



ARTICLE

Students' attitudes to school music and perceived barriers to GCSE music uptake: a phenomenographic approach

Dimitra Kokotsaki  and Helen Whitford

School of Education, Durham University, UK

Corresponding author: Dimitra Kokotsaki; Email: dimitra.kokotsaki@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

The study aimed to investigate how students in lower secondary schools in England perceive the subject of music in terms of its importance and enjoyment. Following findings from the first survey phase of the project, it specifically sought to shed light on the reasons why the majority of students decide not to choose music as one of their optional subjects at GCSE level. The paper presents interview findings with students in three schools at the north-east of England following the phenomenographic method of data analysis. Among factors found to impact on students' decision to continue music at Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16 years) were the desire to spend more time learning music, having more choice and autonomy in the classroom, having more information about the content and requirements of GCSE music, feeling disadvantaged due to not being proficient at instrumental playing and having a limited perception of their own musicality or perceiving music as being elite or difficult. The findings are discussed in terms of their practical implications for the teaching and learning of music in secondary schools.

Keywords: GCSE music uptake; student voice; enjoyment; importance; attitudes towards music; barriers to GCSE uptake; phenomenography

Introduction and background

Concerns have been raised in recent years about the vulnerable position of the subject of music in secondary schools in England. Many teachers are dissatisfied with music education policy decisions and are concerned about the breadth and the quality of music education provision in schools (Daubney & Mackrill, 2018). The uptake of music as a subject at GCSE¹ level remains very low with 7% of students choosing to study GCSE music in 2017 (Caroll & Gill, 2018). This picture has not changed much in the last 20 years. Bray (2000) and Bell (2001) argued that since the introduction of the National Curriculum, uptake of GCSE music had increased by 5% between 1984 and 1997 (Bell, 2001), settling at around 7% of the entire cohort studying music at Key Stage 4² (KS4) by 1997 (Bray, 2000). For Bell, this was seen as a success, despite others such as Hanson claiming 'the National Curriculum has brought about winners and losers', with 'losers' including the arts (Bell, 2001, p. 218). Despite an increase in uptake, Bray, much like Hanson, was sceptical. He observed that, when comparing the uptake of music to other arts subjects, it was by far the most unpopular. In 1997, whilst 7% of the cohort opted to study GCSE music, 15% opted for drama whilst 37% opted for art. Bray's concerns are supported by earlier research in which Gammon also found that 'music's slice of the creative arts cake is small, although stable' (1996, p. 104).

A commonly cited threat to music education is the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in which students are encouraged to take a specific set of GCSE subjects (which excludes the arts). Upon its introduction in 2010, warnings were made as to the negative impact such a policy could have on

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

areas of the curriculum it neglects, including the arts (Adams, 2013; Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2011; Welch, 2011). Such concerns recently came to fruition when the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education (2019) called for the government to review the EBacc ‘to make sure that our children are getting the education they need for the 21st century, not one which is rooted in 1904 Secondary Regulations’ (p. 3). This plea came as a result of a study addressing changes in secondary music education in England which found that of 505 individuals surveyed across 464 schools, 59.7% of respondents felt the EBacc was having negative effects not only on the uptake of GCSE music but also on the overall provision of school music (Daubney & Mackrill, 2018). Such concerns are not limited to this study with findings in a report by Neumann et al. (2016) showing that teachers feel the curriculum offer for music in their schools has decreased, with music reportedly removed from the curriculum in a number of instances, as a result of the EBacc.

Despite such claims, in 2016 Schools Minister Nick Gibb declared the following:

The claim that EBacc squeezes out the arts at GCSE is quite simply wrong. Since the EBacc was introduced, the percentage of state school pupils entered for at least one GCSE in an arts subject has increased from 46% to 50%. Between 2011 and 2015, the number of pupils entered for GCSEs in art and design, music and performing arts have all risen (Gibb, 2016).

Gibb continued to state that the EBacc requires a combination of only seven subjects, leaving students with ‘ample room for other choices’ (2016). Furthermore, he discusses that the arts can exist as extracurricular activities and, therefore, do not need to be studied at KS4 for students to partake in musical activities. Firstly, whilst Gibb claims that exam entries to arts subjects have increased, it is unclear where these statistics have been retrieved from. Questions have arisen surrounding these figures, with some finding them to be misleading (Whittaker, 2019; Cultural Learning Alliance, 2016). Gibbs claim that students have ‘ample room for other choices’ is also lacking in evidence. Whilst this may be correct in some cases, Daubney and Mackrill (2018) found that 14.5% of schools participating in their study claimed that not all students could opt for music even where it was provided as a subject choice, with evidence showing the EBacc had contributed to limiting students’ choices. Nevertheless, the final point by Gibb in relation to music as an extracurricular activity is not entirely wrong. Many students have the opportunity to take part in some kind of extracurricular music activity, particularly with additional support available as a result of the National Plan for Music Education’s introduction of Music Hubs (Department for Education, 2011) alongside other initiatives. The question here, however, is how valuable music education can be if it is to be seen more as an extracurricular activity than something to be studied within the curriculum (Bray, 2000). It has already been discovered that a small number of schools deliver GCSE music outside of curriculum time, raising queries as to its value as a subject (Daubney & Mackrill, 2018). As contended by Savage (2018), ‘It is hard to think of any other subjects where this would be considered an acceptable approach’ (p. 114).

