

## ARTICLE

# Enjoyment of music and GCSE uptake: survey findings from three North East schools in England

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## Abstract

In recent years, music education has seen a decline in the number of students choosing to continue their studies at Key Stage 4 (14- to 16-year-old students) and choose music as a GCSE option in England. Whilst the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a school performance measure which excludes the arts, has come under much scrutiny as to its impact on school music, enjoyment and the perceived importance of music lessons could also be contributing factors to low uptake. This paper presents student survey findings from the first part of a two-phase project that was based on a qualitatively driven mixed-method research design. Findings demonstrated that a decline in enjoyment and in the importance attributed to school music occurred in the first three years of lower secondary school (Key Stage 3). The enjoyment of school music was linked with the students' engagement with practical components of music making, and its importance was mostly equated with future employment opportunities. The findings are discussed in terms of their practical implications in the teaching of music in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** GCSE music uptake; student survey; enjoyment; importance; attitudes towards music

## Introduction

Music education has undergone many developments over the past three decades. Since the introduction of music into the National Curriculum in 1992, a variety of initiatives and policies have been implemented with a view to increasing participation and diversifying music provision. Some of these include Whole Class Ensemble Teaching or First Access programmes in primary education (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, 2019), the Musical Futures programme (Musical Futures, 2019), developed following research into informal learning practices (Green, 2002), The Music Manifesto (DFES & DCMS), that aimed to provide musical experiences for every child (The Music Manifesto, Four Years On, 2004) and the National Plan for Music Education which introduced Music Education Hubs to help provide students with an opportunity to 'progress to the next level of excellence' (Department for Education, 2011, p. 9). A new Model Music Curriculum (March 2021) and the most recent National Plan for Music Education (HM Government, 2022) offer a practical framework with guidance for teachers in their efforts to provide effective music education for all pupils in all schools.

Whilst such initiatives have been developed to help increase participation, recent media headlines imply that involvement in GCSE<sup>1</sup> Music is in decline (e.g. Leigh, 2019; 'Music leaders express', 2018; Weale, 2018). With articles claiming that uptake of GCSE Music has dropped by nearly 20% since 2014/2015 (Leigh, 2019) and others claiming similarly alarming declines (Bath et al., 2020; 'Further decline in Arts GCSE and A level entries', 2018; 'Music leaders express', 2018; Thraves, 2018), it seems that school music provision is in a vulnerable position with only 7% of students choosing music as a GCSE option in 2017 (Carroll & Gill, 2018). More recently, the

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percentage of students choosing music as an option in 2022 has declined by 4% compared to 2020 (Joint Council for Qualifications, August 2022). This decrease is the most recent in a gradual trend of falling entries for GCSE music that shows a staggering decline of 19% in the last ten years (Independent Society of Musicians, 2022).

Furthermore, according to an independent review and analysis of data on instrumental opportunities provided by Music Education Hubs across the country, the number of students taking up instrumental playing, singing and benefitting from ensemble opportunities in their local areas seemed to decline in 2017 as students moved from primary to secondary school (Fautley & Whittaker, 2017). Three years later in their response to the National Plan for Music Education call for evidence, the Arts Council England (ACE) expressed preoccupation with young people's inconsistent progression from Whole Class Ensemble Teaching as well as their reduced progression at intermediate and advanced standards, particularly mentioning boys' participation in ensembles and the more limited progress of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those in receipt of pupil premium (Arts Council England, 2020). In their subsequent strategic guidance (2022–23), ACE advocated the importance of a strong national collaborative approach both across the music education sector and between Hubs. This collaboration aims to help realise the vision of a high-quality and progressive music education for all children and young people based on their needs and interests in accordance with the goals of the refreshed National Plan for Music Education (Department for Education and Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2022).

