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Is music on the wane? A small mixed methods study exploring musical learning in the school reception class in the East of England

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Abstract

This small-scale mixed methods study sought to explore the nature of the musical learning in the Reception year. Research data from the questionnaires ($n = 39$) provide some evidence that little has changed over the last two decades in some aspects of the music provision for children aged 4 and 5 years. However, interviews with eight Reception teachers revealed some unexpected findings on account of some contemporary barriers. Qualitative data suggest that children's entitlement to develop their innate musicality within the Foundation stage curriculum may be at risk, as some teachers find the challenges of 'fitting it all' is difficult to accomplish.

Keywords: Early years foundation stage; musical learning; challenges; Reception year; teachers

Introduction

Children residing in England begin full-time compulsory education during the school year when they turn five. Also known as EYFS2, the Reception year (YR) occupies a unique position in the English education continua (Ofsted, 2017; Dubiel & Kilner, 2017). For, YR marks both the final year of the Foundation Stage (0–5 years), with a primary focus on early development and care, as well as the first year of formal primary schooling (5–11 years). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is characterised by a child-centred, play-based pedagogy, in contrast to the more traditional, transmission-focused form of schooling associated with the National Curriculum from Year 1 onwards (Sanders et al., 2005; Fisher, 2009).

The 'Hundred Review' notes the paucity of research evidence of pedagogy and practice in the YR (Pascal et al., 2017). The Teaching School Council called for more rigorous research to identify best teaching practices for music and the arts (Keeble, 2016). Both reports demonstrated a need for further study into these fields of enquiry. The central theme of this paper is to illuminate the working context of the Reception teacher in a region located in the East of England. Drawn from a thesis exploring the nature of the musical experiences and opportunities offered to children in the YR, the aim is to gain a better understanding of the unexpected finding that some teachers are struggling to incorporate regular opportunities for musical learning and development in the Reception curriculum.

Three broad discourses emerge from the literature review to shape the working context of Reception teacher. The first sets the scene by describing the continually evolving EYFS framework in England. The second explores the more specific characteristics and concerns encountered in this phase of education and the final discourse considers the place and nature of music in this landscape of constant change and challenge.

The early years foundation stage

Early childhood education and care have a long history in England, perhaps beginning with ‘Dame’ schools providing a childcare service for working mothers in the eighteenth century (Whitbread, 1972; Bristol, 2000). The foundation stage curriculum, initially for 3-to-5-year-olds, has evolved considerably over the last 20 years (QCA/DfEE, 2000). Statutory from 2008, the EYFS framework ‘sets standards for development, learning and care of children from birth to 5 years old’ (DfE, 2010, p. 2).

Responding to practitioners’ concerns of an overly complex and time-consuming framework, the ‘Tickell’ review (DfE, 2011) recommended considerable reform. Revisions included reducing the number of early learning goals from 69 to 17, as well as reorganising the curriculum to focus on three prime areas: Communication and Language, Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development and four specific areas: Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World, as well as Expressive Arts and Design (DfE, 2012). The Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) became a salient feature of the revised EYFS framework. Central to all seven interconnected areas of learning and development, they comprise: ‘playing and exploring’ (engagement); ‘active learning’ (motivation) and ‘creating and thinking critically’. Non-statutory guidance in the form of ‘Development Matters’ (Early Education, 2012) was published to support practitioners to implement the statutory requirements.

The EYFS framework has recently undergone another major revision, initiated in 2018 and implemented in September 2021. Early responses during the consultation process were not encouraging (Early Education, 2021).¹ The critique highlighted the imbalance of emphasis, continuing to move away from holistic learning and developmental pathways with the needs of children as the central focus, to the narrow, formal, outcome-driven approach to learning, with the final goal being to prepare children for Year 1.²

The accompanying non-statutory guidance, ‘Development Matters’ (DfE, 2021), has also been revised. A coordinated response from a Coalition of Early Years Sector Organisations described their disappointment, as well as listing a catalogue of ongoing concerns, not least referencing the inconsistent pedagogic approach. Crucially, they pointed out that Development Matters did not acknowledge children’s competence and capacity as active learners.³ A further collaboration by members of the EY Sector Coalition has resulted in developing a new non-statutory guidance document, ‘*Birth to 5 Matters*’, published in 2021.

Tracing the evolving iterations of the EYFS framework demonstrates the constant state of flux and change for practitioners, children and their families. This unprecedented lack of continuity and stability in early years provision, policy and practice in England can only create a source of challenge and tension, as working practices are continually revised (Brooker et al., 2010).

Introducing the challenges

Tensions arise with conflicting perspectives on the purpose of early learning. A narrow, economic perception of early childhood education ‘as a form of “human capital” investment’ (Ang, 2014, p. 188), with an emphasis on preparing children for school and employment, contrasts with the ‘social pedagogy tradition’ (OECD, 2006, p. 13), namely, to prepare ‘citizens to live in, and participate in, the world’ (Sims, 2017, p. 3). This dichotomy of purpose is reflected in the respective pedagogical practices and approaches. The holistic, child-centred, play-oriented approach of the EYFS, deemed to have a ‘horizontal dynamic’ (OECD, 2006), differs from the ‘top-down’, centrally imposed National Curriculum with associative emphases of monitoring, accountability, standardisation, testing, attainment targets and preconceived learning outcomes (BERA, 2003; Soler & Miller, 2003; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2011). Papatheodorou (2010) notes the ‘challenge for early years practitioners who are caught between two conflicting worldviews and discourses of childhood’ (p.13).