Portraying the current state of music in secondary education, Daubney and Mackrill (2018) also found that, in addition to a large number of schools not delivering music lessons for students in Year 7 (the first year of secondary schools in England), in some cases, carousel teaching meant that music was only studied for one term in the school year, resulting in a lack of curriculum time devoted to the subject. With such little time spent in music lessons throughout the lower secondary school (Key Stage 3: KS3³), it is questionable whether students would be prepared to continue their studies at KS4. Staffing levels had also fallen over the period of study (2016–2018/19), with 35.8% of respondents reporting a drop of qualified music teaching staff in their departments. There are currently serious concerns over the ‘erosion of the teaching workforce’ (Bath et al., 2020, p. 443) and a ‘de-professionalised workforce’ (Savage, 2021, p. 473) that threaten the place of music education in schools in England. Furthermore, Daubney and Mackrill (2018) found that 14.5% of schools participating in their study claimed that not all students could opt for

music even where it was provided as a subject choice, with evidence showing the EBacc had contributed to limiting students' choices.

Whilst the current state of music education discussed is disheartening, a more positive picture is portrayed in research conducted by Hallam, Creech and McQueen (2017), who explored the impact of Musical Futures⁴ in relation to continuation at KS4. Through a series of repeated questionnaires and interviews with students and teachers in Musical Futures Champion Schools, findings showed that, as a result of Musical Futures, teachers had seen an increase in the uptake of music at KS4. Students also reported feeling more confident in their own ability, allowing them to progress further after KS3 if they so wished. Some noted disadvantages, however, were that the needs of all students may not be met via this approach and that time restrictions in the curriculum may be problematic for implementation in some schools. Although the adoption of Musical Futures has shown to be beneficial in a small number of circumstances, the overarching problems presented here still remain. Whilst the blame in many instances is put upon the Ebacc, this study aims to explore the barriers involved in choosing music as an option at GCSE level from the perspective of the students who directly experience these barriers. The students' own voice needs to be seriously considered, heard and acted upon in any implementation efforts that concern them as the ultimate recipients and beneficiaries of such attempts (Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021).

This current research explores how students' attitudes towards music lessons, the importance or lack of importance they attribute to music and their enjoyment of the subject impact on GCSE uptake. The study took place before the COVID-19 pandemic which had a deleterious effect on music teaching and learning in many ways (Daubney & Fautley, 2020; 2021). The findings presented here offer an in-depth exploration of students' views adding further insight into the survey findings reported as part of the first phase of the project (Whitford & Kokotsaki, [under review](#)).

Research Design and Methods

The research design was based on a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015). To address the aims of the current project, a survey phase preceded a second interviewing phase with students of secondary age (KS3) to explore their attitudes and potential barriers to GCSE uptake in depth. The first survey phase of the research design yielded data that were analysed and presented as part of the first phase of the project (Whitford & Kokotsaki, [under review](#)) but also helped inform the development of targeted questions in the subsequent interviewing stage. This paper presents and discusses the findings from the second interviewing part of the project. The interview questions served the purpose of helping obtain an understanding of participants' own experiences rather than be influenced by the researchers' own assumptions about the phenomenon (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). The focus group type of interviewing was chosen because participants would be encouraged to interact with one another in response to tightly focused questions on the issue of enjoyment of school music and GCSE uptake. It was expected that this group interaction would produce insights that 'might not otherwise have been gained from a straightforward interview' and would yield a vast amount of data in a short period of time (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018, p. 532).

Data collection and analysis

The study participants were students attending years 7, 8 and 9 (KS3) from three schools in the north-east of England. The three schools were selected to represent geographical and socio-economic diversity within the north-east of England and belonged to different local authorities (for more information about the three schools, see Whitford & Kokotsaki, [under review](#)).

The data were collected between May and June 2019. At the time of data collection, all students involved who were at the end of KS3 had already chosen their KS4 options. After some introductory questions about students' enjoyment of music or lack of enjoyment and an

Table 1. Number of students interviewed per school and year group

	Year 7			Year 8			Year 9		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
School A	X	5	5	X	5	5	X	4	4
School B	2	3	5	2	3	5	2	1	3
School C	2	3	5	2	3	5		X	

exploration of the associated reasons, a more focused discussion then followed linking degrees of enjoyment with reasons for considering studying music at GCSE level or opting for different module choices (Please see Appendix A for more information regarding the questions of the focus groups).

To form the focus groups, schools were asked to select five students per KS3 year group of varying musical abilities and mixed genders. For year groups who had already chosen their options (Year 9 in schools A and B and Year 8 in school C), teachers were asked to select not only a range of abilities but also a mix of students who had and had not chosen to continue studying music at KS4. By selecting students in such a way, it was hoped that a fair representation of student attitudes to music would be ensured to avoid the threat of selection bias. The interviews took place at each school and lasted between 18 and 33 minutes. The number of students per year group and per school that took part in these interviews can be seen in Table 1. Overall, 37 students participated in eight focus group interviews.

The interview data were analysed following the phenomenographic method of data analysis (Marton, 1994; Åkerlind, 2012). Data were coded and organised into categories of description, each of which grouped together similar ways in which the phenomenon was experienced. Each category was then labelled, and relationships were drawn between them in a visual manner. The analysis culminated in the creation of the outcome space which presented in a holistic way the relationships between categories of description that were discovered and is the main goal of phenomenographic research (Åkerlind, 2012).