Within many of these publications, one commonly discussed threat to music education is the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in which students are encouraged to take a specific set of GCSE subjects (which excludes the arts) to help keep their 'options open for further study and future careers' (Department for Education, 2019). By 2022, the government aimed for 75% of students to be studying the EBacc subject combination, with this rising to 90% by 2025 (Department for Education, 2019). With such accountability measures and the ensuing pressure on schools to score highly on the EBacc measures, educational success is ascertained relative to these specific assessment expectations 'despite the narrowing of the curriculum and the prioritisation of certain subjects' (Savage, 2021, p. 470). Many teachers, as evidenced by Savage (2021) and Daubney and Mackrill (2018), have expressed concerns over the quality and breadth of music education provision in schools and lack confidence in music education policy decisions, leaving many anxious about the future position of music in primary and secondary schools. Similar apprehension about the impact of school accountability systems and the ensuing high-stakes testing on the narrowing of the curriculum has been raised by others, both in the UK (e.g. Bath et al., 2020) and internationally (Abril, 2019; Hentschke, 2013; Hebert & Heimonen, 2013; O'Connor & McTaggart, 2017; Shaw, 2018). The study reported in this article took place before the Covid-19 pandemic which greatly interrupted educational provision more broadly (Pietro et al., 2020) and impacted music teaching and learning in many ways (Daubney & Fautley, 2020, 2021).

Whilst the EBacc is under scrutiny from both media and music education advocates alike, this research aimed to explore the decline in uptake from a different angle; that of the students themselves. Ultimately, it is the students themselves who make the decision which school subjects to choose at GCSE level and whether Music is one of them. By exploring students' attitudes towards music lessons, the study aims to enhance current knowledge and contribute to relevant research on the current decline in music uptake by exploring how students' perceptions of importance and enjoyment of school music influence their subject choices at GCSE level.

### ***Students' attitudes and perceptions of school music***

Lamont and Maton (2008) provide comparative evidence on the importance of music lessons using a questionnaire completed by 912 students (attending Years 4–9). In relation to the importance attributed to the subject, music was found to be the least significant subject. An analysis by year group showed that the closer students got to GCSE, the less important they

perceived music to be. Students who chose to study GCSE Music, however, found it more important than those who did not. Whilst it has previously been suggested that this lack of importance may relate to students' future ambitions and careers (Stables & Wikeley, 1997), Lamont and Maton suggest that this alone is not the only explanation for the lack of significance attributed to music and the related issue of low GCSE uptake. They suggest that students' perceptions of the time and effort required to do well in music grow over time (which they term the 'elite code') and that this, coupled with limited career options from studying the subject, make music an uninviting choice at KS4.

Regarding the students' enjoyment of the subject, several relevant studies (Adey & Biddulph, 2001; Lamont et al., 2003; Little, 2009) showed that enjoyment of music has a partial role to play in uptake, suggesting that this is also influenced by students' perceived value of music lessons. Students who did not wish to pursue a career in music were less likely to continue at Key Stage 4 (KS4)<sup>2</sup> despite their enjoyment of the subject. Following Little's (2009) study, there appears to be a gap in educational research exploring students' attitudes towards school music specifically in relation to GCSE uptake.

The aim of this research was to explore how student attitudes towards music lessons, the importance or lack of importance they attribute to music and their enjoyment of the subject impact on GCSE uptake. The research questions that were asked are the following:

1. How do students of secondary school age (KS3)<sup>3</sup> perceive the subject of music in terms of importance?
2. How do students of secondary school age (KS3) perceive the subject of music in terms of enjoyment?
3. How do students' perceptions of importance and enjoyment influence their subject options at GCSE?

## Research design and methods

This paper presents student survey findings from the first part of a two-phase project that was based on a qualitatively driven mixed-method research design (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015). This type of design has the advantage of allowing the triangulation of data with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods resulting in improved accuracy (Denscombe, 2007). In addressing the aims of the current project, it was deemed appropriate to collect quantitative data on a larger scale before exploring students' attitudes in depth with the use of focus group interviews. The first survey phase of the project yielded data that answered the aforementioned three research questions and also helped inform the development of targeted questions in the subsequent in-depth interviewing stage. This paper presents and discusses the findings from the survey phase of the project. The interview findings are discussed elsewhere (Kokotsaki & Whitford, 2023).

