Musicianship for key stage 1 teachers

Teaching generalist primary teachers to teach classroom music

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Contents

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Summary

Musicianship for KS1 Teachers is a small-scale intervention project training generalist (non-music specialist) foundation stage and key stage 1 (KS1) teachers to teach practical music sessions. This project is a replication of First Thing Music, which offers school-based training using a play-based approach drawn from Kodály pedagogy. Although music is compulsory in KS1, and teachers are advised to teach regular short classroom sessions, music provision is patchy in schools because many teachers feel ill-equipped to teach practical music lessons. A combination of negative experiences in their own schooling, limited training in initial teacher education and few opportunities for mentoring by trained and experienced music teachers results in generalist KS1 teachers avoiding teaching music. Data were collected from observations of school-based training, observations of teaching with peer review, participant questionnaires and feedback from participants. Analysis considers the significance of the teachers' practical musicianship skills in enabling them to lead musical activity in the classroom. It reviews how positive teaching experiences develop confidence, fluency and self-efficacy for teaching and how this supports teachers' emerging pedagogical content knowing (PCKg) in music. The project offers recommendations for how intervention research in music teacher training must enable teachers to be autonomous professionals and the importance of embedding the research in the practical logistics of KS1 classrooms in order to gain commitment from participants.

1. Introduction

Music is compulsory in the national curriculum in England, and all generalist classroom teachers are recommended to teach daily short sessions in KS1 (DfE, 2013; 2021). However, music provision in upper foundation stage (FS2; children aged 4–5) and KS1 (children aged 5–7) is patchy because there is a negative cycle of low expectation and lack of agency to teach music among generalist teachers. They self-identify as not musical because of negative mastery experiences when at secondary school. Student teachers experience very limited time for training in teaching music, rarely see music teaching led by other generalist teachers, and consequently feel ill-equipped for teaching music when qualified (Hennessy, 2017; Poulter & Cook, 2022; Welch, 2021). Teachers recognise the value of music for young children but feel unequal to teaching it.

Training changes teachers' self-identity as musicians in the classroom as their confidence and fluency in teaching music improves (Biasutti et al., 2019; Biasutti et al., 2015; Henley, 2017; Hennessy, 2017; Ibbotson & See, 2021; Sirek & Sefton, 2023). High-quality training gives teachers the chance to try out their new skills 'immediately in the workplace, and therefore reinforce learning in a practical way' (Thorn & Brasche, 2020, p. 46). This training demystifies abstract knowledge in music theory so it becomes enjoyable, practical work that teachers can transmit to the children. Good training must also be responsive to teachers' needs, motivations and preferences for them to feel that they have autonomy over their professional learning (Bautista et al., 2017).

Musicianship for KS1 Teachers is a small-scale intervention study training FS2 and KS1 generalist teachers in primary schools in the classroom musicianship skills they need to teach practical music sessions with the children in their classes. It tracks the impact of the training on teachers' musicianship confidence and fluency. It is a small-scale replication of First Thing Music, an accessible, low-cost programme of teacher training for generalist KS1 teachers. First Thing Music embeds training in schools for teams of teachers using a play-based approach drawn from Kodály pedagogy to facilitate mastery experiences in music teaching, gained through trial and error while working in communities of practice with colleagues (Ibbotson & Ibbotson, n.d.; Ibbotson & See, 2021; See & Ibbotson, 2018). This project also functioned as a feasibility study to determine how training inspired by First Thing Music could be offered on a larger scale for primary schools in the Reading area, which is planned for 2024/25 and 2025/26.

2. Research design

The main research question was: how do FS2 and KS1 teachers enact professional training in music teaching? The project had three objectives:

1. Train whole teams of KS1 teachers in classroom musicianship skills so they can lead and direct practical music lessons with confidence.
2. Facilitate teachers to work together as a Reading KS1 Music Community of Practice (CoP).
3. Track and measure the impact of the training on the teachers' confidence, fluency and resilience as music teachers.

This research sought to understand how teachers enacted their new PCKg in music as situated cognition, context bound and dynamically shaped through interaction with the learning environment of the classroom (Bremmer, 2021a, 2021b; Hermans & Bremmer, 2015). The research regarded the teachers as autonomous professionals free to choose how to try out their new teaching knowledge in their particular classroom situations. The researchers were instruments of the research, being music education specialists familiar with the practical realities of the KS1 classroom in the UK and sympathetic to encouraging a progressive approach to music education by providing practical support to teachers they hoped they would find valuable (Young, 2023). Ethical approval was gained from the Institute of Education, University of Reading.

