

POINTS FOR DEBATE

The editors would particularly welcome comments on or responses to articles which appear in the 'Points for Debate' section. These may be in the form of a short paper or letter and should be sent to Dr Stephanie Pitts, Department of Music, University of Sheffield, 38 Taptonville Road, Sheffield S10 5BR, s.e.pitts@sheffield.ac.uk. Selected contributions will be published at the earliest opportunity.

OFSTED, fun and learning: a case study of a school music inspection

Peter Cope

p.a.cope@stir.ac.uk

In December 2001, the Times Educational Supplement reported on an OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) inspection in which a school music department had been heavily criticised for placing too much emphasis on fun and enjoyment. In this paper, the OFSTED report is examined for evidence of the assumptions and justifications of its negative conclusions. The place of enjoyment in teaching and learning music is discussed and it is suggested that enjoyment is important to underpin necessary implicit learning, to maintain motivation and to ensure a lifelong commitment to music. Furthermore, enjoyment is not an easy option, depending as it does on a balance between challenge and developing competence. It is concluded that the OFSTED report fails to back its judgement with convincing evidence, fails to acknowledge the possibility and legitimacy of different positions, and relies on the power of OFSTED for its own legitimacy.

Introduction

The words 'fun' and 'OFSTED' (Office for Standards in Education) do not often occur in the same sentence. The juxtaposition stems from a headline on the front page of the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) in December of 2001, 'Inspectors say no to joy'. The article described how a school had been criticised for making its music lessons too enjoyable. The OFSTED report was quoted as noting: 'Pupils are under-achieving in music because the teaching is unsatisfactory. It places too much emphasis on fun rather than learning' (TES, 2001). OFSTED is no stranger to controversy, but the newsworthiness of this particular report stems from its apparent dissension from a common perception that the fundamental purpose of music *is* enjoyment. Music is a subject which underpins the career aspirations of a minority of pupils. Eastop (2000) points out that, even among the small percentage of pupils who learn to play a musical instrument at school, very few will be sufficiently proficient to audition for a conservatoire and only a small number of these will gain entrance. Those who graduate will then have to compete for the relatively

few job vacancies for performing musicians. There are, of course, other avenues for those wishing to pursue a career in music but the point remains that, for most adults, whether they listen or participate more actively, music is a leisure activity. The idea that enjoyment can be overdone not only conjures up Gradgrindian images of schooling where toil and drudgery are a necessary and defining feature, but seems to miss the point of providing musical experiences at school. At the very least, it raises important questions about music in schools and about how questions of value and differences of philosophy are handled by OFSTED's quality assurance procedures.

OFSTED inspections have variously been characterised as reporting accurately on school performance (Woodhead, 1999), deprofessionalising and demotivating teachers (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996), and seriously damaging schools (Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). Recently, there has been a hint that OFSTED has recognised that inspections may 'ignore the school and simply knock it about' (Woodward, 2001). The establishment of an OFSTED ombudsman indicates an acceptance that outcomes of inspections may be contentious. Nevertheless, there is no sign that the regime of inspection is likely to be fundamentally changed. The questions that have been raised about quality assurance of education in general and OFSTED in particular (see, for example, Davis & White, 2001) remain. Particularly problematic is the nature of the criteria that form the framework used for inspection. The assumption that their meanings are unambiguous allows OFSTED to claim that their inspections are based on valid and reliable judgements about teaching and learning. But, as Gilroy & Wilcox (1997) have pointed out, interpretation of the criteria is unlikely to be based on the shared understanding necessary for reliable and consistent outcomes. Furthermore, the assumption that the criteria are unequivocal representations of 'good practice' is highly dubious.