## Participants

The study participants were students attending years 7, 8 and 9 (KS3) from three schools in the North East of England. The three schools were selected to represent geographical and socio-economic diversity within the North East of England and belonged to different local authorities.

School A was an 11–18 all-girls' academy in which KS3 runs from Year 7 to 9 (ages 11–14). At the time of the data collection period for this project, multiple extra-curricular music activities were offered (nine in total), including a string group, guitar club, two choirs and Grade 5 theory preparation, among others. A variety of instrumental tuition was also offered (at a cost to students) including strings, woodwind, brass, voice, drum kit and guitar. The school reported that students in KS3 received one hour of music per week and that uptake of GCSE Music over the past

**Table 1.** Breakdown of Questionnaire Responses by School, Year Group and Gender (M: Male, F: Female, O: Other, P: Prefer not to say)

	Year 7					Year 8					Year 9					Total
	M	F	O	P	Y7 Total	M	F	O	P	Y8 Total	M	F	O	P	Y9 Total	
School A	1	45	1	2	49	2	102	1	4	109	1	131	4	6	142	300
School B	22	18	1	2	43	15	26	0	0	41	16	29	1	6	52	136
School C	38	41	2	3	84	17	35	3	6	61	x	x	x	x	x	145
					176					211					194	581

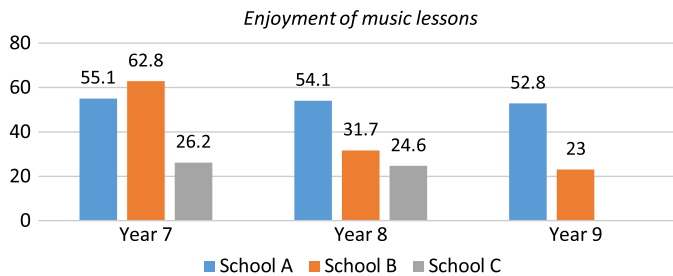
five years had been steady with healthy group sizes. School B was an 11–18 voluntary aided school in which KS3 also runs from Year 7 to 9. Unfortunately, information about extra-curricular activities, instrumental tuition, the time dedicated to music per week and uptake rates at KS4 were not available for this school. School C was an 11–16 mixed academy in which KS3 run from Year 7 to 8 (ages 11–13). As with school A, multiple extra-curricular music activities were offered including choirs, rock bands, a wind band and a keyboard club. Instrumental lessons included woodwind, brass, strings, drum kit, voice and piano. These were at a cost to students, although those eligible for pupil premium had their first lessons paid for. The amount of time allocated to music within KS3 for this school was not known but a decline in numbers for those students continuing at KS4 had been noted over the past 5 years.

### Data collection and analysis

The survey data were collected online from April to May 2019. At the time of data collection, all students involved who were at the end of KS3 had already chosen their KS4 options. The online questionnaires were created using the SmartSurvey software which was an efficient and economical tool in terms of the simultaneous collection of data from a large number of participants and the quick processing of the data (Tymms, 2017). All schools agreed to administer the questionnaire online to their students. Its completion was done during class time without the presence of the researcher and with no guidance from the class teacher. The questionnaire was carefully constructed taking into consideration relevant themes within the literature and questions asked in Little's study (2009) which also explored GCSE music uptake. Closed and open questions were used to gather quantitative data to support focus group findings. Closed questions were always followed by a prompting open question which invited students to justify their chosen closed type of response. The survey questions aimed to shed light on students' enjoyment or lack of enjoyment of their music lessons at school, the associated factors that contributed to these attitudes, the importance they would attribute to music compared with other school subjects, their thoughts about taking music as a GCSE option and the extent of their active involvement in school and out of school musical activities.

Questionnaire data were collected from all three schools, and a total of 686 responses were returned. Of these, 103 were only partially completed and were not used in the analysis. Furthermore, some participants from School C selected 'Year 9' as their year group. These responses were also removed as no Year 9 students were surveyed in School C. Overall, a total of 581 complete responses were used for analysis. A breakdown of responses per school, year group and gender can be seen in Table 1.

