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A National Plan for Music Education is the title of a government policy, and What's the Problem Represented to Be? is a analytical strategy

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ABSTRACT

In 2022 both England and Wales released policy documents entitled *A National Plan for Music Education*. While the English policy was a long-awaited update to a similar policy published in 2011, the Welsh policy was unexpected and seemingly lacked precedent. Despite some attempt to align itself with the concurrent implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales, it more closely mirrored the English policy in seeking to address inequity in music education provision through the development of local music services providing extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition. In light of these similarities, in this article we undertake a comparative policy analysis framed using Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach. We explore the way in which the English policy problematizes access to "excellent" music education and proposes new discursive and institutional structures to "level up" opportunities. In contrast, we highlight how the equivalent Welsh policy conceptualizes the problem of music education as relating solely to access to "learning to play a musical instrument" and proposes the expansion of extracurricular music tuition through a national music service as the solution. Finally, we compare these two political approaches and ask whether the notion of "good-enough" music education could disrupt elitist notions of training in high-quality art musics and unlock new possibilities for music education.

KEYWORDS

classroom music; good-enough; music services; policy; United Kingdom

Introduction

In the United Kingdom in 2022, the governments of both England and Wales released policy documents entitled *A National Plan for Music Education*. While the English policy (Department for Education [DfE] & Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2022) was a long-awaited update to a similar policy published in 2011 (DfE & DCMS, 2011), the Welsh policy was unexpected and seemingly lacked precedent (Welsh Government, 2022). Although its release corresponded with the systematic implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a), it had few links with curricular music education provided inside schools, and instead was primarily concerned with extracurricular music tuition provided outside schools through the development of a new "national music service" (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 1). In this regard it aligned with England's first and second National Plans, which sought to address the "patchy" (DfE & DCMS, 2011, p. 7; DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 11) provision of musical opportunities for young people through restructuring local music services—regional organizations offering extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition and associated music-making activities.

However, while there has been substantial research into English music education policy prior to the 2011 National Plan and in the lead up to the 2022 National Plan, equivalent Welsh developments have gained little to no academic attention. Therefore, in light of the significant similarities and differences between the English and Welsh iterations of their National Plans for Music Education, in this article we undertake a comparative policy analysis framed using Carol Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach. We begin by outlining the historical, educational, and political contexts of both policies since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1992 and the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales following devolution in 1999. Then, drawing on Bacchi's (2023) own analysis of the 2022 English

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National Plan for Music Education, we explore the way in which the English policy problematizes access to "excellent" music education and proposes new discursive and institutional structures to "level up" opportunities (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 2). In contrast, we highlight how the equivalent Welsh policy conceptualizes the problem of music education as relating solely to access to "learning to play a musical instrument" and proposes the establishment of a national music service as the solution (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 1).

Finally, we compare these two political approaches and, following Keith Swanwick (2008), evaluate the potential for "good-enough" music education (p. 9) to disrupt the elitist notions of excellence and instrumental training encapsulated in the English and Welsh policies. We posit that the notion of holistic music education that is good enough—rather than specialist instrumental training that is outstanding—is more likely to align with the ways of making music that hold most value in everyday society. Through engaging young people in diverse and inclusive opportunities for performing and improvising, composing and creating, and listening and appraising, such music education has the potential to exceed the replication of vocal and instrumental skill, develop young people's musical autonomy, and equip them for engagement with and enjoyment of lifelong learning in the arts (Mantie, 2022; Wright, 2019).

Music education policy in England: thirty years of change (1992–2022)

Music education provision across England—both inside and outside schools—was largely unstructured until 1992, when the introduction of a statutory National Curriculum for Music aimed to establish greater uniformity of classroom-based provision (Anderson, 2024). This regulation of music education responded to the growing need to address ongoing friction between traditional and child-centered teaching approaches (Finney, 2011), a problem which some years earlier had prompted Swanwick's (1979) publication of *A Basis for Music Education*—the first overarching model for a balanced music curriculum in England. After several revisions, the 1992 legislation proposed two attainment targets: composing and performing, and listening and appraising. The guidelines suggested a two-to-one emphasis on the aspect of composing and performing, thereby prioritizing practical musical skills over theoretical musical knowledge (Rainbow & Cox, 2006).

Although learning an instrument was not compulsory under the 1992 National Curriculum, in the years following its publication, reports proposed that general school music education could potentially be enhanced by a parallel instrumental curriculum (Evans, 2011). Nevertheless, it was not until 2001 that the government took up the call to offer "every child at primary school who wants to […] the opportunity to learn a musical instrument" (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2001, p. 39; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2001, p. 12). This vision of Labour's Education Secretary David Blunkett—that instrumental and vocal tuition for all young people would provide "opportunities for self-expression, reflection, and emotional development" (DfEE, 2001, p. 61)—quickly gained traction as "the wider opportunities pledge." This led to the development of several government-led school music initiatives: in 2002 the Wider Opportunities Pilot Programme tested different models for implementing whole-class instrumental tuition in primary schools (Davies & Stephens, 2003); and in 2007 the national singing program Sing Up! was launched (Evans, 2011). However, in spite of such projects, the English state schools' inspectorate—the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)—wrote in their triennial subject report on music in schools (2008–2011) that new "national strategies for widening access to music education have not, by themselves, been enough to bring about sufficient improvements in the quality of provision" (Ofsted, 2012, pp. 1–2).