A centralised universal assessment protocol for measuring and tracking progress, the Baseline Assessment scheme, introduced with the Education Act of 1997, was designed to assess pupils in the first weeks of a child's compulsory school life, some barely past their fourth birthday. The scheme also served a school accountability function, monitored by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education)⁴ inspection teams. Schools need to demonstrate a 'narrative of progress' by providing data to evidence the 'value they add between Reception and Year 6' (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2017, p. 7).

Reception baseline assessment (RBA), fraught with controversy, continues to be debated, accompanied by a series of campaigns including 'Better without baseline'⁵ (2015) and 'More than a score'⁶ (2019). Alliances have been formed from numerous organisations, incorporating academics, teaching unions and practitioners, united in the common belief that schools should not introduce RBA, that the scheme is flawed, unreliable, wasteful of public money and potentially harmful (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2017). Two further studies (Goldstein et al., 2018; Roberts-Holmes et al., 2019) have continued to add to the evidence base regarding the value, reliability and ethics of RBA. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) convened an expert panel to consider the evidence to support and justify the government's proposals to introduce baseline assessment, namely, for the purpose of holding primary school leaders to account, for the progress children have made 7 years later by the end of Key Stage 2. The conclusion drawn can be summed 'the government proposals for the reception baseline assessment are flawed, unjustified and wholly unfit for purpose' (Goldstein et al., 2018, p. 5).

A segue from this theme of longitudinal accountability leads to a brief consideration of the purpose and nature of assessment practices in the EYFS. Summative assessment of learning outcomes, accomplished by testing for attainment, recording what has been learnt, contrasts with assessment for learning (AfL) procedures (DCSF, 2008). Also referred to as formative assessment, AfL is a diagnostic tool applied to determine at what stage a pupil is in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (ARG, 2002). Thus, 'AfL encourages learning and promotes motivation by emphasising progress and achievement rather than failure.'⁷

The Expert Group on Assessment (Bevan et al., 2009) recommended combining summative and formative assessment practices. Basford and Bath (2014) highlight the juxtaposition of the positivist and interpretative paradigms resulting from these summative and formative assessment strategies. These authors suggest that the developmental approach based on the illusory ages and stage measurement norm of the 'typical child', by default, yields a deficit view of another child who does not conform to this set of predetermined early learning goals. In pursuit of the 'readiness' agenda, this product-oriented, developmental, positivistic model sits at one end of the assessment continuum. In contrast, the emphasis of the sociocultural, interpretative approach inherent to formative models of assessment is found at the other (Basford & Bath, 2014).

A further dimension for Reception teachers to consider, when monitoring progress and planning next learning steps, involves taking children's interests and dispositions to learn (Ofsted, 2015) into account. Considered essential to lifelong learning, learning dispositions' such as curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence and responsibility, are central to the 'Te Whāriki' early childhood curriculum of New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2017). Equally, Ofsted (2015) acknowledges that the CoEL, describing *how* children learn⁸, are particularly important in the EYFS, as 'early education is about every aspect of a child's development. It is about more than imparting knowledge' (Ofsted, 2015, p. 8), contrary to the view that may yet prevail, that the very young child represents an 'empty vessel to be filled with knowledge' (OECD, 2006, p. 193).

A growing body of research considers the relationship between executive functioning, self-regulation abilities, metacognitive skills and educational achievement (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012; Moriguchi, 2014; Bryce et al., 2015; Robson, 2016; Zachariou & Whitebread, 2015; DfE, 2021). Deemed important for learning and development, young children's ability to focus and pay attention, remember instructions and demonstrate self-control, whilst exercising autonomy

in their learning, develop rapidly during the pre-school years (Moriguchi, 2014; Pascal et al., 2017; DfE, 2021).

A long-standing corps of research literature provides evidence for the contribution of early musical behaviours and practices between infant and carer to support these processes. These include the multi-modal and prosodic nature of proto-conversations (Dissanayake, 2009); infant-directed speech (Trainor, Austin, & Desjardins, 2000); communicative musicality (Malloch, 1999); affect attunement (Stern et al., 1985); intersubjectivity, as well as instinctive musicality (Trevorthen, 1999–2000; Street, 2006); emotional bonds of attachment (Bowlby, 1988) and infant-directed song (Fernald & Simon, 1984; Cooper et al., 1997). Indeed, infant-directed song serves communicative and regulatory functions, accompanying daily routines, such as sleep preparation, bathing, feeding and nappy (diaper) changing. Soothing, calming lullabies contrast with rhythmic playsongs intended to stimulate, excite and entertain. Zachariou and Whitebread (2015) add to this body of research by tentatively concluding that different musical play contexts allowed for self-regulatory behaviours to emerge in the same way as previously reported studies referencing socio-dramatic and pretend play (DfE, 2021). Moreover, more self-regulatory behaviours were afforded by the musical play opportunities with less teacher involvement, particularly those that offered a degree of choice and control, as well as allowing child agency to set the level of challenge.

