National Perspectives

Abstract

This chapter describes the ways in which assessment policy in classroom music education in England has been both legislated for and operationalized in practice. It describes how changes to whole-school assessment legislation have found their outworking in schools and classrooms, which have become contested and problematic sites. It describes how assessment in classroom music has had to shift its focus from *attainment* onto *progression* in order to comply with policy. The chapter also points out the effects of a performativity culture in English school music classes, where the production of data has become a goal in its own right, superseding, in some cases, an attention to learning and musicianship. It concludes that refocusing on musical aspects of teaching and learning would be a good thing for the development of both the subject and the participating learners.

Keywords

assessment, England, National Curriculum, school, policy, generalist classroom music

Chapter 9

Assessment Policy and Practice in Secondary Schools in the English National Curriculum

Martin Fautley

In this chapter the policy and practice of assessment in English schools is discussed and examined. There are many aspects of the English experience that not only are singular but also act as warnings to the wider international music education community, which this chapter points out. The policy situation in England should, at first glance, be openly transparent as a National Curriculum has been operating for many years. However, as we shall see, that has not necessarily helped with ensuring that curriculum and assessment, both as viewed by policymakers and as interpreted by schools and teachers on the ground, have been as straightforward and unambiguous as might be thought to be the case.

The Policy Background to Assessment in Music Education in England

The curriculum in English secondary schools has been in a process of flux for a number of years as a result of policy directives and the subsequent policy changes and alterations in emphasis that flow from them. Indeed, changes in education policy, which happen as the political hue of parliament changes, show that control of the curriculum in schools is often one of the first tasks that an incoming government concerns itself with. When there is a change of party controlling government, this tends to assume an even greater importance. In order to understand how this happens, and how it has affected music education, we need to begin with an understanding of what the very notion of “National Curriculum” means in the English political context, and what this means for teaching and learning in schools themselves.

In 1988 the first National Curriculum for all subjects in both primary schools (up to age 11) and secondary schools (from age 11) was introduced (http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents). This laid down in statute for the first time what subjects should be taught in schools, with a division established between core subjects: maths, English, and science; and foundation subjects, which numbered music among them. Not only did the National Curriculum introduce these core and foundation subjects but also it established what should be taught and learned in each of them and, importantly, how it should be assessed. In this first iteration, assessment was laid out in scalar fashion, in the form of a series of what were known as “National Curriculum levels,” which were designed to be used only at the end of substantial periods of teaching and learning, *key stages*, in the English nomenclature. Despite being labeled a *National* curriculum, it has never applied to independent schools, and over time has increasingly become disapplied in other types of school too.

The 1988 National Curriculum was introduced by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, and was meant to be a significant apparatus involved with raising standards in schools in England. As well as this it would be a key tool in what the right-wing government of the day saw as a mainstay of their political viewpoint, that of promoting “parental choice” of schools, which function would be aided by publishing examination results of National Curriculum and other assessments in local and national newspapers. This does not mean Thatcher fully approved of the final published version of the new National Curriculum, especially when she found out who was in favor of it. Assessment in the National Curriculum was based, by-and-large, on proposals suggested in a report by the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT, [1988](#Ref29)), a body set up with the purpose of advising on how assessment might be achieved. Thatcher herself viewed this report with considerable suspicion: “The fact that it was welcomed by the Labour party, the National Union of Teachers and the Times Educational Supplement was enough to confirm for me that its approach was suspect” (Thatcher, [1993](#Ref30), p. 595). However, she was too late to prevent its transfer into statute. But this discomfort at the birth of an entirely new thing—a National Curriculum—sets the tone for what has happened since, with successive governments wanting to establish political control over *what* is taught in schools. Increasingly this has also included *how* it is taught as well, which has important ramifications for music, as we shall see.

The National Curriculum has not remained fixed since 1998, however. The first of a series of changes took place in 1995, still under a Conservative government. These alterations addressed the issue that the National Curriculum had been conceived of as a series of separate unrelated subject-specific entities, with what was felt to be too much by way of content for each of the subjects in it.

