Aitchison, Mark

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Mark Aitchison

A Study into Musician Identity in Year 8 Students in England

Introduction

As a teacher in Secondary Schools in England, I have been interested in what encourages students to select music for further study and gain a formal qualification. My own passion for music was driven through individual instrumental study, complimented by curriculum music. However, the National Curriculum of England continues to require students access to Music in the curriculum to the age of 14, this is the end of Key Stage 3. They then select subjects from a range of options to continue in Key Stage 4 (ages 14 to 16) and gain a General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE). The following research aims to identify and establish if an awareness of musicality can be enhanced through a music curriculum for Key Stage 3 students (ages 11–14). It explores how students developed an awareness of their musicianship through self-efficacy and how this led to the development of an identity that was strongly related to music.

Background to the Study

Nationally, the number of students successfully completing GCSE Music decreased between 2014 and 2018. DfE data reports a reduction of 20.4 % from 43,600 students to 34,708 taking GCSE Music. (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, ISM & University of Sussex, 2019). The situation differs in many schools and is contrary to the researchers' individual experience. Tab. 1 demonstrates that the number of students opting for music at School 1 (the researcher's school between 2011 and 2018) increases by over 20 % of the cohort while the researcher is teaching at the school, with this number reducing the following year. Likewise, the number of students selecting music at school 2 (the researcher's current school, where this study was done) also increases by a similar amount. With an increase from 25 students in 2017/18 prior to the researchers' appointment to 65 at the end of the first year. Despite the initial increase, there was a marked decrease in the numbers opting for music from 2020/21. Students made option choices for this year during the initial COVID lockdown of Summer 2020, having experienced typical music education between September and March. This reduced further to 9 % of the cohort the following year. This cohort had only experienced a restricted music curriculum (during the year of the study). The current year (2022/23) has seen levels return to 14.7 % of the cohort opting for music, with a further increase for 2023/24. The impact of COVID restrictions on the researcher's experience defined the rationale for the research, which is 'what happens in the curriculum to encourage students to select music for a qualification?'

	School 1			**School 2**		
	Y9			**Y9**		
	Cohort size	Music students	% of cohort	Cohort size	Music students	% of cohort
2011/12	120	5	4.16			
2013/14	120	7	7.14	244	21	8.6
2016/17	120	30	25	244	21	8.6
2017/18	120	15	12.5	263	25	9.5
2018/19				254	36	14.17
2019/20				266	65	24.23
2020/21				257	39	14.78
2021/22				280	27	9.64

Tab. 1: Showing the number of students opting for music at KS4

The Research Problem

The aims of the National Curriculum are to "ensure that all pupils: perform, learn to sing and use their voices… explore how music is created", "they should develop a critical engagement with music, allowing them to compose…". Students should be able to "play and perform confidently… improvise and compose" (Gov.uk, 2013). In the *Music in Schools 2008–2011* review, it was stated that the most memorable and effective lessons had a "relentless focus on musical participation and the quality of musical responses" (Ofsted, 2012, p. 47). A further government review found that "to become successful musicians, pupils must use both the conscious and unconscious minds, with the latter being developed by learning and experience" (Ofsted, 2021). Therefore, students must engage in practical music making, develop their skill and confidence, embedding procedural skills through the conscious mind until actions become unconscious. This is supported by research which argues that when engaged with musical activities, one is musical and that all have the natural ability to become skilled musicians (Hallam, 2006, 2017; Sloboda, 2004; Welch, 2001). Maddux (2012) states that self-efficacy refers to what the student believes they can do, not what they will do. To achieve this, the teacher must implement the self-determination theories of Ryan and Deci (2000), encouraging students to develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) by exploiting flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Students must be encouraged to want to achieve the tasks, especially in Year 8, (aged 12–13) when learning chords in time in the classroom may be perceived as arbitrary when compared to playing a complete piece of music in performance. The development of intrinsic motivation is supported where the teacher follows the processes of student-centred learning (Davis, 2012), ensuring that links are made to prior and external musical experiences. The learning tasks should also be within the ability of the student (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012) providing the framework for them to utilize their metacognition to succeed (Benton, 2014). This is the aim of all music lessons, ensuring that all students can make progress in Key Stage 3 music, leading to the successful completion of a Key Stage 4 qualification (GCSE Music).

