

# THE POWER OF MUSIC

**YOUTH MUSIC POSITION PAPER**

September 2009



# The Power of Music

To mark the DCSF initiative 'Tune In – Year of Music' Professor Sue Hallam from the Institute of Education has conducted an extensive review of published research in order to highlight some of the benefits of music for the development of children and young people. This document summarises some of the main findings and places them in the context of the work we do at Youth Music.

Whilst the reports and evaluations we carry out at Youth Music highlight many of the differences our programmes make to young lives, this report provides supporting evidence from across the academic spectrum and can help us focus our thinking on how we approach our work and why there is a continued need. A clear case is made for the benefits of music making for all children and young people providing a key advocacy tool for Youth Music and our partners.

This short paper is split into two sections, the first summarises some of the key findings, the second puts these findings into the context of our strategic goals for 2010-2015. You are also encouraged to read Hallam's full report which can be found here: [http://www.ioe.ac.uk/Year\\_of\\_Music.pdf](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/Year_of_Music.pdf)

## 1. What kind of benefits can young people get from making music?

### Language, Literacy and General Intelligence

There is a growing body of work looking at how music making affects the brain. Many studies have shown how learning music uses similar processes as learning sounds and patterns, which in turn can aid in the development of language and reading. Crucially, further studies have shown that if structured and long term music making is provided at an early stage (i.e. pre-school) then these benefits are even greater (Anvari et al., 2002, Gromko , 2005).

Many studies have also discovered a link between musical training and improvements in spatial-temporal reasoning (i.e. the ability to visualise patterns and manipulate them over time), which can lead to better general intelligence (Hetland , 2000). It should be remembered, however, that these benefits are only observable for long term structured music making and depend on the development of musical skills (not musical exposure alone).

### Academic Improvement

Better academic attainment is often achieved by those learning to play a musical instrument; however, a key reason for this may be greater motivation more generally. Motivation is linked to self-perceptions of ability and self-efficacy (i.e. how able a person feels to carry out tasks), therefore, the higher a person's motivation, the bigger the gains in achievement. Musical practice is well placed to increase and nurture motivation in children and young people (Hallam , 2005), but again there is evidence that children must enjoy their music making in order to sustain motivation.



## Personal and Social Development

Self-image, self-awareness and positive attitudes are also related to motivation and success. Costa-Giomi (2004) has shown how learning to play the piano can positively affect each of these outcomes, especially for children from low-income backgrounds. Better attitudes towards learning and the peer group can also create an increase in social cohesion and improved behaviour, and using music as part of this process can be especially useful for disengaged and disaffected children and young people (Spychiger et al., 1993). Commitment, respect, responsibility and trust have been highlighted as key factors in the success of musical groups, and are recognised as essential skills to be developed through structured music-making (Davidson and Good, 2002).

Broh (2002) has shown how increased opportunities for intergenerational music-making create significant improvements in young people's cultural and social capital. Cultural capital is the extent to which young people feel they have knowledge of and access to multiple cultural forms (e.g. different types of music, theatre, literature and so forth). Higher cultural capital has been linked to better general health, psychological wellbeing and educational attainment (Bourdieu 1984). Social capital is the extent to which people feel part of a community and is measured by their involvement in different aspects of social life (i.e. through volunteering, being part of clubs and teams, meeting others in the community). Increased social capital in children and young people has been shown to improve physical and mental health, behavioural outcomes, and community cohesion (Ferguson, 2006). High levels of social and cultural capital are key factors in experiencing a safe, healthy and rewarding life in childhood and youth and community music making can provide significant increases in both outcomes.

## Emotional Development

By providing a way for children and young people to express themselves, music making can also develop emotional intelligence and wellbeing. Research shows how the physical act of singing can improve mood, increase relaxation and reduce physical and emotional stress (Clift et al., 2008). Importantly, many of the personal and social outcomes described above are also related to improvements in emotional intelligence and wellbeing. Increased social and cultural capital and increased feelings of self-efficacy and agency are strongly related to psychological wellbeing and reduced stress (Almedom, 2005).

## 2. How does this fit with Youth Music's strategic direction?

### Early Years

There is growing evidence that the positive outcomes discussed above are increased through earlier exposure to music making and learning. Whilst the amount of research focusing on the effects of early years music making is limited compared to other areas of childhood, there is evidence showing positive effects, particularly around the development of parent-child communication and language and reading skills. As with all the additional benefits of music making, Hallam stresses the importance of high-quality instruction and consistent access.

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## Children and Young People in Challenging Circumstances

The relationship between musical participation and personal, social, or emotional benefits is interrelated, and complicated as a result. Rather than one off music making creating direct behavioural, emotional, physical or material changes for children and young people in challenging circumstances, the evidence is stronger that continued music making provides opportunities for wider development. Crucially, music is a key interest for children and young people and features strongly in the development of their identities, therefore they are more likely to get involved with music projects and benefit from that involvement. By ensuring consistent provision, Youth Music gives young people the choice to get involved in something that can make a difference to their own and other's lives.

The strong evidence for improvements in group cohesion and social capital shows how music making projects can benefit communities more widely. Whilst there is clear evidence for many developmental outcomes within formal music provision, informal music making opportunities are better suited to improve community relations and foster the impact of this on the individuals taking part (i.e. linking increased social capital with improved individual wellbeing). Youth Music can help marginalised individuals and groups feel part of a collective, to the benefit of those taking part and their wider communities.

Again a critical consideration is that the opportunities provided are of high quality and that the young people taking part are encouraged to be realistic about their development. If there is a low standard of provision, or if young people feel that they are not able to improve, the observed positive outcomes will be low, or, at worst, negative.

## Encouraging Musical Talent and Potential

As discussed above, a key factor in gaining wider benefits from music making is motivation. Motivation can be nurtured through encouragement and access to high quality tuition and material support. In order to maintain motivation and commitment it is essential that children and young people can aspire to success and are exposed to musical excellence. Youth Music has a key role in supporting pathways to excellence and showing children and young people that success is achievable. The evidence discussed by Hallam suggests that wider benefits do not come from innate musical talent; instead they increase in tandem with consistent access and commitment to musical training.

## Workforce Development

Underlying each of the benefits music making can offer children and young people is Hallam's assertion that provision is consistent and of high quality. This stresses the continued importance of training for teachers, tutors, and music leaders. Whilst teaching methods clearly differ across genres and instruments, and with an acknowledgement that there are many different approaches to high quality music teaching, Youth Music has a key role to play in ensuring that a wide range of training is provided and that all who want to can access this training. Outside the formal curriculum there remains a need to benchmark quality and support and encourage music and youth practitioners to maintain and develop such a benchmark. It cannot be overstated that the benefits discussed in Hallam's review are only achievable if music making is delivered by a knowledgeable and flexible workforce.

## Conclusion

Music can be very powerful indeed, but there are many factors to consider in ensuring that the power of music is maximised and made available to as many people as possible. Hallam's review and this document serve as a timely reminder of these factors and the significance of our continuing work.

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\* Full Bibliography available in Hallam's review

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