With a subsequent change of government in 1997, and with political control swinging to the left to New Labour under Tony Blair, more changes were made to the National Curriculum, and these became statutory from 2000. Further alterations again were enacted in 2007, with a substantially slimmer curriculum document being produced. With another change of government in 2010, this time to a center-right coalition government led by David Cameron, an “expert panel” was convened to look into the National Curriculum, and make recommendations. The notion of political intervention can be seen clearly in the actions of the coalition government and the expert panel on assessment it convened. After a period of time, two members of the expert panel, Professors Andrew Pollard and Mary James, very publicly resigned from it, stating the following among their reasons:

We do so because we are concerned with the directions which the Department [of education] now appears to be taking. Some of these directions fly in the face of evidence from the UK and internationally and, in our judgement, cannot be justified educationally. We do not therefore believe that the review, if it continues on the course which now appears to be set, will provide the quality of education which pupils, parents, employers and other national stakeholders have a right to expect. (James & Pollard, [2011](#Ref12" \o "James, M. and Pollard, A. (2011, 10 October). Letter to Mr. Gove. Retrieved from https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/4.-AP-MJ-letter-to-MG-final-101011.pdf?noredirect=1), para. 2)

Meanwhile, alongside the outward-facing expert panel, the then education minister, Michael Gove, had apparently appointed a secretive team of political (not educational) advisers, from whom he was taking far more advice than from the expert panel: “A shadow team of advisers, whose identity has not been made ‘transparent’, was advising Gove and bypassing the official panel in a move that raised concerns among the experts” (Guardian, [2012](Michael" \l "Ref9" \o "Guardian Newspaper, 2012: ), para. 6).

The reforms went on, but a number of the expert views, like the experts themselves, were disregarded. A new National Curriculum was produced in 2013 for first teaching in 2014. In terms of assessment in music education, this contained a significant development. It was announced that:

As part of our reforms to the national curriculum, the current system of “levels” used to report children’s attainment and progress will be removed. It will not be replaced.

We believe this system is complicated and difficult to understand, especially for parents. It also encourages teachers to focus on a pupil’s current level, rather than consider more broadly what the pupil can actually do. (National Archives, 2014, para. 2 and 3)

This is the situation currently pertaining in England, with new policy announcements being made on a very regular basis—for example, since 2010 there have been over 70 centrally published policy and policy-related documents (Education England, [n.d.](#Ref5)), this number will doubtless have changed by the time this chapter is being read.

In order to understand why these issues are significant for music education in England, and why they provide a useful informant for other jurisdictions, we need to consider both the nature of music education in English secondary schools and how the assessment regime pertaining during the years of compulsory National Curriculum assessment outlined in previous paragraphs has been operationalized in schools.

The Organization of Music in English Secondary Schools

The nature of music education in secondary schools in England is that it is taught and learned as a generalist subject. This means that specific and detailed musical learning does not take place using a single instrument, as is the case in some jurisdictions; instead musical learning is divided by the National Curriculum into three principle but interrelated components, namely *composing*, *listening*,and *performing*,and music is taught through and using these. There are some important distinctions to make regarding how these terminologies are used and understood, both from policy and practice perspectives. Composing normally causes the most concern from an international perspective. What composing is *not* is systemic staff notation-based written exercises, instead it is viewed as creating ideas directly into sounds, using classroom instruments, and realized directly into performance. This suggests the intent of National Curriculum music is that it be a musical education for all. The aims are expressed thus:

The national curriculum for music aims to ensure that all pupils:

perform, listen to, review and evaluate music across a range of historical periods, genres, styles and traditions, including the works of the great composers and musicians;

learn to sing and to use their voices, to create and compose music on their own and with others, have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument, use technology appropriately and have the opportunity to progress to the next level of musical excellence;

understand and explore how music is created, produced and communicated, including through the inter-related dimensions: pitch, duration, dynamics, tempo, timbre, texture, structure and appropriate musical notations. (Department for Education, [2013](#Ref4" \o "Department for Education. (2013). Music programmes of study: Key stage 3. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239088/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_Music.pdf), p. 217)

This generalized version of music education has important implications not only for teaching and learning but also for assessment. We have already had a brief introduction to the National Curriculum levels earlier in this chapter, it is now time to consider them in more detail.

