

## Read all about it!

*What does Ofsted's new music subject report mean for schools, and what does it have to say about pupils' access to music?*

If schools had newsstands, the latest Ofsted report for music would have hit the racks at the back end of September. There may not be cries of "Extra! Extra!" emanating from newspaper sellers on street corners about this new Ofsted edition, but music teachers and senior leaders alike may choose to read, and reflect on what Ofsted says, with their school music provision in mind. Ofsted, the schools inspectorate in England has published three subject specific reports in music, with the most recent before this new report being, well, not that recent, as it appeared in 2012, over 10 years ago. A lot has happened since that time and the new report *Striking the right note* covers a great deal of ground. Beginning by outlining some of the recent policy contexts in music education, it moves on to give its main findings followed by recommendations, before presenting a more detailed commentary for both primary and secondary schools.

I caught up with HMI and subject lead for Music, Chris Stevens to discuss the report and ask a little more about some of the areas it addresses. Chris is a former Advanced Skills Teacher in Music and was a senior leader at a variety of schools in Birmingham, alongside other senior roles. He joined Ofsted around four years ago, before stepping into the subject lead for music role two years ago. I was keen to explore some of the key themes from the latest Ofsted publication, a work of which Chris is clearly proud: "We've always had a proud history of publishing," he says with a smile, "and [those publications] matter because Ofsted is able to give a unique perspective and insights into what's happening in a much bigger picture across the country." The place of Ofsted in the national education debate is one into which this report also fits, as Chris adds, "Ofsted's role is a force for improvement, this idea that we can make a contribution through our insights to supporting and improving the quality of music education in the country".

As Chris occasionally waves his blue biro whilst talking, we move into thinking about some of the issues the Ofsted music report addresses, of which there are many. Barriers to music education is a key area that we discuss together. Chris is at pains to point out that it's not all bad news and that "where schools are getting it right...there was a real focus on what it was they hoped children would be able to know and do as a result of learning the music curriculum". However, as Ofsted's music subject lead, he also highlights the barriers the report addresses, in that in some instances "children were doing music, but there wasn't always a deliberateness about why they were doing those things and what would follow". He also mentioned the continuing challenges that education in a post-covid environment presents for music education and how this can create barriers in schools: "in schools where we saw music thriving – that is children are doing well, achieving well – there were lots of ensembles and leaders understood the importance of the taught curriculum. What Covid has done in some cases is upset that balance, so there were some instances where schools were really struggling to get some of those wider aspects of their music education up and running again, for a variety of reasons. Children are reluctant to come back, or have stopped learning instruments. We visited 25 primary schools and in half of those there wasn't currently any extra music curricular going on." Pausing only briefly, Chris goes on to outline other barriers for children in primary schools, in which he includes teachers' "lack of confidence in delivering the curriculum", and even their "own recognised lack of musicianship". Circling his hand in the air, Chris relates one of these instances to me: "I do remember a music teacher saying to me, very honestly, 'Chris, I'm struggling to give feedback, because I'm not really sure what quality sounds like'". Resting his hand

thoughtfully under his chin, he continues, “But it’s not about being an expert in music; it’s having sufficient knowledge to model and demonstrate the curriculum well and what schools are doing about that.” Building primary teachers’ confidence, not least by increasing the time they receive on music as part of their training, may perhaps help address Ofsted’s observations here.

Progressing from barriers to disadvantage, Chris again acknowledged that there was “a thriving culture of extra-curricular activity”, but that, particularly in secondary schools there “wasn’t that culture, that meant that you could only get that kind of critical knowledge, that understanding, if you were having those paid for lessons, which, of course, some families can’t afford.” Within this frame, Chris stressed the importance of “a well-planned sequence throughout the key stage 3 curriculum that is designed to prepare all children for further musical study.” This would seem to be a genuine pressure point for music education in schools, especially as the previous Ofsted music report from 2012 identified the same area of difficulty. Although Chris acknowledged school budgetary issues as “completing pressures and in some cases that means that, ...they’ve withdrawn funding that perhaps previously was there for instrumental lessons”, he continued to make the point that “it’s about recognising the place of the music curriculum that all children are entitled to and where that’s right and well planned and supported by extra-curricular clubs, children do and can thrive and can be well prepared for their next steps. If that’s not there and that’s not happening, that’s when there’s an over-reliance on children having to rely on paid tuition”. It seems that this is a complex issue and one for schools to continue to consider.

Thinking about pupils with additional needs and requirements is another area of disadvantage, however, the term SEND appears only twice in the Ofsted report. When I asked Chris about this, his reply was earnest and reflective. Looking thoughtful, with hands palm to palm, he highlighted the importance of a curriculum for all: “one of the things we were considering all the time was, is this curriculum’s intent, the way it’s designed, actually supporting all pupils, including those with SEND? The report says there’s actually some weaknesses in the way curriculum’s thought about the planning and those weaknesses also impact on children with special educational needs. So, they were very much at the forefront of our thinking when we were writing the report.” Chris places emphasis on teachers carefully considering their curriculum “adaptions”, through having a clear pedagogy in mind: “it’s about thinking - what do we want our children to be able to learn and do as a result of learning this curriculum? What might some children need in order to be able to achieve those things? There might be all sorts of adaptions to be considered, but that thinking can’t be done until you’re actually clear about what it is you want all children to be able to do and learn.”

