

Pledge of music classes for all pupils has backfired in many primaries, says Ofsted

- Polly Curtis, education editor
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Children attending Sistema Scotland, a music education project in Stirling, Scotland. Photograph: Murdo Macleod/Guardian

Half of school music lessons are not good enough, with many schools abandoning the subject when pupils start revising for exams, according to a review of music education by Ofsted.

A pledge to give every primary pupil the chance to learn an instrument has backfired in some schools, which have dropped individual tuition in favour of whole-class violin or recorder lessons to try to meet it. Nervous teachers struggle to identify pupils with real talent, Ofsted says.

The report says that where lessons are going wrong, teachers often "talked too much", leaving little time for children to make music. They are also failing to teach pupils to listen to music properly.

But in the best schools music is a crucial way of helping pupils build self-confidence and self-esteem, the inspectors say. The report is based on inspectors' visits to 84 primary and 95 secondary schools in England between 2005 and 2008.

It finds that pupils enjoy music lessons but do not make much progress in developing instrumental skills. Some teachers are guilty of assuming that only a few pupils will be good at music, the report says. There is a "lack of musical expectation", with some teachers "praising their [pupils'] efforts indiscriminately with no correction of musical errors".

"Students knew if their work was good, and often showed disbelief when work that was at best ordinary was described as excellent," the report says.

In primary schools, teachers "talk too much", limiting the time pupils spend playing music in the class. Inspectors have found examples of music teaching stopping in the last year of primary school to make way for maths and English before Sats tests. It is a "major concern" that pupils do not get enough time for music in the curriculum. In the majority of secondaries, singing has been abandoned altogether.

Local authority music services are struggling to meet the government commitment that every child will get the chance to learn an instrument by the age of 11. Resources have been stretched, meaning pupils are getting shorter courses and lessons are of poorer quality.

Instrumental and vocal coaches are having to take larger classes, and struggling. The programmes have become too short to give a child the chance to improve at an instrument or make a proper decision about whether to carry on learning.

The report suggests that local authorities should monitor which pupils are more likely to take up music lessons. There have previously been reports that middle-class pupils dominate the best provision. Last year, research also found that what instruments children play is largely dictated by their gender. Girls play the harp and flute, while boys are more likely to learn the tuba and trombone.

Although the authorities have concentrated on tackling sexist attitudes in sport, the study by the University of London Institute of Education showed that stereotypes are just as prevalent in music classes, with the "smaller, higher-pitched instruments" and singing lessons being overwhelmingly favoured by girls, while boys tend towards electric guitars, drum kits and music technology classes.

Jane Joyner, the Ofsted publisher of the report, said: "We found provision to be good or outstanding in half [the schools] but too few schools hitting the high note ... It shouldn't be an elitist opportunity just for some children. There are children who would benefit enormously who at the moment aren't getting it, or get it for a few weeks, then no more.

"There's a value in studying music for its own sake, and an entitlement that any one ought to be able to do that."

Ofsted's head, Christine Gilbert, said: "The report concludes that this should be a very positive time for music education, with the government providing considerable amounts of much needed extra funding. However, inspectors found that increased activity was not necessarily leading to improved music provision.

"Too much was being developed in isolation, and initiatives were not always reaching the schools and teachers that needed them most."