The 'school readiness' agenda presents a further challenge for Reception teachers. This is particularly evident at the transition 'pinch' point between the YR and Y1. The discontinuity between the play-based, relational pedagogic approach of the EYFS and the more formal, structured and outcome-focused pedagogy of Year 1 (Fisher, 2009, 2011; Dubiel & Kilner, 2017), combined with a lack of alignment between the early learning goals and the expectations of the National Curriculum (Ofsted, 2017; Dubiel & Kilner, 2017), results in increasing downward pressure from Key Stage 1 to narrow the early years curriculum (Ang, 2014; Hedges & Cooper, 2014). Teachers report the difficulties of managing this transition effectively due to the shift in emphasis from 'process' in the early years to that of 'content-based' learning in Y1 (Dubiel & Kilner, 2017). The tensions arising from attempting to reconcile holistic child-centred approaches with the downward pressures resulting from outcome-based pedagogies have been described as the 'schoolification' of the early years (Ang, 2014; Pascal et al., 2017; Dubiel & Kilner, 2017).

This second discourse illuminates some of the contemporary issues and priorities which challenge the fundamental principles and approaches to early childhood education. It presents a picture of centralised, 'top down' prescriptive intervention that perhaps responds to and is influenced by socio-economic imperatives, rather than a 'ground up' perspective which places the child at the centre (Plowden, 1967; Wall et al., 2015; Nutbrown, 2018).

The place of music within the EYFS

Music, along with art, movement, dance, and role play were initially located under the umbrella term 'Creative development' (QCA/DfEE, 2000), later rebranded the 'Expressive arts and design' learning area (DfE, 2012). The EYFS Profile Handbook (STA, 2014) lists two 'Expressive arts and design' (EAD) early learning goals, ELG 16: 'Exploring and using media and materials' and ELG 17: 'Being imaginative'. Revised in 2021 to 'Creating with materials' and 'Being imaginative and expressive', 'performing' appears to be the principal focus for the music ELG:

Sing a range of well-known nursery rhymes and songs; Perform songs, rhymes, poems and stories with others, and – when appropriate – try to move in time with music. (DfE, 2021, p. 15)

This development also highlights the tension between process and product-oriented models of musical learning and experience. Morin (2001) demonstrates this dichotomy by contrasting 'large-group, teacher-directed instruction' with child-initiated 'musical play' (Morin, 2001, p. 25). Moreover, Knudsen (2008) records that the 'prevailing tendency is to simplify and 'scale down' [musical] material and methodology' designed for older children (p. 290), rather than adopt 'an appropriate model designed to best serve the developmental capabilities and learning proclivities of this age phase' (Young, 2007, p. 20).

A balance between child-initiated and adult-led activities represents one of six key indicators of effective early childhood practice. Initially recommended in the seminal 'Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years' (REPEY) report (Sylva et al., 2004), this has been reiterated many times since (Broadhead, 2006; Keeble, 2016; Ofsted, 2017; Early Education, 2021). Dubiel and Kilner (2017) acknowledge the challenge that achieving an effective balance of these modes of delivery incurs, remarking that many schools resolve this concern by establishing 'Continuous provision'.⁹ Defined by Early Education (2021) as the 'environment and resources provided for children to explore freely, which support learning with or without an adult and enable children to revisit and build on their learning' (p. 118).

Research studies and reports evidence the importance of a child-centred and developmentally appropriate play-based relational pedagogy in the early years (Wall et al., 2015; Roberts-Holmes et al., 2019), whilst simultaneously recognising that effective early year's pedagogy blends different approaches 'Children learn through play... and through guided learning and direct teaching' (DfE, 2021, p.10). The facilitative role of the teacher is emphasised, recommending that adult-child interactions should involve 'sustained shared thinking' to differentiate and extend each child's learning, as well as provide on-going, formative feedback (Wall et al., 2015; Early Education, 2021). However, the terminology surrounding the pedagogical nature, as well as expectations of effective practice in the YR is increasingly noted to be a source of confusion for practitioners, as they navigate the range of teaching approaches and directives issued in a plethora of statutory documentation, reports, guidance and research studies (Ofsted, 2017; Dubiel & Kilner, 2017).