The questionnaire data were analysed using the data collection tool itself (SmartSurvey) which allows for text analysis whilst also providing a filtering tool in which complex combinations of responses can be viewed and analysed. Results were also exported and analysed using descriptive



**Figure 1.** Percentage of students that enjoyed music lessons in Schools A, B and C.

methods in Excel, such as exploring percentages and frequencies of responses whilst helping produce relevant figures to illustrate the findings visually.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was gained from the School of Education Ethics Committee at Durham University. All recommended ethical guidelines outlined in the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) have been adhered to. Before students participated in the study, they were informed of its aims, what their participation would entail, how the information would be used and that the online questionnaires were completely anonymous. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and could decide not to take part in the survey and/or the focus group interviews that followed.

The questionnaire findings are presented in the next section. The data were collected to investigate students' enjoyment and the importance they attributed to the subject of music at school in connection with their choice of subjects at GCSE.

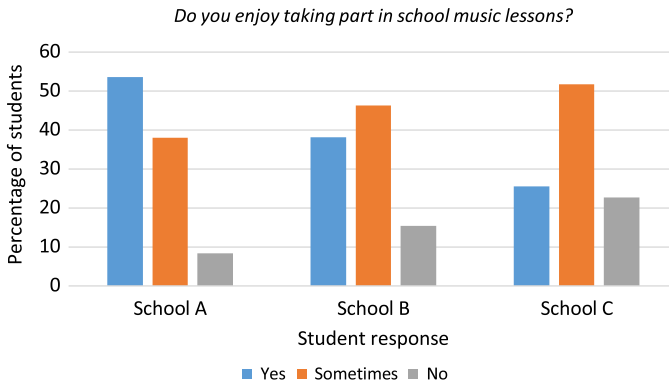
## **Questionnaire findings**

### **Enjoyment of music**

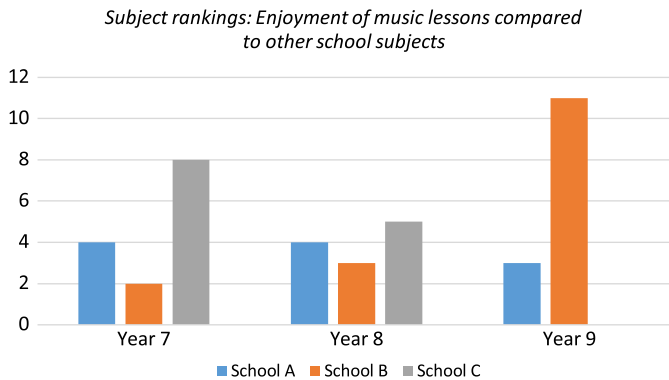
The fourth question in the questionnaire asked students 'do you like taking part in school music lessons?' with response options being 'yes', 'no' and 'sometimes'. The findings showed a decline in those who responded 'yes' in Schools A and B. In other words, there were fewer students in these two schools who fully enjoyed music lessons from Years 7 to 9. In School C, the same pattern of lowered enjoyment of school music lessons was apparent between Years 7 and 8. Following the trend from Schools A and B, it may be assumed that the same decline may have occurred in School C had KS3 continued into Year 9 (Fig. 1). Whilst a decline in enjoyment was found in all schools, it was more drastic in School B but more gradual and smaller in Schools A and C.

Across the whole student sample (for all year groups), the majority of students in each school responded to this question with 'Yes' or 'Sometimes'. 'No' was always the least selected response, showing that in all schools, 76% of the students or more, at least 'Sometimes' enjoyed their music lessons. Differences occurred, however, between School A (the girls' school) and Schools B and C (mixed schools). As shown in Fig. 2, School A had more students responding 'Yes', whilst in Schools B and C more students responded 'Sometimes' to this question. These findings are in line with previous work (e.g. Lamont et al., 2003; Little, 2009) where it was found that enjoyment of music seems to decline as students approach KS4.

