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Research and analysis

Striking the right note: the music subject report

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Applies to England

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Music is a universal language that embodies one of the highest forms of creativity. For many pupils, the music they love will be part of the narrative of their lives and bring colour to the experiences that shape them. Learning about music is a vital part of a broad and rounded education. Taught well, music gives pupils the opportunity to make music, think more musically and, crucially, become even more musical.

Context

In June 2022, the government published ‘The power of music to change lives: a national plan for music education’.^[footnote 1] This refreshed plan builds on the original national plan for music education, ‘The importance of music’, published in 2011.^[footnote 2] The new plan sets out a vision for all children and young people to learn to sing, play an instrument and create music together, and to have the opportunity to develop their musical interests and talents. This plan sets an expectation that schools will have a music development plan in place by the academic year 2023/24 that sets out how they will teach a high-quality curriculum for at least one hour a week in key stages 1 to 3.

Since publishing the first plan in November 2011, the government has invested substantial amounts of funding in a range of music and arts education programmes. It has also established a network of music hubs. Despite this, the government’s call for evidence, conducted in February and March 2020, found that provision remained patchy.^[footnote 3]

The trajectory of music education in recent years has been one in which schools have reduced key stage 3 provision, and trainee primary teachers have been offered

shrinking amounts of music training.^[footnote 4] The number of pupils taking a music qualification at key stages 4 has steadily increased in recent years.^[footnote 5] However, uptake at [key stage 5 has fallen over the last 10 years](#).

This report evaluates the common strengths and weaknesses of music education and considers the challenges that music faces. It builds on the research review that we published in 2021.^[footnote 6] The evidence for this report was gathered by His Majesty's Inspectors and by Ofsted Inspectors who specialise in music and have experience in the primary or secondary phase. This report draws on findings from research visits carried out between December 2022 and June 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors also gathered evidence as part of routine inspections.

The report is split into findings in primary schools and those in secondary schools. It includes evidence from Reception classes and sixth forms. In each of these sections, we talk about:

- aspects of the curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment
- the impact of this on what pupils learn
- the way schools are organised

Overall, this report identifies some significant strengths and weaknesses in school music education. It recommends ways that school and subject leaders can make sure that all pupils leave school with a well-rounded music education that supports them to think more musically and, consequently, become more musical.

In our routine school inspections, we evaluate schools against the criteria in the school inspection handbooks. Inspectors will not use the findings from this report as a 'checklist' when they are inspecting schools. We know that there are many ways that schools can put together and teach a high-quality music curriculum.

Main findings

Leaders in almost all the primary schools visited made sure that pupils had adequate time to learn music. Music was taught weekly in key stages 1 and 2 in most primary schools. We found that in almost all primary schools,

children had sufficiently frequent opportunities to learn music in the Reception Year of the early years foundation stage (EYFS).

In almost all schools, the curriculum in Reception prepared children well for music in key stage 1.

In a very small number of primary schools, pupils did not have enough opportunities to learn music in key stages 1 and 2. In these schools, leaders characteristically organised the curriculum so that pupils were taught music on several isolated days.

Inspectors found considerable variation in the amount of curriculum time allocated to music in key stage 3. In just under half the schools visited, leaders had not made sure that pupils had enough time to learn the curriculum as planned by the school. This meant that, in these schools, pupils were not adequately prepared for further musical study.

In most secondary schools, curriculum leaders organised the key stage 3 music curriculum into termly or half-termly blocks. These blocks typically focused on a different style or genre of music. In most cases, the blocks stood as isolated units. While leaders had considered pupils' musical development in each unit, far fewer had considered their longer-term musical development across the key stage.

In many schools, when considering the curriculum, leaders' thinking focused on giving pupils a range of musical opportunities. In these schools, leaders often associated curriculum ambition with the range of activities offered.

Fewer schools had considered ambition in terms of, for example, incrementally developing pupils' musical knowledge and skills.

The strongest aspect of the curriculum in primary schools was teaching pupils to sing. In secondary schools, curriculum content that developed pupils' singing and vocal work was far rarer. Singing was a significant aspect of the curriculum in only a very small number of secondary schools. Most secondary schools did not build on the strong progress and enjoyment that pupils had experienced in their singing at primary school.

In most schools, the weakest aspect of the curriculum was teaching pupils to become better at composition. Very few schools had considered the underpinning knowledge that pupils need in order to learn how to construct and deconstruct music.

In some schools where music provision was more effective, pupils received high-quality instruction, sufficient practice time and ongoing feedback to improve their musical responses before learning new content and concepts. However, more commonly, at key stages 1, 2 and 3, the focus was on covering the activities rather than making sure that content was learned to a high standard.

In a few schools, leaders and teachers had a clear conception of what pupils should be able to do as a result of learning the curriculum. Crucially, leaders in these schools grasped what these outcomes should sound like. They were, therefore, well placed to evaluate the effectiveness of their curriculum. These schools either had staff with significant musical expertise or accessed this expertise through organisations such as music hubs. In some schools, they took advantage of both.

In most schools, leaders had a realistic view of teachers' subject expertise. In some primary schools, this meant that leaders knew that some of their staff did not have the confidence or knowledge to teach aspects of the music curriculum well. In some schools, this included the staff who were responsible for leading music. Despite this, far fewer leaders had a clear plan for training staff and addressing these weaknesses.

In around half the secondary schools visited, leaders made sure that staff had access to subject-specific training. Typically, teachers in these schools regularly engaged with professional music associations and local music hubs. This work was helping many music leaders to improve their music curriculum. In contrast, in other secondary schools, music teachers were left isolated or were given in-school support from non-music specialists. Consequently, they often had too few opportunities to develop their understanding of effective curriculum design in music and their knowledge of music pedagogy.

Many headteachers and music leaders reported that COVID-19 had had a significant negative impact on the range of extra-curricular activities at the school. Many schools were still in the process of re-establishing the extra-curricular provision they had previously offered.

The inequalities in provision that we highlighted in our last subject report in 2012 persist.[\[footnote 7\]](#) There remains a divide between the opportunities for children and young people whose families can afford to pay for music tuition and for those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Many school leaders reported that in the last few years they had decided to reduce the extent to which they were subsidising instrumental lessons, because of wider pressures on school budgets. Others had stopped providing instrumental and vocal lessons. Approximately half the primary schools visited did not currently offer any instrumental or vocal lessons.

Inspectors found a significant disparity in the range and quality of extra-curricular opportunities among schools. In approximately half the schools visited, there was a strong extra-curricular offer that included instrumental groups and choirs. In these schools, leaders valued these activities and saw them as integral to promoting pupils' wider musical development.

Discussion of findings

Despite leaders' efforts, the last few years have been a challenging time for music in schools. Leaders in the schools visited told us about the challenges they have faced in providing music education, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research and discussions with school leaders show that COVID-19 significantly disrupted music teaching in most schools.^{[\[footnote 8\]](#)} Many pupils did not have access to the high-quality staff, resources and practical music making opportunities necessary for high-quality music education. Our inspectors also identified the ongoing challenges facing many music leaders in re-establishing the school's extra-curricular music activities, which are essential for music to thrive in schools. Many music leaders reported that things are slowly 'returning to normal'. However, there were still several schools where extra-curricular music had yet to return. Approximately half the primary schools visited did not provide any instrumental or vocal lessons.

This report highlights the significant variation in the quality of music education in the schools we visited. Nonetheless, since the time of our previous subject report in 2012, many school leaders, particularly in primary schools, have taken important steps to give music a more prominent place on the curriculum. Many pupils now have regular opportunities to learn music. However, despite this significant improvement, several of the concerns that we raised in 2012 remain. For example, a

proportion of secondary schools still do not make sure that all pupils have enough time to learn a curriculum at key stage 3 that prepares them well enough, should they wish, for further musical study. Concerningly, in some schools, pupils are only well placed to continue their musical education and achieve well after key stage 3 if they have access to paid instrumental or vocal lessons. There is a clear divide between children and young people whose families can afford to pay for music tuition and those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This inequality of opportunity, highlighted at the time of our last subject report, persists.