It is this latter difficulty that underpins unease about the kind of judgements revealed by this inspection and highlighted in the *TES* article. The relationship between enjoyment and good practice in music education is a matter for debate, and OFSTED's negative reaction to fun is highly contestable. Such ambiguity might be expected to lead to judicious caution in both judgement and reporting. But OFSTED was sufficiently confident about this report to use it to publicly castigate an identifiable staff member. This paper examines the evidence base of the report and, in the absence of an explicit statement of its value base, contrasts the implied values and OFSTED's subsequent justification with evidence from theory and research in music education. It draws conclusions about the ethics and effectiveness of the inspection.

The OFSTED report

The OFSTED report on the school as a whole is not unfavourable. In the summary report, overall teaching is described as 'good', as is achievement across all levels of attainment. Leadership is also 'good' and the school provides 'good value for money'. Criticisms of the kinds of judgements made to arrive at these conclusions and of their meaning have been made elsewhere (Richards, 2001). Here, it should be noted that, on balance, the report on the school could be considered as positive. However, there are a number of negative aspects which emerge on further reading. One of these is the nature of the provision in the music department.

Criticisms of music appear with regularity throughout the document. In answer to the question 'How good is the school?', we find that:

Pupils are underachieving in music because the teaching is unsatisfactory. It places too much emphasis on fun rather than learning. (OFSTED, 2001: 7)

As far as 'standards' are concerned:

In music [standards] are well below average. Pupils...are underachieving in ...music. (Ibid.: 8)

Pupils achieve well, compared to their attainment on entry to the school, in all subjects except ... music where they are underachieving. (Ibid.: 12)

Standards have improved in almost all subjects since the previous inspection. They ... have not improved sufficiently in music ... (Ibid.)

Standards are below average in all other subjects except ... music where they are well below average. (Ibid.: 13)

Pupils achieve well in all other subjects except...music...where pupils are underachieving. (Ibid.)

Not surprisingly, the report is highly critical of teaching in music:

Teaching ... is weakest in ... music. (Ibid.: 9)

In years 7 to 9, teaching is good in all subjects except...music, in which it is unsatisfactory ... (Ibid.: 17)

Teaching in years 10 and 11 is good in all subjects except...music, in which it is unsatisfactory ... (Ibid.)

It is also critical of the management of the music department:

There are weaknesses, however, in the management of ... music ... (Ibid.: 26)

In spite of the relentless nature of these criticisms, it is not clear, in this part of the report, what the nature of the problem is. We are told that standards are not high enough, teaching is not good enough, and pupils are underachieving. But only towards the end of the general section of the report, in the part concerned with improvement, are we given a clue as to the specific deficits which OFSTED claims to have identified. Achievement in music will be improved, it asserts,

by ensuring teachers focus their planning sufficiently on the technical aspects of the subject, rather than just promoting enjoyment. (Ibid.: 29)

So it seems that the basis of the critique lies in perceptions of problems with planning and lack of sufficient attention to the 'technical aspects' of music, and an over-emphasis on fun.

It also becomes clear that things are not all bad. The school has clearly managed to establish music as an area that is well regarded by the pupils. One of the striking features of this report is the way it contrives to present positive achievements in music as part of a criticism. Hence, it acknowledges that the strategy of 'promoting enjoyment' has produced

a surge in enthusiasm for the subject. But it wraps up this highly commendable feature of the school's music provision in the context of a negative statement:

In music, the emphasis has been placed on enjoyment rather than raising standards, so that while pupils' enthusiasm for the subject *has rocketed*, they are still underachieving. (Ibid.: 18, emphasis added)

So in spite of the pupils' clear enthusiasm for music, by the time we reach the section of the report that deals with each subject in turn, we are not surprised to find that:

Overall the quality of provision in music is *unsatisfactory*. (Ibid.: 54, original emphasis)

