

Whole Class Ensemble Tuition - its relationship with National Curriculum music in primary schools

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Under the first National Plan for Music Education, published in 2011, Whole Class Ensemble Teaching programmes proliferated across England, to the extent that there were over 700,000 children involved in learning to play an instrument through these. Various descriptions such as 'First Access', 'Wider Opportunities', 'WCET' and 'WCIT', these programmes are characterised by a whole class of children learning to play the same instrument, or instruments from related families, at the same time. Usually these programmes are delivered by a music specialist teacher provided by a Music Education Hub. The aspiration in the original NPME was that this should take place for 'ideally a year or at least one term' across a year. From our years spent analysing the national MEH data returns, we know that the vast majority of WCET learning takes place in Y4, and that there were indeed many children receiving this tuition over a whole academic year. However, behind these headline figures and aspirations, we know that the operationalisation of WCET programmes, ranging from the access children have to instruments through to the funding models by which schools can access this provision, is significantly varied across the country. Indeed, what goes on in one local authority should be taken as no indicator of how things are organised in its next-door neighbour.

Back in 2017 we were commissioned by Music Mark to undertake research into the delivery and conceptualisation of WCET provision, looking at this type of activity from a slightly different perspective than the 'Key Data' reports which we worked on with Arts Council England. One of the key findings from that research was that, in some instances, WCET was being thought of *as* the National Curriculum for Music in some schools, or that it was being tasked with doing more than its original scope, which was to provide an opportunity for every child to learn to play an instrument.

This question about conceptualisation is an important one because it gets to the heart of what the purposes of the provision have come to be thought of. Is WCET a great enhancement to the National Curriculum for Music or, more cynically, is it a way of outsourcing music education to a private provider as a cost-effective form of PPA cover? What are the aims of such programmes, why are they being taught, and how has their effectiveness been evaluated?

Building on our work in this area, we proposed (Fautley et al, 2019) two models of thinking about progression in the context of WCET :

1. Music education starts *with* the instrument, but then broadens out to encompass wider music education aims (MSWI)
2. Music education takes place entirely *via* the instrument (MVI)

These models might appear to be splitting hairs for the sake of academic pedantry, but we believe it is important to thinking through WCET. Is the learning of an instrument a tool which opens up possibilities for a wider music education, or is the purpose of WCET to teach children to play a specific instrument? If WCET is to play a greater role in the delivery and realisation of the National Curriculum for Music, and is being thought of as an integral part of school musical culture, then we have to be clear about its intended purposes and its relationship to other types of activity. The two models we suggest clarify these differences, and should make the place and role of WCET more amenable to discussions between schools and music hubs. This is particularly relevant in light of the latest National Plan for Music Education (2022), where it states "WCET or large/small-group programmes should not be viewed as a bolt-on activity, or external to the music curriculum, but as a

key part of the school's curricular music offer" (p.30). This comment makes it clear that WCET should be an integral part of a school's music offer. In our categorisations of MWSI and MVI, either of these ways of working can be used as a basis for curricula delivery, and it may well be the case that different schools even within the same music hub area choose to go about this in their own way, and this will be absolutely fine, according to the NPME.

Whilst we have been thinking about WCET, over the last few months we have had a number of conversations with our school and hub based colleagues concerning some of the ways WCET features in feedback from schools and, in particular, from Ofsted, trying to understand how relationships between schools, WCET and wider musical learning are understood. In the course of these conversations, a number of instances where Ofsted have remarked on musical provision have emerged, commenting positively on the impact of music both as curriculum provision and as instrumental learning. A couple of examples are illustrative here:

- "Music is strong in the school, both in the curriculum and as an extra-curricular activity"
- "Leaders have developed a rich and engaging curriculum, with a focus on raising pupils' aspirations...Pupils participate enthusiastically in performances with a music specialist, and all pupils in Year 4 have the opportunity to learn the violin."

Note the importance attached in both of these extracts to the presence of music both within the curriculum **and** as an extra-curricular activity. This leads us to an important area for consideration, and one which schools, hubs, and Ofsted will doubtless be considering in the coming weeks. NPME2 says that all schools are supposed to have a "Music Development Plan that links back to their broader school development approach and priorities...[it] should set out how the school will deliver high-quality music provision for all pupils in the three areas of curriculum, co-curricular and enrichment" (p.21). Whilst we know that this may prove challenging for all schools, nonetheless it is to be hoped that thinking about such a plan will encourage schools and hubs to think together about what their WCET programmes should entail. As time goes on, it seems increasingly likely that Ofsted will be commenting on such matters, and with the guidance available in NPME2 it is important that schools and hubs continue to think about this important area.

As researchers we are keenly aware that there is still much more to be known about with regard to WCET, and how it is both conceptualised and operationalised within schools and hubs. We know too that there are important areas to think about concerning progression, both in instrumental learning, and in musical learning more widely, and these are also things we will be keeping a close eye on in the future.

In the meantime we hope that both the current hub reorganisation plans, and the requirements of NPME2 mean that schools have the opportunity to consider what is going on in their music offers, and can act and react accordingly.

REFERENCES

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