We’d covered a lot of ground already, but I was keen to ask Chris about the lack of provision for Music in Key Stage 5. Was this something Ofsted was concerned about? Chris stroked his chin and referred me to the Ofsted document we were discussing – “from the 25 schools we visited, the report says actually very few schools were offering key stage 5 music, and attempts to explain some of the reasons why that might be the case. Your question is about – ‘is Ofsted concerned about it?’ The point is we want pupils to be prepared and there’s a broader question here, about, is the curriculum helping pupils to be well prepared? That’s the question for school leaders to consider, so yes, the report does highlight that – the national statistics which we quote at the start of the report show that to be the case.” Access to the curriculum is coming into view in our conversation, including at Key Stage 5. Chris goes on to develop this point: “Obviously, we want young people to have the opportunity to study music and they want to do that through a broad and balanced curriculum that prepares them well. What the report highlights is that in some cases, that might not be possible,

because of the curriculum, and the way it's being delivered in some schools, and that obviously is a concern." Where Ofsted talks of a concern, more discussion may follow and this debate is an area which is likely to recur in educational conversations for the foreseeable future.

Composition emerged as another area of focus in the new Ofsted report. Chris adjusted his tie as he warmed to this theme: "It's a really important part of the national curriculum, so it was always going to be a focus for us in this report about what schools are doing. One - is it happening? And two - how are schools actually helping children to become more sophisticated in their responses in terms of composition?" Chris was careful to explain what he described as "compositional activity", where it was not always clear "why they were doing that or what they hoped to get out of it." For Ofsted, thinking about composing as a means of facilitating musical development would therefore seem to be an important focus: "it's stated in the report that there was perhaps an assumption that if children just did those things [composing activities] they would somehow get better at composition, whereas schools that were more deliberate...they'd thought about those blocks, rather than doing lots of composition, so it was building." One area discussed was where whole-school approaches may cause difficulties - for example where teachers were "routinely asked to photograph and make records of the children's work...in those terms, [it] actually, was telling the teachers very little about the quality of musical responses ...it was detracting teachers away from actually giving in the moment feedback and taking them away from musical interactions with children". There is clearly a great deal for schools to consider and digest in this report.

Music in schools is about the curriculum children and young people experience both in and outside of lessons, and it didn't take too long before my interview with Chris began to broach this area. Extra-curricular provision is specifically mentioned in the report and I was keen to explore Ofsted's expectations here. Chris nodded, as he acknowledged this new part of our discussion: "I'm glad this has come across that extra-curricular is an important part of a rounded music education in a school. We consider extra-curricular clubs as part of our personal development judgement in our framework...we'll always be interested to know what a school is doing to promote children's talents and interests, what the breadth of opportunities are like and that's something we'll always look at on inspection." Extra-curricular provision in music, is looking like it's pretty important, although Chris is clear that there are no specific Ofsted expectations of what schools should offer: "we don't specify what it might look like for particular subjects," he says, "but it's obviously always a consideration for us." So, what is the role of the *Striking the right note* report in this context? Chris outlines this, whilst he smiles, clearly relishing talking about this part of his inspection work: "Hopefully, what this report does - it re-emphasises that bit which says, actually, if schools are looking to think about improving their curriculum, and they're looking to develop it (an important consideration in the context of music education), our framework is about asking the bigger question. To say: are there a wide range of opportunities for children to explore their talents and interests within the school? That's an important part of our education inspection framework." Extra-curricular provision is an area on which Ofsted clearly focuses its attention and no less so for music. When I asked if a school wasn't offering a broad range, if that would be a problem, Chris appeared more phlegmatic, but nevertheless outlined its significance: "It would be something you'd want to explore. When we look at personal development and come to a judgement, it's important to recognise that there's a number of aspects we consider...so we'd have to take all that evidence in the round. But if there was a situation where we thought those opportunities were limited, we would want to explore that. We want to know why, we'd want to know what the school's doing about it, because it's an important part of a broad and rounded education that children have those opportunities."

Just as so often the case in the most fascinating discussions, the time had passed all too quickly. So many of the issues we'd discussed are the heartbeat of music teachers' and school leaders' daily work with young people. As we concluded our conversation, Chris expressed his thanks to the music profession: "it's quite clear from our report that a lot of music teachers are working exceptionally hard to make music, that they understand the importance of that to young people's lives, and really just a big thank you for what they're doing, because the circumstances some of them are working in after the pandemic is not easy." The new Ofsted report is now off the newspaper stands and firmly in the hands of music teachers and senior leaders. Whatever your views about it, thinking about the report and how it might affect how music is taught in schools and experienced by young people, is going to continue to be important. If you haven't yet, it's certainly time to read all about it.

*Dr Anthony Anderson  
Research Fellow in Music Education  
Birmingham City University*

This document is the Accepted Manuscript version of a Published Work that appeared in final form in Music Teacher, copyright © MA Education, after review and editing by the publisher. To access the final edited and published work, see <https://musicteachermagazine.co.uk>