Given the generalist nature of the National Curriculum, which has persisted almost unchanged through its various iterations, it is unsurprising that assessment of it is also of a general nature. In early versions of the National Curriculum this was done via the use of *level statements.* These entailed holistic phrases of musical accomplishment, and the original intent was that they be used once only at the end of each stage of education, so at 7, 11, and 14 years of age, known as the *end of a key stage* in the local parlance. As an example, here is the wording of the statement for level 5, deemed to be the average level of attainment that would be reached by pupils at the age of 14 years. This wording is taken from the 2007 version of the National Curriculum:

Level 5

Pupils identify and explore musical devices and how music reflects time, place and culture. They perform significant parts from memory and from notations, with awareness of their own contribution such as leading others, taking a solo part or providing rhythmic support. They improvise melodic and rhythmic material within given structures, use a variety of notations, and compose music for different occasions using appropriate musical devices. They analyse and compare musical features. They evaluate how venue, occasion and purpose affect the way music is created, performed and heard. They refine and improve their work. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, [2007](#Ref21" \o "Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (2007). Music: Programme of study for key stage 3. Retrieved from http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/m/music 2007 programme of study for key stage 3.pdf), p. 186)

As can be seen, there is little by way of specificity of musical accomplishment in this statement. It is a holistic overall viewpoint that encompasses all of the elements of National Curriculum music, composing, listening, and performing, wrapped up together in a single statement. Eight of these statements were produced, with an extra available for what was termed “exceptional performance.” Teachers were to use these descriptions in arriving at a “best fit” judgment of learner achievement:

The level descriptions may be seen as describing the complex of attainments of the typical pupil at that level. Their main purpose is to assist teachers in making their judgements of pupils’ performance at the end of the key stage. The mode of use of the level description is to form a “best fit” judgement, considering the range of the pupil’s attainments against the complex descriptions. This judgement should be made bearing in mind the scale of levels, and balancing strengths and weaknesses in the pupil’s overall performance. (Sainsbury & Sizmur, [1998](#Ref25" \o "Sainsbury, M., & Sizmur, S. (1998). Level descriptions in the National Curriculum: What kind of criterion referencing is this? Oxford Review of Education, 24(2), 181–193.), p. 187)

In practice, teachers used their own professional judgment rather than relying on any external testing regime to produce a result:

A consensus of professional judgement is built up about the interpretation of the standard set out in each level description. The consensus is based on the wording of the level description. (Sainsbury & Sizmur, [1998](#Ref25" \o "Sainsbury, M., & Sizmur, S. (1998). Level descriptions in the National Curriculum: What kind of criterion referencing is this? Oxford Review of Education, 24(2), 181–193.), p. 191)

This in itself presented problems, though, especially as teachers had to impose their own personal understandings of coherence on the assessment levels in order for them to make any sense at all. Sainsbury and Sizmur ([1998](#Ref25)) again:

The level descriptions contain, in themselves, collections of varied attainments that have no necessary unity or coherence. It might be argued that this is a collection of descriptions, not of linked performances, but rather of a typical pupil working at that level. But why should this collection of performances be typical of such a pupil? The answer is that this is a pupil who has been following the programmes of study of the National Curriculum. By teaching the programmes of study, teachers are to impose order upon the attainment targets. (p. 190)

An implication of this is that the way to “impose order” is to teach the National Curriculum, such that assessment will make sense. In practice, however, teachers tended to invert the assessment and curriculum planning processes, so that what resulted could be termed *assessment-led curriculum*; in other words in order to teach and assess musical attainment according to the National Curriculum, the classroom teacher had to begin with the assessment criteria, and then look to what curricula materials would be appropriate that could follow the assessment regime. This is the opposite way to which the curriculum was intended to be used, wherein assessment practices would follow teaching materials.

The Role of the Office for Standards in Education—Policing Education in England

I have shown how issues arose early on with the notion of policy being made and then interpreted in different ways at the local level. In order to investigate this further, and explain the context for an international audience, we need to look into the role and importance of Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, a quasi-independent nongovernmental body charged with inspecting schools and reporting on what they find. This anodyne statement does not adequately convey the strength of feeling and very real fear that Ofsted’s name strikes into teachers, head teachers, and governors in English schools.