2.1 ADAPTATIONS TO THE PROJECT

After drafting an initial proposal, we carried out an extensive consultation with potential participating schools to determine the final structure of the project in order to mitigate against possible tensions between researcher intentions and what schools want (Wyse et al., 2018). Several headteachers cited post-Covid exhaustion among teachers as a key reason for the need for the project to be easily accessible to teachers (Kim et al., 2022). Schools requested that training be delivered in schools, rather than at the university, which required the research team to repeat training at different locations. Schools also asked for content to be adapted to local need, for example, including pedagogy specific to teaching

children with special educational needs. Schools did not want to join monthly online CoP meetings led by the researchers. Instead, we integrated smaller-scale, ad hoc CoP meetings with teachers as part of the training sessions and lesson observations. Mindful of the comments by headteachers about not adding to teachers' workloads, we made it clear to teachers that the project was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw. Although these consultations delayed the start of data collection, they did ensure commitment from the teachers who consented to the project (Capewell et al., 2022). We are very grateful to BERA for their understanding in extending the end date of this research project to allow extra time for data collection.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

Seven schools were involved in the project, drawing from a convenience sample of FS2 and KS1 general class teachers working in schools in the Reading area. Data collection happened between March and July 2023 and included:

- A **participant information questionnaire** in Microsoft Forms to determine teachers' experience of teaching and of teaching music, to rank their confidence in teaching specific aspects of classroom musicianship and to consent to participating in the project.
- **Training** delivered by the lead researcher using the first two units ('Beat' and 'Beat and Rhythm') from First Thing Music (Ibbotson & Ibbotson, n.d.) in face-to-face group sessions. Training was video recorded and transcribed.
- **Feedback** taken at the end of training sessions and peer review of teaching, asking teachers to comment on what they had learned in that session and the impact they felt it would have on their teaching. Feedback was collected through a discussion which was recorded and transcribed, and through a questionnaire in Microsoft Forms.
- **Observation of teaching** where researchers completed contemporaneous, free-flow observations which were collated as soon as possible after the event to mitigate against selective memory and unconscious bias.

- **Peer review and discussion of teaching** in a semi-structured interview which was led by the researcher, recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis began during the data collection phase to determine initial themes. After multiple reviews of the data and critical discussion among the research team, we determined five key themes:

1. teacher's practical musicianship skills
2. leading musical activity in the classroom
3. how positive teaching experiences develop confidence, fluency and self-efficacy
4. emerging PCKg
5. logistics of music teaching in daily classroom life.

Data analysis is ongoing and will focus on a systematic review of each data set against these key themes and establishing sub-themes to determine similarity and difference (Hatch, 2002).

3. Findings & discussion

Indicative findings demonstrate the importance of practical training supported by mentoring in making a positive difference to the way a teacher enacts professional training in music. Early results are summarised against key themes in the data.

Table 3.1 summarises the data collected from each school and demonstrates the extent of the teachers' voluntary participation in the project.

3.1 TEACHER'S PRACTICAL MUSICIANSHIP SKILLS

The teacher's practical musicianship skills are the single most important indicator of success in teaching music post-training. Pre-training, teachers reported their musicianship skills as being sufficient to engage in FS2 and KS1 musical activities as a participant, but insufficient for teaching children. There is a cognitive load for teachers in learning how to deliver practical music lessons. They had to internalise and replicate the given set of chants and song with associated musical games. They needed to master the classroom musicianship skills of maintaining a steady pulse while clapping, speaking and moving rhythmically; pitch a note from a chime bar and sing simple songs at that pitch; and use their voice expressively when speaking or singing to convey meaning and musical elements like dynamics (Hennessy, 2017). It was very important that teachers were able to model accurately and fluently the rhythm and pitch actions in the training sessions before they could model this to the children. Observations of training sessions showed that the teachers who mastered these skills quickly were the first to report back successful leadership of the musical games with children. Other teachers also reported successful teaching once they had mastered the musicianship skills necessary to lead the musical activities.

3.2 LEADING MUSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

To lead musical activity successfully, teachers need to feel they have sufficient mastery of the classroom musicianship skills and also feel ready to take a risk in teaching a new activity. Teachers wanted clear guidance. When asked in the participant questionnaire, 'How can we best help you develop your confidence to teach music in this project?', many teachers asked for 'hands-on training' and 'modelling what it should look

Table 3.1
Schedule of data collected in this project

School	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Number of teachers in each school attending training	10	8	13	8	1	2	5
Participant questionnaire	April	April	April	April	April	June	March
Beat training *feedback questionnaire completed*	April	April	April	April	April and May	June	March
Observation of Beat teaching with peer feedback	May (4 teachers)				June	June	
Beat and Rhythm training *feedback questionnaire completed*	June	June	June	June			
Observation of teacher-directed performance *observation notes*	July						

like [with] plans/notes/steps to help me remember', with 'steps to teaching children and best examples of song, chants and vocab' drawn from 'real-life examples'. Acting on this feedback, the training devoted the maximum time possible to practical work so that teachers could memorise and internalise the singing and movement work ready to teach the children. Feedback was universally positive:

- 'It was very informative and really helped to understand the basics.'
- 'Lots of useful ideas to take away and have a go at.'
- 'Fantastic and a highly valued training in preparation for a music module.'

