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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The whole class ensemble tuition programme in English schools – a brief introduction

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Abstract
The whole class ensemble tuition (WCET) programme in English schools is a somewhat singular and relatively recent arrival onto the teaching and learning scene. It arose from a remark made by an English politician and has grown from there into becoming a regular feature in the music education landscape in primary schools. It has elements which will be familiar to music educators in many parts of the world, whilst having some aspects which are unique to the English context. In order to place the WCET programme into perspective, this paper outlines the policy context which gave rise to it and explains what it involves and how it is operationalised in schools.

Keywords: WCET (Whole Class Ensemble Tuition); instrumental music; generalist; class music; England

Background to whole class ensemble tuition

In a Governmental White Paper published in 2001, David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education, said: 'Over time, all primary pupils who want to will be able to learn a musical instrument' (DfES, 2001: p. 12). The first stage in putting this statement into practice was to establish a national working party to formulate plans for how the statement from the white paper could be operationalised in schools. This included involvement from, amongst others, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA – since disbanded) and the English schools' inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The first iteration of this work came to be known as the *Wider Opportunities* programme. Following this work, 13 Wider Opportunities projects were established in a pilot programme, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the National Foundation for Youth Music, a charitable body distributing funding from a recurring annual grant which they receive from, amongst other sources, the National Lottery. This pilot programme operated during the academic year 2002/2003, and it provided opportunities for over a 1000 primary school pupils to participate in learning to play a musical instrument along with their peers in a whole class grouping. In the pilot programme, the normal teaching delivery model was that of paired adults in the classroom, the class teacher and a visiting instrumental music teacher. This pilot programme was evaluated by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2004) who visited 12 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) specifically for this purpose. The Ofsted report was generally positive, finding that:

> Across the 12 programmes, consistently high quality of work was observed in 7 of the LEAs. In the other 5, there were good, sometimes very good features in all of them, but not consistently so. (Ofsted, 2004: p. 6)

The Ofsted report made a number of recommendations, including that

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> . . . over time, all pupils in Key Stage 2 should have access to a free trial period of specialist instrumental tuition, wherever possible lasting for at least one year. (Ofsted, 2004: p. 10)

and also that:

> schools, either individually or in clusters, should work in partnership with music services to identify all available resources and staffing which can contribute to a Wider Opportunities in Music programme in Key Stage 2 which includes or integrates:
>
> – new musical experiences
> – acquisition of musical skills
> – specialist instrumental tuition. (Ofsted, 2004: pp. 10–11)

In the same year as the Ofsted report, Youth Music also published a report on Wider Opportunities (Davies & Stephens, 2004). This too made a number of recommendations, including these:

> – the close collaboration of Music Services, with community musicians, schools and other providers is a unique and vital development which will need careful nurturing and management;
> – Music Services need to plan carefully the implementation of Wider Opportunities Programmes, The information and planning materials available to them through the FMS [Federation of Music Services[1]], Ofsted, QCA and Youth Music should assist this process;
> – implementation needs to be seen as a long-term development probably over the course of several years;
> – funding for development is likely to be shared between several sources including LEAs [Local Education Authorities], Music Services, schools and other bodies;
> – staff training needs to be at the core of all developments, not just at the early stages. (Davies & Stephens, 2004: p. 10)

Davies and Stephens did not only report on what they found; they also offered suggestions as to how the Wider Opportunities programme could be delivered and gave advice to teachers and music services to help with the rolling-out of the programme across the country.

Following the pilot, Wider Opportunities (WO) became established as a nationwide programme. In 2009, the FMS (later to become part of the organisation *Music Mark*) commissioned the University of the Arts London to research the programme across the country (Bamford & Glinkowski, 2010). This resulting report found that:

> The overall results of the impact evaluation indicate that the WO music programme is generally of high international standard and receives widespread positive support from pupils, parents, teachers, headteachers and local authorities. Children appeared genuinely happy in most of the lessons and effective lessons were characterised by innovative pedagogy and interesting approaches. (Bamford & Glinkowski, 2010: p. 8)

The report from Bamford and Glinkowski threw light onto the area of whole class ensemble tuition (WCET) at a time that a new way of organising music teaching and learning in England was emerging, this being bodies known as *Music Education Hubs* (MEHs). Zeserson and Welch commented on this:

> . . . Bamford and Glinkowski's (2010) research was particularly important in helping to make the case for embedding whole class/large group instrumental teaching into the framework for

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> new Music Education Hubs. The researchers found evidence of positive impact and engagement in their research sites—as clearly evidenced in the title of the report—and made precise recommendations about the conditions necessary to maximize that potential across the country. Their report also showed that the well-disseminated insights from 2004 and 2006 had not been as well embedded throughout the implementation of programs as all might have hoped. (Zeserson & Welch, 2017: p. 69)

The WCET programme represented a considerable shift in professional practice for many instrumental music teachers:

> [WCET] involves instrumental music teachers teaching whole classes of primary pupils to play instruments, and sing. The WO programme is 'part of an integrated, holistic musical approach' ... For many instrumental music teachers this represented a significant shift in professional practice. Prior to this the normal *modus operandi* for many instrumental music teachers would be to work with individuals, or small groups of pupils. For these teachers, teaching and learning would be focussed on the acquisition of skills in learning to play a specific instrument. In WO there is an emphasis on whole class learning through the medium of the instrument. (Fautley, Coll, & Henley, 2011: p. 1)

In order to address this, Trinity Guildhall (as it was then) and the Open University were awarded governmental funding to put into place a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme to help those delivering WO come to terms with their new roles. This helped workforce development significantly, with over 74% of instrumental teachers and 79% of class teachers reporting positively on their experiences of this CPD (Fautley, Coll, & Henley, 2011: p. 3), although the uptake of this professional development programme was small in relation to the number of teachers required to roll-out WCET programmes across the country.