A further measure of effective practice in the early years concerns teacher 'Knowledge and understanding' of both child development and the curriculum (Sylva, et al., 2004; TDA, 2008; Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008; Keeble, 2016; Poulter & Cook, 2022). This is particularly pertinent for music on account of the long-standing and ongoing generalist/specialist primary school teaching debate (Mills, 1989; Alexander et al., 1992; Holden & Button, 2006; Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008; Hallam et al., 2009; de Vries, 2011, 2013; Hennessy, 2017; Welch, 2020). Generalist class teachers are expected to have a working knowledge of approximately 10 National Curriculum subjects at Y1 or seven learning areas in the EYFS (Welch, 2020). Indeed, a degree of specialist knowledge is helpful, particularly if teachers are to engage children, as well as differentiate and scaffold learning towards Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotskii & Cole, 1978; Bond, 2015). This is also particularly pertinent for Reception teachers engaged in 'In the moment planning' (Ephgrave, 2018). Responding to a child's interests, the role of the adult is one of observation and reflection, followed by a judgement about whether a teacher interaction would benefit the child's development at that moment in time. This potential teacher involvement may require knowledge and understanding of both child development and music in order to enhance, rather than interrupt or extinguish learning through play (Berger & Cooper, 2003).

Class teachers are reported to lack confidence, demonstrating low self-efficacy beliefs, with regard to facilitating musical learning and development in the Reception classroom (Stunell, 2010). Oft quoted reasons are on account of a perception that formal musical training or a particular musical skill set, or a 'musical ear', is required to teach music (Hennessy, 2000; Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008; Burak, 2019; Poulter & Cook, 2022). Poulter & Cook (2022) note that this view may be exacerbated by the emphasis on performance. Indeed, it has been suggested that the

performative focus on singing and playing instruments, rather than musical play, perpetuates the specialist/generalist discourse. Even more so, should these teacher perceptions be framed by performative criteria, judged against professional Western European, classical, high art ideals, rather than their ability to engage in musical practices with children (Ehrlin & Wallerstedt, 2014; Nieuwmeijer et al., 2021).

A recently published position paper paints an international picture of concern, recommending a need for improved music preparation for early childhood education teachers (Bautista et al., 2022). Contributory factors include: (1) trainee teachers may have limited general musical experience of compulsory music education or extracurricular musical activities prior to enrolment (Koutsoupidou, 2010), although Henley (2017) notes the positive impact of the primary whole class ensemble teaching initiative in England, changing the ITE entry profile of student experience; (2) limited opportunities for music education within generalist teacher education courses (de Vries, 2011); (3) music may be incorporated into generic creativity programmes or integrated with other art forms as identified by the work of the Researching Arts in Primary Schools Project¹⁰; and (4) pre-service music courses have been critiqued for ‘being too short, overly theoretical or abstract, and for lacking practical opportunities’ (Bautista et al., 2022, p.3). Thus, Reception teachers gaining qualified teacher status (QTS) in England may feel underprepared to facilitate musical learning and development in their Reception class.

In-service Teacher Education (INSET), an essential factor in continued professional development (CPD), is considered to be ‘critical to improving teachers’ practice at all career stages’ (DfE, 2011, p. 7) and should apply to all areas of learning, including music (Hallam et al., 2009). Research evidence reports, first, that teachers may not be offered music-related development opportunities and, second, that those training experiences may be considered unhelpful, ineffective or lacking in challenge (Bond, 2015). Pursuing the theme of access, the report, ‘Foundations for quality’ (Nutbrown, 2012), tasked with reviewing early education and childcare qualifications records:

Access to, and the quality of CPD were continually raised by practitioners ... An overwhelming 72 per cent identified cost, both of the training and of cover while staff are away from the setting, as the main barrier to accessing CPD. (Nutbrown, 2012, p. 52)

Further contributory factors related to the limited provision of EC musical professional development opportunities include school leaders opting for CPD connected to whole school priorities, to keep apace of government demands, initiatives and changes, perhaps at the expense of individual teacher needs (Hennessy, 2017; Bautista et al., 2022).

To sum, these three discourses combine to present a complex picture of the early years phase of education and care in England. Unique to the YR, the working context for teachers may be described as one of constant change, tension and challenge as they navigate a variety of pedagogical practices and assessment protocols. This review serves to set the scene in anticipation of the exploratory study, drawn from a thesis, as to the nature of the musical experiences and opportunities offered to children in the Reception class in a region located in the East of England.

Methods

The research question *What is the nature of the musical activity in the Reception class?* provides the foundation for this paper. An explanatory sequential research design was adopted to create a progressive focus from the contextual frame, set by the questionnaire (administered using the online ‘Google Forms’ app),¹¹ toward the more in-depth and rich detail proffered by the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews.

Reception teachers from seven counties in the East Midlands of England provided the population of interest. It was not possible to evidence the impact of the decisions of two sets of gatekeepers (administrators and Headteachers) in forwarding the 500 invitations to Reception teachers to take part in the questionnaire. Thus, the small final sample of 39 self-selecting Respondents was considered to be ‘quasi-purposive’ (George, 2011; Hodges, 2011).

Descriptive demographic data of the working contexts of the participating Reception teachers showed a good cross-section of schools, including: (1) size, from very small (0–100) to very large (600+); as well as (2) range, such as Infant only (4–7 years), infant and junior (4–11 years); and (3) variety, namely, schools were representative of a number of organisational status structures comprising local authority, academy and multi-academy trusts (in receipt of direct funding from the Government), as well as fee-paying independent schools (Appendix 1).

