learning environments far from ideal, but these configurations were particularly detrimental to a subject such as music, where a flexible approach to classroom spaces is required, as has been previously noted: 'Tables do not have to be in rows...Tables do not have to set the tempo. Tables should be tools, not barriers to learning' (Anderson, 2012, p. 42). Such a fluid environment was problematic for schools during COVID, where choices were made about distancing and permitted classroom layouts and applied across all classrooms, irrespective of subject area. This was articulated by participants in their interviews, who described the impact such approaches had on their perceptions of access to equipment and to supporting learning development:

We've had to reduce access to keyboards because of where sockets are and having to have classes facing the front. (Teacher B)

We've had some horrible rooms for teaching music – I had a Science lab once. The kids were 100 yards away at the back of the room and there were gas taps in the way and the desks wouldn't go straight. (Teacher F)

The reconfiguring of timetables and year groups into 'bubbles' (DfE, 2021) (generally school year groups) presented teachers with further challenges, where access to instruments was also problematic, as they were no longer stored in adjacent classroom spaces. This was viewed by teachers as negatively impacting learning time and was, again, a source of teacher frustration:

Because of the numbers we've got in our school and it's a 1970s building with corridors not much bigger than the average house toilet, there was no way we could have bubbles passing each other, so we had to go into zones. So, Year 8 have been in the Humanities block and at the most I've been able to get 15 acoustic guitars that we can use. None of us are guitarists...The guitars are stored on the top floor of a two-storey building, sometimes I teach next to it, sometimes I'm at the opposite end, sometimes, I'm downstairs, so it does take a good 10 minutes out of the lesson just getting the kit. I haven't got time to go and get them before, because there's a different class being taught in that room. It's been a horrific experience.

(Teacher A)

Particularly, notable here is the description of the physical location of instruments compared with classroom spaces and the time taken from lessons to collect and store the instruments required. Apart from the comment explaining that teachers were required to rapidly transform their musical expertise by adopting new types of instruments with which they may have been unfamiliar into their curriculum programmes, the limited nature of resources is also highlighted and is another example of the impact that COVID-safe measures had on access to music-making resources during the pandemic. Ultimately, this led to a high level of teacher frustration too, a lived curriculum experience that teacher A described as 'horrific'.

Destabilised pupil collaboration

COVID-safe working patterns in the research findings this paper discusses appeared to significantly destabilise the collaborative nature of musical learning in schools. As one teacher participant expressed it:

It has taken away group work almost entirely. We now know we're going to have year groups who don't know how to work independently without us watching over them. (Teacher B)

For other teachers, this change was a feature they observed subsequent to the pupils' return following lockdowns, when there had been a substantial period of home, and perhaps lone working for the children concerned. However, the comments were very similar in their nature suggesting that the young people were not accustomed to working together and this had a disabling impact on their musical learning:

[When the Year 8s came back] Ensemble skills were non-existent, it was horrendous. (Teacher F)

The students do not know how to work with each other anymore. To listen to each other, for one person to speak at a time, understand how things fit together musically. That's where the biggest gap will be next year. (Teacher C)

As music-making has been closely linked to musical knowing (Spruce, 2016, p. 26, classes this as 'embodied knowing', for instance), this is a concerning development for classroom music-making. Classroom music-making involves pupils cooperating and working together to achieve their goals and such music-making is a standard part of most music curricula (Anderson, 2022). Research appears to indicate that working in groups is also the pupils' preference when working on music-creating tasks, including composition (Wood, 2022). Cooke

discussed this cooperative feature when she commented that 'collaboration is key to effective musical learning' (Cooke, 2016, p. 105). The ability of pupils to work together in groups, negotiate musical outcomes and realise ideas and imaginative concepts would therefore appear to be a central and essential characteristic, which has been significantly impacted by the COVID pandemic.

Inequity of access to musical opportunities

COVID-safe environments in these research findings appear to have severely impacted pupils' access to musical opportunity and entitlement. During the research interviews, teachers described in passionate detail, how COVID-19 safe environments had, in their view, decimated their attempts to build and sustain vibrant music departments:

In the time I've been here, numbers have gone up, but now they've just been annihilated and it's the first year in my career of 20 years, that numbers have ever gone down that dramatically. With no GCSE this year in Year 10, that means definitely no A-level in two years' time in Year 12. (Teacher A)

Other teacher participants highlighted the inequity of access to musical opportunities which existed in extra-curricular music-making, which had now become problematic to access. Music teachers were clearly still keen to make such opportunities available, but COVID-safe environments were creating significant barriers for teachers and the pupils concerned. The loss of momentum teachers described when such groups had been suspended was an area of real difficulty for the teachers:

We're just in the position where we're able to run extra-curricular again, as long as they're still in bubbles. We've started to pick up a few clubs for Year 7 as of last week. Those are running slowly – it's one of two kids, whereas the room would have been full before. They've never experienced having clubs at school before – that's a whole new thing. (Teacher B)