Research questions were developed to enable the researcher to understand how students' perception of their own development as musicians led to an increased number selecting further study in Music in his school, contrary to the national situation. The questions were: In what ways do Year 8 students interpret the concept of musician identity? In what ways does the learning environment in a Year 8 classroom impact on students' metacognition? And to what extent does the relationship between Year 8 students' self-efficacy and their developing self-identity as musician interact?

The research design for this study involved both the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, through a longitudinal design frame; the intention being to collect quantitative and qualitative data through the year, with surveys providing a 'snap-shot' of the variables (Thomas, 2017). These were studied and examined to trace trends, which were explored further through a focus group discussion. Tab. 2 shows when the data collection took place through the year, along with a short description of the musical activities and impact of COVID necessary restrictions.

Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June
			Survey 1 (S1) w/c 01.12.20			Survey 2 (S2) w/c 23.03.21			Survey 3 (S3) w/c 08.06.21
Students in school, with high incidences of self-isolation in Y8 No musical instruments				Schools closed, remote learning until March 8th. Access to Bandlab for those with ICT beyond smart phone		Students in school, with high incidences of self-isolation in Y8. Bandlab introduced on a fortnightly rotation		Students in school, with high incidences of self-isolation in Y8. Bandlab, guitars and ukuleles used on a fortnightly rotation	

Tab. 2: The impact of the COVID pandemic on students' attendance and musical opportunities

Examples of Survey Questions

The sequence of questions in the survey was designed to provide data for the research questions. The examples below were closed questions that had a Likert scale of 1 to 5 for responses – 1 being a negative answer, students did not agree and 5 a positive answer, they strongly agreed.

> *To be a musician do you have to be famous?*
>
> *A musician is someone who takes part in music making activities.*

Following these examples there were open-ended questions encouraging students to complete sentences, for example:

> *A musical person is someone who can….?*

More complex, open-ended questions included the following examples:

> *Give examples of when you have left a music classroom understanding more about how music is created than when you walked in.*

This question was designed to ascertain the development of metacognition on musical knowledge. By contrast, the following question was designed to focus on metacognition around the application of knowledge through practical tasks:

> *Give examples of when you have left a music lesson more able to create music than when you walked in.*

The final sequence of questions asked students if they believed they were developing musicianship skills and whether they thought they were able to describe themselves as musicians.

Data Analysis

Data was collected through Microsoft Forms and exported to Excel spreadsheets for analysis. Quantitative data was collated and analysed by data set and then compared to trace changes across the sets. This facilitated an opportunity for comparative analysis of the data. The comparison across data sets demonstrated if and how students changed their opinions on the concept of musician identity and their musical self-identity as the longitudinal study progressed. Qualitative data was processed using a comparative method, written responses were categorised and coded to create data. This was then traced across the data sets to enable theme-mapping to highlight common themes and disparities (Thomas, 2017; Bell & Waters, 2014; Burton et al., 2014; Punch, 2009).

Sample

Participants in the sample are members of Year 8 (aged 12–13) at the secondary school where the author is teaching in England. This year group was selected as it falls in the centre of Key Stage 3 (Y7 to Y9). Y8 students are taught by the researcher involving 5 class groups, approx. 120 students. The focus group was comprised of eight participants. The focus group sample comprised students with a variety of musical experiences, with musical experiences only in the classroom and some who had individual instrumental lessons outside school.

As teacher-researcher, actions and responses to students' learning and understanding will have an impact on their responses. It was therefore important to explicitly discuss with the students that the purpose of this research was for me as researcher to understand their personal thoughts and feelings about their musical development. All responses were anonymised and, as researcher, there was no opportunity to match response to student.

