

Music Education Research: more to the point?

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This time last year (NAME Magazine Issue 21) I was moved to write about research. Entitled *Music education research: what's the point?* the article contained my musings about what practitioners – teachers and others – can get out of research. My final conclusion ('research makes you think') was a tad superficial so I thought I'd give it another shot. This article considers Lucy Green's work on informal learning, as an example of particularly effective research. It describes Green's work briefly, states why I consider it important, and suggests how researchers and teachers might improve music education by adopting similar approaches to research.

Between 1998 and 1999 Professor Green, (who had been a Head of Music in a London comprehensive school during the 1980s) investigated 14 pop and rock musicians, performing in guitar-based bands. She interviewed them, listened to their music, watched them perform, and analysed their histories. She investigated how and why they started performing music and, in particular, how they learned their music. She found that they chose to play music that they already knew, through enculturation. They learned this partly by copying recordings on their own, and partly in peer-directed and group learning situations with other members of their bands. When composing their own songs, one or two main songwriters would bring their musical ideas to a rehearsal, and the band would learn and embellish these ideas, often developing them into new structures through watching and listening to each other. They practised because they enjoyed

practising and stopped when the enjoyment stopped – as a result, some had gone through periods when practice was intensive, followed by periods when they didn't practise at all. They valued technical proficiency, and aimed towards this in their learning, but they valued 'feel' more. Although some used notations – staff notation, chord symbols or tab – the aural experience was, for them, the main method of learning new music. Some had sought formal music tuition on instruments or voice, and all of them had had music lessons in classrooms, but overall they found the lessons boring, their progress slow and the music difficult to relate to.

This study was written up in Green, 2001. Between 2002-06 she extended this into an action research project, investigating what happens when informal music learning practices are brought into secondary schools (mainly in Y9). Over 20 schools were involved in the project, and seven (three in London and four in Hertfordshire) were researched in particular depth. This project became part of the Musical Futures venture, with funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and this enabled the project to employ Abigail D'Amore as a researcher. Lucy and Abi carried out participant and non-participant observations in schools; they conducted and transcribed individual and small group interviews of pupils and teachers, conducted meetings with teachers, and distributed questionnaires to all the schools in the project.

The project materials are available on the website (www.musicalfutures.org.uk Practitioners Resources,

Section 2) and the research appears in Green, 2008. Briefly, the project adopted five principles, arising from Green, 2001: pupils learned to play music they already knew through enculturation (i.e. they brought in their own recordings), they copied these recordings by ear, they chose their own groups, they chose their own approaches to the task, and they thus integrated listening, performing, improvising and composing. The project consisted of seven stages, each 3-6 lessons long. Two stages involved the pupils bringing in their own music and copying it, two involved them composing their own music (in Stage 5 they were introduced to a model of songwriting by a live band, including bands of pupils their own age) and the other three involved copying from recordings which had been chosen by Green and in some cases, broken down into looped component parts (stages 6 & 7 involving classical music).

Green (2008) describes, evaluates and raises questions about the project. The descriptive element shows, for example, how pupils chose which track they wanted to play (for many, this took one lesson, whereas some were still choosing well into the second lesson). In the first stage 'they paid little heed to what might be musically more or less approachable' but when this activity was repeated, in the third stage, 'their choices were more informed by musical considerations'. Many groups then started singing along with the recording (in one, predominantly Asian, school the boys were particularly involved in singing). They tended to move on to unpitched percussion before trying to find

pitches on instruments – particularly using electric and bass guitars. In a particularly interesting section, Green describes how she tried to show a boy how to play a riff on a keyboard – she showed him several times, but he stopped every time he made a mistake and the learning ground to a halt. However, when he tried to play along with the prepared CD he picked it up quite quickly. (She suggests that this is because the CD was predictable and under the pupil's control, unlike the teacher.)

The evaluative component provides evidence that (among other matters) the majority of pupils enjoyed the project, made progress in their playing (although they sometimes got worse before they got better), developed their capacity to listen, and changed their views of music, including classical music. Questions raised by the book include such matters as, 'what might have happened if, instead of standing back, the teachers had stepped in to help – would progress have been faster, better, longer-lasting?' and to what extent informal learning approaches might be adapted to other subjects.