When given an opportunity to expand on what the most enjoyable parts of music lessons were, prominent themes across all schools involved practical elements such as playing the keyboard or other instruments, being creative and composing, learning new pieces and working with peers or friends in pairs and groups. A notable response that only appeared in School C was that students



**Figure 2.** Comparison of all student responses per school in response to the question ‘Do you enjoy taking part in school music lessons?’.

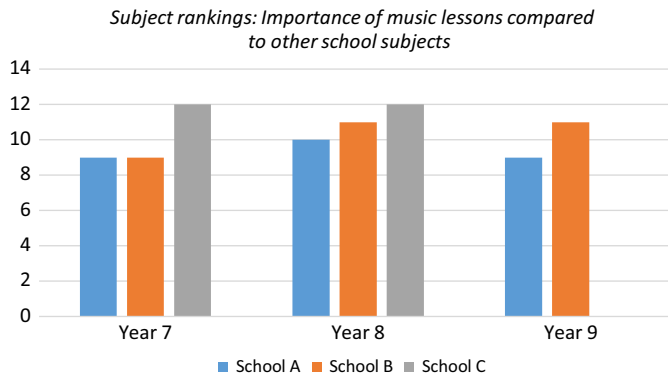


**Figure 3.** Ranking position of the subject of Music in comparison to other school subjects in terms of student enjoyment.

particularly enjoyed using GarageBand (a digital audio workstation) during lessons. Conversely, elements cited as being the least enjoyable parts of music lessons included working in silence, engaging in written or theoretical work, being assessed and having to perform in front of others which caused some students to feel anxious or embarrassed.

Question seven in the questionnaire invited students to rank a list of twelve curriculum subjects in order of enjoyment. Subjects included were English, Maths, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Languages, History, Geography, Computer Science, Art, Drama and Music. As shown in Fig. 3, responses from School B remained consistent with responses from question 4, showing a decline in enjoyment of music lessons throughout KS3 when compared to other subject areas. Findings from Schools A and C, however, showed a different trend, with Music being ranked slightly more favourably in Year 9 (moving from a 4th to a 3rd ranking position) in School A and more evidently placed higher in the ranking of subjects in School C from Years 7 to 8 (moving from 8th to 5th place).

When participants were asked why they enjoyed the top-rated subjects, common themes involved that those lessons allowed for creativity were ‘fun’ and that students liked the teacher. Conversely, when asked what was not enjoyable about the lowest rated subjects, students cited that lessons were ‘boring’ (without any further explanation), topics within them were difficult or hard to understand and again responses highlighted the importance placed on the teachers and the teaching methods used.



**Figure 4.** Ranking position of the subject of Music in comparison to other school subjects in terms of perceived importance.

Question 10 asked students whether their music lessons gave them the opportunity to study the music of their choice. Those who responded ‘yes’ ranked music as 1st for enjoyment in question seven, whilst those responding ‘sometimes’ ranked it 2nd and those responding ‘no’ ranked music in the 11th position. This provides some indication that when students were given an element of choice in their music lessons, they expressed higher levels of enjoyment. A gender comparison would have potentially been useful and would have illuminated similarities and differences in perceptions between male and female students. However, due to the imbalanced gender composition of the sample, such a potentially biased comparison was not performed.

### Importance of music

Students were asked to rank 12 subjects in terms of how important each one was perceived to be as a school subject (Question 18). The subject list was the same as that used in question four. Findings showed that music was consistently ranked poorly, with students in School C ranking it as the least important subject in Years 7 and 8 (see Fig. 4).