The schools we visited wanted pupils to develop a love and passion for the subject. Our evidence identifies that music was stronger, and pupils achieved more, in primary and secondary schools where leaders had gone beyond these broader curriculum aims. Leaders had identified specific end points and the building blocks of knowledge and skills that they wanted pupils to achieve at various points throughout the curriculum. When designing their curriculum, leaders in these schools had given serious consideration to the question: 'What can pupils realistically learn, rather than just encounter, in the curriculum time available?' They had, crucially, considered ambition in terms of pupils' musical development rather than the range of musical opportunities on offer. The schools that were successful focused on deliberately teaching pupils to get better at music rather than assuming they would get better by simply 'doing' music. While these stronger examples were in a minority, our research has found that many school leaders are aware that their curriculum does not focus sharply enough on pupils' musical development. In many schools, music leaders were starting to make good use of the non-statutory guidance available to schools, such as the model music curriculum and Ofsted research review, to rethink, redesign and improve their provision. [\[footnote 9\]](#)

The ability to manipulate sound is central to both performing and composing. It also has an impact on how we listen. In the schools where we found the most effective teaching, the curriculum developed pupils' ability to control sounds, through singing, playing instruments, or learning music technology, gradually and iteratively. Leaders in these schools understood that it takes a lot of time to develop fine motor skills on any instrument. Consequently, they decided to narrow the range of instrument choices within the curriculum. By contrast, where the practice was weaker, pupils often had shallow encounters with too many instruments or insufficient time to rehearse and practise. Consequently, pupils' musical responses were often mechanistic and showed limited expressive quality. In some cases, pupils' lack of fine motor skills was a significant barrier to creating and generating musical ideas when composing.

Our research found considerable differences in how well teachers taught music. Many teachers in primary schools reported that they lacked the confidence and

musical knowledge to teach aspects of the curriculum well. In some schools, the curriculum 'on paper' was designed to help pupils develop, incrementally, the [procedural and declarative knowledge](#) they need to become better performers, composers and listeners. However, teachers acknowledged that lack of musicianship limited its impact. It was not uncommon for teachers in primary schools to stick rigidly to curriculum plans without knowing (or hearing) whether pupils had secured the necessary knowledge to move on. Consequently, as pupils got older, they were increasingly asked to complete musical activities that were beyond their technical capabilities. Many headteachers in primary schools were aware of the weaknesses in teachers' subject knowledge. Despite this, fewer leaders had a clear plan for addressing these weaknesses. Many did not know where to find support. Secondary school teachers were more likely to have access to ongoing subject-specific training than primary school teachers. However, in about a third of secondary schools, leaders had assumed that, because music teachers were 'specialists', they did not need further subject-specific training. In some schools, this meant that significant gaps in subject knowledge, such as how to teach singing, were not being addressed.

In order to flourish, music depends on strong and flexible leadership. We found that leaders in schools with a strong and vibrant musical culture made music part of the fabric of the school. They viewed music as a subject in its own right and valued its contribution to their school's wider culture. Leaders actively sought the expertise of musicians, often from local music hubs, to support them in designing, implementing and evaluating the music curriculum. In these schools, leaders ensured that all pupils benefited from robust, direct and incremental teaching that provided knowledge of the technical and constructive aspects of music. Where this was not yet the case, leaders had recognised this and were taking steps to improve the music curriculum, for example by giving music leaders subject-specific training. Moreover, where music education was stronger, senior leaders understood the critical role that extra-curricular music and instrumental and vocal lessons played in complementing the taught curriculum and pupils' musical development. Leaders in these schools reached out to music hubs. They made sure that all pupils had meaningful opportunities to develop their talents and interests and they routinely showcased and celebrated pupils' musical achievements.

Recommendations

Curriculum

Schools should make sure that:

- pupils, particularly at key stage 3, have enough curriculum time to develop their musical knowledge and skills incrementally
- the curriculum identifies precise end points in performance, composition and listening work, and then sets out the knowledge and skills pupils need, step by step, to reach these end points
- the curriculum builds, incrementally, pupils' knowledge of the technical and constructive aspects of music

Pedagogy and assessment

Schools should make sure that:

- teachers provide ongoing feedback to pupils that improves the quality of pupils' music making both in terms of technique and expressive quality
- teachers routinely demonstrate to pupils what high-quality musical responses sound like, and the processes for achieving those outcomes

Systems at subject and school level

Schools should:

- actively seek the support of local music hubs or other sources of expertise when developing and improving the curriculum
- support subject leaders to develop a curriculum that deliberately and incrementally teaches all pupils to become more musical
- continuously develop teachers' subject knowledge, including their musicianship skills and their understanding of what high-quality music making should sound like for pupils in the age group they teach; this approach should align with the choices set out in the school's curriculum

- make sure that all pupils can develop their musical talents and interests, by offering extra-curricular activities and instrumental and vocal lessons

Other organisations

- Those involved in writing commercial curriculums should clearly identify what pupils should know and be able to do (and what this should sound like) before moving on to the next stage of learning.
- Music hub leaders should continue to develop and build relationships with school and trust leaders to support them in developing their curriculum and wider musical offer.

Key terms used in this report

Knowledge in music

Procedural knowledge

Procedural knowledge is the knowledge used in performing a task, such as playing an instrument or using multi-tracking software fluently. It is the foundation of performing and composing. Well-developed procedural knowledge depends on pupils acquiring an array of automated procedures in order to develop technical and expressive competence on an instrument.

Declarative knowledge

Declarative knowledge is a set of musical knowledge that can be stated verbally. It is content that can be discussed. In a musical context, examples of declarative knowledge might include notation, keys and chords, or the works and songs that comprise musical culture. Declarative knowledge underpins advanced thinking. [\[footnote 10\]](#) It is the presence of this knowledge in long-term memory that enables the conscious mind to process complex concepts. [\[footnote 11\]](#) It is better to give pupils

regular, spaced-out re-encounters with this content than to teach it in blocks, to help them build knowledge in long-term memory.[\[footnote 12\]](#)

Pillars of progression in music

Technical

The development of motor skills for music is an important aspect of controlling and understanding sound. Pupils' ability to control sound, through singing, playing instruments, or using music technology, helps them to get better at performing, composing and listening to music.

Constructive

This refers to knowledge of how the building blocks of music come together, both analytically and in the creative process. It includes knowledge of the musical elements/interrelated dimensions of music and the building blocks of composition.
[\[footnote 13\]](#)

Expressive

This focuses on the less definable aspects of music: quality, meaning and creativity. Our research review identified that musical expression in performance depends on the highly developed technical expertise of the performer. This is combined with what a performer knows and understands about the music they are playing, both specifically and in terms of the wider culture in which the music exists.

Primary

Curriculum intent: identifying what pupils need to know and do

Summary of the research review relevant to curriculum intent

The amount of time pupils spend on learning music is typically short. Therefore, it is particularly important to construct the curriculum to make the best possible use of time. It is impossible to include every aspect of music without the curriculum being 'a mile wide and an inch deep'. In other words, if school leaders do not consider what pupils can realistically learn, pupils are likely to simply 'experience' music rather than get better at it.

High-quality music education is likely to:

- follow a curriculum that takes into account what pupils can realistically learn in the time available
- give pupils regular opportunities to return to and consolidate their short-term learning, while gradually introducing new ideas, methods and concepts
- have identified end points that set out the specific curriculum content to be learned, rather than articulating principles and assuming that any content will work to realise these principles

1. We found that in almost all primary schools visited, leaders were committed to ensuring that pupils learned music as part of the curriculum. Leaders were clear, in broad terms, about their vision for the music curriculum. They told inspectors that they wanted to support all pupils to enjoy music and to increase their self-confidence and sense of achievement.

2. Leaders in approximately half the schools had significantly changed their music curriculum recently or were in the process of changing it. Many leaders said that they had made these changes in response to Ofsted's education inspection framework, which they interpreted as emphasising a broad and balanced curriculum. Others were making changes because of the non-statutory guidance available to schools, such as the model music curriculum. Typically, these changes were in how the music curriculum was organised. Leaders recognised the need for pupils to have regular opportunities to learn music rather than ad-hoc isolated events. Many headteachers, having established more regular time for music on the curriculum, were beginning to think about how to make best use of this time.

3. The primary music curriculum was based on commercially published schemes in most schools visited. In most cases, this approach ensured that children and pupils completed the types of activities set out in the national curriculum and the EYFS framework. In almost all schools, pupils learned a broad curriculum that included various activities, such as singing, playing instruments, and composing and listening to music drawn from different traditions, historical periods and styles. In the few

schools where pupils were not covering the scope of the national curriculum, they tended to have few or no opportunities to compose and improvise.

4. In almost all schools, the Reception Year curriculum prepared children well for music in key stage 1. Children had regular opportunities to learn music. One headteacher described this approach as 'little and often'. Children typically built the foundations of learning music through frequent opportunities to sing nursery rhymes and other simple songs. In some cases, the EYFS curriculum went beyond the scope of the EYFS framework. The curriculum began to introduce children to the building blocks of music, such as gaining a simple understanding of pitch in terms of high or low.