Ethical approval was gained from the School of Education Ethics Committee, at Durham University. All recommended ethical guidelines outlined in the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) have been adhered to. Before students participated in the study, they were informed of its aims, what their participation would entail, how the information would be used and that they would remain anonymous in any publications resulting from the study. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and could decide not to take part in the survey and/or the focus group interviews. Full informed consent was then sought for the audio-recorded focus groups via a parental consent form. Once transcribed, audio data were deleted and all transcripts were fully anonymised. The interview findings are presented in the next section along with the outcome space, in line with the main goal of the phenomenographic analytic approach (Åkerlind, 2012).

Focus Group Findings

Students' attitudes towards music lessons in relation to enjoyment, importance and GCSE uptake were split into four primary categories of description. These categories were named as 1) extrinsic factors, 2) positive intrinsic factors, 3) negative intrinsic factors and 4) barriers to uptake of music. Within these categories, 28 sub-categories were identified, each with their own descriptors. Table 2 shows which focus groups presented evidence of each of the 28 sub-categories. Each category of description and its sub-categories are set out next.

Table 2. Primary categories of description

	Extrinsic Factors						Positive Intrinsic Factors											Negative Intrinsic Factors						Barriers to Uptake				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
A-Y7
A-Y8
A-Y9
B-Y7
B-Y8
B-Y9
C-Y7
C-Y8

Extrinsic Factors (sub-categories 1 to 6)

Extrinsic factors played a large part in students’ decision-making in relation to choosing GCSE subjects in general and also when making the decision whether or not to choose GCSE music. The factors most often mentioned related to good or lucrative careers, success or other elements such as acquiring skills that would ‘help in later life’. Students’ own intrinsic desires and needs in relation to music such as enjoyment of the subject were, in some cases, put aside for extrinsic career-driven goals which were seen to be more important. The six sub-categories that pertained to these extrinsic factors are detailed below (illustrative quotes from the 28 sub-categories are presented in Appendix B)

1. Career-oriented GCSE subjects

It was expressed in all interviews that the subject choices made at KS4 needed to be useful for a future career. Core subjects such as English and Maths were seen as required for most careers, whilst Music in many cases would only be chosen if an individual had a particular interest in it with regard to a specific career, and, in some cases, despite enjoyment of the subject. Extrinsic factors such as this also had implications for the importance placed upon music by students.

2. Lack of music career opportunities

Students expressed an awareness that some areas of the music industry can be difficult to navigate, resulting in a perceived unlikelihood to pursue a successful career in music. Some students mentioned, however, that finding out about possible career pathways in the industry could help to increase the uptake of music at GCSE level.

3. Enjoyment – not enough to counterbalance future study and employment options

Enjoyment of music lessons was not seen as being a good enough reason to continue at KS4, with some students feeling they would rather choose subjects that would provide better job opportunities in the future. It was also stated that it was important to choose subjects which would help students gain access to good colleges and universities and that this was more important to some than enjoying the subjects they might study during KS4.

4. Importance of core subjects

English, Maths, Science and Languages were specifically mentioned as being important subjects to study at school because of their importance and usefulness for employment. For similar reasons, they were also perceived as being more important to study in school than Music.

5. *As important as other optional subjects*

Music was deemed by some to be just as important, if not more important than other optional subjects. It was however still not considered more important than core subjects due to these being required for future careers.

6. *Optional subjects are less important – offered for enjoyment*

Subjects that are optional at GCSE level were seen as less important than those which are compulsory. Some stated that optional subjects were offered for enjoyment purposes and were less important in relation to future careers.

Positive Intrinsic Factors (sub-categories 5 to 19)

There were a number of aspects to music lessons which evoked positive attitudes from students, most of which involved some kind of intrinsic reward. Whilst the presence of these factors was understood to create enjoyment and positivity towards lessons, a lack of these could also have the opposite effect. This was particularly noted for sub-categories 17–19 which cross into the category of ‘negative intrinsic factors’, where a lack of these elements can produce negative attitudes towards lessons. The sub-categories identified as being part of the positive intrinsic factors category are presented below:

7. *Importance of enjoyment*

Despite enjoyment being cited as not enough of a reason to continue Music at KS4, enjoyment was considered by some to be important when choosing which subjects to study at GCSE. The presence or absence of enjoyment could motivate students to choose or deter from choosing certain subjects. This was seen not only in relation to music but also in reference to other subjects. While previously stated (sub-category 3) that enjoyment was seen by some as not a good enough reason to continue at KS4, for others, it was an important factor in their decision-making process.

8. *Music as a release*

Music was considered to be a relief from academic subjects which could help alleviate stress. It was also cited as being a subject that could teach students a different set of skills compared to other academic areas.

9. *Enjoyment of practical work and performance*

Practical work and performance were mentioned in the majority of interviews as being enjoyable aspects of music lessons, with group performance and band work being noted as particularly enjoyable activities.

10. *Composing and being creative*

Composing and creative aspects of music lessons were perceived as being particularly enjoyable. This was an area of music in which students expressed a desire to be more actively involved.