To understand how this came to be, a very peculiarly English division of legislature and judiciary in education needs to be understood. The procedure for enacting policy at a national level rests with the government. There are different policymaking mechanisms for each of the constituent countries of the United Kingdom—England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Proceeding from central policymakers it then devolves to local authorities (although increasingly less so nowadays) and individual schools and chains of schools to interpret how policy will be enacted in each of their specific circumstances. Then, acting as a sort of uneasy mixture of judiciary and the police, is Ofsted, whose role is defined as being both “independent and impartial” (Ofsted website). Ofsted reports directly to parliament. Fear of the results of a bad outcome from an Ofsted inspection cannot be overemphasized for an international audience. There have been teachers who have committed suicide as a result of a poor Ofsted inspection result,[[1]](#endnote-1) so intense is the pressure that these inspections place on head teachers, teachers, and schools.

Ofsted inspections of schools are reported in local press, and this, combined with examination results being published in newspaper “league tables,” means that schools feel considerable public pressure to present themselves in the best possible light. One of the effects of this is that Ofsted utterances are seen as being of significant importance by schools themselves, and any discussion of assessment or pedagogic innovation is suffixed by the question “Would Ofsted like it?” rather than by the more personal “Will this be good for the learners in our school?” Another of the effects of this has been that fear of Ofsted has spawned a whole series of what have become known as “Ofsted myths.” These can spread rapidly thorough the education system. An example of this is when in one school, allegedly, Ofsted inspectors stopped pupils in school corridors and quizzed them as to what National Curriculum levels they were currently working at in all of their various schools subjects. The upshot of this was that suddenly schools started ensuring that all of their pupils were drilled in this knowledge!

Consequentially there came a marked departure from the practice of awarding levels only at the end of a key stage, and they came to be awarded to pupils far more frequently, notably at the end of each project or piece of work. Indeed, so widespread did the usage frequency increase that holistic level statements, as outlined in the example above, become inadequate to show fine-grained progression of the sort that it was believed “Ofsted wanted,” and so an entirely spurious set of sublevels was introduced. This subdivided the extant level statements into what, it must be said, was an entirely ad hoc system more or less invented and reinvented in each school, of what came to known as “sublevels.” These were (and in some cases still are) ubiquitous, their use coming to be a regular and common part of teaching and learning encounters (Fautley, [2012](#Ref7)). The reason that these sublevels were and are a problem is to do with enactment of policy at a local level, the resultant classroom practice that ensued, and misunderstandings of what teaching and learning in generalist music education look and, importantly, *sound* like.

As I have shown, the level statements themselves were designed and written as holistic and overarching comments on overall musical attainment. Subdividing them was done to show either progression through the levels or to produce rewritten atomized statements of musical progression, both of which are a long way from the original intention of the authors of the levels. As sublevels had no origin in statute, interpretation of what they meant, and how they should be written, was very much left to the individual whimsy of schools. Indeed, such was the variation in practice that even the number of sublevels was not standardized! Although over time most schools opted for three, usually labeled a, b, and c, giving level markings such as 4b, 5c, and so forth. In some schools, though, tenths of a level were used, giving a decimal grade, 4.4, 5.1, and so on, while a few schools used a percentage, somehow dividing the levels into hundredths, giving marks of 4.45%, 5.17%, and so forth. Confusion was rife, and this was amplified by the fact that very few schools undertook any form of standardization of their sublevels with other institutions.

Progress, Progression, Attainment

Those from other countries who look in on the English system of assessment in classroom music education are often confused by the way in which English schools have a somewhat idiosyncratic notion with regard to what progress and progression entail. Indeed, these two words have come to have related, but strangely discontiguous meanings. “Progress” is operationalized as the speed at which attainment points are met, whereas “progression” is often viewed as the ways in which learners move through programs of study, or schemes of learning. Again, this is largely due to the way in which schools have interpreted Ofsted utterances. In 2014, Ofsted wrote to all schools saying that they would henceforth be looking at pupil work to ascertain what *progress* had been made. This caused a flurry of worry among schools, as suddenly a focus on progression became the order of the day. This has had the interesting and unintended consequence of schools moving their attention away from attainment and onto progression. As one teacher remarked in an interview:

Teacher: My school aren’t so bothered about attainment any more, it’s only progress they are interested in

Researcher: How can they concentrate on progress without also looking at attainment?