Perhaps the most lamented area of impact for equality of access was the musical environment that teachers had established over many years, which according to teacher perspectives, had become damaged through the response to COVID-19 safe environments. As one participant memorably put it:

The extra-curricular – that whole culture we built up – has just gone. Having bubbles and not being able to cross over has been terrible. Normally, we'd have Year 11, Year 10s, Year 9s, Year 13s all in one classroom at lunchtime, all doing different stuff on computers, all in the practice rooms rehearsing bits and bobs. One of my favourite things is when you see a 6th former knock on the door of a practice room of a Year 9 rehearsing and say, 'Oh, that's really good.' That's made their day, that's made their week. That's the kind of culture we had going on. It's just all gone. It took a long time to build up that atmosphere where that kind of human behaviour was occurring. I'm worried and daunted about building that back up again. (Teacher C)

The impacts of the COVID-19 as reported by music teachers were therefore significant for music education. Music teachers work hard to ensure that all their pupils have access to musical opportunities and the literature of music education frequently discusses the importance of

access to music (Daubney & Fautley, 2020; Swanwick, 1999; Welch, 2005). Such curriculum entitlement in classroom music, which for some may be the only moment they have to discover music with a music practitioner discussing and assisting them on their journey, realises entitlement as an experience and not only a concept, as Philpott et al. (2016, p. 174) put it: 'Assessing individual needs is about inclusion and this is achieved by ensuring that all young people receive their entitlement to music education'. Curriculum reformulations as were necessitated by COVID-safe working practices, were fundamentally in tension with musical expression as promoted and facilitated by teachers in schools in the pre-pandemic era. This curriculum tension for music teachers caused considerable professional and personal disorientation and this is evident in their interview responses.

DISCUSSION

As detailed in the research findings of this study, the COVID pandemic has proved to be a significant event for secondary classroom music curriculum in England. Whilst the pandemic may have presented opportunities for teachers to re-think their practices in fresh ways, the restrictions on permitted musical activity due to government COVID guidelines would seem more likely to have inhibited, rather than widened these musical learning horizons. In addition, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the likelihood that it is not COVID that has caused the experiences outlined by the music teachers in this study, but responses of schools to the significant national and international emergency. These reactions were realised through the filter of 'COVID-safe' (Howard et al., 2021) discourse, in which schools sought to interpret and implement government guidelines, in which there was often significant room for manoeuvre. The manner in which responses to COVID impacted on formulations of curriculum is therefore significant and likely to have international implications, just as the COVID responses already discussed in the literature review were international in their scope. It was these complexities of the COVID-safe discourse in England which led to a wide variance of practices for what was permitted in schools and although such approaches were communicated to the teacher workforce in schools as necessitated by the pandemic, there were, in reality, a wide variety of legitimated practices which varied from one school context to another. This was evident in research findings for this study, where teachers described differing scenarios: Music keyboards were permitted to be used in the classroom with the instruments facing all directions; music keyboards were permitted only if they were facing the same direction; music ensemble work was permitted in practice rooms only with the windows and doors open if the teacher did not enter this space; music ensemble work was permitted in practice rooms without windows if doors were open and the teachers were permitted in the space; and a wide variety of other permutations. 'COVID-safe' thus became a way in which the school music curriculum was restricted, albeit as an unintended consequence of school control systems, in which school senior leadership teams acted as the moderators of acceptable musical realisations—a hitherto unknown interaction on so wide a scale.

During the course of the pandemic, COVID-safe conceptual filters which schools developed acted as a funnel through which musical realisations and interactions were squeezed and transformed. Examples of this funnelling can be seen in Table 3, where the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are outlined. Such funnelling had a significant impact on how music curriculum was realised in schools, where the characteristics of classroom experiences in music became fundamentally different. These changes were accepted by music teachers due to the challenging educational circumstances at the time, over which they had very little agency. Funnelling of musical opportunities in classrooms appeared in four primary ways:

1. Teaching music musically was funnelled to become teaching music unmusically, as music teachers sourced and used musically unpromising materials in the most musical way they could. (An example of this was plastic mats with a picture of a piano keyboard on them, but which made no sound).
2. Resources which enabled musical responses (such as Digital Audio Workstations) were funnelled to restrict access and this inhibited musical development (for instance when pupils were not permitted to enter specialist music classrooms).
3. Collaborative and creative interactions where pupils worked in groups on composing and performing projects were funnelled, and this destabilised musical collaboration, as ensemble collaborative working was prohibited.
4. An entitlement to musical experiences by musical visitors to classrooms or in extra-curricular activities was withdrawn, thus leading to inequality of access to music-making. Those who could afford private instrumental lessons continued to do so in an online format, for instance, whilst those who were digitally and materially impoverished were not able to access these opportunities.