5. Inspectors found that, in most schools visited, when considering the curriculum leaders' thinking focused on giving pupils a range of musical opportunities. Leaders often associated curriculum ambition with the range of musical activities on offer. Far fewer schools considered it in terms of pupils' musical development.

How one school went about changing its approach to building an ambitious music curriculum

Leaders explained that, in the past, they had wanted all pupils to have the chance to learn many different instruments. They hoped that this would inspire pupils to learn an instrument in more depth. However, leaders identified that, in reality, only a handful of pupils chose to continue learning an instrument.

Leaders decided to change their approach to pupils' musical development. They decided to reduce the number of musical instruments pupils encountered and emphasise singing instead. They worked with a local music hub to redesign the curriculum so that all pupils had regular and ongoing opportunities to become better singers. Underpinning this work was a clear ambition that, by the end of their time at the school, all pupils would be able to sing a range of songs in 3 parts confidently, accurately and expressively.

6. In most schools, leaders were not clear about the precise content they wanted pupils to learn and why. These included schools that had adopted commercial schemes of learning. In schools where leaders were clear about what they wanted

pupils to learn, this was most likely to relate to singing and playing instruments. It was least likely to relate to composition.

Planning the curriculum so that pupils become more ‘musical’

Summary of the research review for curriculum progression

A good music education is underpinned by robust, direct and incremental teaching about the technical and constructive aspects of music. Pupils learn this knowledge in the context of music’s history and provenance. This allows them to make increasingly sophisticated and expressive responses.

A high-quality music curriculum is likely to:

- deliberately build pupils’ procedural knowledge in how to control sound
- provide plentiful opportunities to consolidate procedural knowledge
- be built in a way that is gradual, iterative and coherent with regard to instrument choice
- include opportunities for pupils to develop and practise the components of compositions that are set out in the school’s curriculum
- include tasks at a technical level that is appropriate for pupils to be able to realise their expressive intentions
- give pupils opportunities to learn about musical culture and repertoire

7. Most primary schools visited were able to show inspectors the different activities and topics that pupils covered in each year and key stage. Fewer were able to articulate a clear rationale for the way these projects had been organised and ordered, to show how pupils should progress musically. Leaders in many of the schools visited had identified this weakness, and over a third were developing their curriculum to address it. Many had started by thinking about how the curriculum could support pupils to sing and play instruments more musically, by incrementally developing their control and fluency.

8. In a few schools, leaders paid serious attention to ensuring that the pupils not only experienced singing and playing instruments but were incrementally and deliberately

taught to gain greater control, fluency and accuracy. Typically, in these schools, leaders had a clear view of the components their pupils needed to learn and remember as they moved from the early years to Year 6.

9. Teaching was most effective when the development of pupils' technique went hand in hand with broadening their knowledge of the provenance of the music they were learning. For example, in one school, pupils were learning to sing a lullaby. As part of the work, pupils learned about lullabies and how the features of the music reflected the composer's intentions. It was clear that this knowledge greatly enhanced the expressive quality of their singing. Pupils worked with great enthusiasm to develop a suitable tone and sing quietly and with control.

10. In the few schools where leaders paid serious attention to incrementally developing pupils' ability to control sound, they understood that:

- getting better at any instrument takes time
- technical competence on one instrument does not necessarily transfer to other instruments

11. Leaders in these schools had often decided to reduce the number of instruments pupils were learning. By contrast, where teaching was less effective, and the curriculum less ambitious, pupils had several shallow encounters with many different instruments. Consequently, pupils' musical responses were often mechanical and inexpressive.

12. In less than half the schools visited, pupils learned to play an instrument as part of a whole-class programme. This programme typically happened for up to one year in Years 4 and 5. About half these schools were supported by their local music hubs in delivering this work. In most cases, when these individual programmes were supported by the music hubs, they were sequenced logically.

13. About a quarter of headteachers reported that, in recent years, they had decided to end their links with their local music hub and teach whole-class instrumental programmes in-house. The most common reason given by leaders for this decision was that of competing priorities in school budgets. In several schools where this decision had been taken, we found that school leaders had not given enough thought to whether teachers had the subject knowledge to deliver these in-house instrumental programmes.

14. In many schools where pupils were learning an instrument as part of a whole-class instrumental programme, this learning was isolated from the rest of the music curriculum. It was often not sustained or built on. This was because, in many

schools, curriculum planning for the following years took little or no account of any learning that had taken place during the whole-class instrumental programmes. Furthermore, only a few examples were seen of bespoke programmes being planned in consultation with individual schools to tie in with other music curriculum content.

15. The strongest aspect of the curriculum in primary schools was support for pupils' singing. In some schools, leaders had set out how the curriculum would support pupils to become better singers. As part of this work, curriculum plans clearly specified the component knowledge pupils needed to learn to develop their singing technique from Reception to Year 6. The most effective schools supported this with carefully chosen songs that matched the pupils' learning stage. In these schools, pupils' strong progress in singing was underpinned by regular, ongoing vocal work in the classroom as well as in assemblies. In schools where the curriculum was less effective, leaders viewed singing as a participatory activity and did not consider the technical or expressive demands of the music pupils were singing.

16. In about half the schools that used commercial schemes, teachers were often not alert to the component knowledge pupils needed to secure before moving on to the next stage of learning. Sometimes this was because leaders and teachers had not fully understood the progression model set out in the schemes they had adopted. In the weakest examples, teachers followed curriculum plans rigidly and literally, but did not pay enough attention to whether pupils were securing the procedural and declarative knowledge they needed in order to make progress. For example, in one class, pupils were learning to play a walking bass on tuned percussion. The teacher had not spotted that several pupils were struggling to play the part accurately. They needed more practice time to secure the technical demands of the music. Despite this, pupils were moved on to even more complex musical parts. Consequently, they lost focus, and the quality of their musical responses deteriorated.

17. Where curriculum thinking was strong, pupils' knowledge of the interrelated dimensions of music was deliberately and incrementally broadened and deepened as pupils moved through the curriculum. In these schools, leaders made sure that pupils had repeated opportunities to learn about the interrelated dimensions through performance and composition activities, as well as through specific listening opportunities. Where this worked well, the musical features pupils were expected to recognise aurally were not extensive, and, crucially, pupils were given regular, deliberate and repeated opportunities to hear these musical devices in a range of musical contexts.

How one school went about building pupils' knowledge of the interrelated dimensions of music

Leaders planned that pupils would develop and deepen their knowledge of dynamics as they moved from Reception to Year 2. In Reception, children played lots of musical games using percussion instruments, which built their knowledge of key terminology such as 'loud' and 'quiet'. This learning was reinforced through repeated opportunities to sing nursery rhymes using quiet and loud voices, with control. Teachers built on this work in key stage 1. Pupils at this stage were introduced to gradual changes in dynamics. As before, they were given regular and repeated opportunities to put this knowledge into practice.

18. In most schools, the weakest aspect of the curriculum was teaching pupils to become better composers. Very few schools had considered the declarative and procedural knowledge that pupils needed in order to develop as composers. However, there were some notable exceptions.

How one school went about building pupils' knowledge of the building blocks of composition

Leaders intended for all pupils to compose a recorder solo for a school concert by the end of Year 6. Pupils were also learning to play the recorder as part of the curriculum. This gave them sufficient procedural knowledge to create and, crucially, hear their musical ideas. Leaders had carefully considered the components of composition that pupils needed in order to achieve this. Throughout the curriculum, these components were isolated. Pupils had sufficient time to build their knowledge of how to use them, as well as time to explore and experiment. In Year 4, for instance, pupils practised composing question-and-answer phrases using the pentatonic scale. They then had further opportunities in Year 5 to compose more extended phrases using a major scale. This systematic approach to developing pupils' skills enabled them, by the time they reached Year 6, to have a wide range of compositional components to draw on when composing their own recorder solos.

What pupils know and remember

What inspectors learned from their visits to classrooms and speaking to pupils

19. In most primary schools in our sample, pupils did not have a secure grasp of the skills and knowledge that leaders had planned for them to learn. Furthermore, leaders often paid insufficient attention to whether pupils were learning the curriculum as intended.

20. The most successful aspect of the curriculum was pupils' singing. In around a third of schools, pupils were able to sing with increasing confidence, accuracy and expression as they moved through the year groups. Inspectors found that, in schools where pupils were achieving well in singing, they were often more confident and accurate in recalling sounds from their aural memory.