Teacher: I don’t know, they just do! (Fautley, [2016](#Ref8))

This is all rather odd, as progress is clearly by-and-large about the rapidity—or lack thereof—of speed at which pupils move through various attainment milestones. To say that attainment is something that schools “aren’t so bothered about” seems to be counterintuitive, if not plain wrong! But this focus on progress has also highlighted another policy-practice disjunct in the way the notion of *visible progress* has taken hold. As a result of the aforementioned Ofsted pronouncement, two other Ofsted statements, made in the 2012 *Handbook for Inspection* (Ofsted, [2012](#Ref18)), also had a significant impact on thinking at a local level:

[J]udgement on the quality of teaching must take account of evidence of pupils’ learning and progress over time. (p. 34)

Observing learning over time . . . scrutiny of pupils’ work, with particular attention given to . . . pupils’ effort and success in completing their work and the progress they make over a period of time. (p. 35)

The question that schools asked themselves was that if Ofsted visits, and inspections of individual teachers and their lessons last on average for 20 minutes, what sort of progress might it be expected that pupils could make in this time? This requirement arose from the same Ofsted fear that was discussed earlier, with serious consequences, it was felt, if this production of visible learning was not done. As one commentator observed:

The twenty-minute “outstanding lesson” now endemic, with its enforcement by terrified leadership teams, and even training courses offered by the usual suspects who are making a fast buck out of teaching schools how to game the system. This concept requires teachers to split lessons into 20-minute segments (the length of time an inspector will attend a lesson), and in that twenty minutes, tick every box on the inspection framework, which itself would take most adults at least five minutes just to read and decode. Chief amongst the hoops teachers are required to jump through is that of demonstrating that every student in the class has made measurable progress inside twenty minutes. (Royal Society of Arts, [2013](#Ref23" \o "Royal Society of Arts, (2013). Inspector inspect thyself. Retrieved from https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/matthew-taylor-blog/2013/12/inspector-inspect-thyself-), para. 11)

What is interesting about this comment, and the fear that led to the described actions being commonplace, is that it is a terror of the *consequences* of not being compliant that has led to this situation, rather than the activity itself. In other words this is an example of the policing of policy coming to replace the policy itself; this in turn being due to culture of performativity, resulting in and from a climate of fear.

The Role of Assessment in Accountability

This point takes us to a key issue in the English education system, and of music education in particular. This is the role of assessment in accountability processes. Performativity, and what has come to be known as “the standards agenda,” are driving many aspects of learning in music lessons, as elsewhere across the school curriculum. Performativity was defined by Ball ([2003](#Ref2)):

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of “quality”, or “moments” of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. (p. 216)

Elsewhere, Ball ([2006](#Ref1)) observes, “as part of the transformation of education and schooling and the expansion of the power of capital, performativity provides sign systems which ‘represent’ education in a self-referential and reified form for consumption” (p. 70). Ball ([2003](#Ref2)) describes performativity as being a “terror,” with teachers feeling it “in their soul” as being something they are struggling against: “[T]hese struggles are currently highly individualized as teachers, as ethical subjects, find their values challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity” (p. 216).

It is performativity that causes a very tight focus on assessment and testing, but England is not alone in this. The Finnish commentator Pasi Sahlberg (Sahlberg, [2014](#Ref24)) has observed this, characterizing it as being part of what he calls the GERM, a global educational reform movement:

GERM has gained global popularity among policymakers and change consultants because it emphasizes some fundamental new orientations to learning and educational administration. It suggests strong guidelines to improve quality, equity, and the effectiveness of education, such as putting making learning a priority, seeking high achievement for all students, and making assessment an integral part of the teaching and learning process. . . . GERM assumes that external performance standards, describing what teachers should teach and what students should do and learn, lead to better learning for all. By concentrating on the basics and defining explicit learning targets for students and teachers, such standards place a strong emphasis on mastering the core skills of reading and writing and mathematical and scientific literacy. The systematic training of teachers and external inspection are essential elements of this approach. (p. 150)