In School B, music was placed in 9th ranking position by Year 7 students but 11th by students in Years 8 and 9, showing a decrease in students’ perceived importance of the subject over time. In School A, music was also ranked in 9th place among the 12 subjects by students in Year 7, and in 10th place by those in Year 8, again showing a slight decline. This improved however in Year 9, with music returning to the 9th place in students’ responses. A similarity between Schools A and B was found in that drama was consistently perceived as less important than music. Art and computer science were also the only other subjects ranked lower than music, with all other subjects being consistently perceived as more important. Whilst the ranking of music in Schools A and B was slightly higher than that observed in School C, it must be taken into consideration that students in Schools A and B reported that drama was not studied (Question 4).<sup>4</sup> This could explain the low ranking given to drama in Schools A and B. However, drama was also ranked poorly where it was studied in school C, placed in 11th ranking position by Year 7 students and 10th by those in Year 8. Table 2 shows students’ rankings of all subjects for each school by year group followed by the cumulative ranking per school. Interestingly, computer science is ranked poorly across all schools, and, in a number of cases, it is perceived as less important than music, art or drama.

Whilst this study did not intend to focus specifically on the subject of drama, this finding presents some interest as it implies that limited or no exposure to a subject in school may reduce its perceived importance. It can, therefore, be hypothesised that the amount of time (or lack of time) given to a curriculum subject could also have an impact on students’ perceptions. Further evidence in support of this hypothesis exists in relation to the poor ranking of computer science. Between 2012 and 2018, curriculum time given to computer science had dropped substantially,



Table 2. Ranking of School Subjects in Terms of Importance Per School and Year Group

	School A				School B				School C		
	Y7	Y8	Y9	Overall	Y7	Y8	Y9	Overall	Y7	Y8	Overall
<b>1</b>	M	M	M	M	M	E	M	M	M	E	M
<b>2</b>	E	E	E	E	E	M	E	E	E	M	E
<b>3</b>	B	B	B	B	H	B	B	B	G	B	B
<b>4</b>	P	C	C	C	L	C	C	C	B	C	G
<b>5</b>	C	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	H	H	H
<b>6</b>	H	L	G	H	G	L	L	L	L	P	C
<b>7</b>	G	H	H	G	C	H	H	H	P	G	P
<b>8</b>	L	G	L	L	B	G	G	G	C	L	L
<b>9</b>	Mu	CS	Mu	Mu	Mu	A	CS	CS	CS	A	CS
<b>10</b>	A	Mu	CS	CS	CS	CS	A	A	A	D	A
<b>11</b>	CS	A	A	A	A	Mu	Mu	Mu	D	CS	D
<b>12</b>	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	Mu	Mu	Mu

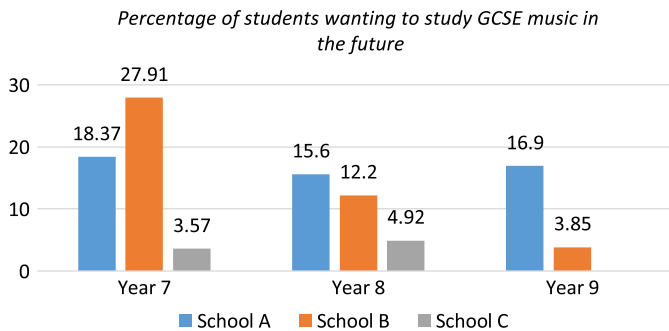
M = Maths    E = English    B = Biology    P = Physics    C = Chemistry  
 H = History    Mu = Music    A = Art    D = Drama    G = Geography  
 L = Languages    CS = Computer Science    **D** = Drama not studied

with some students receiving less than one hour of the subject a week (Kemp & Berry, 2019). This lack of curriculum time (which is similar to that allocated to arts subjects) could provide further indication that the perceived importance of school subjects may relate to the time they are allocated within the curriculum. In addition to time potentially affecting perceptions of importance, limited lesson time seems to also be contributing to students preferring music outside of school where they can allocate more time to their musical practice (see, for instance, Tossavainen & Juvonen, 2015).