Given the consistently detrimental nature of the report on music, we might expect to find the criticisms backed up by substantive supporting evidence in the subject-specific section of the report. But it becomes clear that we have to rely solely on the opinion of the single specialist OFSTED inspector to decide on whether 'standards' are appropriate and teaching is satisfactory. The report, for example, gives no details on examination achievement because 'the number of candidates entered for the GCSE examination in 2000 was too low to allow statistical comparisons to be made' (ibid.: 54). The use of raw examination data is, of course, open to considerable problems of interpretation because of the contextual factors and the statistical variation. But it is interesting to note that, according to the newspaper article (*TES*, 2001), in the year of the inspection 40 per cent of pupils achieved an A* to C in music at GCSE. Numbers of candidates sitting are not given but *TES* notes that this percentage is higher than the national average of 33 per cent achieving these grades. In the absence of pupil numbers, we have to be careful about interpretations of these data, but they do not support the disastrous picture painted by the OFSTED report. In particular, they challenge the statement made on page 55 of the report where it is claimed that, at the end of Year 11, pupils 'are trying to gain skills that should have been learnt in earlier years and this restricts their access to higher GCSE grades'.

Although the accusation of a lack of focus on technique is restated in this section of the report, the evidence on which this is based is unclear. We are told that by the end of Year 9, pupils 'sing enthusiastically but not with a full range of technique and tone control' (OFSTED, 2001: 54). In keyboard work, 'pupils play rhythmically but do not use an appropriate technique' (ibid.). Curiously, in addition to playing rhythmically, they 'perform hesitantly' (ibid.). But although further references are made to 'lack of technique', the only specific example of a technical deficit is in keyboard playing, where pupils apparently use 'just one or two fingers, which leads to an inability to perform more difficult pieces or to combine both hands fluently' (ibid.).

There are other complaints. 'Compositions are very basic' (ibid.). Pupils do not use ICT 'to support musical performance and composition' (ibid.). Perhaps most remarkably, it appears that, in spite of the repeated complaints about the quality of the teaching, not a single lesson observed by the inspector was unsatisfactory, this in spite of the litany of complaints listed thus far. The unsatisfactory outcome is apparently due to a deficit in long-term planning within the music department. Recurring in this section is the complaint that 'too much emphasis has been placed on fun and not enough on teaching the technical aspects of the subject', and that 'The department has, until recently, focused too much on

the extra-curricular activities and instrumental opportunities in order to improve pupils' enthusiasm for the subject' (ibid.).

In spite of this negative picture, the report and the associated *TES* article do reveal some more positive aspects of the school's music provision. The most obvious of these is the way in which the school has captured the enthusiasm of the pupils for music. Even the OFSTED report, which manages to portray this aspect of improvement in a critical light, describes the enthusiasm as having 'rocketed'. There are repeated (and negative) references to fun in the report and it is clear that the school places far more emphasis on this aspect than the OFSTED inspector feels is appropriate. We also know that the school has done a lot of work on extra-curricular provision of activities for pupils, although, for OFSTED, this is interpreted as an inappropriate emphasis. The *TES* article also makes it clear that the music department has the full support of the head teacher and of the parents of the school.

What is most striking about these differing perspectives is that they clearly stem from radically different approaches to music education. The school appears to see music as being about enthusiasm and participation, while OFSTED emphasises 'standards' and technical matters. Their concerns are further explained by a statement from an OFSTED spokeswoman quoted in the *TES* article which reported the case:

Music lessons should be fun but, unless pupils have a proper grasp of technical aspects, they can't enjoy them as much as they could. (*TES*, 2001)

There is a logical problem with this statement, which implies that the school is *not* succeeding in engendering enjoyment amongst the pupils. The casual intellectual sloppiness of this remark suggests that justification of inspection reports is not a priority. Nor does it suggest that research evidence is a priority for OFSTED. There is, unsurprisingly, evidence that shows that music education that was experienced as boring or too difficult results in adults who lack confidence in their musical abilities (Hennessy, 2000). It also begs the question of whether a focus on 'technical aspects' is a prerequisite for successful learning in music, as well as for enjoyment.

