

Common barriers for musical progression journeys

Systems over individuals

What is the problem? The organisation and its systems come to take precedence over the individual people for which it exists.

How could it be overcome? Particularly where reputation and recognition are at stake, organisations can come to focus too much on themselves, to the detriment of the people within them (e.g. a school or orchestra dissuading their star pupils from moving on to a higher-level institution which would be in their interest). Few educational organisations argue with their core purpose being about their individual learners so encouraging them to review individuals' journeys from individuals' perspectives can open minds. Then helping organisations to understand how individual journeys can be supported pragmatically within organisational efficiency, without the need for a one-size-fits-all machine, can

Organisational preservation

What is the problem? Concerns about organisational viability, identity and tradition hold back new developments and collaborations.

How could it be overcome? Build an atmosphere of trust, where organisations feel they are respected and understood, rather than under attack. Try to identify case studies of when relevant long-standing, high-reputation organisations have reported making significant developmental changes, against initial concerns, with positive impacts. Identify ways in which organisations can collaborate without undermining their individuality. Stretch comfort zones and challenge complacency constructively.

Cultural preservation

What is the problem? Preservation of existing traditions can dominate over or restrain the development of new alternatives.

How could it be overcome? Find ways of observing and building on traditions respectfully, appropriately and respecting the individuality of today's children and young people. Allowing people to own traditions themselves is essential to safeguarding those traditions, and ownership tends to involve some degree of personalisation and customisation. Also, today's ways of consuming culture – distributed digitally, marketed socially, and, often, created collaboratively – are generally more openly meritocratic than their predecessors and high quality tends to stand the test of time!

Lack of funding

What is the problem? There is increasing competition for reducing funding sources.

How could it be overcome? Seek funding opportunities resourcefully, widely and enterprisingly. Look carefully at existing opportunities, resources and capacity and how they can be used to greater effect. Look at in-kind resources: e.g. support from parents, or children helping each other, or free online resources. Have an open mind in exploring new avenues, such as charging different people for services or developing business models. Seek guidance and support on sourcing funding and on developing new income streams – it's often out there to be found.

Not understanding infrastructure

What is the problem? People who have only a very local knowledge of their part of the music education infrastructure are unlikely to seek out new ideas and opportunities from other people that they don't know about.

How could it be overcome? The need to join up, communicate and collaborate is paramount if children and young people's journeys are going to be supported effectively and individually. Hubs and Hub lead organisations now have a clear mandate in making sense of the diversity and complexity of the music education landscape. Beyond this, an enormous amount would be achieved if everyone involved took it as their responsibility to communicate what they were doing and to find out what others were doing, and to do so with an open mind.

Resistance to change

What is the problem? People and organisations are relatively happy with what they do and don't want to change it.

How could it be overcome? Culture change, organisational change and personal change often take a long time and a lot of effort. Books are written about these but, briefly, key to effecting change seem to be: breaking big changes into manageable bits; taking time; building trust; strong communication; finding appropriate incentives; stretching comfort zones and challenging complacency; building ownership of change; being versatile and flexible. Music can be a powerful communicator: use music as a medium and a tool for bringing about musical change where you can!

Adults' lack of confidence

What is the problem? Adults might like to change what they do and how they do it but lack confidence to do so, or perhaps sense a lack of support and endorsement.

How could it be overcome? Change often represents a risk, are therefore requires confidence, particularly if things have always been done one way, which is now being challenged. Making sure that realistic goals are set, that personal successes are recognised, that meaningful praise is given, that people aren't alone but are trusted and supported, and that there's a dose of 'yes you can' attitude, are all good ways of giving adults confidence to make changes.

Perceived elitism

What is the problem? Parents and families see music as being elitist and 'not for them' and don't encourage, or even discourage, their children's music-making.

How could it be overcome? Schools and other who work with parents need to communicate that there's more to music than expensive violin lessons, X-factor, and unreachable celebrities, and that their children's creative musicality is a significant asset. Helping parents to support children's music – e.g. by becoming 'co-researchers', or offering open-minded encouragement – and communicating effectively with parents can help to harness parent's significant supporting role.

Lack of time

What is the problem? There is interest in making changes and taking on new approaches but lack of time to do so, given that the existing work needs to continue.

How could it be overcome? Generally, people will try to make time for something if they value it highly enough, so the challenge might be to persuade people how a different way of working could help them to achieved their existing goals better and more effectively. Some activities (e.g. teaching children to play chords on a ukulele) will have faster observable returns than others (e.g. developing young music leadership skills) and short-termism is generally easier than long-termism. So the challenge is to persuade people to take a longer-term perspective, to agree goals with them, and measurements of those goals, and then to communicate with them along the way – a framework for making time.

Stifling spaces

What is the problem? Stifling environments, particularly in schools, aren't conducive to or hold back creative exploratory approaches.

How could it be overcome? Build musical projects that enhance the environment (e.g. showcases, poster designs etc.). Work with school authorities to enhance the environment. Ensure music-making spaces, at least, are conducive environments. Find ways to feed off and into the existing environment, rather than being oppressed by it. Work outdoors and in external spaces where you can.