A ‘nested’ sub-group of eight Reception teachers emerged from the quantitative sample as interview participants (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Drawn from three counties in the East Midlands, the school profiles of the eight participants also portrayed a good cross-section of contexts, in range, size and variety. Located in areas which could be perceived as rural, semi-urban and urban, the schools were noted to have varied recorded indices of multiple deprivation.¹² Finally, a range of in-service experience was identified by the date of their initial teacher training (1970s to 2010s). See appendix (2).

Both *Microsoft Excel* and the *Statistical Programme for Social Sciences software programme (SPSS)*¹³ were employed to collate and analyse the quantitative data. Two tiers of descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were applied, including the use of two nonparametric tests: *Fisher’s Exact test of Independence* (Field, 2018) and *Mann-Whitney U test* (Field, 2018). The literature review had suggested the pertinence of four key participant variables that might assist in the search for nuanced patterns of interest. These formed the basis of cross-tabulation within the statistical analyses. The four participant variables were: (1) EYFS age-specific training; (2) length of teaching experience on the basis of the training decade; (3) experience of EYFS age-specific music CPD and (4) self-identification as a musician.

A ‘hand and eye’ protocol facilitated the thematic analyses of the interview data, affording a closer involvement and working knowledge of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were audio recorded (with participant consent), transcribed and anonymised to provide rigorous and thorough ‘ad verbatim’ accounts. Summary reports of both sets of data were submitted to the participants for information and verification. A list of ethical criteria and good practice was drawn up, approved and applied at all stages of the research process. Founded on the cyclical process of critical review, evaluation and reflection, concomitant with the hermeneutic philosophical principles of reasoning and interpretive understanding, a theoretical framework was devised with a view to achieving inference quality.

Data collection and analyses

The working context of the Reception teacher provides the central focus of interest for this paper. Drawn from a broader, exploratory mixed methods thesis, the quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview) data reported here centre on pedagogy and practice, as well as teacher preparation and professional development.

Pedagogy and practice

A child centred, play-based pedagogy is central to the EYFS. The Reception teachers were asked to recall their observations of a variety of child-initiated musical play activities. Questions were posed on the frequency of this ‘musicking’ (Small, 1998). Quantitative data include:

- 67% (26:39) of teachers reported that at least half or some of the children in their classes were observed singing whilst engaged in child-initiated play, and that this occurred either some or most days (92%, 36:39).
- a similar number (64%, 25:39) reported that it was commonplace for their children to initiate other kinds of musical activity other than singing either some or most days (90%, 35:39).

Observed musical activities included singing and dancing (97%, 38:39), instrumental play (100% 39:39), technological music play (44%, 17:39), recreating tunes (87%, 34:39) and creating original music (97%, 38:39). These data suggest that most Reception teachers observed children engaging in various forms of self-initiated musical play. (A scarcity of hardware and/or software might explain the lower response for technological music play).

Questions were also posed about the resources provided to stimulate and facilitate child-initiated musical play. Almost all of the respondents (92%, 36:39) indicated that a 'sound' area for 'musicking' was available every day or some days. This area was located outside in just under half of the classrooms (46%, 18:39), whilst 44% (17:39) of teachers provided music areas both inside and outdoors. This theme was developed in the interviews. Children could access a 'sound' area every day in three out of four classrooms, yet instruments were available to play only in about half of the classrooms every day. A participant reflected upon the provision of a box of instruments outside in the play area, explaining that the children could bring them inside, but they might be relocated into a cloakroom area if the music making became too noisy (Participant A). Participant B added that musical activities were not provided indoors all the time 'because it can get noisy' and music played at high volume can become a 'sensory issue' for the children with autism in the class.

Participant B described the staffing constraints which influenced their decision to offer the children free access to the instruments. Referring to the deployment of teaching assistants when managing 'a high proportion of children with challenging behaviour', there were occasions when they thought 'Today I haven't got that support, I might not put that activity out'. Moreover, this participant felt unable to offer an outside musical activity, due to the 'five or six children who would need an eye kept on them with those resources' (Participant B). These data suggest that access to sound makers as well as concerns of the noise levels related to practical music making, long evidenced in the literature, remain a challenge for the Reception teacher in some contexts (Addison, 1991; Tarnowski, 1999).

To learn more of the recommended balance between child-initiated and adult-led activities (Sylva et al., 2004; Broadhead, 2006; Keeble, 2016; Ofsted, 2017; Early Education, 2021), questions focused on staffing, planning and curricular frameworks. Responsibility for the planning and delivery of the adult-led musical input rests largely with the class teachers (61%), although a school musical specialist (21%) or, less often, a visiting music Teacher (13%) may fulfil this role.