In last year's article I suggested that research can add to teachers' knowledge by analysing practice, by challenging perceptions and by generating and developing 'big ideas'. I also suggested that, because research-derived knowledge is based on careful analysis of data, it tends to be more firmly grounded than knowledge produced by other means. To me, Green's research into informal music learning achieves all the above. Practice – of musicians, teachers and pupils – is analysed carefully, and presented honestly. She is particularly good at delineating the limits of improvement – for example, understanding those pupils whose views of classical music were unchanged by the experience of the project's latter stages. There is evidence that teachers' perceptions were challenged – some expressed fears which weren't realised, and many were surprised by the quality of the pupils' work. The project connected with current 'big

ideas', concerning pupil voice and individualised learning (although there are no claims relating to this in Green, 2008). Last year I gave my PGCE students heavy hints about investigating the extent to which their lessons satisfied pupils' needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (the three most basic psychological needs according to Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000)). Green's work does exactly this. I am old enough (just!) to remember the excitement caused by John Paynter's 'York Project' and I hope Green's work will have a similar, invigorating effect on music teaching.

To me, Green's work is also good research. When educational research first started it often involved experimental trials on large population samples, but researchers long ago discovered the limitations of such approaches, and Green's work is a good example of the more recent, 'real world', approach to research. It is supported by a very considerable knowledge of the literature; its mixed methods allow data from different sources to be compared, and the considerable amount of qualitative data (transcripts of what was said in questionnaires, interviews, observations and meetings) is supported by quantitative data: the actual numbers of people who strongly agreed, agreed or disagreed with questionnaire statements. The writing is clear and accessible, limitations are acknowledged, claims to knowledge are not over-stated, and readers are invited to bring their own opinions to the texts.

Although research is not the only, or even the main, influence on education, I believe it should have more influence than it has currently. At present, I see education as being driven too much by inspection and assessment systems which in turn are driven by political needs (e.g. the need for the government to demonstrate success) rather than educational ones (e.g. the need to develop each person). Of course research is not immune to political pressures but independently-funded inquiry, led by open questions (e.g. 'what happens when informal

music learning is brought into classrooms?' rather than, 'does an increase in time for literacy lead to an increase in pupils' test scores?') can help. Green (2008) appears to embody a successful approach to music education research: Lucy and Abi listened to teachers and learners and took what they said seriously. They brought their experience as researchers to the conversation, linking their work with previous research and suggesting reasons for what they saw and heard.

This differs from quite a lot of music education research, much of which is philosophical rather than empirical, small-scale (involving only one institution), and based outside compulsory education. And we need this, too. But, because compulsory education is precisely that, we owe it to the pupils to make it as good as possible, so I think we need more medium and large-scale projects, focusing on school music, and perhaps most of this should relate to the core issues of teaching and learning. There are problems in achieving this. Very little time is spent on researching music education in the UK. Most music education researchers (I include myself in this category) also have heavy teaching loads in Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development; research is fitted in around other, more pressing, commitments. Research funding is limited and hard to obtain and music education has to compete with other priorities. Also, research isn't easy – the most common apprenticeship is the PhD, which tends to take at least three years of costly, and often lonely, full-time study. Educational researchers don't always have a background in teaching and don't necessarily talk to teachers about their research. As a result, they continue to find answers to questions that teachers don't ask, whilst teachers (who often obtain research findings in half-baked and second-hand formats – consider the difference in your understanding between reading Green's books and reading this article!) continue to see research as irrelevant to their everyday needs.

In this situation, Green's work can point the way, not only to a development of music teaching but also music education research. It was appropriately funded and it talked with teachers and their pupils, rather than simply studying them; consequently, it has something important to say.

References

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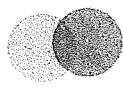
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See also

D'Amore, A (2007) *Informal learning in the music classroom*. In Coll, H & Finney J (Eds) *Ways into Music*. Matlock: National Association of Music Educators

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Teaching Music

The new TDA eCPD website currently under development with Synergy TV is called Teaching Music and is live for registrations. Go to www.teachingmusic.org.uk for more details of how to register.

A joint NAME and MEC steering group have been working alongside David Ashworth, the project leader. They expect to pre-launch the site at the London International Music Show education day on Friday 13th June at Excel in London's Docklands. The full launch will be held at the NAME Conference on Friday 10th October at the ICC in Birmingham, when delegates will be able to log on and use the site throughout the Conference.