Lesson observations demonstrated that teachers still had to overcome some apprehension in taking the first step to lead the songs and games with the children. Successful teachers remembered the sequence to start the songs by speaking or singing the introductory phrase 'ready steady off we go' at the right tempo and pitch (if sung), having first pitched the note from a chime bar. They felt comfortable including instruments in the presentation of the songs and moving around the room to demonstrate the games with the children, including musical elements like changing dynamics (volume) and tempo (speed) with the children: 'Everyone copy me, I will show you like a conductor.' Some teachers commented on the challenge of remembering everything they had to do in multimodal music teaching with material that may not yet be fully internalised: 'the chanting I found the easiest, more structured for me [than the singing] and I don't get muddled up so easily'.

3.3 HOW POSITIVE TEACHING EXPERIENCES DEVELOP CONFIDENCE, FLUENCY & SELF-EFFICACY

This project sought to change the perceptions and competence of the participants by facilitating positive music teaching experiences for the teachers. Encouraging critical self-analysis in peer review in CoP discussions emerged as a key mechanism for helping teachers describe their growing self-efficacy in music teaching. Sharing common experiences in handling critical incidents in teaching, such as children not pitch-matching accurately, was also important for teachers to discuss how to use these incidents as ways to develop learning for all children. Positive responses from the children were very important in reassuring teachers that the effort of learning new teaching skills was valuable: 'Our school was ringing with the sound of marching feet, postmen knocking and Ickle Ockle Bluebottles all week. The children absolutely loved it!'

3.4 EMERGING PCKG

Self-analysis in CoP discussions also helped teachers articulate their emerging PCKg. When asked what they wanted from the training, teachers identified a desire to gain PCKg to devise and deliver their own lesson content, and to assess the musical learning of the children. Findings from data post-training showed that teachers began to construct their conceptual knowledge of music from reflection on the children's musical learning. Teachers were increasingly able to describe accurately what musicianship they had developed by teaching and make realistic predictions about how they would next use their musicianship skills to support the children's future learning. For example, one teacher recognised they could combat their fear of singing by using a bell to pitch the note first: 'I've just been nervous starting not knowing if I'm in the [right pitch], the bell does help' and this cued the children to sing in tune. Where teachers had multiple training sessions (schools 1 to 4 and school 6) and were able to try out their teaching between sessions, their self-analysis of their PCKg in music was increasingly more detailed and discerning. They were able to predict what they would observe in the children's learning that would indicate understanding: 'When I can hear and see the children are doing as requested in various songs, i.e., beat in the feet and all [the children] switching from quiet to loud at the right moment.'

3.5 LOGISTICS OF MUSIC TEACHING IN DAILY CLASSROOM LIFE

This research is pragmatic, offering practical, workable solutions to classroom problems (Cohen et al., 2017). Teachers requested training that was directly applicable to the classroom, asking to be shown how to teach the children in 'short and snappy' segments that can be applied 'to fit into a stretched timetable'. The observation data were useful in gathering contextual information about the impact of the physical and human environment on the way teachers applied their new PCKg into sequences of learning for the children and enabled the researchers to adapt later training sessions to be specifically applicable to the local school environments. Teachers liked the fact that the training gave them material for a five-minute music session that they could easily remember and fit into a busy working day: 'Because then [with five-minute slots] you can [...] structure [it] in your head quite well. The five minutes or 10 minutes in this case, that's fine. But if it goes to 20 minutes [...] I feel I might get into a muddle.'

4. Conclusions & recommendations

Musicianship for KS1 Teachers was planned as a feasibility study to investigate the practicalities of carrying out a longer-term intervention study for teaching FS2 and KS1 teachers to teach music, which is planned for 2024/25 and 2025/26. Although a small-scale project, it did successfully train whole teams of FS2 and KS1 teachers in classroom musicianship skills for teaching short practical music sessions focusing on beat and rhythm with confidence. Teachers were facilitated to work together in CoP groups in their schools and benefited from the mutual support of their peers in enacting the training in their classroom teaching. These CoP groups were best facilitated in school teams so that teachers could discuss their work in the immediate context of their classrooms. The impact of the training on the teachers' confidence, fluency and resilience as music teachers was seen most noticeably in their increasing facility to articulate their emerging PCKg as they discussed how they were using their classroom musicianship skills in their teaching. They were able to use their musicianship skills to handle critical incidents in music teaching without losing the flow of their teaching, and also to imagine and predict how to tackle learning challenges that the children would face.

It is important that close-to-practice research in music teacher education respects teachers as autonomous professionals whose wishes and intentions are valued and integrated into the research design. Devoting time to consultation over the design of the project and agreeing what deliverables schools want from the research is a key aspect for getting participant commitment in intervention projects like this one, as is building strong personal relationships with the individual schools and participants. In order to let the researchers in, schools need reassurance that research will improve the professional competence of teachers without overwhelming them with additional work. The credibility of the already successful First Thing Music project was significant in persuading schools and teachers to participate in this project, as was the personal reputation of the lead researcher as a teacher trainer at the local university. Involving schools in co-creation of close-to-practice research in music teacher education increases the value and currency of research among schools. This is particularly important if researchers wish schools to be influenced by research findings and facilitate teachers' research-informed practice.

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