Following this report, the newly appointed coalition government commissioned Darren Henley (then managing director of the popular radio station, Classic FM) to undertake an independent review of music education in England. Amongst his recommendations, Henley (2011) emphasized that "all children at Key Stage Two [aged 7–11] should have the opportunity to learn an instrument through whole class ensemble teaching" (p. 11). He cited the wider opportunities program as a cost-effective way of implementing such learning and concluded that the scheme should be made a statutory requirement, alongside the National Curriculum, in all primary schools (p. 11).

The first English National Plan for Music Education

It was in response to Henley's (2011) review that the English government published the first iteration of the National Plan for Music Education (DfE & DCMS, 2011). The intention of the policy was "to recognise the importance of music in the lives of young people" and ensure they would receive "a music education that is of the highest quality" (p. 3). The National Plan took forward the wider opportunities initiatives

in aiming to provide equal access for all young people "to learn a musical instrument; to make music with others; to learn to sing; and to have the opportunity to progress to the next level of excellence" (p. 9). First, it sought to build upon the basis of the National Curriculum for Music by adding whole-class singing and instrumental teaching in the classroom; and, second, it established local "music hubs"—organizations that would partner with schools to offer young people accessible, extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition and improved progression routes into regional and national music-making opportunities (pp. 10–16). In line with Henley's recommendations, these hubs were expected to replace local music services (which had previously offered extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition supported by local government funding), thereby eliminating geographic variation in provision, establishing "national consistency and equality of opportunity" (p. 11), and offering centralized financial support through national government funding (p. 9).

Although the 2011 National Plan in some ways reflected a political commitment to supporting equal opportunities for music education, critics called out its view of music education as narrow and exclusionary (Spruce, 2013b). Grounded in a false projection of a common national consciousness, its focus primarily upon whole-class ensemble tuition risked constructing music education as a formal and homogenous endeavor, subjugating non-western, spontaneous, and informal ways of making music (Spruce, 2013a). Similar issues were perpetuated in the revision of the National Curriculum for Music which followed soon afterwards (DfE, 2013). Although the guidelines appeared more flexible than those that preceded them, their emphasis upon talent and musicality, appreciation of the canon, reading staff notation, and compulsory vocal and instrumental training firmly situated statutory music education within a framework foregrounding the values of western art music (Bate, 2020).

The second English National Plan for Music Education

In spite of the apparent governmental support for music education offered through the first National Plan and the revised National Curriculum, independent reports published prior to the expected review of the National Plan in 2020 painted a bleak picture of music-making in English schools (Daubney et al., 2019; Hallam, 2016; Incorporated Society of Musicians [ISM], 2018; Underhill, 2020). They highlighted how other policies such as the English Baccalaureate—an accountability measure requiring young people at secondary level to be examined in English, mathematics, sciences, humanities, and modern foreign languages (but not arts) (DfE, 2019)—had had a detrimental impact on music education (Daubney et al., 2019). This emphasis upon subjects with greatest monetary value, typical of the neoliberal prioritization of free market capitalism, possessive individualism, and economic efficiency (Horsley, 2015; Kanellopoulos & Barahanou, 2021), appeared to "nudge" young people away from supposedly non-core subjects including music (Lilliedahl, 2023). Such issues became increasingly pronounced during the global outbreak of COVID-19, in which the prioritization of core subjects and the logistical challenges of teaching music online and during physical distancing saw dramatic decreases in school music-making. One survey reported "68% of primary school teachers and 39% of secondary school teachers stating that music provision is being reduced as a direct result of the pandemic" (Underhill, 2020, p. 14).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a knock-on effect on the revision of the National Plan in England. A public call for evidence in early 2020 found that only around half of respondents believed that music education was being delivered in line with the 2011 policy, and that some had specific concerns surrounding regional disparities in provision, lack of guidance for early years and special educational needs settings, and unclear progression routes beyond whole-class ensemble tuition (DfE, 2021a, pp. 5–6). However, the subsequent revision of the National Plan was not published until June 2022. In the meantime, what was released was the *Model Music Curriculum: Key Stages 1 to 3* (DfE, 2021b): "a non-statutory resource that provides a practical framework through which the statutory requirements of the curriculum can be met" (p. 4). Designed in collaboration with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, the Model Music Curriculum presented teachers with a "rich and varied" (p. 5)—but highly prescriptive—pre-prepared framework for lesson planning.

As in the case of the first National Plan, while the Model Music Curriculum superficially suggested governmental support for music education, it also signaled a growing move toward state-controlled, centralized curriculum design (cf. Anderson, 2024). On the one hand, it therefore aligned with the neoliberal prioritization of organizational productivity and managerial accountability over individual creativity and professional agency; but on the other, it also represented "a clear example of a neoconservative attempt to gain strong control over legitimate musical knowledge" (Young,

2023, p. 150). This neoconservative ideology—reinforcing a narrative of cultural restorationism that emphasized the transmission of an immutable canon of elite, intellectual tradition (Mullen et al., 2019; Young, 2023)—constructed the Model Music Curriculum as a touchstone for the ambitious education promoted by the Conservative government (Anderson, 2024; Fautley, 2024; Ofsted, 2021). As expressed by Young (2023), the seemingly contradictory principles of neoliberalism and neoconservatism converged in the Model Music Curriculum—and, subsequently, in the second National Plan for Music Education:

> neoliberal policies have dispersed music education provision to a wide range of new providers [such as music hubs] and given them a degree of autonomy. At the same time, neoconservative policies have attempted to centrally dictate what counts as knowledge through direct regulation of the curriculum. (p. 149)

When, in 2022, England's second National Plan for Music Education was finally published (DfE & DCMS, 2022), to some extent it continued to reflect the wider opportunities pledge as manifested in the first National Plan. However, in line with political currents of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, it moved away from an emphasis primarily upon fundamental accessibility and toward one upon professional excellence: "our vision is to enable all children and young people to learn to sing, play an instrument and create music together, and have the opportunity to progress their musical interests and talents, including professionally" (p. 5). This mirrored the wider Conservative strategy of "levelling up" (p. 2)—improving opportunities in underprivileged or impoverished areas—and the academic rigor of the Model Music Curriculum. The National Plan also restructured regional music provision, withdrawing direct funding from the 118 hubs established by the first National Plan and instead devolving monetary support to 43 "music hub lead organisations" (p. 47) to streamline provision and promote collaboration. Each music hub lead organization would be responsible for coordinating "joined-up music education provision" across several regions through maintaining partnerships "made up of schools and academy trusts, local authorities, music and wider arts and education organisations and charities, community or youth organisations, and more" (p. 47).