Sahlberg’s notion of “defining explicit learning targets for students and teachers” is an important one in the English educational system. This is because targets set by teachers for the work of their pupils turns out, in many cases, to be the means by which the teachers themselves are judged. This links back to the earlier description of sublevels, in that the way that many schools use these is to set a minimum requirement of progress which the pupils *have* to make, delineated in terms of how many sublevels the pupils have covered per year. The way in which this target setting was arrived at was by the simple arithmetic division of the expected National Curriculum level at age 11, and then how to get to the expected National Curriculum level 5 by age 14. What this resulted in was a requirement of pupils making a specified number—usually two or three—sublevels progress per year. This in itself sounds like a reasonable requirement, but what happened in many cases was that the requirement became not a means of monitoring progress (and progression), but an end in its own right, with teachers having to produce data showing that their pupils *had* made the necessary number of sublevels required in all cases. These were statistical data, in many cases school leadership teams cared little for the individual stories of pupils, of the names behind the numbers, they were simply concerned with numbers on a spreadsheet. This is a clear example of what the educational commentator Warwick Mansell calls “the obsessive, sceptical, and politicised emphasis on statistics which characterises our education system” (Mansell, [2007](#Ref13), p. 210).

What we find, when looking into this further, is that these statistical levels of progress targets which the learners make, have become instead a proxy measure of school, and, importantly, teacher efficacy. This is because the target has become itself a measure, a clear example of what has become known as “Campbell’s law.” This states, “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures, and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” (Campbell, [1976](#Ref3), p. 49).

More specifically, Campbell describes what this means in relation to education in the form of test scores:

achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways (Campbell, [1976](#Ref3), pp. 51–52).

This is exactly what happened in the English situation. Test scores, in this case taking the form of National Curriculum assessment levels, had “become the goal of the teaching process,” with the result that processes of monitoring pupil attainment had switched instead to processes of monitoring teaching via grades (National Curriculum levels) that teachers were giving their pupils.

Of course, all of these notions of progress and progression in secondary schools assume that the starting points from which progression can be measured are more-or-less accurate. But the National Association of Head Teachers in the United Kingdom has pointed out that this cannot be automatically taken to be the case. The grades that teachers in primary schools are giving are subject to exactly the same sort of performativity issues that the grades in secondary schools as described previously have been:

with the lack of trust exhibited by the profession itself—junior schools often report that infant schools’ assessments of their pupils are over-inflated, secondary schools argue that they need to test pupils on arrival because primary assessments, including national tests, cannot be relied upon. In part, this lack of trust is due to a lack of consistency and in part to the perverse incentives resulting from a high stakes accountability model . . . secondary schools were likely to test pupils as they came into year 7 rather than trust the KS2 assessments. This was generally seen as a problem caused by the nature of the accountability system rather than any underlying lack of ability within the profession. (National Association of Head Teachers, [2014](#Ref17" \o "National Association of Head Teachers. (2014). Report of the NAHT commission on assessment. Haywards Heath, Sussex, UK. Retrieved from www.naht.org.uk/assets/assessment-commission-report.pdf), pp. 15–16)

What all this means is that:

pupil outcomes are of enormous individual significance and schools have a social and perhaps moral obligation to maximise individual student attainments, raise aspirations, and enhance employment and educational opportunities. However, translated from measure of individual attainment to institutional indices of success on which careers and institutional fates depend, pupil outcomes begin to serve a quite different purpose. (Husbands, [2001](performance" \l "Ref11" \o "Husbands, C. (2001). Managing ), p. 7)

And this is the situation that currently pertains in England, where teachers are judged by how many of their pupils have made a statistically stipulated amount of progress, using measures that the teachers have devised themselves. The tail is certainly wagging the dog here!

