

The Power of Music: a research synthesis on the impact of actively making music on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people

Prof Susan Hallam MBE

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There is accruing evidence which indicates that actively making music can contribute to the enhancement of a range of non-musical skills and lead to other beneficial outcomes. Research continues to explore the circumstances under which these benefits may occur. A recent review of the evidence from neuroscience suggests that early engagement may be important (before the age of seven), the length of musical engagement and commitment to it, the type of training, and the instrument learned. The quality of teaching is also crucial as to whether any benefits are realised. When teaching is poor there may be no benefits and negative outcomes. The common characteristics of musical programmes which are beneficial are emerging. They need to be highly interactive and enjoyable with opportunities for: developing new skills and performing; acquiring cultural capital; developing interpersonal bonds and solidarity in pursuing shared goals; on-going intensity and frequency of contact; developing mutual respect; and recognition and rewards for excellence. Receiving positive affirmation from others relating to musical activities, particularly performance is crucial in enhancing self-beliefs whatever the age of the participants. If performances are in high status cultural venues the impact is enhanced. The research undertaken to date suggests that: • active engagement with making music should start early for the greatest benefits to be realised; • engagement needs to be sustained over a long period of time to maximise the benefits; • the activities need to include group work; • opportunities need to be available for performance; • the quality of teaching needs to be high; • the curriculum needs to be broadly based including activities related to pitch and rhythm, singing, instrumental work, composition and improvisation, and the reading of notation; • to have a positive impact on disaffected and at-risk young people, the musical activities need to be in a genre with which they can relate.



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