Research Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Following the collation of the data, results were examined to develop responses to the research questions. The findings of the research are discussed within the most common themes revealed through the research.

Taking Part in a Musical Activity

71 % of students responded positively to the statement that taking part in a musical activity warrants the label of musician. This creates cohesion with previous research that all engaging with musical activities were musical and therefore musicians (Hallam, 2006; Sloboda,

2004). This is confirmed by the number of students mentioning a performance-based musical activity from 38 (S1) to 77 (S3) in an open question. Discussions in the focus group revealed that students were mindful that being able to clap or click in time with music gave one a level of musicianship to warrant the label of musician. This would imply that respondents did not add a level of musical technical complexity to participation in order to facilitate the label of musician identity: one just had to be actively and accurately involved.

There is, however, some deviation from the findings of Hallam (2006) and Sloboda (2004) with regards to the concept of music making in the classroom. 55 % of student responses were less assured that taking part in musical activities in the classroom facilitates the identity of musician, with only 18 % agreeing with the statement. This indicates that students did not think that taking part in music making (performance) activities in the classroom facilitated the identity of musician. By contrast, the findings reveal that 67 % of students associated creating their own piece of music with the identity of a musician.

It is fascinating that, while students felt that taking part in musical performance in the classroom did not suggest one was a musician, their response to creating music was positive, declaring that *'creating my own piece'* (S2f37) facilitated the identity of musician. This may be explained by the self-awareness students felt when taking part in performance activities (McPherson, Davidson & Faulkner, 2012). The introduction of guitars and ukuleles prior to S3, had a negative impact on student responses to taking part in musical activities in the classroom. One would have expected that the introduction of learning to play hooks, riffs and chord progressions would have had a positive impact. However, because of lack of access to the instruments earlier in the year, students were still focused on the procedural knowledge (Toyne, 2021), rather than giving a skilled musical performance (Robinson & Davidson, 1996). When S3 was completed, students were still learning how to play the chords on the ukulele, still working out which strings and frets they needed to use to play the hooks and riffs. Very few had been able to master the technical demands of the instruments and perform with fluency and confidence. Therefore, students were unable to assimilate the formal, procedural focussed activities they were experiencing (Green, 2008; Toyne, 2021), with their understanding of the skilled performing musician (Robinson & Davidson, 1996; McPherson et al., 2012). A focus group member opinion was that *'[when] you think of musicians you think of them … on stage performing. You don't think of them… in a classroom'* (FGc2). This evidence also supports the notion that musical ability – and therefore musician identity (Hallam, 2006; Sloboda, 2004) -can be determined through creative and compositional tasks (Spychiger, 2017).

Musical Knowledge and Musician Identity

Students perceived that the development of secure musical knowledge leads to musician identity. Findings showed that students considered musical knowledge important, with an increase by 40 % of students mentioning various aspects for the sentence, 'a musical person is someone who can….', with many mentioning *'understand music'*, *'read music'* and *'A musical person, is someone who can identify changes in music'* (S3m45). Therefore, students have developed the notion that being able to critically appraise music links to musician identity (Hargreaves, Miell & MacDonald, 2002; Evans & McPherson, 2017; Toyne, 2021). This activity can be related to both the music listened to and discussed in the classroom, and the music that students listen to for their own leisure purposes. They can take the knowledge developed in the classroom and apply it in a different and informal context (Green, 2008). Thus, this activity connects to contexts use beyond the classroom, whereas learning to play a musical instrument may be restricted to a formal classroom activity.

By contrast, 60 % of students disagreed that answering questions about music in the classroom suggested that one was a musician. As Levitin (2006) suggests, students might be reluctant to take part in classroom discussions for fear of making a mistake and revealing a potential inadequacy. Their self-conscious state prevents active engagement in the classroom, which they may perceive as a sign of a lack of knowledge. As a result of this, students will compare themselves with the perceived success of their peers and, by doing so, reject their identity with that subject; in this case, a musical and emerging musician identity (Elliott & Silverman, 2017).