Music education policy in Wales: from devolution onwards

When the United Kingdom devolved some aspects of government to Wales in 1999, education was one area in which the Welsh government gained the power to enact its own distinct policy. However, the Education Reform Act of 1988, which paved the way for a national curriculum, pre-dated devolution, so the earliest development of the Welsh National Curriculum occurred in tandem with the English guidelines. But, while for most school subjects the Welsh and English policies were initially identical, the Welsh version of the National Curriculum for Music differed from that in England from the start. The debate between music educationalists and policymakers in England resulting in the two-to-one emphasis upon composing and performing against listening and appraising was an "uneasy compromise" (Gammon, 1999, p. 140) between Swanwick's (1979, 1992) conception of the subject as a practical, holistic mix of performing, composing, and appraising, and the views of conservatives such as Roger Scruton (1991) (reflected in the contributions of the National Curriculum Council), who believed in the higher status of music from the western art traditions. In contrast, Wales adopted Swanwick's model wholesale from the start, with a curriculum document which defined the musical skills of performing, composing, and appraising without prescribing content, genre, or form.

Young people's experience of music education in Wales, as in England, was augmented by local music services, whose peripatetic musicians were employed to visit schools and provide individual and small-group instrumental and vocal tuition. Music services also provided a network of local and regional ensembles such as orchestras, choirs, and brass bands. However, in the 1990s, local authority boundary changes meant that the eight existing counties were divided into 22 unitary authorities. This served as a catalyst for an increase in variation of provision between regions, both in terms of the size of each music service and their offering and funding. Despite an £8 million music development fund provided by the Welsh government (1999–2003) and the publication of a policy review (Jones, 2010)—which resulted in the government's pledge for all three- to 19-year-olds to "participate in a broad range of high quality musical experiences" and "learn from practising musicians through concerts, workshops, [and] residencies" (p. 25)—music education provision remained inequitable. Extracurricular music, therefore, became "an economic and geographical lottery" (Braithwaite, 2011, n.p.).

This variability in Welsh music education provision in the early 2000s prompted the formation of a task-and-finish group—a temporary committee tasked with investigating, reporting upon, and addressing the inequity of opportunity in relation to young people's access to music services in Wales (Welsh Government,

2015). After completing its assigned research, the group's list of issues to consider included:

> alternative methods of service delivery; options for charging policies, with a view to achieving greater parity; across Wales, more equitable provision and access for eFSM [eligible for free school meals, and therefore from a low-income family] learners; options for musical instrument supply, refresh, purchase, rental arrangements; and the potential for greater partnership working. (p. 2)

The group made its report in 2015 and several of its recommendations pointed toward the need for an increased level of consistency, standardization, and collaboration between music services. It made no recommendations, however, in relation to classroom music, since its terms of reference were clearly drawn in such a way that they focused solely on music service provision.

In 2018, the Welsh Assembly's Culture, Welsh Language, and Communications Committee published *Hitting the Right Note*, a report into the committee's "inquiry into funding for and access to *music education*" (National Assembly for Wales, 2018; our italics). This report was clear that its terms of reference once again related solely to local authority music service provision (p. 11). However, its title and repeated references to "music education" as synonymous with "music service provision" (e.g., pp. 6, 11, 12) appeared to betray a narrow vision on the part of the committee of what constituted music education, seemingly entirely ignoring classroom music education as provided in state schools. The same oversight then occurred in the subsequent *Music Services Feasibility Study* (Welsh Government, 2020b). Despite a title which clearly focused on music services, a conflation between music service provision and music education in the wider sense was evident:

> music education or tuition is concerned with the long-term commitment to learning how to actively make music, e.g. playing an instrument well, or voice training. This can take years, in respect of building up expertise, and can include progression through the stages of graded examinations. (p. 30)

Tellingly, the feasibility study referenced problems (particularly in primary schools) with the delivery of music and proposed the provision of one-off "musical experiences" to alleviate such issues: "musical experiences are attractive to headteachers because they are easy to plan and budget for. Musical experiences are particularly popular in primary schools, who are unlikely to have a music specialist on their staff" (Welsh Government, 2020b, p. 29). The notion that a lack of a "specialist" in a primary school might preclude the delivery of the subject in the classroom (despite its presence on the curriculum) reflected the potential barriers that primary teachers might perceive in relation to music education. Globally, since primary teachers are usually required to be "generalists" who teach most or all curriculum subjects to their pupils, many experience challenges in relation to the subject of music (e.g., Carroll & Harris, 2023; Hallam et al., 2009; Russell-Bowie, 2009). Within Wales, Gary Beauchamp and Thomas Breeze (2022) have shown that some primary classroom teachers conflate being a highly proficient performing musician with being able to teach the subject effectively in the classroom. Judith Kneen et al. (2020), considering the implications of the new Curriculum for Wales for teaching the expressive arts, noted that there were particular concerns among primary teachers around their subject-specific knowledge, especially in music (p. 268). However, research suggests that such issues can be alleviated without consigning music to the sole remit of "specialists" (Beauchamp & Breeze, 2022; Kneen et al., 2020; Zhukov & Barrett, 2025).

