

Executive summary

Context

There is a strong professional belief that music is an important element in the lives of children and young people with special educational needs. However, evidence from OfSTED (1999) suggests that the quality of music education provision is satisfactory or better in only one third of special schools in England. The purpose of this research project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Trust with support from the Royal National Institute for the Blind, has been to investigate the nature of music education provision for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) or profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD).

The research was conducted in three phases across the 1999-2000 academic year and included questionnaire sampling and school visits, supplemented by informal discussions with teachers and other professionals who were involved in SLD and PMLD provision. A total of 53 schools participated. Although the research was exploratory in nature, the evidence suggests that there is considerable variation in the quantity and quality of music education and music therapy available to pupils. Nevertheless, there is a range of examples of sound educational practice that could provide the basis for raising standards across this special school sector to ensure that the belief in the importance of music is consistently matched with appropriate provision.

Main findings

- 1 Extrapolation from DfEE sources suggests that there are 397 schools in England designated to cater for SLD, PMLD or Multisensory Impairment (MSI), a category that includes SLD and PMLD pupils. A further 200+ special schools also make provision for SLD and PMLD pupils. The data indicate that this section of the special school population comprises in excess of 30,000 children in England (section 1 pp9 ff).
- 2 There are no established definitions of the terms SLD and PMLD that are readily available and understood across the sector. Accordingly, the research team generated working definitions of SLD and PMLD that matched generally with responses from schools. For the purposes of

the research, pupils with PMLD were regarded as having profound global developmental delay, such that cognitive, sensory, physical, emotional and social developments are in the very early stages (as in the first year of usual development). Pupils with SLD have severe global development delay, such that cognitive, sensory, physical, emotional and social developments are in the early stages (as in the first twelve to thirty months of usual development). However, there is considerable variety to be found within these global categorisations (section 4.3 pp25 ff).

- 3 Unsurprisingly, therefore, the pupil population is not always accurately reflected in the official school label, such that SLD and PMLD pupils are to be found in other parts of the special education sector; SLD and PMLD schools may also have pupils with other forms of disability (sections 1 pp9 ff and 3.3 pp17 ff).
- 4 Where schools differentiated in their responses between SLD and PMLD pupils, the reported ratio was approximately 4:1 (section 4.3 pp25ff).
- 5 There is a wide variation in the size of the schools, with a complex mix of age groups across those that participated (section 3.6 p19 ff). However, by far the most common category of age population in participating schools was 'all age', embracing early years to post-16 (section 3.4 pp18 ff). Notwithstanding the nature of the pupil population, such a wide range is likely to make particular demands on the music education expertise of teachers.
- 6 Virtually all schools had a designated music co-ordinator and the title was commonly understood and used (section 4.1.1 pp22 ff). The majority of full-time music co-ordinators had a range of other duties and teaching responsibilities, whereas those working part-time tended only to teach music. Over half the music co-ordinators had no significant background or qualification in music or music education.
- 7 Most pupils however, received music tuition from their own class teacher who classified themselves as 'non-specialists' in music (section 4.1.1 pp22 ff).
- 8 Approximately one third of schools provided music therapy on site (section 4.1.2 p23). Within these, the proportion of pupils actually receiving music therapy was estimated at 5 per cent. This equates to less than 2 per cent of the SLD and PMLD pupil populations overall.



- 9 Continuing professional development (CPD) in music education appears to be ad hoc and reactive to the availability of local provision, although collectively there is a range of possible CPD providers (section 4.2 pp23 ff).
- 10 All but one school had a music policy document. Half of current School Development Plans mentioned music (section 4.10 pp43 ff). The majority of schools based their schemes of work on the National Curriculum for Music (statutory for pupils aged 5 to 14 years in maintained schools) (section 4.4.1 pp28 ff). Nevertheless, specified example activities demonstrated a bias towards the early years ('Foundation Stage'), reflecting the developmental ages of the pupil populations. Overall, there was no common curriculum framework evident for these groups of children.
- 11 Music therapy activities demonstrated the same eclectic mix, based on the perceived individual needs of pupils, personal expertise and local circumstances (section 4.5 p31 ff).
- 12 Without exception, headteachers were extremely positive about the potential and actual benefits to their pupils of engaging in music activities (section 4.6 pp32 ff).
- 13 Notwithstanding the wide variation in the formal design of music curricula, all schools made extensive use of music in other areas of the curriculum (sections 4.7.1 p33 and 4.7.2 pp33 ff) and therapies. Music was seen as a catalyst for other types of activity. Consequently, children were often exposed to significant amounts of music during the school day, but this was somewhat idiosyncratic in its conception. Responses suggested that there was little or no connection between the formal music curriculum and musical activities within the wider curriculum. Nevertheless, the majority of music co-ordinators stated that musical objectives appeared regularly on most SLD/PMLD pupils' Individual Learning Plans (section 4.10 pp43 ff).
- 14 The resources for music varied across schools. Nearly half of schools had a specified music room, with a higher proportion (two-thirds) having multisensory rooms or areas that held musical equipment (section 4.8.1 pp38 ff). The widespread use of unpitched percussion probably reflected the conceptualisation of much of the music curriculum within an early years framework and also the music education expertise of the (essentially non-specialist)

teachers. Only one third of schools reported that they had a specific budget for music (section 4.8.1 pp38 ff) and this was generally small in comparison to the cost of musical instruments or music technology, suggesting that such equipment was likely to be purchased (if at all) through the allocation of other funding.

- 15 The technology used in schools for music largely comprised 'domestic' sound reproduction equipment (section 4.9 pp39 ff). This is likely to mitigate against active participation by pupils; although there were exceptions, such as ultrasonic beams, it would appear that these were neither widely nor systematically used.
- 16 Links with the wider community for musical activities were widespread and varied (section 4.11 pp44 ff), although most of the artists that were brought into school did not specialise in work with pupils with special needs.
- 17 The majority of respondents did not make distinctions between attainment and progress in music (section 4.12 pp47 ff). This is probably inevitable, given the lack of an agreed curriculum, the wide variation within the pupil populations, both coupled to the general lack of empirically based research data on SLD and PMLD children's musical behaviours and development.
- 18 When prompted however, teachers were able to identify particular pupils (1:10) who were perceived as either showing a considerable flair for music, or who had a marked interest in musical activities (section 4.13 pp52 ff).
- 19 Overall, there is evidence that music is a significant component of the lives of pupils with SLD and PMLD. There is a widespread recognition in schools of the potential benefits of music, both as an area of development in its own right and also to many other areas of pupil development. This suggests a positive basis for progress if schools were to be provided with clearer guidance on how to frame music education for SLD and PMLD pupils, informed by a coherent and comprehensive set of studies into such pupils' musical behaviours and development in educational and other settings.

