

Q. In some ways music can be thought of as the ultimate interdisciplinary subject, but it is also highly specialised in other respects. Examine this paradox in the context of the debate about music's role in primary and secondary education.

Music is fundamentally “a pattern of sounds... intended to give pleasure to the people listening to it.”¹ It has therefore been considered in both mathematical and artistic approaches, and can be identified in most aspects of society. However, music has been a discipline only studied by a decreasing minority, as pupils progress through their education. In an attempt to integrate music into the curriculum, the subject was used for its interdisciplinary quality alongside other subjects. However, the focus of music curriculum moved away from the priority of music being a central part of the curriculum, towards the benefits to be gained for other subjects and skills from musical input. Therefore, the intention and purpose for music education, as to what can be gained from it by viewing it as a subsidiary or an independent subject, has changed the content and the ways in which it is taught. Two publications that promote contrasting interpretations of whether to teach music alongside or discretely from other subjects are Music Mark's “10 Things You Should Know About Music,”² describing the educational value of music education; and Ofsted's Music Report (2021)³ which concludes that music should be learned for music's sake.

Interdisciplinary

Over the past decade, music education has become a method of enhancing the curriculum, by crafting the music curriculum around projects and topics dictated by other subjects. This stems from the intention to make music education less overlooked by making music “an integral part of school life.”² Music Mark's poster “10 things you should know about music” summarised the transferrable benefits music has on a child's learning, describing it as “an educational building block.”² These skills are implicitly and explicitly practiced through music education. Therefore, it has become increasingly common for children in the primary phase to experience music in the service of another subject. This occurs particularly in primary education, for example in teaching children songs about the alphabet, they learn to access the aural memory for the purpose of remembering and making sense of basic information.

One of Music Mark's points about music is that it “is an educational building block,” meaning it can be a foundation to learning skills and an aid to developing them. This can be understood not only in the sense that music can be a creative device for teaching, but it also indicates that musical discipline develops mathematical and communicative understanding. For example, children learn to subdivide beats with different note values, and learn melodic and harmonic intervals in melodies and chords. Therefore, division and addition (and effectively their opposites) become an immediate reaction to judging lengths and pitches of notes when playing an instrument – a musical exercise with mathematical foundation.

Singing songs such as the alphabet song develops not only aural memory but phonological awareness. Children not only learn a sequence of letters, but distinguish between the sounds and attach meaning to

each sound, owing to the fact that phonics are sounds and so must be viewed through a musical lens. Therefore, learning phonics is a similar process to understanding phrasing and pitch.

At secondary level, where subjects naturally become more specialist, music is less frequently used as a device for other subjects, however the skills learned and developed through music at primary level draw parallels to other subjects at secondary school. Terminology such as pattern, sequence and oscillation are used in Maths, Physics and Music.⁴ Therefore, a child with musical knowledge would be at an advantage in beginning secondary education, being already acquainted with these terms through music.

This also applies to skills indirectly acquired at primary level. Whilst music develops a child's own language at primary school, it practises the skills of recognising patterns and giving meaning to symbols outside of one's own language which are required for learning new languages at secondary school. This is largely because music is effectively processed as a language by the brain. Meaning is attached to note pitches as it would be to phonics and words, then articulated in phrases or sentences. Therefore, the brain recognises patterns in grammar as it would in music, and has already had practice in translating new sounds.

Music enhances the knowledge of other subjects in its reliance on them: students often gain a historical and geographical understanding in order to fully understand the context of musical convention and expression associated with different periods and cultures. This can be learned through their music education, however supplements subjects such as history and geography in learning about culture. In fact, in viewing music fundamentally as an art form, students often exercise their understanding of musical expression by depicting imagery for visual aid. Images have historically inspired some pieces of music, however, through the medium of creating visual art, students learn to develop an emotional response to music.