The Welsh National Plan for Music Education

The series of Welsh government reports from 2015 to 2020 formed the backdrop to the publication of the National Plan for Music Education in 2022, which continued to confuse music education with a narrower view focused almost exclusively on instrumental and vocal tuition. The National Plan stated that its purpose was to "deliver our […] commitment to 'establish a national music service for Wales'" (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 3), but at the same time set out a seemingly more widely framed "vision for music education in Wales," declaring that "experiencing the joy of music, in all its forms, should be at the heart of every school and setting" (p. 2). Although achieving this would presumably involve supporting schools and other music-making settings, the National Plan barely referenced the fact that music, as a practical subject learnt holistically through performing, composing, and appraising, should already be present for all young people within their classroom contexts. Instead, the plan focused on the creation of a national music service—primarily as a provider of extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition, but also as a basis for a "music in schools" program (pp. 13–18) that would be supported by a "national instrument, resource and equipment library" (p. 8) and digital resources for "professional learning support" (p. 19). In its diagrammatic representation of young people's access to music education as provided by the national music service,

the Welsh National Plan overlooked any music education already taking place in schools and related settings (pp. 6–7), other than in terms of "signposting" (p. 10) careers in the creative industries.

A comparative policy analysis

From as early as the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales in 1992, there has been a clear contrast in the two nations' approaches to music education policy. While English legislation continues to be shaped by right-wing political trends of neoliberal marketization, performative accountability measures, and neoconservative cultural restorationism, broadly left-wing Welsh policies grapple with the ongoing challenges of meeting the needs of young people across geographically and socioeconomically disparate regions. Given this juxtaposition, the publication of one English and one Welsh music education policy at the same time and bearing the same title merits further analysis. While both represent recent developments in complex and distinctive political and educational histories, their commonalities extend far beyond their titles. Though the English National Plan takes a more holistic view of the interrelation between school music education and music service provision than the Welsh policy, the outworking of the so-called wider opportunities pledge is much the same as that of the Welsh national music service: the universal provision of instrumental and vocal tuition. The similarities and differences between the problems represented by the two plans—and the solutions they pursue—are therefore worthy of attention.

"What's the Problem Represented to Be?"

Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis known as "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" was groundbreaking in its conceptualization of the role of public policy. In contrast to structuralist approaches such as the multiple streams framework (Béland & Howlett, 2016; Kingdon, 2011), the narrative policy framework (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2017), and innovation and diffusion models (Berry & Berry, 1990; Stone, 2012)—which typically presumed that policy was a governmental means of solving preexisting problems—Bacchi's method adopted a poststructural lens to show how policy was a governmental means of representing, constructing, or producing an emergent problem in a politically expedient manner (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Drawing on anthropological understandings of policy as culture (e.g., Shore & Wright, 2003) and sociological understandings as policy as discourse (e.g., Ball, 1990), "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" reframed policy function by questioning taken-for-granted positivist paradigms. In Bacchi's characterization, for example, the 1992 National Curriculum in England and Wales was not introduced to *solve* a self-evident "problem" with "education." Instead, by establishing a nationally-mandated curriculum framework, the policy *constructed* a "problem" with "education"—namely, its lack of oversight and standardization by the government.

The "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach is structured around six primary questions. The first asks how a proposed policy intervention reveals a specific conceptualization of a problem, situating the policy within its broader political framework and identifying the allocation of funds and resources. The second question focusses upon the presuppositions underlying the problem representation. Considering the background epistemological and ontological assumptions allows the identification of "conceptual logics" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 5) or meanings that validate the problem representation. These may include patterns of governmentality, public debate, or political ideology. The third question then asks how the problem representation has diverted from alternative pathways to assume dominance. Bacchi (2009) draws on Foucauldian genealogy to show how problem representations evolve not in "natural" or "linear" ways, but instead are "contingent and hence susceptible to change" (p. 10).

While the first three questions of the "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" approach focus on the origins and underpinnings of a problem representation, the final steps introduce a more critical framing. The fourth question asks, "what is left unproblematic in this problem representation?" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 12), and addresses the pathways untrodden and the voices unheard. It may identify oversimplification, misrepresentation, or silencing. The fifth step then draws on these limitations to consider the effects of the problem representation upon discourse and debate, the production of governable subjects, and people's everyday lives (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 23). Question six returns to how the production and dissemination of a specific problem representation has made it authoritative (p. 24). Bacchi then emphasizes the importance of exploring the potential to enact "resistance" in the face of the problem representation, and the need for a reflexive turn that problematizes the problematization in order to unearth and scrutinize personal, social, or cultural assumptions (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

"What's the Problem Represented to Be?" has been used widely in policy analysis, including in the field of education. It has often been applied to analyze the implementation of policy in areas of education deemed to be contentious or controversial, such as in the schooling of Roma (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018) and Indigenous (Burgess et al., 2023) children. It is therefore unsurprising that it has also been applied to music and arts education contexts, since in many countries such subjects face an ongoing crisis of legitimation (Aróstegui, 2016; Bowman, 2005; Koza, 2010; Lilliedahl, 2023). Existing research has seen the approach used to investigate the professionalization of Swedish music teachers (Larsson, 2023), curriculum development in Maltese secondary music education (Mallia, 2024), and—notably—the implementation of the second National Plan for Music Education in England (Bacchi, 2023).