In terms of planning for musical learning and development, there was a fairly even split between those Reception teachers who followed a structured framework (44%) and those who did not (54%). A statistically significant finding demonstrates that the musically accomplished respondents ($N = 9:12$) were more likely to follow a structured curriculum framework for music than their colleagues (two-sided Fisher's Exact test; $p = 0.14$). The questionnaire also invited further comment on planning for musical learning and development for individual children, prompting such responses as 'following children's interests and ideas' (11:39 respondents), as well as looking for gaps in knowledge and plotting 'next steps' (8:39).

The interview participants, in particular the two recently qualified teachers Participant C and Participant D, described the challenges of trying to incorporate music within the curriculum:

... with the pressures of having to teach so much maths and English all the time ... we're having to do ... an extra maths session which is called 'maths meetings'; ... every day ... so that's kind of replaced music a little bit at the minute. (Participant C)

Participant D commented on the imbalance of core and creative learning opportunities:

With seven areas of learning, ... (it's) quite a challenge to cover everything ... in equal measure ... There is a danger, I think, of putting more emphasis on writing and maths ... We ... don't actually allow enough time ... for more creative things. (Participant D)

Participant F, a more experienced teacher, also reflected on the curricular pressures to accomplish the end of key stage expectations for literacy and numeracy, suggesting that music is not valued as it might be. Participant B described the level of intervention children in their Reception class received to reinforce their core subject learning:

... maths and literacy carry on pretty much all day in different groups. So, children might get it two or even three times a day. (Participant B)

Participant B explained that core subject learning often spilled over into the afternoons, at the expense of music, P.E. and 'something creative ... I have to drag it from somewhere ... that little bit of time' (Participant B).

This data supports the claim that whilst opportunities for musical play may be incorporated into the continuous provision offered to the children (Bryce-Clegg, 2015), adult input to lead musical learning may be on the wane. A postscript note of concern implies that even access to musical play cannot be taken for granted, for as Participant C explained:

We haven't done any music this week ... actually the music area is closed this week ... it's quite a big area, so we've been advised to offer less ... so that the children aren't overwhelmed ... if we think it (the topic) lends itself ... then we'll open those areas ... rather than ... just for the sake of it, because it's all about ... children playing purposefully. (Participant C)

Reflections on this account offer an interpretation that reveals that Participant C was conscientiously adhering heeding to both national guidance and local professional advice. For, it is recorded that 'Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play' (DfE, 2012, p. 6). In other words, play that is planned and facilitated with specific learning outcomes in mind.¹⁴ Equally, this comment may be interpreted as illustrative of the insufficient breadth and depth of musical knowledge and understanding, as these Reception teachers did not perceive any opportunities for musical learning could be gained from that particular 'caterpillar' topic.

Teacher preparation and development

The professional standards for QTS state that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are required 'to have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s)' (DfE, 2011, p. 11). Taking into account Darling Hammond's view that there is a direct correlation between the length of teacher preparation and the quality of teaching (2000), the questionnaire asked teachers to reflect on the quality and quantity of the musical input in their Initial teacher education (ITE) programme. Despite a bias toward education-focused undergraduate studies (77%), rather than postgraduate (23%), data include:

- 41% (16:39) of teachers reported an absence of musical input.
- 23% (9:39) commented on poor quality.
- Less than one quarter (23%, 9:39) reported that the music input was good or excellent.
- Undergraduate provision for music tended to be a 'one off' or 'stand-alone' experience (41%, 16:39).
- 26% (10:39) of the respondents noted the 'irregular' nature of the musical ITE input.

Cross-referencing the second participant variable 'Period trained', with the dependent variables 'ITE input experience' and 'musically accomplished Reception teacher', two findings of significance were noted further to applying the two-sided Fisher's Exact test. First, the more recently trained Reception teachers (2000s, 2010s) described their ITE music input as a 'one off' experience, rather than delivered 'on a regular basis', reporting a p -value of 0.08. Second, a p -value of 0.015 indicates that the musically accomplished singer and/or instrumentalists were statistically more likely to have been trained in the 1970s and 1980s, rather than more recently.

The participants were also asked to reflect on the musical component of their initial training. All the teachers had engaged in their ITE, be it PGCE, BEd, or BA with QTS,¹⁵ from the 1970s through to the 2010s. Only one teacher, Participant H, unequivocally reported the music component of their initial training to be a positive, useful experience and that this was in part due to the experience and enthusiasm of their primary education lecturer who was a musician. Half of the interview participants, including the two recently qualified teachers, reflected an ambivalent representation of the music component of their ITE. Comments referenced the limited musical contribution (Participant E); an input imbalance between subjects (Participant D); as well as the lack of depth and thorough attention (Participant C). Participant F, a very experienced Reception teacher, attributed the approach adopted by their tutors to be one of encouragement and enthusiasm, rather than instruction. Both Participant G who trained in the 1990s and Participant B in the 2000s presented a gloomier picture, struggling to recall the experience or describing it as 'very, very limited' (Participant G).