21. Many schools made sure that pupils learned a musical instrument as part of the classroom curriculum in key stage 2. Inspectors found that in some schools, pupils made progress on these instruments and were playing with increasing accuracy, fluency, control and expression. A significant feature of these schools was that pupils tended to have repeated and regular opportunities to practise on 1 or 2 instruments across several years. By contrast, where pupils were not making appreciable progress on the instrument they were learning, they had tended to have several shallow encounters with many instruments.

22. Inspectors found that composition was the area where pupils knew and remembered least. Very few pupils demonstrated a secure knowledge of musical devices, how to manipulate musical ideas and how to organise ideas into musical structures.

Pedagogy: teaching the curriculum

Summary of the research review in relation to teaching

Success in implementing any curriculum depends strongly on teachers' effectiveness, as laid out in the research underpinning the education inspection framework. Although this effectiveness is contextual, research highlights some points to consider.

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- high levels of guidance for novices, remembering that pupils in every key stage are sometimes novices
- a focus on the quality of musical responses, supported by ongoing feedback on task components
- clarity about the components that will form the basis of formative assessment

23. In over two thirds of the primary schools visited, the curriculum was being delivered mainly by non-specialist teachers. In approximately a third, the music curriculum was delivered by a music specialist. In some cases, leaders had identified staff with musical expertise and made changes to the timetable to allow them to deliver the curriculum. More commonly, these specialists were brought into the school to deliver the curriculum.

24. In over half the schools visited, teachers did not have enough subject knowledge to teach the curriculum well. Many teachers reported that they lacked confidence. One teacher spoke for others when she said, 'This is all new to me. I am learning with the children.' Nonetheless, nearly all teachers were keen to develop their practice and welcomed any training they were receiving.

25. In schools where teaching was most effective, teachers closely matched the choices of activity and pedagogy to what they wanted children to learn. For practical music making, this involved classrooms where musical sounds played a dominant role. Furthermore, teachers gave pupils direct guidance and lots of modelling of how pupils' work should sound. This modelling included the teacher sharing their musical thinking. In one school, pupils were learning to compose variations based on a simple melody. The teacher modelled their thinking to support pupils in their approach to this work. The teacher asked, 'I wonder what impact playing the melody quietly with detached notes will have? Can you imagine that in your head?' She then played her variation, drawing pupils' attention to the impact of the changes made. Consequently, pupils were well placed to create their variations. Where teaching was less effective, very little modelling took place. Teachers focused too much on verbally explaining tasks to pupils and offered little or no musical demonstration.

26. There was a marked difference in the quality of musical guidance and modelling for singing across the schools visited and within schools. In some schools, teachers modelled various technical aspects of singing confidently and regularly. In several visits, inspectors noted how this had supported strong musical responses from pupils.

27. In schools where teachers were using published schemes, many commented that the structure and set of activities and accompanying resources made them feel more secure. Many teachers found the accompanying instructional videos helpful in developing their own knowledge of key musical terms and basic musicianship skills.

28. In many schools visited, teachers' lack of pedagogical content knowledge resulted in there being too little:

- effective modelling of musical processes, particularly in composition
- focus on the quality of pupils' musical responses. One teacher's comment was typical: 'I cannot focus on musical quality because I'm not sure what quality sounds like or what I should be listening for.'

29. In a few schools, teachers' feedback focused on the components pupils needed for forthcoming learning. In one school, for instance, pupils were learning the ukulele as part of the curriculum. Leaders in this school had made sure that all those delivering the curriculum were 'crystal clear' about the precise technical skills and knowledge that pupils needed to secure before they could move on to the next stage. This included, for instance, checking that pupils were using the correct finger patterns for the chords they were learning. In addition, teachers had a clear conception of what quality should sound like. This enabled adults, including non-specialists, to be alert to any errors in pupils' learning and to provide swift feedback to get them back on track quickly.

Assessment

Summary of the research review in relation to assessment

This section focuses on assessment that is marked, which can be summative or formative. Less formal assessment is covered in our section on pedagogy.

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- judicious use of summative assessment to check whether pupils are learning the curriculum as intended
- use of assessment to identify pupils' misconceptions or gaps in their understanding

30. Assessment was weak in most of the primary schools visited. In around half the schools, there was no summative assessment of pupils' work. Where assessment was more effective, it was likely to be of pupils' development as performers. In these examples, summative assessment focused on checking whether pupils were learning the intended curriculum. In other words, were pupils reaching the curriculum standards in performing, as determined by the school?

How one school went about using assessment to check on curriculum effectiveness

Leaders emphasised teaching pupils to become better singers. At key points in the year, classes performed a song they had been working on. The technical demands of the song closely matched pupils' stages of learning. This gave the music leader and classroom teacher an opportunity to evaluate whether the pupils collectively were singing at the standard that was expected for their stage and, if not, what aspects they needed to work on. This type of summative assessment took place infrequently, typically once or twice a year, so that it did not take time away from pupils learning the curriculum.

31. In many schools, leaders told us that they were unsure how to assess pupils in music. This was reflected in one headteacher's comment: 'We really do not know where to start and we really need some help with this.' This uncertainty about how and what to assess was not surprising, given that many schools were at the early stages of identifying the precise knowledge and skills they wanted pupils to learn.

32. In many schools that had developed an assessment model, the assessment focused on whether the curriculum had been covered rather than on what pupils had learned. For example, in one school, leaders had taken statements from the national curriculum and turned these into 'I can' statements, such as 'I can use my voice to sing expressively.' As part of the assessment model, leaders asked teachers to tick whether pupils had completed these activities. This approach gave leaders little or

no information about the quality of pupils' music making. It only told them what had been covered. Furthermore, they did not use the information gathered from this process in a meaningful way. Often teachers knew that the assessment information they were gathering was not being used to identify gaps or evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum. One teacher explained, 'We tick the boxes and forget about it.'

33. In a few schools, teachers were making video or audio recordings of pupils' work. In most cases, schools were recording pupils' work simply for posterity. In other instances, recordings were often made to 'prove' that the curriculum had been covered and often added unnecessarily to teachers' workload. In far fewer schools, leaders were using these recordings to support their evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum.

34. In rare cases, assessment practices took too much time, added to teachers' workload and disrupted teaching of the curriculum. For example, in one school, leaders expected teachers in Reception to routinely photograph children completing musical activities. This provided no information about the quality of pupils' musical responses. Additionally, it limited the time available for the adults to give in-the-moment feedback to pupils.

Systems at subject and school level

Subject leadership

Summary of the research review in relation to leadership in music

A high-quality music education depends on effective subject and school leadership. Few other subjects are so dependent on this necessary flexible support from the school and its systems in order to flourish. Music activities also have financial implications, particularly given the imperative to ensure that pupils have equal opportunities to participate.

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- sufficient time for teachers to teach the music curriculum
- a range of extra-curricular opportunities for pupils, including opportunities for pupils to perform to the school community, put on concerts and shows, and go on trips to professional concerts

- opportunities for pupils to have instrumental and vocal lessons
- leaders who understand how music departments operate differently from those of other core/foundation subjects and are therefore flexible in their approaches
- leaders who understand their staff's experience and expertise in and knowledge of music
- a focus on developing teachers' subject knowledge, including developing them as musicians

35. We found a thriving and strong musical culture in around a quarter of the primary schools we visited. Typically, headteachers and governors in these schools demonstrated a deep commitment, including financially, to music education. They ensured that the curriculum was well resourced and that there was enough time to teach it. Furthermore, they made sure that music leaders and teachers had the professional development they needed to further improve the curriculum and its delivery.

36. In all the schools we visited, leaders made sure that pupils learned music as part of the curriculum. Music was taught weekly in key stages 1 and 2 in most of the primary schools visited. This was typically for around 45 minutes a week. In most schools, pupils had additional regular opportunities to sing, usually in assemblies.

37. In a very small number of schools, pupils did not have regular opportunities to learn music. Music was characteristically organised in these schools into several isolated days, with few or no opportunities for pupils to build their musical knowledge. In other schools, teachers were allowed to decide when to teach music. This often had negative consequences for pupils' learning. For example, some teachers chose to teach the curriculum for the year in one weekly block. When this happened, pupils were unable to recall much of what they had learned. In a few schools, leaders had adopted a commercial scheme, but had not allocated sufficient time to deliver it.