Learners' lack of confidence

What's the problem? Sometimes children and young people lack the confidence to develop their own individual musical journeys.

How could it be overcome? Developing your own individual journeys, as opposed to following what everyone else seems to be doing, can take a great deal of confidence. This is one of the reasons why it's important for children to have a range of potential role models and goal models, and to have access to diversity and excellence. And, as with adults, confidence is built through realistic goals, recognising success, meaningful praise, trust and support, can do attitude and managed risk taking.

Measurability

What's the problem? It's easy to measure some things (e.g. tuning, sight-reading) and harder to measure others (e.g. creativity, musicality) and the easy-to-measure tend to dominate in a measurement-focussed culture.

How could it be overcome? There are plenty of measurements for these kinds of things: e.g., measuring creativity by asking a child to evaluate if they've achieved their purpose, or expressed what they intended; e.g., measuring musicality by asking performers and audience to assess the impact music has had on them. So the challenge is three-fold: identifying these and other measurements; finding ways to present these measurements alongside 'conventional' ones so that they're valued appropriately; finding ways to persuade stakeholders to value 'non-conventional' measurements in their own right.

Targets culture

What is the problem? Targets culture for student performance in schools and in education policy and culture can prohibit more creative and individualist approaches.

How could it be overcome? Targets tend not to dictate how the targets are reached, just what they targets are. So you could work within a targets culture by being creative and individual in working towards targets, and at the same time endeavouring that senior leaders can see and understand how your approaches are being effective.

Adults' own journeys

What is the problem? Adults who were brought up in narrow uninspiring education environments, directed towards a limited set of musical goals, sometimes end up recreating that environment for children, not perhaps deliberately but because that's what they know.

How could it be overcome? "The perennial problem with education is that everyone has had one and so thinks they're an expert at it." Teaching is a social activity: showing teachers different ways of doing things, particularly through film and face-to-face, as well as relating the individual stories of young musicians can be effective at highlighting the strengths and weaknesses in their own practice. Help teachers to learn as you'd like them to help others to learn: constructively, creatively, self-critically, collaboratively etc.

Teacher-pupil mismatch

What is the problem? A teacher, or other supporting professional, doesn't enthuse or can't engage a young musician.

How could it be overcome? Music is a personal, and social, thing so it's no surprise that some music education relationships don't work well. Where possible, try to have taster sessions between people in new interactions: first impressions aren't everything but they are often accurate. And keep an eye on existing relationships to make sure you know when it's time to move on, or to encourage a young musician on to the next opportunity or teacher. At the same time, supporting adults should listen hard to children and young people's ideas, aspirations and enthusiasms and incorporate them into the learning process as much as possible: adaptation is required on both sides of a relationship.

Technique before creativity

What's the problem? "Technique before creativity" refers to a belief, perhaps mistaken, that you need to develop a solid body of technique before you can develop creativity.

How could it be overcome? You need knowledge, understanding and skills to harness and develop creativity, but you can also use creative approaches -- nurturing creativity -- to develop knowledge, understanding and skills. Children are born incredibly creative; so the challenge for creative musical education is less about 'music or creativity' and more about developing music creatively and nurturing musical creativities. Watching some effective, creative music-making with very young children can quickly demonstrate how much they can learn through their natural creativity and inclination to explore, without needing recognised technique.

Over-directedness

What is the problem? Children are shoe-horned and over-directed towards specific destinations too early on in their development. The goals they're aiming towards aren't their own goals, or those for which they're best suited, but the goals that their teacher/parents etc. would like them to achieve.

How could it be overcome? Make sure there is room for existing models and values of established excellence (e.g. great musicians, performers, composers) to enrich and inspire children's progression journeys, without dictating where they should be heading towards. Look for opportunities to communicate children's individual abilities to other stakeholders (schools, parents etc.). Understanding the diversity of excellence, and how it's measured – having an understanding of the many different kinds of musical adults and what it takes for them to be excellent – is an essential part of supporting individual journeys.

Fear of failure

What is the problem? Fear of perceived failure, underperformance and humiliation can result in reluctance to try different things, and other negative consequences.

How could it be overcome? Ensure the things you're aiming to achieve, and how they are measured, are appropriate and realistic, and that stakeholders understand what you're doing and why. Make time for honest, constructive reflective practice to ensure that you're learning from where you're less effective. Be sure to recognise your successes for what they are.

Lack of progression knowledge

What is the problem? Adults having or perceiving a lack of experience in supporting progression, in general or in areas new to them.

How could it be overcome? Perhaps stereotypically, non-music specialists and music leaders specialising in first opportunities perceive a lack of understanding of how to support progression, although often the lack is in supporting a specific part of musical progression. There are several ways of addressing professional capacity, including professional development, networking, practice sharing, and reflecting on practice. No adult is likely to have, or to develop capacity to do everything themselves. Collaboration is the short- and long-term answer.