Music education hubs

England is unusual in that it has not only a National Curriculum (NC) for music, which is described below, but also a National Plan for Music Education (NPME) (DfE & DCMS, 2011). The National Plan (NPME) established the roles of MEHs. Space precludes a detailed discussion of MEHs here, but in essence they are:

> Music Education Hubs are groups of organisations – such as local authorities, schools, other hubs, art organisations, community or voluntary organisations – working together to create joined-up music education provision, respond to local need and fulfil the objectives of the Hub as set out in the National Plan for Music Education
>
> Hubs are coordinated by the Hub lead organisation, which takes on responsibility for the funding and governance of the Hub. The total amount of Hub funding from the Department for Education in the 2019–20 financial year is £75.84 million. (Artscouncil.org.uk, no date)

In terms of WCET, the NPME established four core roles for the Music Hubs to put into practice, one of which related specifically to Music Hubs:

> Ensure that every child aged 5–18 has the opportunity to learn a musical instrument (other than voice) through whole-class ensemble teaching programmes for ideally a year (but for a minimum of a term) of weekly tuition on the same instrument. (DfE & DCMS, 2011: p. 11)

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This somewhat variable requirement for duration of delivery-length means that there is very little by way of standardisation of programmes. In her research, Hallam found that:

> The length of the provision reported varied from half a term to six years although the majority of the sample provided tuition for a whole year. (Hallam, 2016: p. 5)

With funding for music education diminishing in real terms, there has been a significant change to employment terms and conditions over the past few years, away from contracted permanent jobs and towards a model where instrumental teachers are more likely to be hourly paid and often self-employed (Musicians Union, 2017). This casualisation of employment terms and conditions is a significant threat to the quality of teaching and teachers delivering instrumental provision, including WCET, which in turn leads to further fragmentation of provision (ISM, 2018). The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education noted that:

> Teachers are not always valued or properly rewarded for their work. Hubs are increasingly moving teachers onto insecure, flat-rate, hourly paid roles. This affects their access to professional development and has had the unintended consequence of fragmenting instrumental teaching as teachers form their own cooperatives often in direct competition to Hubs . . . Employment insecurity [also] impacts teachers' mental health. (Daubney, Spruce & Annetts, 2019: p. 21)

This further compounds the inequalities in MEH provision noted by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2018).

Music in primary schools

WCET normally takes place in primary schools, which in England provide education for children aged between 7 and 11 years. The provision of WCET takes place against a background of a previously existing NC for music. There has been a NC in force since 1992. In the latest iteration, published in 2013, the NC for music for primary schools is very brief:

> Pupils should be taught to sing and play musically with increasing confidence and control. They should develop an understanding of musical composition, organising and manipulating ideas within musical structures and reproducing sounds from aural memory.
>
> Pupils should be taught to:
>
> – play and perform in solo and ensemble contexts, using their voices and playing musical instruments with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression;
> – improvise and compose music for a range of purposes using the inter-related dimensions of music;
> – listen with attention to detail and recall sounds with increasing aural memory;
> – use and understand staff and other musical notations;
> – appreciate and understand a wide range of high-quality live and recorded music drawn from different traditions and from great composers and musicians;
> – develop an understanding of the history of music. (DfE, 2013)

These 133 words – the entirety of the NC for children aged 7–11 years old – form the basis for teaching and learning in the primary school. It should be apparent from the text of the NC that this is a classroom-based curriculum, with performing, composing and listening as the three main strands. School music often taught by the generalist class teacher, who may or, more likely, may not be a musician or a music education specialist.

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WCET content

Another area where there is very little standardisation is that of content of WCET programmes. The range of instruments involved is large; Fautley , Kinsella, and Whittaker found that over 35 instruments formed the basis for various WCET programmes, with Violin and Trumpet/Cornet being the most common (Fautley, Kinsella, & Whittaker, 2017). Alongside learning to play an instrument, WCET programmes draw on a range of other music learning and performing activities, including clapping and rhythm games, movement, composing and listening to music. An important component of WCET programmes is singing, with the majority of programmes involving singing in some form (Lamont, Daubney, & Spruce, 2012). Some WCET programmes also involve learning to read from music notation, either staff notation, or graphic notation, or other forms. As with other areas we have seen, there is no standardisation of what is taught, learned and performed.

Assessment

As with so many other aspects of WCET, there is no standardised form of assessment involved in programmes (Johnson & Fautley, 2017), and although many MEHs have developed their own versions, there is no commonality of standards or standardisation, of attainment targets, or of curriculum goals. This in itself is not a problem, as the length of the programmes, the context in which it is taught and the age groups/instruments vary consistently; therefore, this flexibility is appropriate for the diversity of the programmes offered.

Conclusion

This very brief introduction sets the scene for what is involved in WCET programmes in England and will hopefully enable an international readership to gain some understanding concerning how it came into being and of the different and disparate ways in which the programme is operationalised.

Note

1 FMS, the Federation of Music Services, no longer exists, but is now subsumed within an English national music subject association 'Music Mark'.

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