

CREATING A NEW MEANING FOR 'MUSIC' IN THE SCHOOLS OF WALES

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Synopsis

The level of provision and the quality of music teaching in the schools of Wales has come increasingly under fire in the last five years from parents and from agencies concerned with the educational welfare of young people. Under pressure from the UK central government to improve the 'performance' of teachers, schools in Wales (as in the rest of the U.K.) have become increasingly preoccupied with the more academic subjects, often at the expense of arts or creative activities. These are optional subjects past an early stage rather than forming a core part of the National Curriculum. There has also been a marked reduction in the level of funding available in Wales to employ music officers and peripatetic music teachers to ensure quality music teaching in schools. The result has been a very low level of participation in music education - often concentrated in areas of socio-economic privilege where parents can afford to cover the costs of tuition fees and extracurricular activities. An effective response to this shortfall has been the establishment of a Music Development Fund by the Welsh Assembly. I will also describe a proposal for 'Youth Music Action Zones' in Wales (mirroring an initiative which is already in place in England) which aims to encourage partnerships between a wide range of music providers to ensure that there is the widest range of music access for young people both in and out of schools, and to encourage practitioners from different sectors to collaborate in this process.

Background

For a variety of social, cultural, economic and other reasons, many young people in Wales are no longer very interested in the 'traditional western' model of music education which predominates in the limited school provision which is available. Traditionally-trained music teachers tend not to have the breadth of knowledge or experience to meet the need for a broader range of musical activities within the school environment.

In many areas there is the anomaly of young people whose interest in music outside of school hours is clear from their participation in a range of chosen music activities, but who feel that at school 'music is boring' and choose not to take part in even the limited provision which is available. They are drawn to alternative music-making opportunities outside the school environment, provided by a range of independently funded community music organisations who are supported by an increasingly broad range of funding sources who view music activities as an effective way to engage with marginalised or disaffected young people. This reflects a growing body of evidence that involvement with music-making in genres which interest them provides young people with a creative activity to boost their confidence and self-esteem, providing a 'cool' alternative to the temptations of anti-social or criminal behaviour, and in some cases leading to qualifications which can open the door to opportunities for further education or employment.

The rapid expansion in the level and variety of community music activities available to young people outside of school hours and structures in Wales is supported by a slow but steady change of thinking by arts funders, who are coming around to recognising the intrinsic value of art other than the 'classical' or 'high art' forms. The still relatively new Welsh Assembly Government, which is ultimately responsible for the allocation of arts funding in Wales, is also driven by an imperative to justify the spending of public money on the arts by demonstrating how arts activities contribute to broader policy objectives such as economic development, training, reductions in youth offending and so on. There are an expanding number of community and voluntary arts organisations who have been able to access funding from the Arts Council of Wales (ACW) under their Arts for All scheme, which prioritises projects in disadvantaged areas and work with young people, and the current ACW Corporate Plan and Arts Development Strategy both highlight the importance of participation in the arts, and the need for expanded work with young people.

There is also an increasing recognition on the part of educationalists of the importance and value of introducing young people to creative activity when they are still at a formative age - both for the

intrinsic pleasure and satisfaction that is derived from developing a creative skill, and also because an increasing body of evidence suggests that engagement with creative activity helps mental development in a way which will also have positive benefits in the performance in a range of other subject areas.

In our neighbour country of England the growth in music activities for young people has been dramatic in the past five years, partly driven by the establishment of the National Foundation for Youth Music (NFYM) three years ago with significant funding from the Arts Council of England. NFYM is a re-granting body with a budget of over ten million pounds per year, and in its relatively short life it has been responsible for supporting a wide variety funding initiatives which have enabled thousands young people to be involved with music activity for the first time, both in schools and out. There are also several other government-backed initiatives emerging in England which will provide greater access to arts activities for children in school, such as the 'Creative Partnerships' programme which aims to link schools with artists and arts organisations in their area, and the recently launched Arts and Kids Foundation.