Exploring the school placement opportunity with the interview participants offered mixed responses. Participant E commented: 'Probably most of the sort of use of music came during teaching practice . . . observing teachers'. However, this does depend on the confidence, experience and musical expertise of the teacher mentor, not a guaranteed opportunity, and likely to be arbitrary at best. Participant D explained:

If you then went to a school where . . . perhaps you didn't get a lot of experience doing that in your placement either, you almost finish your PGCE Year feeling a bit underprepared to teach certain things. (Participant D)

These data indicate an additional challenge for some Reception teachers, perhaps contributing to a lack of confidence, as some begin their careers without the necessary musical knowledge and understanding to facilitate musical learning and development in the Reception classroom. Participant H was fortunate that their first school placement built on the good musical grounding that they had received at college. This combination empowered them to be musically confident and prepared for encouraging children's musicality in their own setting.

Beauchamp (1997) suggests that practising teachers should be able to access Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to further develop their musical knowledge, understanding and confidence. Just over half of the questionnaire respondents (54%; 21:39) had undertaken further professional development training that incorporated music.

Emergent themes from the interviews on the subject of CPD ranged from: (1) the complete absence of music In-Service Education Training (INSET) since initial teacher training; (2) whole school music CPD with associated opportunities (Participant C) to (3) the constraints Reception teachers encounter. Cited barriers to accessing music CPD included limited funding and the low priority the subject area was given in school development plans (Participant G and Respondent A). Opportunities for music CPD for three of the participants appeared to be either non-existent, or at the very least historic or sporadic: 'No, none at all' (Participant G). Two participants commented on their good fortune to have a music specialist on the school teaching staff, knowledgeable and experienced in early years practice, providing support (Respondent A and Participant D). Participant C reflected on the impact of a whole school music CPD opportunity. Increased confidence and more positive attitudes towards the teaching of music were contrasted

with school timetabling constraints, which did not allow teachers to apply their new knowledge. Respondent B offered a further dimension to the barriers of funding and priority:

(In my) current school, a lot of music is provided by outside agencies and so maybe they wouldn't see a need for the teachers to be trained. (Respondent B)

Hallam et al. (2009) add to this theme, suggesting that schools employing visiting music specialists may incur the long-term risk of 'deskilling' generalist teachers.

Data analyses from this mixed methods study highlight that little has changed in the respect of some barriers to musical learning in the Reception class, such as access to soundmakers and acceptable levels of music 'noise', as well as ITE experiences, including school placement and CPD opportunities. However, additional contemporary challenges are also emerging, introducing further curricular tensions, impacting on music-making learning opportunities for some children in the YR.

Discussion

Informed by the principles of hermeneutic philosophy, a cyclic theoretical framework was devised to provide the analytical lens to review the datasets. Findings suggest that there has been little or no change to EYFS practice in the respect of some of the musical opportunities and activities in the Reception classroom. Logistical challenges persist, including the dilemma of acceptable levels of music 'noise', with its associated disruption to other learning areas, as well as ongoing concerns that the instruments and other resources may be at risk of damage (Addison, 1991; Tarnowski, 1999). Similarly, it appears that little has changed in the respects of the challenges associated with both teacher preparation and ongoing professional development (Brewer, 2003; Bautista et al., 2022).

However, on closer inspection, additional challenges begin to emerge. The Reception teachers reported difficulty in achieving a balance between child-initiated and adult-led learning, arising from the curricular tensions of trying to 'fit it all in'. External monitoring and accountability pressures result in increased emphasis on prioritising literacy and numeracy to the point of repeated daily intervention (de Vries, 2011). Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) describe this phenomenon as 'educational triage', explaining that children, identified as failing to make sufficient progress, are withdrawn from class for booster sessions to try to breach the attainment gap. Indeed, schools are 'judged on both the identification of the children in need of 'intervention' and the success of these interventions in returning them to the norm progress' (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017, p. 8). A timetabling pinch point is the consequence of this process of educational triage, such that Reception teachers have to make decisions about which learning areas to forgo (Stunell, 2010; Poulter & Cook, 2022). Most common were the creative arts, more specifically, music, as well as physical activity.

Study findings suggest that concerns of insufficient teacher preparation for noncore subjects, such as music, prevail (Russell-Bowie, 2009; Henley, 2017). Combined with reports of haphazard school placement experiences, participant responses give further weight to Hennessy's (2006) description of the 'double bind' in which NQTs find themselves. Limited musical input during ITE programmes may contribute to poor levels of teacher confidence and self-efficacy (Hennessy, 2012). Hennessy goes on to suggest that the combined disadvantage of insufficient initial teacher preparation and in-school training exacerbates the view that teaching music is difficult and best left to 'experts' (Hennessy, 2006, 2017).¹⁶

The findings from this study suggest that some teachers may have found the challenges of 'fitting it all in' difficult to accomplish. Indeed, despite the best of intentions, opportunities for musical learning in accordance with the recommendation for children's cultural arts entitlement (UN, 1989) may have fallen by the wayside. It may be that this issue will be addressed by the recent Ofsted framework (2019) which promotes a broad and balanced curriculum.

Conclusion

Exploring the nature of musical learning and experience in the Reception classroom in an area in the East of England provided the original research focus. Findings suggested that little has changed over the last 25 years in some respects, namely resources, teacher preparation and professional development. Viewing the data through a hermeneutic lens, unexpected reports that musical learning opportunities were further diminishing in the Reception classroom warranted closer inspection.