Bacchi's (2023) analysis of England's second National Plan for Music Education—which she originally presented as a keynote paper at the 13th International Conference for Research in Music Education in April 2023—offers an overview of how "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" might be applied to such a policy. After situating it within its wider sociopolitical context, she identifies proposals that locate problem representations. The first of these is evident within the policy's title, "the power of music to change lives." In a single line, the plan produces the problem as "the need for some lives to change," and the solution as the transformative "power of music" (p. 236). Bacchi goes on to highlight the plan's specific proposals relating to progression and development, inclusion and diversity, talent and creativity, professional development, and evidence-based policy. But she is the first to admit that her analysis "is limited to indicating issues and debates that require further consideration" (p. 237). In what follows, therefore, we take up this call for further consideration and interrogate England's second National Plan for Music Education alongside its Welsh equivalent in order to present an in-depth analysis of the two nations' respective problem representations and their potential impacts upon music education. We divide Bacchi's approach into six questions of problem representation and effect, addressing each in relation to first the English and then the Welsh policy, before concluding with the question, "how could this problem representation be disrupted or replaced?"Department for Education 2011

The problem? Music education

In both England and Wales, the essential problem represented in their National Plans for Music Education is, put bluntly, "music education." No other curricular or extracurricular subjects have National Plans or equivalent guidance, statutory or non-statutory. In England, this is particularly evident inasmuch as the subject of music has a National Curriculum framework (DfE, 2013), a Model Music Curriculum (DfE, 2021b), and two National Plans (DfE & DCMS, 2011, 2022). More specifically, across both nations the problem with music education is represented as relating to historical, geographical, and socioeconomic patterns of inequitable access and opportunity.

What is the problem represented to be?

In identifying "the need for some lives to change" (Bacchi, 2023, p. 236), England's second National Plan echoes the wider opportunities pledge represented in the first National Plan. It highlights the ongoing, patchy provision of music education and expresses "the clear ambition to level up musical opportunities for all children, regardless of circumstance, needs or geography" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 2). Yet this language of "levelling up" suggests a more nuanced problem than simply a lack of opportunity; instead, it implies a lack of "excellent" or "ambitious" opportunity (p. 2). This representation of the problem is reinforced at three levels. First, at an institutional level, opportunities for music education are considered to lack ambition because the curriculum is not sufficiently well-supported by government oversight: "more needs to be done to support teachers, leaders, schools, trusts and music hubs to deliver the best for children and young people" (p. 5). Music is singled out as needing more support to "be planned and taught as robustly as any other foundation curriculum subject" (p. 2). Second, at a regional level, since high-quality opportunities are not consistently available across all localities, teachers and young people are to be redirected toward "new national centres of excellence in teacher development, inclusion, music technology and pathways into the music industry" (p. 3). And third, at a national level, where routes into "world-leading" creative industries (p. 7) are inaccessible or obscure, "it is vital that each part of the music pipeline—schools, community music, further and higher education, and employers in the music and wider creative sector—collaborates to create joined-up talent pathways" (p. 3).

As in England, although reviews preceding the Welsh National Plan for Music Education originally framed the problem with music in terms of inequity of access to and parity of *music service* provision across a geographically challenging country, by the publication of the National Plan the problem is framed

much more widely in terms of *music education* (Welsh Government, 2022). However, the nature of the problem remains firmly positioned in terms of the opportunity to learn to play an instrument—usually the remit of music services rather than music education more broadly construed. Unlike in England's National Plan, the solution to the problem of music is conceptualized as one-dimensional: as lying within the creation of a national music service offering accessible, extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition. The Ministerial Foreword laments that, "learning to play a musical instrument has been for those few whose parents and carers could afford the tuition costs," and emphasizes that, "our vision for the National Plan for Music Education is for all children and young people across Wales, regardless of background, to have the chance to learn to play an instrument" (p. 1).

What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this problem representation?

Fundamentally, the proposals of both the Welsh and English National Plans to provide equitable and excellent opportunities for music education are underpinned by the belief that everyone is entitled to music education. This is an admirable sentiment, and one that has been upheld by scholars and practitioners across diverse fields of music:

> if we agree that we are *all* musical, that we have a *need* for music, and that we have a *right* to an education that develops all of our talents and abilities, then I believe that diverse, personally and culturally relevant music educations that develop the *musical* talents and abilities of *all* young people should be a human right, and that access to rewarding music learning throughout the life course should be one measure of a socially just society. (Wright, 2019, p. 218; original italics)

Yet in the problem representations offered by the two plans, this right or entitlement to music education can be fulfilled only by specific and narrow conceptualizations of teaching and learning music. In the case of England, this is by provision of the highest quality. In the case of Wales, this is by provision of extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition.

In England's second National Plan, the term "high quality" is mentioned 48 times in relation to institutional, regional, and national levels of music education. But nowhere is it defined. On an institutional level, "high quality" is equated with "the high standards set by the National Curriculum, as exemplified by the Model Music Curriculum" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 15). This reference to the Model Music Curriculum presupposes that greater government oversight is the best means of enhancing the quality of curriculum design and delivery, and begins to elevate the non-statutory guidance from the status of "desirable" to "essential." A similar presupposition is evident at a regional level, with the restructuring of the music hub network meaning that schools will defer to "lead schools for music" selected as high-quality role models for "supporting other schools to improve their music provision" (pp. 52–53). In turn, four government-appointed "national centres of excellence" in inclusion, continuing professional development, music technology, and pathways into industry will offer music hubs high-quality, "expert support" (p. 25). Such partnerships, carefully overseen by government, reinforce the assumption that stronger accountability measures will generate higher-quality music education.