This funnelling is further represented in [Figure 3](#), which shows how these interactions are connected:

Following the remission of the COVID-19 pandemic, some COVID-safe features have been retained by schools in their structures and funnelling appears to have had a lasting impact. COVID-safe features retained include lesson lengths, asking pupils to come to school dressed in their PE kits, not permitting pupils in school buildings during lunchtimes, and online parents' evenings in a manner not experienced prior to the pandemic. The question therefore arises as to whether curriculum approaches required by COVID-safe funnelling have also been retained by schools. This would mean that what is perceived as musical learning has also changed. One music teacher, writing in March 2021 in an article entitled 'How I...Teach music without instruments', reflected on their curriculum, which during COVID-19 had become largely theory and aural based, and put it this way:

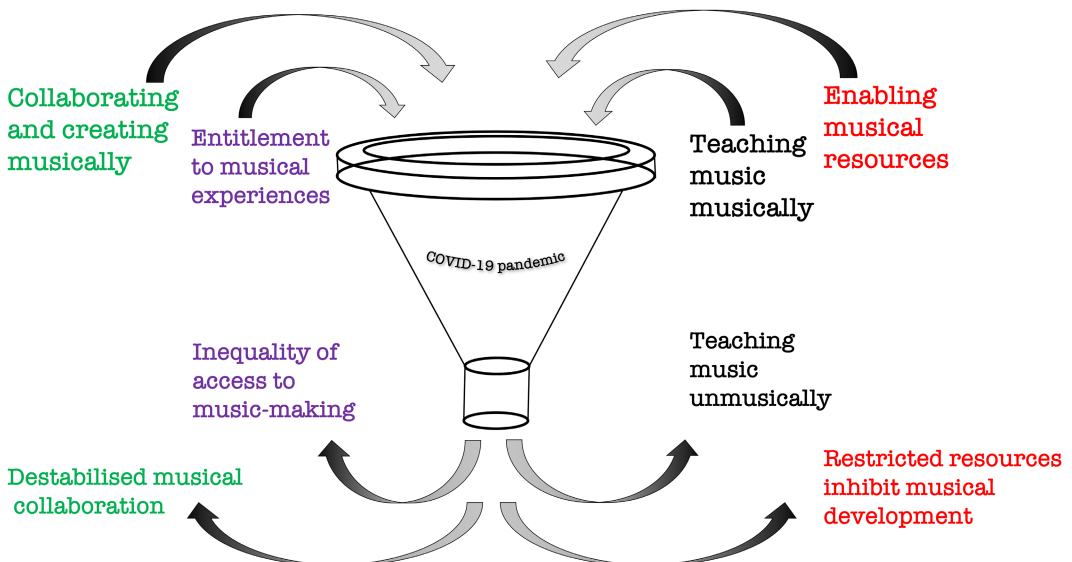


FIGURE 3 Funnelling of classroom musical practices caused by interpretations of COVID-safe school environments.

We don't want to lose our performance focus – that is still an integral part of being a musician – but we have been reminded of the benefits of focusing solely on music theory and appraisal rather than just expecting our students to pick up these skills along the way.

(Stevens, 2021)

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the findings of the research study, this paper discusses, and reading comments from teacher participants and from those contributing to music educational discourse (inter alia Stevens, 2021) seem to indicate that perceptions of music curriculum have shifted. Such a shift has enabled what might be described as potentially unmusical pedagogies to become further entrenched in classroom practices. The work of Oak Academy has received attention in its aims to present teachers with curriculum models as a way of easing issues of teacher workload (Oak Academy, 2022). This has led to wide-ranging debate, with some describing these curricula as 'preferred model[s] of how to teach everything, for how long and lesson-by-lesson, which books to read and what it wants said and not said' (Coles, 2022, p. 1). The Department for Education has, since these comments, continued with its aspirations to address what it describes as 'weaknesses in curriculum design' (DfE, 2022, p. 12), and also outlined its 'vision for high-quality curriculum design', an aim which has been 'exacerbated by the pandemic' (DfE, 2022, p. 13). The modality of such a curriculum offer would seem to be more prescribed in its outlook: 'We have data that using textbooks could save a teacher on average 1.6h a week in lesson planning (as a conservative estimate)'. (DfE, 2022b, pp. 4–5). The impact that privileging a textbook approach could have on music would be severe, and align with rationales where music was constrained, in the experiences of music teachers and their classes, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The educational policy structures that emerged during this time, further enhance a non-constructivist viewpoint of music education, which if sustained, have the potential to create significant barriers to musical learning for young people in their school curriculum.

Swanwick (2016) identifies what he calls the developing discourse of music education. Such a discourse has continued to grow and be impacted by school responses to the COVID pandemic. The question of what this means for music education therefore remains, and although this may not be completely clear, the phenomenon of funnelling appears to be real and one that requires further investigation. The possibility that COVID-safe environments created by schools have irreparably damaged classroom music curricula for pupils is a genuine issue. Ongoing discussion, debate and investigation will be required to determine the extent of this and to ensure that active music-making and creating in the classroom remains an entitlement for every child in every school.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no known issues which represent a conflict of interest in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research received the approval of the Birmingham City University Ethics Committee subject to 2018 BERA guidelines prior to being conducted between 2020 and 2021.

ORCID

Anthony Anderson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1423-2163>

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