Teaching and learning in music

One of the striking features of the OFSTED report is the confidence and certainty with which it is presented. It might seem to the lay reader that teaching and learning in music are well understood and non-contentious. But there are, in music as in other subjects, competing philosophies and methodologies. Plummeridge (2000) points out that a characteristic feature of music education in schools over the past 100 years has been its diversity. Although the National Curriculum Subject Working Group for music tried to reflect different strands of thinking, there are still significant differences of opinion about the nature of music education. It is clear that the knowledge involved in participation in and understanding of music is complex. Playing a musical instrument depends partly on cognitive and sensory-motor skills and partly on a knowledge of musical principles. This latter is commonly implicit amongst practising musicians (Cope, 1998; Green, 2001). But as a number of commentators have pointed out (e.g. Hargreaves, 1982), school education tends to place more value on explicit, declarative knowledge than on skills or on implicit knowledge.

It has been clearly established that significant learning can take place by the acquisition of implicit knowledge. People have been shown to be capable of learning to handle complex tasks without awareness of the principles underlying the application of their knowledge (Berry & Dienes, 1993). Boreham (1992) demonstrated that in an area as apparently scientific and rational as medical practice, implicit knowledge plays a significant role in successful diagnosis. In music, Dowling (1993) has shown that practical experience enhances implicit knowledge of tonal frameworks and of pitch encoding. Dowling argues that implicit procedural knowledge is crucially important in understanding music and that this can only be developed by practical involvement. Learning about music is counter-productive if the implicit framework is not in place:

We should not be misled into thinking that imparting declarative knowledge helps people much in understanding music . . . students can't use elaborate declarative structures until they have the basic schemes to deal with sensory material. (Ibid.: 17)

This line of argument suggests that OFSTED have got their causal link the wrong way round. It is not the case that 'unless pupils have a proper grasp of technical aspects [of music], they can't enjoy them as much as they could' – quite the reverse. Pupils first need to develop a sound implicit knowledge of music by playing and interacting with it within and outwith the curriculum, a process surely dependent on motivation and enjoyment. Only when such a secure implicit basis is in place can they understand the technical aspects or develop meaningful higher order knowledge about music. And Dowling does not share OFSTED's aversion to fun:

if instead of *talking* to children, teachers got them *singing* it would help a lot and would produce active involvement. Also, it is fun. (Ibid.)

There is considerable support in the literature for the practical involvement of children in the making of music. Elliott (1995), for example, uses Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) concept of flow to underscore the key role of enjoyment in practical music-making. Enjoyment depends on the relationship between musical challenge and musical competence. If the challenge is too high for the current competence, the result is anxiety. If the challenge is not commensurate with competence, the result is boredom. It is not hard to see that either of these outcomes may result in disengagement. Enjoyment is not an accident but results when challenge and competence are appropriately balanced, and, contrary to OFSTED's assumption, this is not a trivial outcome.

The report was also concerned about the attainment levels of children learning to play musical instruments. On the face of it, enjoyment would seem to be an important feature of this aspect of music. Evidence relating to achievement in learning musical instruments suggests that a significant and crucial factor in success is the persistence of the learner (O'Neill, 1996). This is not surprising given the necessity for practice in order to develop the necessary skill level. Technique is considered important by conventional music tutors but, without practice, it is unlikely to develop in any significant way. In fact, over-emphasis on correct technique may be counter-productive in that it may have a demotivating effect on the learner. On the other hand, studies of popular musicians (Green, 2001) and adult learners (Cope, 2003) suggest that technique can be acquired as and when it becomes necessary if the learner is motivated to improve. Taken together, this evidence suggests that

keeping learners motivated and enthusiastic, by making learning enjoyable, is an important factor in achieving success in learning a musical instrument. If this is the case, then the school's approach to playing instruments has much to commend it.