In Wales, the National Plan's fundamental assumption that all young people have a right to an accessible and high-quality music education becomes problematic in its conflation of extracurricular instrumental and vocal tuition and ensembles with music education in its entirety (Welsh Government, 2022). References to learning to "play an instrument" (pp. 1, 4, 11, 19) and accessing a "range of instruments" (pp. 4, 9, 13, 15) appear throughout the document, while schools are almost always referred to in terms of being "supported" through initiatives such as the "music in schools" program (pp. 13–18). This perpetuates an assumption that classroom teachers (especially primary generalists) are not capable of teaching music within the school curriculum. Instead, trained performing musicians—who, not being qualified classroom teachers, typically possess their own extensive music *performance* education, but no music *pedagogy* education—are assumed to be more capable of providing music education through "first experiences" (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 13). The National Plan implies that such experiences are sufficient to compensate for any lack of musical opportunity or socioeconomic disadvantage, despite the wider Curriculum for Wales requiring classroom teachers to be equipped to integrate music within locally relevant curricula (Welsh Government, 2020c) emphasizing holistic progression and "powerful connections" between subject disciplines (Donaldson, 2015, p. 68).

How has this problem representation come about?

Although the political ideologies that characterize the wider governance of England and Wales differ in

significant regards, the National Plans of the two countries hint at shared norms and values. While the marketization and commercialization of music hub provision introduced by England's first National Plan can be interpreted as neoliberal in character (Horsley, 2015; Kanellopoulos & Barahanou, 2021; Spruce, 2013a), Welsh policy, especially as evident in the Curriculum for Wales, typically aspires toward minimizing performativity frameworks and maximizing educational agency (Kneen et al., 2023; Power et al., 2020). However, in the problematization of high-quality music education in England, and in the conflation of music services and music education in the Welsh National Plan, similar trends foregrounding the importance of elite, western modes of music-making betray a shared, neoconservative view of music education.

Building upon the traditional canons of cultural knowledge offered by the National Curriculum and the Model Music Curriculum (Bate, 2020; Young, 2023), England's second National Plan's problematization of "excellent" and "high-quality" opportunities for music education is explicitly neoconservative in character (Young, 2023). Nick Gibb, the English Minister of State for School Standards at the time of publication of the second National Plan, credits his music education—"years spent in school and church choirs"—with introducing him to "the beauty" of western art music, including "the tingling mysticism of Allegri's Miserere" (DfE, 2021b, p. 2). This sentiment, reflected in the foregrounding of England's "proud history of music-making" in the plan's Ministerial Foreword (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 2), illustrates the neoconservative assumption that historic western art musics and other elite modes of music-making possess greater intrinsic value than other means of musical expression or participation. In particular, it suggests that "opportunities should be available for all but we should not be hesitant in creating an elite of musicians, akin to the elites we celebrate in sport" (p. 3).

The Welsh misrepresentation of inequity of music service provision as inequity of music education provision exposes a parallel ideological shift toward elite neoconservatism. While gathering evidence to address the regional disparities in resourcing local music services (Welsh Government, 2015), *Hitting the Right Note* draws on an exclusive sample of influential musicians and ensembles (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). It features high-profile Welsh musicians such as the conductor Owain Arwel Hughes and the choral director Tim Rhys-Evans, who at the time was well known for his work with the choir Only Men Aloud, winners of the BBC's *Last Choir Standing* competition. Alongside them are featured select organizations such as Tŷ Cerdd and National Youth Arts Wales, who are responsible for elite musical ensembles such as the National Youth Orchestra of Wales. Conspicuous by their absence are schools and school teachers: while five individuals are named as sources of written evidence, none of them are classroom teachers (e.g., Senedd Cymru, 2017). Reflecting the neoconservative persuasions expressed by Gibb in concurrent English music education policy, committee chair Bethan Syed situates *Hitting the Right Note* in direct relation to her experience as a young musician, "playing some of the world's most renowned orchestral music, working as a team, or travelling to different countries with the National Youth Orchestra of Wales" (National Assembly for Wales, 2018, p. 5). Both Gibb and Syed thereby construct music education as residing (solely) within an elite, western framing, without calling upon a wider evidence base that may suggest otherwise.

What is left unproblematic or silenced in this problem representation?

In spite of the personal testimonies of political actors such as Gibb and Syed—whose own experiences of music education centered around rigorous western art music practices—both the English and Welsh National Plans begin by offering the rationale that national folk traditions of music-making underpin the need for accessible and high-quality music education. In England's plan, the Ministerial Foreword states that, "down the generations, music has enriched our national identity, our community and our economy. Music education is essential to safeguarding and extending the musical life of our country for generations to come" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 2). The Welsh Ministerial Foreword is similar:

> music has been, and continues to be, one of the most inclusive ways to communicate and celebrate our culture and language. We can be proud that our communities across Wales have long produced music renowned across the world. (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 1)

Yet in both cases, what remains unacknowledged is the fact that these influential musical traditions have historically been informal, unregulated, and occurred in the private rather than the public sphere (e.g., Finnegan, 2007; Williams, 1998). Traditional participatory practices and contemporary digital cultures alike have prioritized collaboration and collegiality over mastery and excellence, inclusivity and diversity over quality and virtuosity, and the "good enough" over the "ever more ambitious" (Swanwick,

2008; Tobias, 2013; Turino, 2009). But these ways of musical engagement—which, for many, will form the mainstay of their lifelong music-making—are erased from both National Plans and thereby from the very concept of music education.