38. Inspectors found a significant disparity in the range and quality of extra-curricular opportunities across the schools visited. In approximately half the schools, there was a good range of extra-curricular activities, including instrumental groups and choirs. In these schools, leaders greatly valued these activities and saw them as integral to promoting pupils' wider musical and personal development. For example, one headteacher told us, 'We see our choir as an extension of the classroom curriculum. It gives our pupils more chance to practise and become even better.' By contrast, in a handful of schools visited, there were no musical opportunities at all beyond the classroom for pupils.

39. Pupils had the opportunity to have vocal and/or instrumental lessons in around half the schools visited. Most schools worked with their local music hubs to provide this tuition. Participation rates in these lessons varied widely across schools. In a few schools, leaders, including school governors, had made a strong financial commitment to making sure that all pupils who wanted to have lessons could do so. In other schools, we found that, while families were expected to pay for lessons, the school subsidised lessons for disadvantaged pupils. Typically, in these schools, participation rates, particularly for disadvantaged groups, were higher than in schools where lessons were not subsidised.

40. In around half the schools we visited, there were no instrumental or vocal lessons. There were several reasons for this. In a few schools, leaders had not considered whether to offer these lessons or were unaware of the offer from the local music hub. More commonly, headteachers explained that they had decided not to offer lessons because, in their view, families could not afford them.

41. Many headteachers reported that COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on the range of extra-curricular activities offered by the school and pupils' participation. One primary leader described how a significant number of pupils had given up their lessons during this period and had not returned the instruments. More commonly, leaders explained that pupils were slowly returning to these lessons, but numbers remained well below pre-pandemic levels. Furthermore, extra-curricular clubs had yet to restart in a few schools, following the return of pupils to school.

42. A striking feature of schools with a strong extra-curricular offer was that they considered it important that all groups of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) had the opportunity to attend. Senior leaders routinely checked participation rates and were actively thinking about how to increase them further.

43. In around a third of schools visited, senior leaders were strongly committed to providing opportunities for pupils to visit concerts and hear professional musicians perform.

44. Some subject leaders were well supported. For example, they were able to attend a range of external continuing professional development (CPD) courses. Some of these developed their expertise in designing a music curriculum. Where this was the case, schools were more likely to be further ahead in their curriculum thinking.

45. In most schools, leaders had a realistic view of teachers' subject expertise. This sometimes meant that leaders knew that their staff lacked the confidence and

knowledge to deliver some aspects of the music curriculum well. Despite this, far fewer leaders had a clear plan for addressing these weaknesses. A very small number of leaders believed that there was no need to develop teachers' subject knowledge, because as one leader said 'they just follow the commercial scheme we have provided'. This did not help teachers to develop their musicianship skills. These skills are vital for modelling musical processes and providing meaningful in-the-moment feedback. In other schools, leaders had not made plans because they were unsure where to find support.

46. The CPD most frequently cited by teachers was training associated with the published music curriculum that their school had adopted. This training tended to focus on practical matters, such as where to find resources. Teachers also told us that they had found the instructional videos that accompanied some of the training material helpful in developing their knowledge of musical terms.

47. In a few schools, leaders were taking well-considered actions to strengthen teachers' musicianship skills. They were realistic about what they could achieve, and therefore viewed this work as an ongoing process, which they described as 'little by little' rather than a one-off activity.

How one school went about developing staff's subject knowledge

The music leader had prioritised training on how to teach singing. They had taken this decision because singing was a significant aspect of the school's curriculum. Leaders engaged with their local music hub and arranged training for staff on how to teach aspects of singing. In addition, as part of the weekly singing assemblies, the music coordinator modelled how to teach singing well. Teachers in this school reported how useful they had found this training and how it was helping to improve their music teaching. They said that they had more confidence in modelling how to sing and in spotting errors and providing ongoing feedback to pupils.

Secondary

Curriculum intent: identifying what pupils need to know and do

Summary of the research review relevant to curriculum intent

The amount of time pupils spend learning music in key stage 3 is typically short. This means it is particularly important to construct the curriculum to make the best possible use of time. It is impossible to include every aspect of music without the curriculum being a mile wide and an inch deep. In other words, if school leaders do not consider what pupils can realistically learn, pupils are likely to simply 'experience' music rather than get better at it.

High-quality music education is likely to:

- follow a curriculum that takes into account what pupils can realistically learn in the time available
- give pupils regular opportunities to return to and consolidate their short-term learning, while gradually introducing new ideas, methods and concepts
- have identified end points that set out the specific curriculum content to be learned, rather than articulating principles and assuming that any content will work to realise these principles

48. We found that, in most secondary schools visited, leaders were committed to making sure that pupils learned music in key stage 3. The range of activities set out in schools' curriculums was largely dictated by the national curriculum in key stage 3 and then exam specifications in key stages 4 and 5.

49. In almost all schools, leaders were clear about their vision for the music curriculum in broad terms. They discussed with inspectors their desire to support all pupils to enjoy music, build their confidence and develop their appreciation of music.

50. In nearly all schools, leaders said that the scope of their key stage 3 curriculum was as broad as the national curriculum. However, this was not always the case. One of the biggest limiting factors to the scope and ambition of the music curriculum at key stage 3 was the time given to the subject and how this time was organised. There was significant variation in this.

51. In around half the schools, pupils learned music for around one hour a week in Years 7 to 9. Pupils typically participated in activities such as playing instruments and

composing and listening to music drawn from different traditions, historical periods and styles. However, curriculum content that developed pupils' singing and vocal work was far rarer. This was a significant part of the curriculum in only a few schools.

52. The curriculum was usually less ambitious and more limited in scope when leaders had decided to deliver key stage 3 in just 2 years. This was also the case in schools where leaders had decided to teach the music curriculum in blocks of time throughout the year. In these schools, only some aspects of the national curriculum were covered in appropriate depth. In general, these were areas such as learning to play instruments in a range of solo and ensemble contexts. However, some notable omissions often resulted in pupils having very limited music education. Pupils in these schools typically had very few, if any, opportunities to learn how to compose music. In addition, pupils in these schools were much less likely to listen to or learn about a wide range of music.

53. The school's approach to exam specifications sometimes limited the scope and ambition of the music curriculum in key stage 4. In many schools, the exam specifications had become the curriculum. Few schools had considered the components pupils needed to learn in order to reach the high-level outcomes set out in the specifications. This was particularly the case in pupils' ability to deconstruct and analyse set works. Typically, teachers alerted pupils to the key constructive features of the music they were studying and asked them to annotate musical scores with this information. However, they often gave little attention to the components pupils needed to know in order to identify these features for themselves. Leaders were often aware of these weaknesses but had concluded that pupils could achieve well in their exams despite not knowing this underpinning knowledge.

54. In most schools offering music at key stage 5, leaders recognised the need to break down aspects of the high-level outcomes in the specifications into smaller building blocks. Many leaders were aware that some pupils, despite achieving well at GCSE, had significant gaps in their learning and were not adequately prepared for A-level music. These gaps often related to declarative knowledge about how music works. They included knowledge about keys, chords, scales, how to read notation and other constructive features. Most of these schools were providing pupils with additional tuition to address these gaps.

55. Performing was the aspect of the curriculum where curriculum end points, and the components needed to reach those end points, were most likely to be clearly defined. In these schools, leaders often had a strong focus on preparing all pupils at key stage 3 for key stage 4 music. By contrast, some schools had identified broad end points, such as 'develop basic keyboard skills', without setting out clearly what that meant in practical terms.

How one school set out the specific content pupils should learn

Pupils were taught to play the steel pans. Leaders had set out the exact repertoire they expected all pupils to be able to play accurately, fluently and expressively at various points throughout key stage 3. They had considered the technical and expressive demands of the music, and how these demands would be increased over time.

56. Clarity about curriculum end points for performing often went hand in hand with clear identification of the knowledge about staff notation that pupils were expected to use. Leaders in these schools were ambitious for pupils to use some aspects of notation automatically. Therefore, they were realistic about what pupils could reasonably learn, rather than just encounter, in the time available. These leaders recognised that pupils needed a lot of practice in order to be able to read fluently at the level set out in the curriculum. By contrast, in some schools, even though pupils encountered notation, there was no expectation that they would learn to use it.

57. Few schools had clearly set out the end points for composition in their curriculum. Typically, leaders had high-level aims for pupils' compositional work, such as 'We want pupils to be creative', or 'Pupils need to compose a piece in the style of samba'. However, few had given sufficient thought to the detail that would allow pupils to achieve these aims.