Taking Part in Musical Activities in the Classroom and Musician Identity

The disparity between taking part in music performance activities outside and within the classroom is profoundly linked to the age group taking part in the research. The findings of this study uphold the research of Elliot and Silverman (2017) that students linked the concept of musician identity with their experiences within the classroom. The changes in their responses – for example, the number disagreeing that taking part in music in the classroom indicates musician identity rising from 35 % (S1) to 55 % (S3) – aligns with research which suggests that student experiences in the classroom influence a fluctuating opinion. This supports the notion that the structure of identity is dynamic rather not static (Marcia, 1980). Mead (1934) suggests a discrete contrast between the personal and social aspects of oneself, with the knowledge of oneself and of others developing in parallel, resulting in changes in self-identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elliott & Silverman, 2017).

Music Theory and Creating Music

Music theory activities enabled students to recognise how they created music using instruments and software. Students were taught in classrooms with no access to musical instruments for the first term, except for piano mats and rhythm clock activities with chopsticks. During this time, students were taught how to create chords and move their hands around a keyboard focussing on the 12-bar blues chord progression. Without the ability to hear the sound they created, they relied on the physical act of moving their hands to the right place on the keyboard and visually recognising accuracy. Therefore, in the early terms of the year, much emphasis was focused on music theory in a very formal manner, contrary to the informal approaches proclaimed by Davis (2017), and Green (2001, 2008). Despite the attempts to ensure the learning activities were kinaesthetic in design, students were unable to "experience[ing] stimulus material through performing and exploration" (Toyne, 2021, p. 116) as there lacked the immediate feedback given by a real musical instrument. One could argue that, as a result, students were unable to develop an intrinsic interest in the activity and the lack of musical feedback prevented the tasks from having a utility value (Evans, 2017). The task was completed without delivering the aural satisfaction of success which, in turn, supports future and more complex goals.

Recognition of the importance of music theory activities related to practical music making fell following the introduction of musical instruments. Student responses reduced when asked about the impact of music theory on creating music, from 74.8 % (S1) to 59.7 % (S3). This could be the result of students becoming concerned with procedural knowledge (Toyne, 2021). This suggests that, while students were aware of their constructed knowledge, the success of applying that knowledge to make musical sound was limited and did not satisfy their concept of success, preventing a positive self-efficacy. Consequently, this negatively impacted on the development of musician identity.

Music Theory and Success in Software-Based Music Learning Activities

There is a disparity between the responses students gave to the impact of music theory when this is compared to the success in their music work. As the surveys progressed, the response of 54.5 % being able to accurately find their way around a keyboard, rose to 76.4 % by S3. The only piano keyboards students encountered during the lessons moved from the piano mats (Anderson, 2021) to the QWERTY keyboard option in *Bandlab* (a cloud-based DAW). As a result, the application of their knowledge through the sequencer gave sounds which allowed them to hear the music they had created (replicating the James Bond theme). Therefore, the activity moved from an unresponsive, arbitrary activity to one that promoted both knowledge and enjoyment, facilitating the change to a flow activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012). As a result of sound being made and work being shared with the teacher, formal feedback encouraged students to attempt the more complex aspects, developing intrinsic motivation (Evans, 2017). The activity therefore had a utility value (Evans, 2017), and moved towards an informal approach in a formal classroom (Davis, 2017; Green 2001, 2008). The opportunity to use a music sequencer gave students the opportunity to review their own work, compared against the modelled examples, facilitating feedback that developed confidence and metacognition (Hallam et al., 2012; Benton, 2014; Sherrington, 2019; Toyne, 2021). This had a positive impact on their musical self-efficacy and emerging musical identity, as they heard that they were making musical progress.