Without a robust definition of "high-quality" music education, England's second National Plan for Music Education effectively purports that "levelling up" can only be achieved through adherence to the Model Music Curriculum and accountability to schools and hubs designated as "excellent" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, pp. 2–3); access to music education via other means or for other purposes is therefore silenced. Likewise, in the Welsh National Plan, "wider community music partners" (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 6) are mentioned in passing as having an incidental role in music education, while a select list of elite partners such as the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and the National Eisteddfod are offered as examples of "making music with others" (p. 25).

The silencing of traditional and contemporary participatory music-making in the Welsh National Plan is exacerbated by the negotiation of its interface with the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a). In outlining how their version of music education can "support" music in the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 10), the authors of the National Plan position themselves as peripheral to—rather than integrated within—the curriculum, offering superficial first experiences and digital resources rather than comprehensive professional development opportunities. Indeed, in a recent funding call for education organizations bidding to provide support for the Curriculum for Wales, applicants were specifically advised that no funding would be given for music, since "specific arrangements are [already] in train for support against [this priority]" (Welsh Government, 2024, n.p.). These "arrangements" entailed £12 million in funding for the National Plan's new national music service (Welsh Government, 2025)—thereby legitimizing its narrow conceptualization of music education and silencing valuable, participatory music-making practices.

What discursive, subjectification, and lived effects are produced by this problem representation?

Although the English and Welsh National Plans create contrasting problem representations regarding excellent music education in England and music service provision in Wales, their neoconservative stances result in similar discursive effects around the exclusivity of music education. This is especially evident in the hierarchical diagrams used to model "talent pathways" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 3) through music service provision from first access to specialist tuition (Figures 1 and 2).

Within England's second National Plan, the discursive frequency of references to the high-quality, excellent, and ambitious music education supporting the talent pipeline is remarkable. Given that the first National Plan contains approximately 22,000 words, and the second National Plan approximately 27,000 words, "high quality" is mentioned once per 786 words in 2011 and once per 563 words in 2022; "excellent" is mentioned once per 1,222 words in 2011 and once per 844 words in 2022; "ambitious" is mentioned once in total in 2011 and 25 times (once per 1,080 words) in 2022; and "talent" is mentioned once per 1,375 words in 2011 and once per 628 words in 2022. While these terms align the second National Plan with the contemporaneous National Curriculum

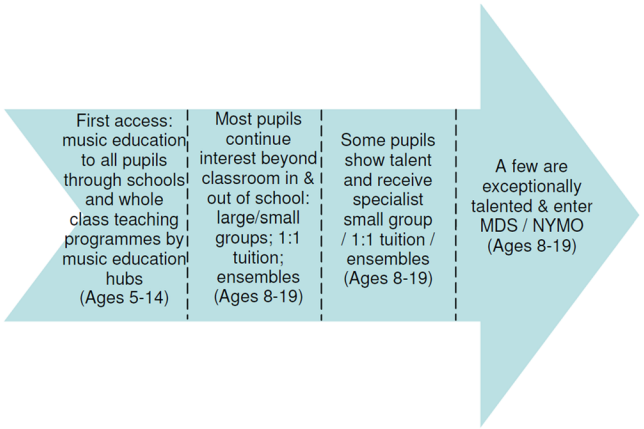

Figure 1. Progression in music education as modeled in the first English National Plan (DfE & DCMS, 2011, p. 18). Note that MDS refers to the Music and Dance Scheme (government bursaries to specialist music and dance institutions) and NYMO to the National Youth Music Organizations (e.g., National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain).

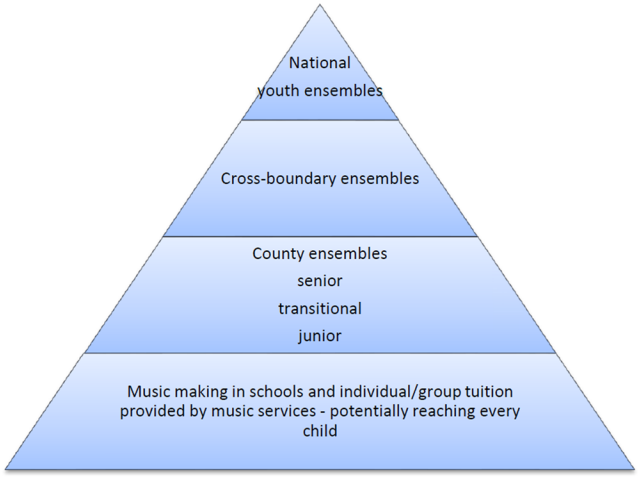

Figure 2. Progression in music education as modeled in the Welsh music services (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 6).

and Model Music Curriculum, new vocabulary around the National Plan's accountability and regulatory expectations has repercussions for lived experience. Prior to its publication, there were no local or school "music development plans" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 14), "lead schools for music" (p. 16), "music progression funds" (pp. 21–22), "music hub lead organisations and partnerships" (p. 47), or "national music hub centres of excellence" (pp. 58–60). These complex new structures introduced national competition for governmental funding, regional restructuring of former music hubs, and local requirements for rigorous documentation of music education provision. Institutions are therefore accountable for building local cultural infrastructure, maintaining progression routes, and ensuring inclusivity and sustainability—leaving overstretched teachers increasingly likely to fall back onto pre-prepared, politically endorsed, neoconservative curricula such as the Model Music Curriculum and resources from "the new arms-length national curriculum body" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 23), the Oak Academy (https://www.thenational.academy).