When given the opportunity to express why the subjects they ranked highly were important, common responses included that the subjects were ‘needed’ or would be useful in later life, that they are required for future jobs and that they are most typically used in everyday life. Conversely, when asked why subjects at the bottom of the list were the least important (question 20), the most common themes included that these subjects were not required in day-to-day life or that they will not be useful, helpful or needed in later life. Additionally, it was frequently cited that they would not be required for jobs, with some students stating that fewer jobs exist in the areas related to these subjects. Exploring these rankings in relation to enjoyment, it was found that students who enjoyed music lessons ranked music in 9th place in terms of importance, those who ‘sometimes’ enjoyed the music lessons placed it in 11th ranking position and those who did not enjoy their lessons perceived it as the 12th least important subject. This shows a decline in importance depending on students’ levels of enjoyment, but it also demonstrates that overall, music was not regarded to be of great value even to students who enjoyed the subject.

Examining the findings in more detail, whilst music was still considered somewhat unimportant, findings differed slightly between schools. In School C, students’ perceived importance of music remained consistent with perceptions reported in past studies (Harvey, 1984; Stables & Wikeley, 1997) with music being the least important subject. In School B, the decline observed is in line with findings by Lamont and Maton (2008), and Tossavainen and Juvonen (2015) who found that the importance of music diminishes as students approach upper school





**Figure 5.** Percentage of students expressing a desire to study GCSE music.

grades. The exact reasons for the slight increase found in students' ranking of the subject of music in School A (from Years 8–9) are not known. However, Year 9 students in this school discussed fewer barriers to GCSE uptake than any other year group (see Kokotsaki & Whitford, 2023, for the second phase interview findings). This subsequent finding seems to indicate that this particular group of students may have experienced fewer challenges in their music learning at school which may have had a knock-on effect on their perceived importance of music.

Students' perceptions of the importance they attributed to music were then analysed in relation to question 13 which asked, 'Would you like to study GCSE Music in the future?'. Results for question 13 can be seen in Fig. 5. The highest percentage of students wishing to study music at GCSE level (about 28% at the beginning of secondary school) was attending School B but the number fell dramatically in subsequent years (Years 7 and 8). In School A, the overall number of students was lower (about 19%) from the start and remained constant in Years 7 and 8, with only slight fluctuations. Only a few students in School C (about 4% and 5% in Years 7 and 8, respectively) wished to study music at GCSE level. It was also found that those who expressed a desire to continue at KS4 ranked music 6th in terms of importance. Those who might have wanted to continue studying music at GCSE level ranked it 9th, whilst those who did not, placed it in 11th position among the other school subjects.

Common reasons for wishing to study GCSE Music for those who responded 'yes' were that lessons were enjoyable or fun, they played an instrument or they wanted to have a future career in music or the arts. Furthermore, when comparing these rankings to students' future career ambitions, the positions were exactly the same, showing that music was often regarded as more important by those wishing to continue their studies at KS4 and those wishing to pursue it as a career in the future.

Additional analysis showed that those receiving instrumental lessons both inside and outside of school (questions 11 and 14) valued music more than those who did not. Furthermore, with regards to choice within lessons (question 10), students who felt they were able to study the music of their choice ranked music as more important (9th) than those who felt they could sometimes have a choice (11th) and those who felt they did not (12th), showing that having the opportunity to study the music of their choice may increase students' perceptions of its importance.

## Discussion

The study findings confirmed that the participants regarded music as a relatively unimportant subject (RQ1) as, in all schools and across all three-year groups, it was consistently placed at the bottom third of all school subjects. In the survey responses, the study participants emphasised the importance of core subjects compared to optional subjects which were perceived as less important. This finding is well aligned with previous research, as in a number of relevant studies, music

typically appears as the least important subject alongside other areas of the arts (Harvey, 1984; Lamont & Maton, 2008; Stables & Wikeley, 1997) mainly because of career and future employment-related concerns (Stables & Wikeley, 1997; Wright 2002). Looking ahead to their future career, students often regard other areas of the curriculum as more important for securing employment. However, it is suggested in the literature that, even though many students consider music as less important compared to other subjects in school (McPherson, 2007; McPherson & Hendricks, 2010), they tend to have a special affinity to music in school (McPherson & O'Neill, 2010). Finnish students, for example, express positive views towards their musical learning in school but the importance they attribute to music seems to decrease as they move on through schooling to upper secondary school grades (Tossavainen & Juvonen, 2017). Despite this, their interest in music outside of school remains strong. Similarly to these studies, our results reinforced the finding that students at the beginning of secondary school reported their enjoyment of music as a school subject but their positive attitudes showed a gradual, albeit small, decline as they approached the end of KS3 and prepared to make their GCSE subject choices.