58. Where the curriculum was more effective, leaders often had a clear and realistic view of the music that pupils would be able to compose as a result of learning the curriculum. Although inspectors found great variety in these curriculum end points in terms of styles and genres, all these schools clearly focused on teaching pupils the constructive knowledge they needed to reach the end points they had chosen. For example, in one school, leaders' ambition was that, by the end of key stage 3, pupils would be able to write a melody and provide an appropriate musical accompaniment in a 'classical style'. In this school, leaders had carefully considered and selected the building blocks that pupils would need to reach this specific end point. These included different types of scales and musical devices, such as perfect and imperfect cadences.

59. In most schools, leaders wanted pupils to develop an appreciation of music. Many leaders explained how they wanted pupils to be able to listen to music and then talk knowledgeably about it. However, inspectors found that very few schools

had considered and sequenced the knowledge that pupils would need in order to achieve this. Furthermore, leaders sometimes assumed that pupils listening to a wide range of music in itself would develop their ability to listen with increasing discrimination.

Planning the curriculum so that pupils become more ‘musical’

Summary of the research review for curriculum progression

A good music education is underpinned by robust, direct and incremental teaching about the technical and constructive aspects of music. Pupils learn this knowledge in the context of music’s history and provenance. This allows them to make increasingly sophisticated and expressive responses.

A high-quality music curriculum is likely to:

- deliberately build pupils’ procedural knowledge of how to control sound
- provide plentiful opportunities to consolidate procedural knowledge, including using staff notation
- be built in way that is gradual, iterative and coherent with regard to instrument choice
- include opportunities for pupils to develop and practise the components of compositions that are set out in the school’s curriculum
- include tasks at a technical level that are appropriate for pupils to be able to realise their expressive intentions
- give pupils opportunities to learn about musical culture and repertoire

60. In most secondary schools in our sample, leaders had designed their own music curriculums. Typically, at key stage 3, the music curriculum was organised into termly or half-termly blocks. In most cases, each of these blocks was based on a musical style or genre.

61. We found that, in most schools, the exam specification had become the key stage 4 curriculum. In other words, pupils completed activities set out in the specification, such as composing to a given brief or listening to set works. Fewer

schools had seriously considered the smaller chunks of knowledge that pupils needed to learn in order to prepare them well for the end points set out in the specifications.

62. In most schools, leaders had not considered, when designing the music curriculum, what pupils had learned at primary school. Few had discussed curriculum planning with their feeder primary schools or developed a strategy for the music curriculum across the key stages. Sometimes this was because leaders had assumed, in some cases mistakenly, that pupils had done little or no music at primary school.

63. Most schools were able to show inspectors the different activities or topics that pupils covered in each year and key stage. Fewer were able to articulate a clear rationale for the way these projects had been organised and ordered, to show how pupils should progress musically. In most schools, the priority was designing a curriculum that broadened pupils' experience of different musical genres and styles. They did not sufficiently consider pupils' musical progression. It was not uncommon, for instance, for leaders to see units of learning as isolated projects, without considering how to build pupils' knowledge across units.

64. We found that in around a quarter of the schools visited, leaders paid serious attention to making sure that the curriculum supported pupils to become more musical. They deliberately and incrementally developed pupils' knowledge of technical, constructive and expressive aspects of music. Leaders and teachers in these schools often understood how these aspects were interrelated.

How one school went about incrementally developing pupils' knowledge of the technical, constructive and expressive aspects of music at key stage 3

Leaders in this school considered carefully how the curriculum was built from unit to unit. They asked themselves, 'How does this unit build on what pupils have done previously?' Some units built on pupils' ability to control sound. Others built on constructive and expressive aspects of music. Leaders explained that the curriculum had a 'golden thread', which was that pupils would incrementally become better at playing the keyboard across the key stage. Leaders explained that this knowledge of how to play the keyboard was essential to prepare pupils for forthcoming learning, such as using midi

sequencers. Nonetheless, the curriculum was not narrow. Pupils did not just learn to play the keyboard all the time. Leaders ensured that pupils experienced a range of other instruments. These were used as vehicles for developing pupils' knowledge of constructive and expressive aspects of music. For example, in one unit, pupils were using tuned percussion instruments. Leaders were clear that the focus of this unit was not on technical aspects, but on building on pupils' previous learning about scales.

65. In a handful of schools, where vocal work and singing were part of the curriculum, leaders had considered, step by step, how pupils would become better singers. As part of this work, curriculum plans clearly identified the component knowledge that pupils needed to learn in order to develop their singing technique. Leaders supported this with carefully chosen songs that matched the pupils' technical abilities well, allowing pupils to develop expressive responses to the songs they were singing. In schools where the curriculum was less effective, leaders often viewed singing as a participatory activity, and it was usually only taught in Year 7.

66. In schools where leaders paid serious attention to incrementally developing pupils' procedural knowledge of playing instruments and using musical technology, leaders often understood that:

- getting better at any instrument takes time
- technical competence on one instrument does not necessarily transfer to other instruments

67. Leaders in these schools had often decided to reduce the number of instruments pupils were learning. This ensured that pupils had repeated and regular opportunities to build and practise this procedural knowledge. By contrast, where teaching was weaker, pupils had several shallow encounters with many instruments. A feature of these weaker curriculums was that learning units tended to be isolated, and leaders had not considered pupils' musical progress across units. Pupils often developed some technical competence on various instruments, but this was often at its earliest stages. Consequently, pupils' musical responses were usually mechanical and inexpressive.

68. In a few schools, leaders carefully designed the curriculum to teach pupils to use staff notation. Where the curriculum was more effective, teachers taught this knowledge step by step. In other schools, the curriculum design did not support pupils to use notation. Pupils were typically introduced to significant amounts of information about notation in a one-off unit and were not given enough opportunities

to consolidate this knowledge.

How one school went about developing pupils' knowledge of how to use staff notation

Pupils in Year 7 started by learning to play simple keyboard pieces drawn from various music styles and genres. The music leader had carefully selected these pieces, as they used a very limited pitch range, rhythms made up of crotchets and minims, and carefully selected expressive markings. Over time, the curriculum deliberately and incrementally introduced pupils to a broader range of pitches, rhythmic values and expressive markings, while still giving them regular and meaningful opportunities to practise what they had already learned.

69. In most schools, the weakest aspect of the curriculum was teaching pupils to become better composers. Typically, at key stage 3, pupils composed music at least once during every unit of work. As most curriculums were organised around styles and genres, pupils were typically asked to compose music in several different styles and genres across the key stage. The aims of the curriculum were therefore often unrealistic. Put simply, pupils did not have enough time to learn and practise the components needed to compose with any degree of confidence in these styles.

70. In a few schools, leaders had designed a curriculum that supported pupils to become better composers and develop their capacity for creativity. The curriculums in these schools had several common features:

- Leaders understood that musical composition depends on a vast array of smaller building blocks of learning. For example, they recognised that pupils' ability to create musical ideas was linked closely with their ability to play and aurally imagine the sounds they intended to create.
- Teachers made good use of music technology so that pupils were able to hear their musical ideas.
- End points were clear. Leaders knew precisely what pupils should be able to compose because of learning the curriculum. They typically focused on 1 or 2 genres, traditions or styles.
- Leaders had identified and isolated the components that pupils needed to learn in order to reach these end points. They often drew on different styles, genres and traditions to introduce and exemplify these components.

- Leaders designed the curriculum so that pupils had enough time to rehearse the smaller components and to experiment with their musical ideas.

71. In most schools, pupils were introduced to knowledge about the interrelated dimensions of music throughout the curriculum. In far fewer schools, leaders had designed a curriculum that broadened and deepened pupils' knowledge of these over time. In one school, for example, leaders had carefully sequenced the curriculum so that pupils built their understanding of the concept of texture, and of different textures, year by year. More commonly, leaders had not identified the specific knowledge about the interrelated dimensions that they wanted pupils to remember. In the weakest practice, pupils were introduced to the interrelated dimensions in a one-off unit at the start of Year 7 and had few opportunities to revisit these concepts or deepen their knowledge of them.

What pupils know and remember

What inspectors learned from their visits to classrooms and speaking to pupils

72. In most secondary schools that we visited, pupils did not have a secure grasp of the skills and knowledge that leaders had planned for them to learn. Furthermore, teachers and leaders at key stage 3 often did not pay enough attention to whether pupils were achieving the goals set out in the curriculum.

73. We found significant variation in the depth of the procedural knowledge that pupils learned in key stage 3. There were some schools where pupils, including those with SEND, developed fluency, accuracy and expressiveness when singing and/or playing instruments. Leaders in these schools were ambitious. They often focused closely on preparing all pupils for the demands of key stage 4 music. More commonly, inspectors found that, while pupils had opportunities to play a variety of instruments across the curriculum, the procedural knowledge that they developed was shallow and difficult to retain. Consequently, they were often not well prepared for the next stage of their education.