The aim of this paper was to gain a better understanding of the unexpected finding that some Reception teachers are struggling to incorporate regular opportunities for musical learning, activity and experience in the curriculum. The three discourses, described above, combine to present a complex picture of the early years phase of education and care in England. The working context for teachers may be described as one of constant change, tension and challenge as they navigate a variety of pedagogical practices and assessment protocols. This landscape of constraints and challenge is intensified in the YR, by the additional pressures and tensions associated with baseline assessments, school readiness and transition into Y1.

Another report of this phenomenon from the perspective of teacher preparation describes the disappearing visibility of music in early childhood teacher education, with a corresponding impact on kindergartens and pre-schools (Kulset & Halle, 2019). Acknowledging both the extrinsic functions and the intrinsic value of music for children in this early phase of education, these authors share their surprise: 'one should think that music and singing songs would be an obvious part of everyday life in all kindergartens' (n.p.). Indeed, Ehrlin and Wallerstedt (2014) echo this view by suggesting that 'music really lies at the heart' of this early childhood phase of education (p. 1800).

Notes

- 1 <https://www.early-education.org.uk>
- 2 <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/changes-eyfs-2021>
- 3 <https://www.early-education.org.uk/press-release/coalition-early-years-sector-organisations-statement-new-non-statutory-guidance-eyfs#coalition>
- 4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>
- 5 <http://www.betterwithoutbaseline.org.uk/>
- 6 <https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/>
- 7 <https://cambridge-community.org.uk/professional-development/gswafl/index.html>
- 8 <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/>
- 9 <https://earlyexcellence.com/latest-news/press-articles/using-continuous-provision/>
- 10 <https://artsprimary.com/>
- 11 At the time of submission, the online version of the questionnaire remained available at: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1ut1gMTfsKl4y5etp4TdksAblK2NHmJJ2KiXc0Lc9y6o/edit>.
- 12 Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>.
- 13 Retrieved from: <http://www.spss.com>.
- 14 <https://www.nel.moe.edu.sg/teaching-and-learning/iteach-principles/engaging-children-in-learning-through-purposeful-play>
- 15 Qualified teacher status is required in order to teach in maintained primary schools. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/qualified-teacher-status-qts>
- 16 Retrieved from: <https://www.tes.com/news/dont-forget-teachers>

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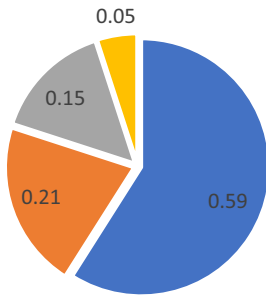
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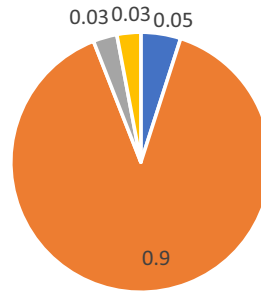
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Appendices

Appendix (1) Questionnaire respondents' school profiles



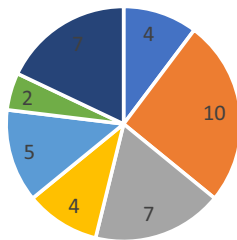
■ L.A. School
 ■ Stand-alone Academy
 ■ Multi Academy Trust



■ Infant school ■ Primary School
 ■ Pre-prep ■ Other

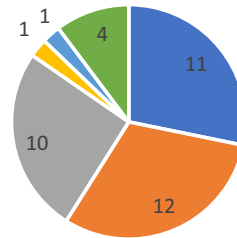
School Status

School Type



■ 0-100 ■ 100-200 ■ 200-300 ■ 300-400
 ■ 400-500 ■ 500-600 ■ 600+

School Size (Number on roll)



■ Johnstown ■ Frankshire ■ Gordonshire
 ■ Grantshire ■ Martinshire ■ Unknown

School Location (county pseudonyms)

Appendix 1. Questionnaire respondents' school profiles.

Appendix 2. Demographic profiles of the participants' school contexts

Name	ITE	Qualification	School status	NoR	Location	Free school meals*	IDACI score	IDACI rank	IDACI decile
Participant E	1980s	BEd	Independent	200-600	Rural village	N/A	29667	10	0.042
Participant D	2010s	BA & QTS	Academy	600+	Town	21.80%	6620	3	0.301
Participant F	1980s	PGCE	MAT	400-500	Town	13.20%	17553	6	0.135
Participant B	2000s	BA & QTS	LA	100-200	Market town	47.60%	18298	6	0.127
Participant G	1990s	PGCE	MAT	100-200	Town	40.20%	21973	7	0.095
Participant H	2000s	PGCE	Academy	600+	Town	16.50%	11512	4	0.213
Respondent A	1970s	BEd	MAT	100-200	Rural village	N/A	22367	7	0.091
Participant C	2010s	BA & QTS	Academy	400-500	Urban village	12.90%	20891	7	0.103

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