While the National Plan in Wales does not explicitly emphasize the same language of excellence as its English counterpart, its elision of music service provision and music education provision has significant discursive repercussions in silencing everyday formal, non-formal, and informal ways of learning music (Folkestad, 2006). In following up *Hitting the Right Note* (National Assembly for Wales, 2018) by positioning professional musicians as more capable of teaching music in the classroom than professional teachers, the authors of the Welsh National Plan risk reinforcing negative views of music as "too specialist" to teach within classroom curricula. Given that music is already a subject in which teachers' concerns about values and pedagogies loom large (Beauchamp & Breeze, 2022; Philpott, 2010; John et al., 2024, the Welsh National Plan therefore mirrors England's Model Music Curriculum and Oak National Academy in subjectifying classroom teachers as lacking expertise and agency, and requiring the support of "professional learning" delivered by musicians without qualified teacher status (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 13).

How and where has this problem representation been produced, disseminated, and defended?

The representation of high-quality, elite music education as a means of solving problems of inequitable access to music-making has been reinforced across England and Wales through the restructuring and monitoring of music service provision and resources. In England, the meritocratic selection of music hub lead organizations as part of the "ambitious national programme providing high-quality music education for all children and young people" (Arts Council England [ACE], 2024, n.p.) saw two regions left without lead organizations that met the exacting high standards required. Yet even without lead organizations, individual institutions remain accountable for delivering consistently rigorous, high-quality music education. Although the schools' inspectorate cannot enforce the enactment of the non-statutory National Plan, Ofsted's (2023) review of music education highlights the "expectation that schools will have a music development plan in place by the academic year 2023/24" (n.p.) and praises schools in which "music leaders were starting to make good use of the non-statutory guidance […] to rethink, redesign and improve their provision" (n.p.). In doing so, Ofsted defends and validates the National Plan's narrow conceptualization of a high-quality music education.

In Wales, the National Plan presents the national music service as the be-all and end-all solution to the problem of music education. This flawed premise is reinforced by the government's funding allocations, purchase of instruments, and subscription to the digital platform of music teaching resources, Charanga (https://charanga.com/site). The assertion that this supports the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a)—without offering classroom teachers professional learning (Welsh Government, 2024)—strengthens an exclusionary, neoconservative understanding of music education. Furthermore, despite education having been devolved to Wales 25 years ago, the lack of a Welsh subject association for music means that there are few forums for fostering debate and

discussion around such issues, and that change may well be difficult to enact.

The disruption? "Good-enough" music

By problematizing music education as inequitable and inaccessible, the National Plans for Music Education in England and Wales create constraints around the legitimate teaching and learning of the subject. In England, music education is constructed as requiring myriad accountability structures and prescriptive political interventions in order to fulfill expectations of excellence and ambition. In Wales, music education is positioned outside the reformed Curriculum for Wales and the professional agency of qualified classroom teachers, and instead placed solely within the remit of the national music service and associated musicians. In neither case do policymakers focus on the situational expertise of school music teachers to create relevant and responsive musical experiences for young people in their local areas. Reinforced by the neoconservative emphasis upon elite, western art musics, both National Plans therefore effectively rarefy music as beyond the capabilities of everyday classroom practice and expect teachers to continually meet new standards of competency or else delegate such responsibilities (Karlsen, 2019).

How could this problem representation be disrupted or replaced?

As outlined in this article, we suggest that across England and Wales there is an urgent need to recognize the professional expertise and autonomy of classroom music teachers. While we acknowledge our own positionality as scholars and practitioners who are personally invested in classroom music teaching practices (Berger, 2015), we believe that our analysis demonstrates the value of empowering classroom teachers in music education—even if this is just one among many potential sources of "counter-conduct" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 24) against these dominant political problematizations. In England, we contend that this would mean reducing the pressure of accountability and "terror of performativity" inherent in the second National Plan (Ball, 2003), while in Wales, it would mean equipping teachers in schools to teach music rather than offloading it to unqualified musicians within the context of an unregulated national music service. Both such approaches, however, would need to be underpinned by the value of a "good-enough" music education (Swanwick, 2008), rather than by the neoconservative notions of elitism and excellence envisioned in current policy.

According to Swanwick (2008), good-enough music teaching is not that which simply scrapes over the line of acceptable classroom practice, but rather, that which recognizes that music teaching does not always result in observable music learning, and that music learning does not always result from observable music teaching. Following Malcolm Ross (1978), Swanwick (2008) posits that the good-enough music teacher is one who, through operationalizing their own professional autonomy, "is able to facilitate students' immersion in this environment of the symbolic world and promote the growth of their musical autonomy" (p. 12). The good-enough music teacher enters into musical conversation with young people, recognizing the unique contributions they bring into the classroom (p. 12). The music teacher therefore begins to open up liminal spaces for young people's musical agency, for unexpected musical encounters, and for the informal learning that takes place beyond national frameworks, development plans, and model curricula. Given that, beyond the classroom, it is this manner of music-making that is likely to characterize the lives of both teachers and young people (Tobias, 2013), this "good enough" can also be appreciated as of the "highest quality"—at least insofar as it encompasses expertise, relevance, and lifelong benefits.

In expanding the musical horizons of young people into new "potential spaces" (Swanwick, 2008, p. 12), we suggest that the good-enough music teacher can create opportunities for pathways of learning that diverge and disperse from the strictly regulated notions of progression enshrined in English and Welsh policy. These spaces are where young people are most likely to have the opportunity "to express themselves," "to explore their creativity" (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 2), and "to communicate and celebrate [their] language and culture" (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 1). This may not be through mastering an instrument, participating in an elite ensemble, or pursuing a career in the creative industries. But it may be through the on-and-off, good-enough, lifelong musicianship that can encourage flourishing, improve wellbeing, and build relationships (Mantie, 2022). This approach to music education—which fosters diverse, low-stakes, and participatory ways of music-making (MacGregor, 2020)—is perhaps that with the greatest potential to disrupt dominant narratives of elitism and excellence and begin to address the "problem" that is "music education."

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