11. Enjoyment due to peers

The presence of friends within music lessons helped to increase enjoyment for some of the study participants. It was also mentioned that enjoyment of lessons had increased over time for some students as they built relationships with their peers. This category, however, was only mentioned in two out of the eight focus groups that were conducted.

12. Links between music in and out of school

Students showed a positive awareness as to how music learning inside of school links to music engagement outside of school. It was expressed by some that musical skills and knowledge developed in lessons could help with students' musical involvement outside of school and vice versa. This was particularly noted in all of the interviews in School A and with Year 7 students in School C.

13. Increased learning through enjoyment

In three interviews, it was reported that enjoyment of lessons meant that more learning would take place and that students would be more motivated to revise subjects which they enjoyed.

14. Technology

Various uses of technology, both inside and outside of school, were considered to enhance learning and make engagement with technology more enjoyable. The most commonly mentioned tools were YouTube and GarageBand. The latter, in particular, was used in lessons to compose as well as to record and listen back to musical pieces for evaluative purposes.

15. Felt informed about GCSE

Some students expressed the view that they felt adequately informed about what GCSE music would entail and what the expectations would be, enabling these students to make an informed decision as to whether they should continue at KS4. Out of those that felt well informed, the majority held this view on the basis of discussions with musical friends or family who had some knowledge of GCSE music. Teachers explaining what was involved and what would be expected was only mentioned in two interviews, whilst students being informed by friends and family was mentioned in five interviews.

16. Enjoyment increased with increased ability and advanced topics

For some study participants, music lessons had become more enjoyable over time due to a sense of increased competence that enabled students to play a wider variety of pieces. Instances of this were evident in seven out of the eight interviews conducted. The introduction of more advanced topics was also cited as making lessons more enjoyable. Some Year 7 students seemed somewhat disillusioned with music at the start of secondary school, particularly when there was a lot of repetition of the material that they had already learnt in primary school.

17. Choice and variety

Having choice appeared important in relation to enjoyment of music both inside and outside of school and was mentioned in all focus groups. Students expressed a desire to exercise an element of choice over pieces they learn in lessons and, in some cases, have autonomy over the way in

which they learn them. Similar views were expressed regarding students' musical involvement outside of school.

18. Variety of instruments

A prominent theme was students' desire to have access to a variety of instruments in lessons. It was felt that this could help increase enjoyment and also potentially promote uptake of music at GCSE. It was also felt that introducing a variety of instruments early in secondary school could provide students with more choice and would give them more time to practise their preferred instrument in preparation for GCSE music. Some participants expressed the view that the keyboard was the main, or only instrumental choice in lessons and were therefore unsure as to whether they would have the choice to play other instruments throughout KS4.

19. Group work

Group work was mentioned as being an enjoyable part of music lessons and something students would desire to do more of. Band work was specifically mentioned in school B as a musical activity which students particularly looked forward to and would like more of in their lessons.

Negative Intrinsic Factors (sub-categories 17 to 25)

A number of analytic themes were categorised as negative intrinsic factors. These were elements of music lessons which evoked less positive feelings from students. In some cases, they contributed to a dislike of certain aspects and decreased enjoyment in music lessons. Such negativity could have an impact on students' decision to study GCSE music, particularly in relation to feelings about their own musical ability which crossed into the fourth category, 'barriers to uptake'. The sub-categories that pertain to these negative intrinsic factors are presented next.

20. Dislike of repetition

Some students stated that repetition was an aspect of lessons which was 'boring' and could contribute to decreased feelings of enjoyment. This was noted to be the case in performance work when having to repeat pieces for practice purposes.

21. Dislike of theory or written work

Students from all schools apart from Year 9 students in school A expressed some kind of negativity towards theoretical and written work in their music lessons. Typical comments were that music theory was difficult, boring and hard to remember. Regarding written work, students felt that writing was at the heart of the majority of school subjects, whilst music was usually made more enjoyable due to its practical elements. Writing in music was therefore found to be 'boring' compared to other aspects of lessons which students preferred.

22. Disruption can influence enjoyment

Students that caused disruption during lessons were found to have negative effects on other students' experiences and decreased their enjoyment of the subject. Disruption was also found to be an issue for some students who pursued music outside of school. They noted, in particular, that practising at home was often not enjoyable enough due to the lack of a quiet space to work in.

23. *Mixed ability groups can be detrimental for enjoyment and progress*

Some students felt that being in mixed ability groups was detrimental for some students' enjoyment and progress in music due to some peers not taking lessons 'seriously' (this was mentioned in two focus group interviews). Some also expressed frustration about the lack of differentiated work that led to students' needs and abilities not always being catered for. It was suggested that streaming classes earlier in the same way as other subjects could help to increase both enjoyment and uptake and potentially lead to seeing music as a more important curriculum subject.

24. *Enjoyment decreased with time – increase in difficulty*

One of the main factors contributing to students' decreased enjoyment of lessons compared to when they first started secondary school was the increase in difficulty over time. Some study participants also felt that lessons in Year 7 were more enjoyable as they were new and exciting compared to their past experiences of school music. However, over time this novelty wore off.

Barriers to Uptake (sub-categories 25 to 28)

Distinct sub-categories emerged from the focus groups relating to areas students felt could be preventing uptake at KS4. Some previously mentioned sub-categories could also be considered barriers to uptake, e.g. students' perceptions of a lack in career opportunities; however, the sub-categories described below relate directly to barriers inside the school environment perceived as deterring students from choosing music at KS4.