In Wales, an important barrier to the further development of music activities in the schools has been a lack of money available to local governments of the different counties, each of which is responsible for music provision in their own area, and there is a wide variation in the level of service provided by them. In the capital Cardiff there has been, in spite of a relatively high level of funding, a large discrepancy between the demand for music teaching and the level of delivery, characterised by a concentration of provision (in almost exclusively classical music) in areas where parents tended to have sufficient income to buy in the activities for their children, and very little elsewhere. However there are several community music organisations in Cardiff whose work prioritises young people, and whose objectives include broader social, educational and personal-development objectives for participants. Increasingly they have begun to work in partnership with head teachers who are persuaded that a much wider range of musical activity in school would provide an important and valid learning opportunity for pupils and could effectively address the issue of (often self-imposed) exclusion from school-based music activity.

Three years ago the National Assembly for Wales recognised the critical shortage of music activities in Welsh schools and inaugurated the Music Development Fund, a package of funding which went to local authorities in the various counties of Wales for them to spend in providing additional and non-curricular music activities in a way which they felt was most appropriate to needs of their area.

In Cardiff they took the relatively radical step of hiring a local head teacher, Jenny Griffin, as a coordinator of the Fund and giving her a relatively free reign in designing a programme of activities. She has a background of working in one of the most disadvantaged wards in the city and was already convinced of the importance of offering a wide variety of music genres and activities in schools in order to engage with the most excluded children. Jenny has been able to deliver a wide ranging programme of activities in Cardiff, targeting the areas of greatest need, and working in partnership with local community music organisations and practitioners - an approach which is fairly innovative in Wales, and one which has been seen to bring excellent results. Sessions which she has initiated include: samba music in infants schools; rock, rap, hiphop and jazz sessions in secondary schools; and a range of 'world-music activities, including Indian drumming, steel pan and gospel singing, targeting schools with pupils of mixed ethnicity. She has also delivered an innovative programme of music activities to three special schools in the city who cater for pupils with special needs. Previously there was little or no music activity in these schools, and the pupils, some of whom have extreme behavioural problems, have responded extremely enthusiastically.

All these activities are delivered in partnership with a wide variety of local community music organisations and practitioners. With this partnership approach, schools have been able to deliver music activities for which they have neither the in-house skills or the resources to buy in outside expertise, and community music practitioners are able to apply their particular experience in involving and empowering disaffected young people. Their way of working often represents a break from the formal 'learning' approach traditionally adopted in schools whilst having equally valid learning outcomes. Crucially, Jenny has identified and adapted an approach to evaluating these music sessions so that the learning which is taking place can be measured and validated, irrespective of the particular musical form or approach to teaching which is being employed.

There has been initial resistance on the part of some head teachers and music teacher to the idea of outsiders coming into schools to work with 'their' pupils. Paradoxically this resistance has been likely to increase where the new musical activity was particularly successful in engaging with and motivating the most excluded or 'troublemaking' kids. Partner organisations have had to learn the importance of consulting and working in partnership with the school staff at every stage - making them feel a part of the process, passing on relevant skills and information to them and working to create a non-threatening atmosphere.

There has also been an increased emphasis on the importance of creating paths of progression and opportunity for young people in schools, and after they leave school, who show a particular aptitude or enthusiasm for non-traditional musical forms. The learning which they achieve in musical areas such as 'DJ Skills' or 'Rock Guitar' can be accredited in the U.K. under systems such as the Open College Network. In this way participation in a music activity can open the door to further education opportunities for marginalised young people who might have found these doors closed to them if they followed to more traditional educational routes.

The current round of the Music Development Fund programme in Wales will come to an end in March 2003, and the Welsh Assembly have commissioned an evaluation report to look into the results and effectiveness of the programme in each of the local authority areas. There is currently a high concern amongst schools and music teachers about how the expanded level of provision which the MDF has enabled should be sustained. Intense lobbying is taking place for the Fund to be at the very least maintained at existing levels and ideally expanded. That decision is now in the political arena of the Welsh Assembly, jointly overseen by the recently appointed minister for Culture and Sport, and the Minister for Education. As usual, the outcome will come down to available resources and who has the strongest claim on those resources. Those of us working with music and young people in schools have our fingers firmly crossed!

In looking for new and more effective ways to provide music-making opportunities for young people, the National Foundation for Youth Music (NFYM) recently launched and funded a series of Youth Music Action Zones (YMAZ) in England which have demonstrated dramatically the effectiveness of a more collaborative approach to the delivery of youth music activities. Each 'Zone' (and there are more than twenty at the time of writing) is established in a particular geographical area. A range of local organisations who engage with young people and use, or plan to use, music in their work (including officers responsible for music delivery in local schools) are invited to form a consortium to devise and deliver an expanded programme of activities in their local area. The NFYM funding which is available to support this expanded programme is a strong motivation for a partnership approach to be adopted between consortium members.