Implications for Policy and Practice in Secondary School Music Classes

There are serious implications for music teachers from the policy and practice situations described in this chapter, not just locally but also nationally and internationally. Notions of performativity and measurement, teacher efficacy, and the primacy of pupil scores are international issues. In America, Diane Ravitch (Ravitch, [2013](#Ref22)) has observed:

The thirst for data became unquenchable. Policy makers in Washington and the state capitals apparently assumed that more testing would produce more learning. They were certain that they needed accountability and could not imagine any way to hold schools “accountable” without test scores. This unnatural focus on testing produced perverse but predictable results: it narrowed the curriculum; many districts scaled back time for the arts, history, civics, physical education, science, foreign language, and whatever was not tested. Cheating scandals occurred in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and other districts. States like New York manipulated the passing score on state tests to inflate the results and bring them closer to Washington’s unrealistic goal. Teaching to the test, once considered unprofessional and unethical, became common practice. (pp. 13–14)

But what does this mean for the classroom music educator? There is no doubt that assessment in music education, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. After all, as Swanwick (1988) long ago observed, “to teach is to assess” (p. 149), and in music education in England and elsewhere there is a long and proud history of doing music assessment, and getting it right, and as reliable and valid as it can be. The history of ABRSM and Trinity College graded examinations presents strong examples of this. We also know that music educators are really good at formative assessment, and that this is a vital aspect of developing high-quality learning outcomes in our pupils. What we are witnessing now is the all-pervading eye of neoliberalism being cast firmly over every aspect of schooling and education. Music education and music educators are not immune from this, and the English examples outlined in this chapter show that very real dangers can accrue from too much political interference in the curriculum. But there is also a danger for music as a school subject if music educators try to argue that music should stand outside such measures, as the danger becomes then that the same neoliberal reformers will simply cut music and the arts from schools, as they do not understand that which they cannot measure. In the United Kingdom we already have the example of the secretary of state for education warning against studying the arts: “Education secretary Nicky Morgan has warned young people that choosing to study arts subjects at school could ‘hold them back for the rest of their lives’” (The Stage, [2014](‘Arts" \l "Ref26" \o "Stage, The (2014, 11 November). Education Secretary Nicky Morgan: ), para. 1).

So, removing the necessity for assessment from music could well be counterproductive. But what would help music educators is for assessment to be placed as servant, rather than master. Nowhere is this truer than in curriculum time for school music lessons.

With finite budgets, and the perils of performativity biting hard, a clear focus on curriculum would be of serious benefit to the classroom music practitioner. None of the egregious cases of assessment problems outlined in this chapter are the result of teachers making free choices. They have all been made under the constraints of externally imposed systems. In order for music teachers to reclaim assessment as their own, we need to look very carefully at what we think the purposes of schooling are, and what they should be. While it can be argued that assessment *is* learning, the very future of the subject itself is in question if music education becomes reduced to the teaching and learning of only that which can be easily assessed. One of the things we know about music as a truly *musical* experience is that overly simplistic assessment schedules cannot possibly capture the subtleties and nuances of skillful music making, whatever the style, type, or genre. After all, as Janet Mills (Mills, [2005](#Ref15)) noted,

As I leave a concert, I have a clear notion of the quality of the performance which I have just heard. If someone asks me to justify my view, I may start to talk about rhythmic drive, or interpretation, or sense of ensemble, for instance. But I move from the whole performance to its components. I do not move from the components to the whole. In particular, I do not think: the notes were right, the rhythm was right, the phrasing was coherent, and so on—therefore I must have enjoyed this performance. And I certainly do not think something such as SKILLS + INTERPRETATION = PERFORMANCE. (p. 176)

Reclaiming assessment, then, is one of the most important tasks facing music educators in England and elsewhere in the coming years. But it is to be hoped that there are also lessons to be learned for the international community from what has been happening in England. The effects of Campbell’s law, the chasing of statistical targets at the expense of real learning and music making by children and young people, the judging of teaching efficacy by pupil grades, and the other issues outlined in this chapter, all of these divert time away from the teaching and learning of music. Indeed, the very reason many music educators enter the profession in the first place, to help young people make music both individually and together, has been sadly replaced for many by a narrow focus solely on measuring the measurable. We need to look forward to a time when we value music as whole, not just the isolated atomistic components of it that we often struggle to measure. This is the real lesson for international music education, that music lessons are better when they are musical.

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1. Note

   For example: “An award-winning headteacher hanged herself shortly after Ofsted downgraded her school, an inquest has been told” (Guardian, [2015](Headteacher" \l "Ref10" \o "Guardian Newspaper, 2015: )). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)