25. *GCSE music as elite/difficult*

In all interviews, students mentioned that music was seen as an elitist or difficult subject. Playing an instrument or having a 'musical background' was seen as essential to pursuing GCSE music, along with having good ability in the subject. While being competent enough was seen as a potential reason for someone to continue their studies at KS4, having low musical ability was cited as a reason not to continue despite any enjoyment that the subject may bring.

26. *Limited GCSE options*

It was discussed in two of the focus group interviews that students felt their subject choices at GCSE may be limited due to the available options and the blocks into which subjects are arranged, preventing some from choosing to study GCSE music even if they wished to. This was however only mentioned by students in Year 7, and not those in Year 8 or 9 who had already chosen their options.

27. *Time*

Students (particularly in school B) expressed that the amount of time spent in music lessons was important in helping students to prepare adequately enough to then take GCSE music examinations. Having more time could encourage uptake by allowing students to further develop their skills and confidence, as not all students were able to take additional instrumental lessons either inside or outside of school. The time given to music in the curriculum was also seen as an indicator of its importance compared to other subject areas.

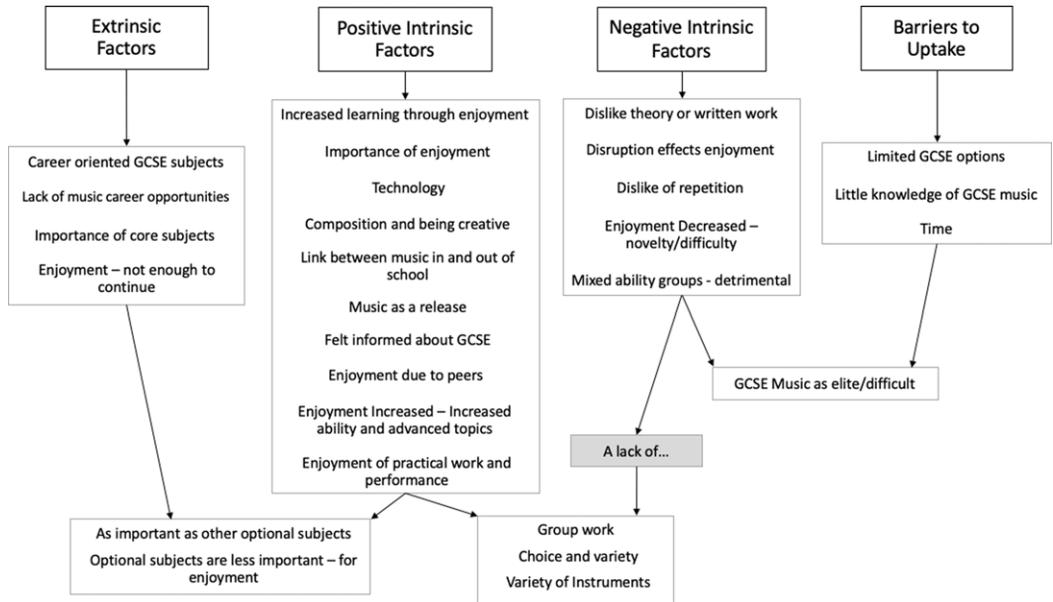


Figure 1. Outcomes space.

28. Little knowledge of GCSE music

Some students expressed the view that they had very little knowledge of what GCSE music involved and, in some cases, stated that having more information would be beneficial. This was noted in all focus groups except in those that involved students who had already chosen their GCSE subjects (Year 9 in Schools A and C, Year 8 in School B). Overall, students showed an interest to know earlier on in secondary school what the requirements and expectations would be in studying music at GCSE level.

Outcome Space

Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the outcome space as this has emerged from the analysis of the focus group data. The relationships between the analytic categories and sub-categories are depicted, demonstrating that some sub-categories overlap and are discussed in varying ways in the focus group interviews. These key findings as shown in the outcome space will be discussed in the discussion section that follows.

Discussion

The analytic findings confirmed that the study participants regarded music as a subject that lacks importance in secondary school. The students particularly emphasised the importance of core subjects compared to optional subjects which were perceived as less important (categories four and six in the outcome space). The lack of importance given to music as a school subject, alongside other areas of the arts, has been confirmed in a number of relevant studies (Harvey, 1984; Stables & Wikeley, 1997; Lamont & Maton, 2008) mainly because of career and future employment related concerns (Stables & Wikeley, 1997; Wright, 2002). However, many students have a special fondness to music in school (McPherson & O’Neill, 2010) or outside of school (Tossavainen & Juvonen, 2015), even though they still consider it as less important in comparison to other school subjects (McPherson, 2007; McPherson & Hendricks, 2010).

The study participants mentioned that they would like to spend more time in music lessons. The relationship between time and perceived importance of a subject was raised in the focus groups and was categorised as a barrier to uptake in the outcome space. Limited lesson time given to school music seems to lead to students preferring music outside of school where they can allocate more time to their musical practice (see, for instance, Tossavainen & Juvonen, 2015). The study participants also expressed a desire to get familiarised with the expectations around the subject of music at GCSE level earlier in order to have more time to prepare for it should they wish to pursue music at that level. Within the sub-category of 'time', it is worth noting that these findings, all concerned students' perceptions from Schools B and C. In School A, 'time' was not mentioned as being a barrier to opting to study GCSE music. This may somewhat explain why music was regarded as being more important in School A.