Metacognition and the Learning Environment

The design of the learning activities within the learning environment had an impact on the students' metacognition. When asked about factors that facilitated confidence, students commented on repetition and chunking-down tasks throughout the survey. This suggests that students recognised how the learning activities were designed to be within their technical capability (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012), with 19 mentions in S1 and 20 in S3. The concept of chunking-down and repetition in the task can be exemplified when students learned the C chord and then the G chord on ukulele. Moving between the two and then playing them for the correct duration to create the chord progression of *Yellow Submarine*, and then introducing the Dm chord for the verse. This replicates the pattern of activities suggested by Toyne (2021), while assimilating the suggestions from the 'Principles of Instruction' (Rosenshine, 2012; Sherrington 2019). Students recognised that this was a method that developed both their confidence and metacognition. This confirms the success of a learner-centred learning environment, where risks could be taken to make progress (Davis, 2012).

The Development of Self-Efficacy and Its Impact on Students Identifying as Musicians

Student musical self-efficacy developed through Year 8. Research findings consistently reveal that students were aware that they were making progress through the academic year. Findings revealed that 63.4 % of students understood more about music in S3, 44.3 % stating they had learned to play an instrument and 49.5 % stating that they had learned how to create music. This implies that students were aware of their progress and could acknowledge that they had made progress in learning how to construct and make music, despite the constraints of the pandemic. They responded assertively, believing in what they could do and what they could achieve (Maddux, 2012; Spychiger, 2017). This implies that students were aware of an emerging musician identity as they acknowledged taking part in musical activities and were becoming more confident in music making.

Students' musician self-identity did not develop as the year progressed. Findings from the research demonstrate that there is a marginal decline in the number of students identifying as musician at the end of Year 8 between S1 (25.2 %) and S3 (21.8 %). These findings appear to contradict existing research which states that those who take part in musical activities are musicians (Hallam, 2006; Toyne, 2021) and the findings of this research. It does support the notion that the most definitive identifier in the identity of music relies on self-perceived competence (Hargreaves et al., 2002; Sloboda, 2004; Hallam, 2006; Spychiger, 2017). Comments from the survey corroborate this – *"I'm not a musician, I can barely play guitar"* (S3m16) – suggesting that, despite being able to create sound on the guitar and take part in a musical activity, students perceived that they were not able to play well. Students were denied the chance of moving beyond a focus on the technical demands of music making (Spychiger, 2017; Toyne, 2021). The findings also suggest that students' identity did not fluctuate through the school year, contrary to research by Marcia (1980).

Though students suggested that the quality of musical output was not important in musician identity, they did not apply this to themselves. Despite the attempts by the classroom teacher to provide opportunities to make music, their experiences did not facilitate the competency required for students to engage with the music making usually associated with a musician, for example performing with fluidity and dynamic range. To become an intrinsic flow activity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012; Evans, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000), access to instruments is necessary far earlier in the academic year. Fundamentally, COVID prevented students from becoming competent at music to the extent that they could enjoy what they were doing, and therefore they were denied the opportunity of perceiving that they could do music.

The Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Self-Identity

The lack of practical musical activity was detrimental to the relationship between musical self-efficacy and self-identity as a musician. Despite 63 % of students recognising that they had made progress in their musical knowledge and understanding through Year 8, 60.9 % disagreed with the statement that they were musicians. This is the direct result of the lack of the musical activities that one would normally expect in the classroom. Due to COVID restrictions, students were unable to sing throughout the year and there was a lack of access to musical instruments. Students associate playing music and singing with the activities of a musician; without being able to do this, they were unable to leave the context of the classroom and music activities remained part of a curriculum.

Student self-efficacy did not have a positive impact on the declaration of self-identity as musician: this can be seen from the response of 55.7 % of students, stating that they had either stayed the same or not learned to play an instrument through the year. This could be explained by the impact of the pandemic. Students did not have the chance to engage fully with learning activities, moving from amotivation (low competence) to intrinsic motivation (inherent satisfaction) (Renwick & Reeve, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Though the learning tasks were within their ability (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012), there was not enough opportunity for students to use their developed framework of metacognition to feel they had succeeded (Benton, 2014). Students had been presented with the opportunity to explore an instrument (guitar and ukulele), however they did not (55.7 %) feel they had made sufficient progress to respond that they had learned one during the year. In effect, students did not have enough exposure to practical music making to facilitate the resolution of industry over inferiority (Erikson, 1982). Students therefore felt that, though they had attempted musical activities, they had not perceived that they had become proficient enough to suggest that they could do music and therefore self-identify as musicians: they had not had enough musical experience to be able to declare that they are a musician.