74. In some schools, despite a lack of ambition in the taught curriculum, the wider musical offer, including vocal and instrumental lessons, enabled some pupils to develop strong procedural and declarative knowledge. This raises questions about the equality of music education in these schools, as strong musical development and progress to the next stage of musical learning relies on access, in some cases,

to paid tuition.

75. At key stages 4 and 5, considerably more schools made sure that pupils had the knowledge and guidance they needed to perform music. This knowledge was typically provided by instrumental or singing teachers.

76. Constructing and deconstructing music was the area of the curriculum where pupils knew and remembered the least, at both key stage 3 and key stage 4. In a small number of schools, pupils developed sufficient procedural and declarative knowledge to develop musical ideas convincingly and confidently.

77. Many leaders spoke of their desire to ensure that pupils listened to music with increasing discrimination as they moved through the curriculum. However, this only happened in a small number of schools. Pupils in these schools incrementally learned the procedural and declarative knowledge they needed to do this at the same time. More commonly, pupils, particularly at key stage 4, learned lists of terminology related to musical devices and facts about music without sufficient opportunity to hear these in practice. Consequently, while pupils in many schools were able to recall facts about the music they had studied, far fewer had learned the procedural knowledge they needed to recognise these musical devices aurally and comment on their expressive effect.

Pedagogy: teaching the curriculum

Summary of the research review in relation to teaching

Success in implementing any curriculum depends strongly on teachers' effectiveness, as laid out in the research underpinning the education inspection framework. Although this effectiveness is contextual, research highlights some points to consider.

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- high levels of guidance for novices, remembering that pupils in every key stage are sometimes novices
- a focus on the quality of musical responses, supported by ongoing feedback on task components
- clarity about the components that will form the basis of formative assessment

78. We found that, in most secondary schools visited, leaders referred to the teachers delivering the music curriculum as music specialists. In a small number of schools, some of or all the key stage 3 curriculum was being delivered by non-specialists. The most common reason given by leaders for this was ongoing challenges with recruiting music teachers. In a few cases, leaders had temporarily removed music from the curriculum because of a shortage of specialists.

79. Non-specialists were rarely supported or given any training to deliver the music curriculum. Consequently, most non-specialists did not have enough subject knowledge to deliver the curriculum, provide ongoing feedback or model confidently to pupils.

80. A common finding was that teachers, irrespective of whether singing was part of the curriculum, lacked the confidence and knowledge to teach singing. One specialist music teacher explained, 'Sometimes senior leaders can think just because you are a musician you know how to teach every aspect of music. That's just not the case. I have never been taught to sing and am not sure how to teach it well in the classroom, so I tend to avoid teaching it.'

81. In around half the schools visited, teachers broke tasks down into component parts and provided pupils with lots of guidance on each of these parts. They also gave pupils adequate practice time. For example, in one school, pupils were learning to play a new piece on tuned percussion. The teacher explained and modelled a new rhythmic feature of this music – syncopation – and then the class sang the melody. Therefore, by the time the pupils came to practise the line on tuned percussion, they had internalised the rhythm. This avoided overloading their working memories. By contrast, in other schools, pupils' working memories were overloaded. Pupils were given tasks with insufficient guidance and limited opportunities to practise their components parts.

82. In almost all schools, teachers understood the essential role that ongoing feedback plays in supporting pupils' musical learning, and they provided feedback to pupils in lessons. However, the impact of this feedback on pupils' musical learning varied considerably. Where it worked more effectively, teachers had a strong awareness of the component parts pupils needed to secure in order to produce high-quality work or to prepare them well for the next stage. For example, in one school, pupils were learning to play the C-major scale on the keyboard. The teacher was clear that, in order for all pupils to be able to play the scale well and musically, with a legato touch, the feedback they provided needed to ensure that all pupils were using the correct finger pattern.

83. In rare cases, inappropriate whole-school assessment policies disrupted the

delivery of the music curriculum. Inspectors found a few isolated examples of senior leaders requiring music teachers to record in writing the verbal feedback they were giving to pupils. Consequently, a disproportionate amount of teachers' time in lessons was taken up with administering this process rather than giving pupils the ongoing feedback they needed. This approach also added significantly and unnecessarily to teachers' workloads.

84. In the most effective practice, teachers understood the interrelated nature of technical, constructive and expressive aspects of music. For example, as part of a key stage 3 curriculum, pupils were learning to play a version of Beethoven's 'Für Elise' on the keyboard. The work built on previous tasks and introduced pupils to new technical demands and constructive knowledge, such as changes in hand position and chromatic notes. In addition, pupils simultaneously learned about the provenance of the music. This included information about the purpose of the piece and Beethoven's possible musical intentions. This approach worked well; it was clear that this knowledge was introduced to enhance the expressive quality of pupils' playing, and not to simply teach them disconnected facts. Pupils worked with impressive focus to convey the meaning of the music, by concentrating on a legato touch and appropriate phrasing.

85. In about half the schools visited, there was a consistent and sharp focus on the quality of the music that pupils created. Typically, in these schools, teachers routinely listened to pupils' musical responses and used this information to improve pupils' work through rehearsal. In a few instances, teachers' feedback was less helpful. It was used to encourage pupils and praise them for their participation, even when the musical responses were of poor quality.

86. Modelling of musical outcomes by teachers was a common feature of music lessons. Typically, teachers demonstrated to pupils what their musical responses could sound like. In fewer schools, teachers provided more detailed guidance by modelling, step by step, how they had reached those outcomes. For example, in one school, pupils were learning to improvise using the blues scale. The teacher went beyond demonstrating what an improvisation could sound like and modelled, step by step, how to construct a high-quality improvisation. This approach greatly improved the quality of the pupils' improvisations.

Assessment

Summary of the research review in relation to assessment

This section focuses on assessment that is marked, which can be summative or formative. Less formal assessment is covered in our section on pedagogy.

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- judicious use of summative assessment to check whether pupils are learning the curriculum as leaders intend
- use of assessment to identify pupils' misconceptions or gaps in their understanding

87. Inspectors found that, in most secondary schools, leaders were using inappropriate models to assess pupils' learning in key stage 3. Typically, this was because schools had created assessment models that were based on key stage 4 examination criteria. This gave leaders little helpful information about the extent to which pupils had learned the key stage 3 curriculum. Furthermore, leaders seldom used the information gathered from this process to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum or identify gaps in pupils' learning.

88. In schools where assessment was working well, leaders and teachers had identified what pupils should know and be able to do at various stages in the curriculum. They had a clear understanding of the smaller chunks that pupils needed to learn to reach these points. In one school, for instance, students in the sixth form were learning to compose chorales in the style of J S Bach. Leaders had broken this end point down into smaller building blocks of knowledge. This included ensuring that students could harmonise cadence points accurately and in the style of Bach. Teachers, therefore, checked at an appropriate point whether students had secured this crucial building block. In contrast, where assessment models were less effective, this often went hand in hand with little or no clarity about curriculum end points or the smaller blocks of knowledge needed to reach these end points.

89. In most schools, there was an understanding, particularly among music specialists, that summative assessment should be minimal so that it did not reduce the amount of time pupils spent learning music. In most schools, the frequency of summative assessment was appropriate and did not have an adverse impact on the teaching of the curriculum. However, in a few schools, this was not the case. Typically, in these schools, leaders required teachers to assess pupils formally as frequently as every 6 weeks. As one teacher explained, 'I have to assess the pupils every 4 to 6 hours of learning. This means the pupils rarely get the time to practise they need.'

90. In most schools, teachers were making video or audio recordings of pupils' work. In some of these schools, these recordings were being used well, to check whether the school's intended curriculum aims were being achieved. In contrast, some schools were recording pupils' work simply for posterity.

Systems at subject and school level

Subject leadership

Summary of the research review in relation to leadership in music

A high-quality music education depends on effective subject and school leadership. Few other subjects are so dependent on this necessary flexible support from the school and its systems in order to flourish. Music activities also have financial implications, particularly given the imperative to ensure that pupils have equal opportunities to participate.