Conclusion

The report examined raises a number of questions about OFSTED's policy on the quality assurance of teaching. First of all, there is the confidence and certainty with which the judgements are delivered. There is, in teaching music (as in all other subjects), substantial room for legitimate differences in professional opinion. Many aspects of the school's approach would appear, on the basis of the information in the OFSTED report and the subsequent *TES* piece, to be defensible. Enjoyment seems more likely to result in a lifelong attachment to music, which is in accordance with current commitments to the importance of lifelong learning. Enjoyment is more likely to develop the implicit learning that underpins the understanding of musical concepts. It is more likely to result in the persistence that is required to master a musical instrument. And enjoyment is not a cheap and easy option in responding to the problems of music pedagogy but is attained by matching musical opportunities and challenges to the developing competence of young musicians in a way that keeps them engaged.

There is no trace of doubt or room for debate in the OFSTED report, which is unremittingly and unquestionably hostile in relation to music in the school. It bases its critique on an appeal to standards, an appeal linguistically conceived to convey a sense of measurement and objectivity. These latter are absent – the report depends on the opinions of a single inspector. Woodhead (1999) has claimed that OFSTED reports represent 'disciplined subjectivity'. In practice, this amounts to an implicit claim to objectivity and there is no allowance made for the possibility of error or of legitimate professional difference. Whether the subjectivity is 'disciplined' or not, the contextual factors, the questions of value, philosophy and methodology, the history of the school and, most crucially, the grossly uneven power relations are all factors which imply the fragility and the potential injustice of imposed public judgements. In this case, the report makes no reference to the possibility of different values in music and no reference to the possibility of competing underlying rationales or methodologies.

A second problem is the source of OFSTED's authority. Far from a 'measurement' against a set of unambiguous standards, the report relies on the opinion of a single inspector and on an assumption of authority in the sense of expertise. This is inevitable, given the nature of the judgements to be made, but it means that the authority of the inspector is central to the whole process. And yet we have no way of making a judgement about this crucial factor since the report gives only the name – no qualifications, no summary of experience, no evidence on which to judge whether the inspector's implicit claim to authority has any validity whatsoever. Recent experience suggests that OFSTED's selection procedures for its inspection teams do not preclude the recruitment of incompetent and dubiously motivated individuals (Bright, 2000). Furthermore, this report shows that OFSTED's authority is based on power – underpinned by an implicit theory of performance management which assumes that pressurising and humiliating staff leads to improvement. OFSTED's view clearly does not contribute to a dialogue about learning but assumes a

privileged position based on that power. The OFSTED inspector has the power to make judgements which are presented as objective (even though they cannot possibly be), and to describe the overall level of the music provision as unsatisfactory, in spite of significant evidence to the contrary.

A third problem lies in the public reporting of the judgements, which has implications both for the ethics of the process and for the potential for school improvement. Inglis (2000) points out that in the current climate:

Accountability . . . is a pistol loaded with blame to be fired at the heads of those who cannot answer charges. The pistol is fired in public. Its lesson is that wounds shall be visibly inscribed on reputation. (Ibid.: 424)

It may well be that the music department has problems in areas such as planning and that there is room for debate on the balance between technique and enjoyment. But improvements are not likely in a system which delivers subjective and punitive 'quality' snapshots and ignores or undervalues the efforts and progress the school has made in advancing the cause of music in a way that seems laudable to parents and to readers of the report. There is clear evidence of the debilitating effects of OFSTED inspection on conscientious and well-motivated teaching staff (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996). A more effective and certainly more ethical approach would include a professional discussion about the issues raised and an exploration of alternatives, accompanied by genuinely supportive strategies. Inglis (2000) suggests that it would be far more effective to conduct inspections so that they incorporated 'properly reflective, open and collaborative exchange' (ibid.: 428) rather than attempting to 'shame everyone into making things better' (ibid.: 426). In this instance the music department has been publicly criticised in a way that is unlikely to do anything but undermine the authority, morale and effectiveness of the teachers. Not only is this unlikely to be effective but, in the context of schooling, a profoundly ethical process, the blatant disregard of any concern for the ethics of the process is repellent.

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