This study strongly suggests that there is a link between students' self-efficacy in music and their identity as a musician. Through the findings, one can see that students recognised that musician identity relied on taking part in a musical activity, regardless of technical level and proficiency, agreeing with established research (Hallam, 2006, 2017; Sloboda, 2004; Toyne, 2021). However, identifying themselves as musicians was stifled by the self-awareness of their proficiency (Hargreaves et al., 2002; Sloboda, 2004; Hallam, 2006; Spychiger, 2017) as they did not have the experience to move beyond the procedural aspects of music making (Toyne, 2021). Consequently, the gratification that comes with successful music performance did not facilitate the resolution of industry (Erikson, 1982).

Conclusions from the Research

Findings demonstrate that students' understanding of musician identity agreed with established research – that being involved with practical music making warranted musician identity. However, there was disparity when students were asked about making music in the classroom. Most students recognised that they made technical progress on the musical instruments once access was facilitated. This confirms a positive impact on their self-efficacy and self-identity as musicians. It confirms that, to assimilate progress with musician identity, students need enough experience on musical instruments to feel confident; this allows technical requirements to become subconscious, so that they can focus on the musical aspects of a performance, fluency and ensemble, for example. It is therefore paramount that the focus of music lessons is on creating music practically to allow students to build the metacognitive awareness required to move from novice toward mastery skills on the instrument. It is the practical application of musical knowledge, with secure self-efficacy, that leads to self-identity as a musician.

Students also recognised that being able to discuss musical concepts and construction, analysing a piece of music facilitated a musician identity, again, unless in the classroom. This suggests that discussions around musical concepts ought to be applied to practical music making. Discussions around musical concepts need to be explicitly linked to practical music making, regardless of complexity; for example, using different chord progressions or accurate rhythm notation, reading and performance. Without the explicit correlation, musical theory work becomes arbitrary and inconsequential. Although students recognised that their musical knowledge and its application to music making was developing, there was not a positive impact on their self-identity as musician. Students did not have the opportunity to spend enough time playing a guitar to think of themselves as guitarists or musicians.

Remote learning was detrimental to students' musical metacognition and self-efficacy, despite students being able to access music making through software on smart phones, tablets and computers. The findings of this study demonstrate that the importance of face-to-face teaching with a specialist teacher is essential.

The creation of a positive learning environment is also a key factor in the development of musical metacognition. Through the study, students reported that the chunking-down of musical concepts was useful in the development of their musical knowledge and its practical application. This supported their metacognition, allowing them to feel confident and successful before introducing more complexity. Each task started with the simplest application, building awareness and confidence leading to success with a more complex concept. Students' self-musical awareness developed when the music they had created sounded like the example, either modelled by the teacher live or from a recorded excerpt of music, and this led to a positive self-efficacy and self-identity as musician.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Based on the conclusions discussed above, practitioners could consider integrating musical theory with practical application, ensuring that students' musical knowledge links with technical skill and performance or composition experience. Explicit connections between the musical experiences of the classroom and how they connect with those beyond the classroom should be made clear to students. Tasks should be broken down to the minimum cognitive and technical level to ensure all have a secure and positive starting point before introducing more complexity, be that through musical concepts or technical skill. The music curriculum should be designed to increase complexity, both in musical knowledge and technical skill. Instruments should be integrated into the curriculum to ensure access through the year, rather than be the focus of a unit or term. For example, using keyboards – where practical – to allow students to move from novice toward competent, taking the technical aspects of the instrument from conscious to sub-conscious, enabling students focus on the musical concepts of fluency, dynamics, ensemble, which this study has shown can facilitate positive musical self-efficacy. To facilitate the recognition of an emerging musician identity, students need to be encouraged to reflect on their progress and to recognise how their musicianship is developing.

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