Skills such as emotional and social development and spatial awareness are acquired from music education; music does not simply make links to other classroom subjects, but develops cognitive function. Playing an instrument requires the brain to cope with multi-tasking and coordination, playing in an ensemble requires communication, and interpreting music involves an emotional response. Although these activities are explicitly musical activities, they fundamentally lay the foundations for or even act as another format to develop these skills.⁵

Specialist

The 2021 Ofsted Subject Review for Music concluded that music should not be taught in service of another subject, rather with the intention of learning about music and enhancing musicianship. This contradicted Music Mark's poster, which had, whether intentionally or not, encouraged music to be used as an educational tool. Instead, this renewed outlook proved that music "need[ed] no further justification,"³ because it was a discipline in its own right. Ofsted had reverted to this point of view to address the decreasing numbers of music provision, in opportunities and lesson time, which was resulting in a national average of one to two students studying Music A Level per school. In fact, one of the most damaging effects of the use of "generic teaching strategies,"³ used to teach music and to teach with music

was that music's presence as a tool diminished and its importance was reduced throughout each level of education.

Past a certain point of studying a subject, the learner does not need a musical context to aid the understanding or memorisation of information. This is seen in a child's language acquisition. When a child is first learning the order of the alphabet and attaching value to phonics, songs are used to aid their learning. However, a secondary school child would have practised language to the extent that they are too fluent to need a device to remember the building blocks of language (phonics). At this point, the method of using music is practised less frequently, and what little musicianship has been developed is halted completely. Having learned music in a subject's context that is unrelated to music, and with this method of teaching becoming less frequent throughout a student's education, the student's musicianship is therefore less developed, with less interest and importance placed on music at a higher or optional level.

Music is not only used as a device in other subjects, but as subject content for practising skills largely unrelated to musicianship. Where children had learned about composers and musical periods by writing about them, practising literacy more than musicianship, it becomes harder to mould music education into other formats as the content and skills become more developed. The reason for this is that music becomes more specialised and resembles other disciplines less, the more detail it is taught in further along in education. However, other subjects have also been recognised as being interdisciplinary, and so music has in some cases been replaced by other subjects that have a similar effect on a child's development.

The similarity in the limitations between both of these methods of incorporating music into the curriculum is that, by using music within a different framework, the musicianship is diluted.

Therefore, the approach to music education and purpose as to what is to be gained from the music lesson has altered its place in the wider curriculum. If music is taught for the sake of being a discipline in its own right, the music lesson simply practises another subject covertly. However, to approach music as a specialist subject does not negate the interdisciplinary qualities to be taken from it. Skills can be acquired from music education consciously and unconsciously, and so to use music for the purpose of developing other subjects does not allow for a rounded music education to develop those conscious and unconscious skills completely. After all, the place of music in education and in life is nothing if not to foster musicality and inspire the connection to art. "Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything."⁶

Bibliography

¹ Meaning of music in English – Cambridge Dictionary (online)

² 10 Things You Should Know About Music – Music Mark, 2015

³ Ofsted Research Review Series: Music – Ofsted, paragraphs entitled, “The current context of music education in England”, “Systems at subject/school level” and “Making the case for music”, 12th July 2021

⁴ 4 ways that music and mathematics are related – Omaha School of Music and Dance, 10th June 2016

⁵ 4 ways that music and mathematics are related – Omaha School of Music and Dance, 10th June 2016, paragraph entitled “Music affects how we study and think”, citing Dr Frances Rauscher, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

⁶ Plato

The Importance of Music, National Plan for music – Department For Education, 2011, Anex 3: The benefits of music, page 42

Reviewing the Model Music Curriculum in detail – Incorporated Society of Musicians, 14th April 2021

6 ways Ofsted wants schools to teach music – Claudia Civinini, TES magazine, 12th July 2021

Music and Early Language Acquisition - Shepherd School of Music, Rice University Psychology, Language and Music Cognition Lab, University of Maryland, 11th September 2011

The Relationship between Music and Language – Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology, Sebastian Jentschke, February 2015