



Making sense of music in special schools

A new report has raised concerns about the quality of music education in England for the most severely learning disabled pupils. Anita Holford reviews the evidence and finds that the role of community musicians isn't widely understood

Schools music has had a bumpy ride over the last few years. Just when the Department for Education and Employment (now Department for Education and Skills) had begun to inject more funding into it through the Music Standards Fund (introduced in 1999 and now extended to at least 2003/4), two key reports – *All our futures: creativity, culture and education*, and following that, *Arts education in secondary schools: effects and effectiveness* – published strong arguments about the need for a rethink (see *Sounding Board Autumn '00*, p10).

And although many people would like to think that music plays an even more important role in the education of children with special needs, a recent report funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Trust, and carried out by the University of London Institute of Education and the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), contains strong evidence that special education is experiencing a similar crisis, and more worryingly, that community music goes unrecognised by many in the special education sector.

The PROMISE (Provision of Music in Special Education) report focuses on music education for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) or profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). It was prompted by an OFSTED report in

1999 that suggested that the quality of music provision was satisfactory or better in only one third of special schools, and that there were difficulties in recruiting music specialists, especially in secondary and all-age schools.

Adam Ockelford, one of the PROMISE report's authors, and assistant director of education and employment at the RNIB, explains: "The anecdotal evidence we were

getting from our music advisory service at RNIB was that there was a perception that music was particularly important for these two groups, but on the other hand there seemed to be no official government information about it. And although people felt music was very important, there was a feeling that provision was patchy. So we felt as a starting point we should do some basic research about what was actually happening."

The research, which took place between 1999 and 2000, did indeed find widespread recognition of the importance of music and its impact in many areas of child development and far from satisfactory provision, despite evidence of good practice. Although nearly all the schools surveyed or interviewed (53 in total) had a designated music co-ordinator, over half of these had no significant background or qualification in music or music education, and most pupils received music tuition from their own class teacher who generally classified themselves as a non-music specialist. More often than not, teachers responsible for delivering music activities had not received any further training or professional development in music skills.

The situation isn't so very different from the rest of the UK's schools. The National Campaign for the Arts and other arts organisations have been lobbying for some time for teachers to be given greater

LINKS

Provision of Music in Special Education (PROMISE) report by Professor Graham F Welch, University of London Institute of Education; Dr Adam Ockelford and Sally-Anne Zimmermann, RNIB

RNIB, Education and Employment Department, 224 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6AA T: 020 7391 2149 E: adam.ockelford@rnib.org.uk

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority T: 020 7590 5555 W: www.qca.org.uk

National Campaign for the Arts T: 020 7333 0375 W: www.artscampaign.org.uk

Special schools facts

● There are 1399 special schools in England which cater for children with special needs such as physical disabilities, hearing or visual impairment, speech and language difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, epilepsy or autism.

● Children with profound learning difficulties are legally entitled to education, but this is a relatively recent development, but despite government attempts at integration, most children with SLD and PMLD are still educated in special schools.

● In total, there are 28% of special schools (397 of the total of 1399) which are designated to cater for these children, but around 200 or more special schools also make provision for SLD and PMLD

pupils. There are schools which specialise in PMLD and SLD pupils, but many of these also have pupils with other types of disability, and other parts of the special education sector also have PMLD and SLD pupils. Most of these schools have pupils from early years to post 16.

● Severe Learning Difficulties and Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties

● There are no commonly agreed definitions for PMLD and SLD, so the researchers based theirs on information from schools, which suggested that PMLD described cognitive, sensory, physical, emotional and social developments which are in the early stages, such as in the first year of usual developments; and SLD described developments which are in the first 12 to 30 months of usual development.

support in delivering creative activities both in their initial teacher training (where the amount of time that trainee teachers spend on arts subjects has been declining) and through partnerships with artists and arts organisations (see box out below). But the PROMISE report also raises something more disturbing: a lack of widespread recognition of community music as a discipline within special education. And where it does exist, the usually short term and unsystematic nature of the projects is particularly problematic for pupils with special needs.

The report talks of music therapy (around a third of the schools had music therapy on site), although music therapy activities appear to be very eclectic and roam into what could more perhaps more appropriately be seen as 'community music' territory. Teachers and music therapists describe the benefits and indications of progress in music therapy in terms of increasing confidence, taking turns, awareness of others, expressing emotions, relaxation, enjoyment, increased attention, in addition to the more clinical benefits such as improved motor skills and language development. One therapist wrote: "The children must have enough time to respond and when they do, the therapist adapts her music to their responses, the music created is then a joint/shared experience. The therapist is not playing to the children, but inviting them to create music with her."

Ockelford believes that music therapists have filled a need, but that there is confusion about the role that the various types of music work can play: "There are a huge number of community music activities happening in schools. We didn't

actually use the word community music, but we did use the term 'links with the community'. I think there's a huge confusion between music therapy and music education for these groups and it arises because music therapists have moved in to a bit of a vacuum in the music education side."

"People may not think of the term 'community music'," he continues. "But a huge number of schools have links with music in their local community, and invite a range of people in from local amateur musicians to really big projects with prestigious orchestras. But it's not in any sense systematic, and it's not linked back to what normally goes on in the schools – it's

more of a one off project. Schools need to link more systematically with involvement of community musicians to get the maximum benefit, with more thought about preparation and exit strategies. But clearly the benefits are enormous, for pupils as well as teachers in special schools."

There's clearly a long way to go before the belief in the importance of music in the lives of children with special needs is matched with suitable provision. The report is being launched on 20 October at a conference to discuss music and special needs, and the authors hope to undertake more detailed research in addition to working with the QCA in developing the curriculum for these pupils. "What we don't really know is how musically their development works," says Ockelford. "Is it just that they have a delayed musical development, or do they have a different musical development from other pupils? So there's more work to be done on early musical development in relation to these pupils, as well as on the content of the curriculum."

Developments in England such as Artsmark (Arts Council of England-funded awards for schools providing high standards of practice); Creative Partnerships (government scheme to be run by ACE linking schools, artists and arts organisations in deprived areas); and research by the major teaching and examination bodies are paving the way for a new climate of creativity in education. It's crucial that special schools are not left out, and that more effort is devoted to developing a greater understanding of the different ways in which the musical development of these pupils' can be supported.

Music teaching developments

Update on reports in Sounding Board Autumn 00 on developments in the arts and creativity in education

Review of the quality of teaching and learning in the arts

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is looking at what makes good practice in the teaching of arts and creativity, and ways of maximising the contribution of the arts to pupils' education. It is also investigating a range music teaching qualifications and definitions, encompassing terms such as music tutor, amateur, community musician, and will be working with organisations such as Metier, the national training organisation for the arts, and Sound Sense, to investigate occupational standards and qualifications.

Review of initial teacher training

Arts organisations have been urging that reform of the education system needs to begin with teachers being offered experience of the arts in their initial teacher training. This summer, the Teacher Training Agency has published revised standards and requirements for the award of Qualified Teacher Training, which all teachers must gain to be employed in a maintained schools. The new proposals allow for a greater diversity of routes into teaching and a greater emphasis on professional values and practice, and continuing professional development. The TTA is keen to hear the views of a wide range of arts organisations and practitioners (by 2 November); call for a consultation pack on 0845 606 0323, or from www.canteach.gov.uk.