The second research question asked how secondary school age students perceived the subject of music in terms of enjoyment. The aim was then to ascertain how perceptions of importance (RQ1) and enjoyment (RQ2) would influence the students' subject options at GCSE with particular reference to the subject of music (RQ3). Although enjoyment was seen to decline in all schools, students did not have wholly negative views about music as a subject. The majority of students either liked or 'sometimes' liked lessons. This indicated that many students still did enjoy parts of their lessons similar to previous findings by Lamont et al. (2003). Adey and Biddulph (2001) and others (e.g. Little, 2009) found, however, that such enjoyment is often not a good enough reason for a student to continue a subject at KS4, with the 'usefulness' of a school subject playing a more important role in the decision-making process. Some of this study's participants expressed a similar view in the questionnaire responses that wishing to pursue a career in music was a key determinant of their decision to choose it at GCSE level. In this respect, the further study of music acquired a sense of value for their future aspirations. This view about how future career goals can have a negative impact on GCSE choices echoes findings in previous studies (Adey & Biddulph, 2001; Lamont & Maton, 2008; Little, 2009).

In line with previous research, the most enjoyable parts of music lessons were those which involved playing instruments and participating in practical work, composing, learning new pieces, working in groups (Kokotsaki, 2016; Lamont et al. 2003; Little, 2009) and making use of music technology (Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021). Incorporating opportunities for students to be involved in well-designed and carefully planned lessons having a focus on music technology may not only help to increase enjoyment but could also expose students to a number of additional career pathways in relation to recording and production helping them to gain a broader view of potential career options in the music industry.

Furthermore, whilst this study did not set out to explore gender differences in enjoyment of music lessons, some interesting findings were observed. A higher percentage of students expressed their liking for music in School A (an all-girls school), compared to the other two mixed schools (B and C). The analysis of enjoyment rankings by gender in the mixed schools revealed that females ranked music as being more enjoyable than males, similar to findings by Stables and Wikeley (1997), Button (2006) and Tossavainen and Juvonen (2015).

The study's findings cannot be generalised to the wider population (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) as they were based on the use of a convenience sample. The sample, however, did represent the views of the majority of all KS3 students in the three schools ( $N = 581$ ) making up an appropriate sub-set of units from the targeted population (De Vaus, 2013). The findings offered a broad picture of students' views about the importance they attributed to music, their enjoyment of the subject and how these might influence their choices at GCSE level. The study concludes with the authors' hope that students' enjoyment of Music as a subject and the importance they attribute to it will keep increasing in the near future leading to greater

student numbers choosing the subject at GCSE level. New and substantial developments in music education, such as the recently refreshed National Plan for Music Education (2022), with its dedicated focus on improving the quality of music provision in schools through stronger partnerships at the local and national levels, create an optimistic outlook for the future of music teaching and learning in schools in England.

## Notes

- 1 GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) is a qualification in a specific subject offered to students aged 14–16 in England.
- 2 Key Stage 4 (KS4) refers to the two years of school education which incorporate GCSEs, and other examinations, in maintained schools in England normally known as Year 10 and Year 11, when pupils are aged between 14 and 16.
- 3 Key Stage 3 (KS3) refers to the lower years of secondary school in England and Wales normally known as Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9, when pupils are aged between 11 and 14.
- 4 Even though Drama is not a discrete subject within the National Curriculum in England and forms part of the English Curriculum, in School C Drama was taught as a discrete subject. In Schools A and B, Drama did not occupy a place as a separate distinct subject, and therefore, students in these schools reported that Drama was not studied.

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