Furthermore, having instrumental lessons (both inside and outside of school) and being able to exercise an element of choice in their music lessons seem to enhance students' perceived importance of the subject. Choice has been empirically found to be desired by students in secondary school (Kokotsaki, 2016a; Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021) and is also an integral part of the Musical Futures approach (Hallam, Creech, & McQueen, 2018). Further aspects of music lessons contributing to perceptions of importance included being involved in group work, being offered variety in the musical content of the lessons and playing a variety of instruments in class (Kokotsaki, 2016a, 2016b; Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021). If these aspects of music provision were effectively addressed, the uptake of Music at GCSE could potentially be improved, as has been the case with some of the Musical Futures champion schools (Hallam et al., 2018). The underlying argument is that giving young people the time, space, resources and a fruitful environment for practical engagement with music in the classroom can open up opportunities to exercise control over their learning, develop autonomy and enhance creativity (De Vries, 2010; Hallam et al., 2018; McQueen & Hallam, 2010; Kokotsaki, 2011; McQueen et al. 2018).

A number of participants expressed the view that the perceived usefulness of a school subject in later life is a key determinant in whether they would decide to take it as an option at GCSE level. One of the most cited views in relation to 'usefulness' was future career paths. Some students felt that there is a distinct lack of career opportunities in the music industry where, in line with employment opportunities in the creative industries more broadly, building a successful career is perceived to be a difficult undertaking. This resulted in music being perceived by many as a poor career choice and, therefore, a poor choice of subject at KS4. This view about how future career goals can have a negative impact on GCSE choices, echoes findings in a number of previous studies (Lamont & Maton, 2008; Adey & Biddulph, 2001; Little, 2009). Furthermore, other factors that have been found to impact on students' decisions to continue music at KS4 included music being perceived as difficult or elite (Gammon, 1996; Lamont et al., 2003), and students having limited perceptions of their own musicality (Little, 2009), being disadvantaged due to not receiving instrumental tuition (Wright, 2002) and holding the view that they are not regularly enabled to exercise their creative potential in music at school (O'Neill & McPherson, 2002).

The notion of music as a school subject being elite/too difficult was raised in all interviews and was categorised in the analysis as one of the barriers to the uptake of music as an option at GCSE level. The study participants also expressed the view that the ability to play an instrument well or have a musical background was essential to continuation at KS4. With Music having limited curriculum time however (which is an ever-growing issue according to Daubney & Mackrill, 2018; Bath et al., 2020), the implication is that some students may feel unable to make sufficient progress within lesson time that choosing music as a GCSE subject and succeeding at it would become a realistic prospect. Whilst many students may own an instrument and be in a position to receive additional tuition either inside or outside of school to aid their musical progression, disadvantaged students, who may not have such opportunities, would miss out on continuing their music education at GCSE level. As a result, they would be marginalised regarding their musical development and further career prospects.

In line with previous research, the most enjoyable parts of music lessons were those which involved playing instruments and participating in practical work, composing, learning new pieces, working in groups (Lamont et al., 2003; Little, 2009; Kokotsaki, 2016a) and making use of music technology (Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021). Incorporating opportunities for students to be involved in well-designed and carefully planned lessons having a focus on music technology may not only help to increase enjoyment but could also expose students to a number of additional career pathways in relation to recording and production helping them to gain a broader view of potential career options in the music industry (Johnson et al., 2019).

Having more autonomy over their learning and a wider variety of instruments in lessons could help improve students' enjoyment and could potentially have a knock-on effect on their decision to choose music as an option. These aspects have been found to be beneficial in the Musical Futures approach which has shown increases in the uptake of music in some schools (Hallam et al., 2017). Furthermore, the study participants argued that being informed earlier about the content of GCSE music would open up the possibility of selecting an instrument for the performance component of the assessment from a variety of instruments instead of only focusing on the keyboard as the only available instrument. Similarly to perceptions of importance, choice was also found to be a key factor in students' perceptions of enjoyment of music. Those students who felt they could exercise an element of choice in their lessons ranked music first for enjoyment in the questionnaire responses. Enhancing students' sense of autonomy in making their own choices, where appropriate, should be carefully considered when levels of enjoyment during music lessons as perceived as being low.

The study's findings cannot be generalised to the wider population (Cohen et al., 2018) as they were based on the use of a convenience sample. They did, however, offer a rich picture of students' views about the importance they attribute to music, their enjoyment of the subject and how these might influence their choices at GCSE level. The three schools were selected purposefully in order to allow a comparison of students' views and experiences from schools representing geographical and socio-economic diversity within the north-east of England. The study offers a useful and in-depth insight into students' views about music learning and teaching in secondary schools in England which readers may be able to relate to, adapt to their own needs and circumstances, and put to good use (Bassey, 2001). It is hoped that the new Model Music Curriculum (2021) will inspire, enthuse and help teachers to continue to strive to offer engaging and diverse music lessons. It is vital that students are offered appropriate musical opportunities during their years at school to help them experience the value and the important role that music can play in 'fostering a creatively engaged society' (Pitts, 2000, p. 166) where their musical identities continue to develop and evolve throughout their lives.

