

Jurassic Coast Teaching School Alliance

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Teaching and Learning Case Studies

Name of School: The Woodroffe School

Title of case study: Pupil Premium Music Research Project

Where did you start from, what did you set out to do and why?

The idea for this project came from a combination of common sense, observation and research evidence. There are lots of academic papers which stress the impact of music education on a child's general intelligence: learning a musical instrument has been shown to have an impact on progress at school, as well as helping children to socialise and grow emotionally.

Common sense suggests that children who set themselves to learn something as difficult and demanding as a musical instrument will develop their skills in a variety of ways and learn new skills, many of which will be transferrable. And observation indicates that many of our highest achieving pupils learn musical instruments. Of course, it is almost impossible to disentangle much of this from other factors – family background, peer influence, finance, lack of opportunity etc. – but there is enough evidence to suggest that learning a musical instrument has an impact on a child's development and thus seems to encourage more rapid progress in school.

However, learning an instrument in school has long been seen as something of a middle class pursuit and it is clear that many disadvantaged students are excluded from similar opportunities, not necessarily because of finance (most schools use Pupil Premium funding for music lessons if a pupil asks for support) but because of a combination of reluctance and a sense of cultural exclusion.

It therefore seemed sensible to attempt to engage Pupil Premium students in an aspect of school that many perhaps feel excludes them and then to assess the impact on both their academic progress and their attitude to study.

What did you do and who was involved?

Using Pupil Premium funding topped up by funds from other sources, we offered all Pupil Premium students in Years 7 and 8 the opportunity to learn a musical instrument of their choice. We promised to provide them with an instrument and pay the costs of instrumental tuition using our usual team of peripatetic musicians. Their only commitment would be to attend lessons regularly and take part in at least one musical ensemble at school.

The pupils were identified and letters sent home. There was, of course, some persuasion involved, as many pupils were reluctant to take advantage of the offer. Despite being offered access to an instrument and free lessons from professional musicians, many could not see the point! The cultural barriers were evidently stronger than we imagined.

We were lucky to be able to secure the support of the county's ailing music service and they agreed to lend us the instruments we needed free of charge. This meant we could offer a real choice to pupils. The programme was launched via a lunchtime activity involving PP students trying out a range of instruments and meeting our peripatetic staff before choosing an instrument

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to learn. This was an exciting and successful event but it attracted far fewer students than we thought likely to attend.

Having carefully costed the programme assuming large numbers, we found in the end that only a handful in each year group applied. A few dropped out after a few weeks but enough continued to make it a viable study. After all, if only one pupil took the opportunity then some good would have been done.

What difference did it make?

Although the evidence is largely qualitative, we did attempt to use quantitative data. We had access to SATs scores, of course, and CAT testing in Year 7 but we wanted to find some data that could be compared between September and July in one year. The only testing we do that qualified was the WRAT spelling test, which new pupils do during their induction day and again at the end of the year. This is inevitably a very crude tool but it does at least provide verifiable data.

Having done the project for two years, there is clear evidence of improvement in advance of other Pupil Premium students, though the numbers involved are not really statistically significant.

Average Improvement in WRAT SPELL test				
Year Group	All	PP	Free Music	non-PP
KSW 2013-14	6.2	6.9	10.3	6.1
SLH 2014-15	27.1	29.5	31.0	26.8

In order to confirm the impact of the free lessons, a much more detailed study would have to be done using a wider range of statistical tools. However, it was gratifying to see that the pupils involved seemed to have made progress.

More important was the qualitative evidence comprising Tutor reports and Year Head observations. This suggested that those pupils who took part in the programme tended to get involved in more activities and take part more enthusiastically in lessons. It could be, of course, that this enthusiasm prompted them to take up the offer in the first place but there was undoubtedly a tangible difference. Those students who rejected the offer may have been unmotivated generally and thus not motivated to take up the offer in the first place but it could be that some of the successful students might have lost motivation without the musical stimulus on offer. The evidence is unclear but a positive effect does seem to be observable.

What are you planning to do next?

We plan to continue the project in the hope that more Pupil Premium students take up the offer of free instrument hire and free lessons. We also plan to continue using the same data to make comparisons year on year.

Of course, if this were to become a fully credible academic study it would need much more accurate data tracking and careful use of questionnaires. As it is, it was done simply to confirm a feeling we had that Pupil Premium pupils would benefit from musical instrument tuition and would need help to overcome the cultural barriers preventing them from taking part in what is widely perceived as the domain of the middle classes.

Overall we are satisfied that the experiment has been a success: we have students learning musical instruments who would not normally have taken part (some of them have even taken 'grade' examinations) and some evidence that their academic progress surpassed both those who chose not to participate and the average progress made by all students. We also have the informal evidence that the pupils involved are clearly enjoying and benefiting from the experience.

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