High-quality music education is likely to have the following features:

- sufficient time for teachers to teach the music curriculum
- a range of extra-curricular opportunities for pupils, including opportunities for pupils to perform to the school community, put on concerts and shows, and go on trips to professional concerts
- opportunities for pupils to have instrumental and vocal lessons
- leaders who understand how music departments operate differently from those of other core/foundation subjects and are therefore flexible in their approach
- leaders who understand their staff's experience and expertise in and knowledge of music
- a focus on developing teachers' subject knowledge, including developing them as musicians

91. We found that there was considerable variation in the amount of curriculum time allocated to music in key stage 3. In just over half the schools visited, leaders had ensured that pupils had adequate time to learn the curriculum as planned. This time was typically organised into weekly lessons. In just under half the schools visited, leaders had not made sure that pupils had enough time to learn the full breadth of

the national curriculum. Where time was limited, pupils were far more likely simply to 'do music' than get better at it.

92. In nearly all schools, pupils had the opportunity to study music at key stage 4. In all schools where music was taught at key stages 4 and 5, pupils had sufficient time to study the curriculum.

93. In a few secondary schools visited, school leaders had decided to move from GCSE music at key stage 4 to other courses, which they described as 'more accessible'. In most cases, leaders had an appropriate rationale for this. However, in a few schools, leaders had failed to recognise that poor curriculum planning at key stage 3 was an important reason why pupils were not adequately prepared for what came next at GCSE. By contrast, a similar number of schools were more ambitious. They were adapting and modifying their key stage 3 curriculum to ensure that all pupils were well placed to study GCSE music if they wished. In addition, these schools were changing their extra-curricular offer to ensure that all pupils had further opportunities to practise and build their expertise if they wanted to.

How one school went about ensuring that all pupils were better prepared for GCSE music

Leaders had recognised that, in the past, their key stage 3 curriculum had not prepared all pupils well enough for key stage 4. A leader said, 'Our pupils did a lot of musical activities, but when it came down to it most pupils could actually do very little.' Leaders decided to develop the taught curriculum, with a strong focus on teaching pupils to become better singers. They also introduced a school choir. Leaders attributed the ever-growing number of pupils studying GCSE music to these changes.

94. Most of the schools with pupils aged 11 to 18 that we visited were not currently offering music at key stage 5. In several schools, leaders had decided in recent years to remove music from the curriculum at key stage 5. The most common reason for this was that they could not afford to run courses with low numbers of students.

95. In some schools, leaders demonstrated a secure knowledge of how music departments operate differently from those of other core/foundation subjects and were therefore flexible in their approaches. For example, in several schools, senior

leaders made sure that subject leaders had additional time to manage and lead the school's extra-curricular offer and manage the school's peripatetic teachers. Unsurprisingly, these schools were more likely to have a thriving musical culture. In addition, several schools leaders ensured that pupils could study music at key stages 4 and 5, despite low numbers of pupils opting for the subject. In some cases, this was because leaders and governors had committed to offering music and, as one leader put it, had 'taken the hit in terms of staffing'. In other cases, leaders had found solutions by amalgamating small groups of pupils in Years 12 and 13.

96. In most schools, leaders made sure that teachers had the resources they needed to teach the curriculum. However, in a few schools, the teaching of the curriculum was significantly hampered by insufficient or inadequate resources.

97. We found that, where school leaders considered curriculum music lessons to be important, they were also more likely to have a rich and vibrant extra-curricular offer. This was because leaders in these schools understood the critical role of extra-curricular music in giving pupils meaningful opportunities to develop as musicians. Approximately half the schools visited had a strong extra-curricular offer that included instrumental ensembles and choirs, and opportunities to perform to a range of audiences. In a few schools, there were few or no opportunities for pupils to develop their musical interests and talents. We also found that, in these schools, pupils were unlikely to have opportunities to study music beyond key stage 3.

98. In most schools, there were opportunities for pupils to have instrumental and vocal lessons. Pupils' participation in these lessons varied widely across schools. In a few schools, leaders, including school governors, had made a strong financial commitment to making sure that all pupils who wanted to have lessons could do so. In other schools, leaders were subsidising lessons for groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils. Typically, in these schools, participation rates, particularly for disadvantaged groups, were higher than in schools where lessons were not subsidised.

99. Many school leaders reported that, in the last few years, they had decided to reduce the extent to which they were subsidising instrumental lessons, because of wider pressures on school budgets. Leaders in these schools told us that, as a result, fewer pupils were having instrumental or vocal lessons and going on to study music at key stage 4.

100. In many schools, COVID-19 had had a significant negative impact on the musical life of the school. Music teachers described a significant reduction in the number of Year 7 pupils who had learned an instrument in primary school.

Furthermore, teachers explained how significant numbers of pupils had given up learning an instrument because of the pandemic. Many music teachers told us that the cumulative effect of this was that they were struggling to maintain previously well-established music ensembles. In some schools, music groups and ensembles had not re-started.

101. Where subject leadership was strong, leaders focused on improving the quality of education, and not just on administration. For example, they visited lessons to discuss with pupils what they had learned and checked that work matched curriculum intentions.

102. In a small number of schools, whole-school policies were having a detrimental effect on music education. Inspectors saw examples of leaders requiring all lessons to start with a silent learning activity. The negative effect of this approach on music lessons was rarely considered.

103. In around half the schools visited, leaders made sure that staff had access to subject-specific training. Music teachers told us how much they valued this support. Teachers found guidance on how to construct and design a music curriculum particularly helpful. Typically, teachers in these schools had strong links with music hubs and regularly engaged with professional music associations. By contrast, in other schools, music teachers were sometimes left isolated. While they had received whole-school training in generic pedagogical approaches, they often had few meaningful opportunities to develop their understanding of how to design a music curriculum and to teach music. This often resulted in these teachers not being well placed to make necessary improvements to the curriculum.

Methodological note

This thematic report draws on findings from 25 primary and 25 secondary schools. This evidence was gathered by His Majesty's Inspectors and by Ofsted Inspectors who specialise in music and have experience in either the primary or secondary phase. This report draws on findings from research visits. We carried out these visits between December 2022 and June 2023.

We identified a balanced sample of schools to visit in terms of:

- pupil numbers
- levels of deprivation

- school location (urban or rural)
- the school's current overall effectiveness grade, although inadequate schools were not available for selection

Participation in the research visits was voluntary. If a school declined to take part, then inspectors visited an alternative school with similar characteristics.

Each research visit was carried out in one school day, usually by a single inspector with relevant expertise in music education. Wherever possible, inspectors spoke to senior and subject leaders, visited music lessons and spoke to pupils. They also reviewed pupils' work in music.

Each inspector visited multiple schools. They gathered evidence about music education in the schools they visited. Inspectors did not make any judgements about the quality of music education in individual schools. However, the range of evidence gathered across these visits enabled us to identify common themes in music education that are likely to be relevant in a wide range of schools.

Inspectors gathered evidence on the following areas:

- curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment
- school-level systems and their impact on music education

When analysing this evidence, we drew on the conception of quality in music education, which we outlined in our music research review. This enabled us to consider how music education in English schools relates to our best evidence about how schools can ensure a high-quality music education for all pupils.

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1. [‘The power of music to change lives: a national plan for music education’](#), Department for Education, 2022.↵
 2. [‘The importance of music: a national plan for music education’](#), Department for Education, 2011.↵
 3. [‘Music education: call for evidence’](#), Department for Education, 2020.↵
 4. All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, University of Sussex and Incorporated Society of Musicians, ‘Music education: state of the nation’, February 2019; N Bath, A Daubney, D Mackrill and G Spruce, ‘The declining place of music education in schools in England’, in ‘Children & Society’, Volume 34, Issue 5,

2020, pages 443 to 457.[↵](#)

5. [‘KS4 national data’ from ‘Key Stage 4 performance’](#), Department for Education, July 2023.[↵](#)
6. [Music research review, Ofsted, July 2021](#).[↵](#)
7. [‘Music in schools: wider still and wider’](#), Ofsted, March 2012.[↵](#)
8. [‘Education recovery’ series](#), Ofsted, December 2021.[↵](#)
9. [‘Teaching music in schools’](#), Department for Education, March 2021.[↵](#)
10. G McPhail, ‘The search for deep learning: a curriculum coherence model’, in ‘Journal of Curriculum Studies’, 2020, pages 1 to 15.[↵](#)
11. B Oakley and T Sejnowski, ‘Learning how to learn’, Penguin Random House, 2018.[↵](#)
12. RV Lindsey, JD Shroyer, H Pashler and MC Mozer, ‘Improving students’ long-term knowledge retention through personalized review’, in ‘Psychological Science’, Volume 25, Issue 3, 2014, pages 639 to 647.[↵](#)
13. ‘Music elements’ and ‘interrelated dimensions of music’ are a way of referring to the building blocks of music. These include pitch, duration, tempo, timbre, texture and structure.[↵](#)

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