Notes

- 1 GCSE is a qualification in a specific subject offered to students aged 14–16 years in England.
- 2 Key Stage 4 (KS4) refers to the 2 years of school education which incorporate GCSEs, and other examinations, in maintained schools in England normally known as Year 10 and Year 11, when pupils are aged between 14 and 16 years.
- 3 Key Stage 3 (KS3) refers to the lower years of secondary school in England and Wales normally known as Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9, when pupils are aged between 11 and 14 years.
- 4 Musical Futures is an informal approach to learning that employs real-world methodologies in the classroom, drawing on approaches utilised by popular music practitioners rather than those used within traditional or formal music training contexts (Musical Futures, 2019).

References

- ADAMS, J. (2013). The English Baccalaureate: A new philistinism? *Journal of Art & Design Education*, 32(1), 2–5.
- ADEY, K. & BIDDULPH, M. (2001). The influence of pupil perception on subject choice at 14+ in geography and history. *Educational Studies*, 27(4), 439–450.

- ÅKERLIND, G. (2012). Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(1), 115–127.
- ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (2019). *Music Education: State of the Nation*. <https://www.ism.org/images/images/State-of-the-Nation-Music-Education-WEB.pdf>.
- ASHWORTH, P. & LUCAS, U. (2000). Achieving empathy and engagement: A practical approach to the design, conduct and reporting of phenomenographic research. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), 295–308.
- BASSEY, M. (2001). A solution to the problem of generalisation in educational research: Fuzzy prediction. *Oxford Review of Education*, 22(11), 5–22.
- BATH, N., DAUBNEY, A., MACKRILL, D. & SPRUCE, G. (2020, Online First). The declining place of music education in schools in England. *Children & Society*, 34, 443–457.
- BELL, J. F. (2001). Patterns of subject uptake and examination entry 1984–1997. *Educational Studies*, 27(2), 201–219.
- BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (4th ed.). London. file:///C:/Users/ded0dk/Downloads/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-for-Educational-Research_4thEdn_2018.pdf.
- BRAY, D. (2000). An examination of GCSE music uptake rates. *British Journal of Music Education*, 17(1), 79–89.
- CARROLL, M. & GILL, T. (2018). *Uptake of GCSE subjects 2017: Statistics Report Series No. 120*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment.
- COHEN, L., MANION, L. & MORRISON, K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*. Oxon: Routledge.
- CULTURAL LEARNING ALLIANCE (2016). *Arts Education Statistics: What We Know*. <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/arts-education-statistics-what-we-know/>.
- DAUBNEY, A. & FAUTLEY, M. (2020). Educational research: Music education in a time of pandemic. *British Journal of Music Education*, 37(2), 105–106.
- DAUBNEY, A. & FAUTLEY, M. (2021). U-turns in the fog: the unfolding story of the impact of COVID-19 on music education in England and the UK. *British Journal of Music Education*, 38, 3–12.
- DAUBNEY, A. & MACKRILL, D. (2018) *Changes in Secondary Music Curriculum Provision over Time 2016–18/19*. <https://www.ism.org/images/images/SUMMARY-Changes-in-Secondary-Music-Curriculum-Provision-2016-18.pdf>.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION (2011) *The Importance of Music: A National Plan for Music Education*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-importance-of-music-a-national-plan-for-music-education>.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND THE DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT (2011). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/music-education-in-england-a-review-by-darren-henley-for-the-department-for-education-and-the-department-for-culture-media-and-sport>.
- DE VRIES, P. (2010). What we want: the music preferences of upper primary school students and the ways they engage with music. *Australian Journal of Music Education*, 1, 3–16.
- GAMMON, V. (1996). What is wrong with school music? – A response to Malcolm Ross. *British Journal of Music Education*, 13, 101–122.
- GIBB, N. (2016). *The Claim that the EBacc Squeezes Out the Arts Is Wrong*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/leaguetables/12110986/The-claim-that-EBacc-squeezes-out-the-arts-is-wrong.html>.
- HALLAM, S., CREECH, A. & MCQUEEN, H. (2017). Can the adoption of informal approaches to learning music in school music lessons promote musical progression? *British Journal of Music Education*, 34(2), 127–151.
- HALLAM, S., CREECH, A. & MCQUEEN, H. (2018). Pupils' perceptions of informal learning in school music lessons. *Music Education Research*, 20(2), 213–230.
- HARVEY, T. J. (1984). Gender differences in subject preference and perception of subject importance among third year secondary school pupils in single-sex and mixed comprehensive schools. *Educational Studies*, 10(3), 243–253.
- HESSE-BIBER, S., RODRIQUEZ, D. & FROST, N. A. (2015). A qualitatively driven approach to multimethod and mixed methods research. In S. HESSE-Biber & R.B. JOHNSON (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Multimethod and Mixed Methods Research Inquiry* (pp. 3–20). New York: Oxford University Press.
- JOHNSON, C., MCALPINE, K. B. & MERRICK, B. (2019). MusicWorks: Supporting students' musical career paths through technology-enhanced authentic learning. In P. H. BULL & J. KEENGWE (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Innovative Digital Practices to Engage Learners* (pp. 315–333). Pennsylvania, PA: IGI Global.
- KOKOTSAKI, D. (2011). Student teachers' conceptions of creativity in the secondary music classroom. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 6(2), 100–113.
- KOKOTSAKI, D. (2016a). Pupil voice and attitudes to music during the transition to secondary school. *British Journal of Music Education*, 34(1), 5–39.
- KOKOTSAKI, D. (2016b). Pupils' attitudes to school and music at the start of secondary school. *Educational Studies*, 42(2), 201–220.
- LAMONT, A., HARGREAVES, D. J., MARSHALL, N. A. & TARRANT, M. (2003). Young people's music in and out of schools: A study of pupils and teachers in primary and secondary schools. *British Journal of Music Education*, 20(3), 229–241.
- LAMONT, A. & MATON, K. (2008) Choosing music: Exploratory studies into the low uptake of music GCSE. *British Journal of Music Education*, 25(3), 267–282.

