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**What is KS3 Music Education for?**

Posted by [davidashworth](https://teachtalkmusic.wordpress.com/author/davidashworth/) ⋅ September 3, 2016 ⋅ [17 Comments](https://teachtalkmusic.wordpress.com/2016/09/03/what-is-ks3-music-education-for/#comments)

****Martin Fautley writes:**

*David Ashworth challenged to me to write a guest editorial entry for Teach Talk Music which didn’t focus on assessment, and was contentious! So this is my attempt to do just that, but I couldn’t leave assessment alone, sorry. So this piece begins and ends with assessment, but does go somewhere else in between!*

When people talk to me about assessment, one of the things I normally do is to ask them what their teaching and learning programmes entail. I firmly believe that assessment is bound up with curriculum content, and that to properly understand assessment, we need to understand the associated curriculum.

It seems nowadays to be such an obvious statement that schooling is all about exams and results that it is hard to think about what music education might look like were this not to be the case. In secondary school music, I am sure that for many teachers, their KS3 curriculum arises from assessment, both immediate and deferred. Let me explain. I hear many, many teachers tell me that they see KS3 as preparation for GCSE, and that they “have to” teach certain topics at KS3 so the pupils are ready for the exam at some point in the future. The most extreme version of this was some years ago, when a teacher told me that because there was so much to do in the big anthology of music set works for A level, that s/he started teaching it in Year 7 (this teacher may be reading this!). However, s/he appreciated that the kids didn’t like it, and weren’t really ready for it, yet s/he felt so constrained that they had to do it. How far is it from that (admittedly extreme) position, to the common one wherein many teachers today tell me that they have to start preparing pupils for GCSE in Y7?

It is at this point I’d like to start us thinking about the purposes of KS3 music education. After all, we know that nationally only about 7% of entrants take GCSE music. If the purpose of KS3 music lessons is to prepare young people for the GCSE examination, does this mean that we are preparing, planning, and teaching a KS3 programme that is *really* only meant for the 7% who will carry on into KS4? Now I know that this will provoke howls of rage from many music teachers, as their whole *raison d’être,* as perceived by the school, is to produce good exam grades. Indeed, I hear many stories of performance management issues where teachers have problems, through no fault of their own, in this very area. No, what I am raising here is the notion that KS4 music is having a backwards effect in many schools on their KS3 curricula. In the assessment literature this is known as *backwash* effect, and is a significant issue. I very much doubt (but could be wrong) that GCSE exam boards have done much research on the effects of backwash on KS3 music programmes, but in my work with secondary schools I see this a great deal.

What this can mean in some schools, which admittedly are extreme examples, is that we see a KS3 programme that, at best, ignores, and, at worst, alienates, 93% of the kids who experience it. In many other schools we see common GCSE topics regularly being taught. Now, this, clearly, is entirely defendable. Schools are measured by their GCSE results, and no sensible teacher would ever do anything at KS3 that jeopardises this. But this raises that big question:

***What is KS3 music education for?***

There are also some subsidiary questions which follow from this:

*If KS3 music education is only preparation for KS4, then what is the place and role of the 93% who will not take it?*

*Has KS3 ‘failed’ these pupils, or have they ‘failed’ KS3?*

I don’t want music teachers to think I am having a pop at them, I’m really not, so let’s undertake a small thought experiment:

*If KS3 music was the end of all music education, and, like now, there was no final summative assessment or examination, what might it look (and sound) like?*

This thought experiment gives you *carte blanche* to design a curriculum *with no terminal assessment!* I know, now that is a thought experiment along the lines of *Schrödinger’s cat*, and really does require some thinking! No exam, blimey! So, freed from this constraint, what would your curriculum look like? Or, asked another way round, how much of what your curriculum consists of currently would you feel free to stop? How much would you shift towards “doing” music, and what would be the role, in this new dispensation, of “learning” music? Would you adopt, say a “musical futures” type curriculum? Would you look to the USA, and teach band and choir? Would you look to Wider Opps, and teach whole class ensemble music? Would you concentrate on singing?

Let’s add a further challenge into the mix! How *portable* is this curriculum? Is this *your* curriculum, for *your* kids, in *your* school, now? My back-of-an-envelope feeling is that it probably is, and that this is a really good thing! I think our current focus on “what works” in education misses out the questions “for whom?”, “with whom?” and “in what context?”. Personally, I think it would be nice to celebrate curricula diversity.

Now, let me throw down a further challenge: having done this thought experiment, and considered *your* ideal curriculum, what’s to stop you implementing it *now*? How much of what you now do *must* be done to keep those KS4 grades coming?

But let us finish, as we began, with assessment. I wish to suggest that we have become downtrodden by assessment measures and accountability. Teachers dare not deviate from what they see as ‘safe paths’ of curriculum due to this fear. Said fear means starting GCSE increasingly lower down the school, ensuring that exam results are the focus of everything that we do, and never deviating from this path. But as Einstein probably didn’t observe, “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results”, and so in some instances, we are so scared, that we keep our KS3 curricula as they are (and, in some cases, ever have been), and hope that things will get better!

Now I know that this thought experiment business might come across as “Ivory Tower” stuff, as thinking about KS3 cannot be divorced from KS4, but I am really worried that music will disappear from our schools, for instance with EBacc effects, and that as music educators we may all be far too busy to notice it happening.

I said above that this piece is *not* about taking pot-shots at busy music teachers, but is designed to stimulate thinking. And David Ashworth did ask me to be contentious! Anyway, let’s have a collective think about what we are doing before someone with a calculator and a spreadsheet decides they don’t need us to do any of it any more anyway!

*Endnote: Thanks are due to some of my (I’m not supposed to say “my”, sorry!) PhD students, whose individual and collective thinking shines through this editorial, I’m not naming you, as you can later take the credit for your own published thinking in these areas, but you know who you are, and thanks. Coffee/Beer/Curry will follow!*

**Reflective questions**

This piece is peppered with questions, so here are a few extracted to think about:

* What is KS3 Music Education for?
  + Who are the 93%
  + What does/should their music education look like?
* Freed from the trammels of examination criteria, what would your ideal KS3 music programme entail?
* How specific to you, in your school, with your kids, is your curriculum?
  + Does this matter?
* What, if any, are the differences between *learning* music, and *doing* music?

***Professor Martin Fautley, Birmingham City University***