The evidence so far is that this collaborative approach results in a much higher level of provision by all the partners than they could have achieved working alone. Economies of scale are achieved, resources and skills can be shared, wasteful duplication is avoided, and the partners move away from seeing themselves as competitors for limited funding. An 'exit strategy' is always needed with time limited funding of the type provided by NFYM, but the intention is that during the period that YMAZ projects are funded they will create a culture and a habit of collaboration amongst the partners which will continue, and demonstrate to other potential funders the value of this approach.

In Wales we are about to launch two pilot YMAZ projects to see if the model which has been so successful in England can be replicated in Wales. The projects will be in areas which have been identified as having a particularly low level of music provision, linked with a high overall level of economic deprivation.

Planning for these projects is at an early stage, but they will be launched on a pilot basis later this year and will be closely monitored so that lessons learned and experience gained can be shared with other youth music providers. In the meantime, I am currently working on setting up a pilot Wales Youth Music Forum which will begin with a brief on-line conference and will aim to encourage youth music providers from all sectors to share information and resources and to look at opportunities for collaboration - to make a break with the culture of secrecy and competition which has developed around some community music practitioners. This way of working has developed primarily in response to the limited availability of funding. Hopefully extra money from the Arts Council of Wales and the Welsh Assembly for innovative music work with young people both in schools and out, will

play an important part in making collaboration and partnership between the wide range of youth music providers and support organisations which exist in Wales, the predominant way of working in the future.

Appendix 1

From: Creative Future - A Cultural Strategy for Wales
(Welsh Assembly Government, 2001)

'Any long-term cultural strategy must begin by laying the foundations in our schools and colleges. The National Curriculum does give our children not only the opportunity to learn about their history, culture and language and those of other countries, but it also provides a chance to explore and develop their own talent, imagination and creativity. That must mean, at all ages, opportunities must be available to fulfil themselves through music, drama, dance, arts, design, technology and sport as well as core academic and vocational subjects.

To fulfil these ends we must ensure, first, that schools can make the most of the opportunities implicit in the curriculum. Second and subject to competing demands, they and others should be resourced to provide further extra-curricular opportunities, including regular exposure to and contact with the professional arts and participation in sports at as high a competitive level as talent allows. Beyond school, we must enable the outlook of young people to remain just as broad, by ensuring that provision is made at a community level and that professional arts organisations have an active commitment to the engagement of the young.

Under the National Curriculum in Wales, music is compulsory up to and including Key Stage 3. The National Assembly has already recognised the importance of providing all young people with opportunities to take part in musical activities of all kinds, regardless of their social background or where they live'.

The desire for this work, in time, to be firmly rooted alongside more traditional musical genres is seen as a primary goal and, to this end, a Junior Steel Pan Orchestra will perform, together with the Counties' Junior Schools' Choir, Orchestra and Brass Band, at the Junior Schools' Festival at St David's Hall in March. Efforts to build on existing inter-cultural links and understanding are felt to be well served by this initiative'.

Appendix 2

From: The Music Development Fund in Wales
(Welsh Authorities Music Education Association, 2001)

'Quantitative measures say nothing of the real and important impact of the Fund on children and young people i.e. the quality of the experiences which they are getting, and the enjoyment, sense of achievement, feeling of fulfilment, and boost in self-confidence which all this is bringing them.

The range of priorities, strategies and initiatives described in this report reflect the diversity of provision across Wales. When the Fund was first introduced in 1999 no two Counties were at the same starting point, and since its implementation each County has had its own distinct priorities, in line with individual Education Strategic Plans. What is clear, however, is that the Music Development Fund has enabled each LEA to make significant further progress along the continuum towards providing a stimulating, relevant and vibrant musical experience outside of the classroom to as many children and young people as possible.

This report also shows that each LEA already has targets for further progress along this continuum beyond 2002, funding permitting. Many of these targets encompass new initiatives, whilst several others deal with consolidation and further development of initiatives established in these first three years. Many of the new initiatives outlined in this report are merely in their infancy, and experience has shown that such things take several years to reach maturity. Experience has also shown that such wonderful musical opportunities for young people can and will disappear overnight if funding is withdrawn.