- LITTLE, F. L. (2009) *An Exploration into the Uptake Rates of GCSE Music with a Focus on the Purposes of Music in School*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. School of Education, University of Durham, Durham.
- MARTON, F. (1994). Phenomenography. In T. HUSÉN & T. N. POSTLETHWAITE (eds.), *The International Encyclopaedia of Education*, (2, pp. 4424–4429). Oxford: Pergamon.
- MCPHERSON, G. E. (2007). Children's motivation to study music in schools. In R. FAULKNER, A. STANBERG & J. MACINTOSH (eds.), *Proceedings of Australian Society for Music Education Biennial National Conference* (pp. 21–25). Perth, Western Australia: Australian Society for Music Education Incorporated.
- MCPHERSON, G. E. & HENDRICKS, K. S. (2010). Students' motivation to study music: The United States of America. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 32(2), 201–213.
- MCPHERSON, G. E. & O'NEILL, S. (2010). Students' motivation to study music as compared to other school subjects: A comparison of eight countries. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 32(2), 101–137.
- MCQUEEN, H. & HALLAM, S. (2010). Music in the secondary school. In S. HALLAM & A. CREECH (eds.), *Music Education in the 21st Century in the United Kingdom: Achievements, Analysis and Aspirations* (pp. 228–244): London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- MCQUEEN, H., HALLAM, S. & CREECH, A. (2018). Teachers' and students' music preferences for secondary school music lessons: Reasons and implications. *Music Education Research*, 20(1), 22–31.
- MODEL MUSIC CURRICULUM: KEY STAGES 1 TO 3 (2021). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974366/Model_Music_Curriculum_Full.pdf.
- MUSICAL FUTURES (2019) Who we are and what we do. <https://www.musicalfutures.org/who-we-are>.
- NEUMANN, E., TOWERS, E., GEWIRTZ, S. & MAGUIRE, M. (2016). *A Curriculum for All? The Effects of Recent Key Stage 4 Curriculum, Assessment and Accountability Reforms on English Secondary Education*. London: National Union of Teachers.
- O'NEILL, S. A. & MCPHERSON, G. E. (2002). Motivation. In R. PARNCUTT & G.E. MCPHERSON (eds.), *The Science and Psychology of Music Performance: Creative Strategies for Teaching and Learning* (pp. 31–46). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- PITTS, S. (2000). *A Century of Change in Music Education: Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Practice in British Secondary School Music*. London: Routledge.
- SAVAGE, J. (2018). Music education for all. *Forum*, 60(1), 111–122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2018.60.1.111>
- SAVAGE, J. (2021). Teaching music in England today. *International Journal of Music Education*, 39(4), 464–476.
- STABLES, A. & WIKLEY, F. (1997). Changes in preference for and perceptions of relative importance of subjects during a period of educational reform. *Educational Studies*, 23(3), 393–403.
- STAVROU, N. E. & PAPAGEORGI, I. (2021) 'Turn up the volume and listen to my voice': Students' perceptions of Music in school. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 43(3), 366–385.
- TOSSAVAINEN, T. & JUVONEN, A. (2015). Finish primary and secondary school students' interest in music and mathematics relating to enjoyment of the subject and perception of the importance and usefulness of the subject. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 37(1), 107–121.
- WELCH, G. F. (2011). The arts and humanities and 'English Baccalaureate': STEAM not STEM. *Research in Secondary Teacher Education*, 1(2), 29–31. https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/5d937d8dc15cf895c906d9bb6326274a3e4d68769d6bb612959e605682dadf34f/71825/2046-1240_1-2_pp29-31.pdf.
- WHITFORD, H. & KOKOTSAKI, D. (under review). Enjoyment of music and GCSE uptake: Survey findings from North East schools in England. *British Journal of Music Education*.
- WHITTAKER, F. (2019). *Revealed: The Three Inconvenient Truths about the EBacc*. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-the-three-inconvenient-truths-about-the-ebacc/>.
- WRIGHT, R. (2002) Music for all? Pupils' perceptions of the GCSE Music examination in one South Wales secondary school. *British Journal of Music Education*, 19(3), 227–241.

Appendix A Focus Group Script

1. Are your music lessons enjoyable?
 - a. Tell me what it is you enjoy about them.
 - i. Why is it you enjoy these aspects?
2. Is there anything you don't enjoy about your music lessons?
 - a. Why do you not enjoy these aspects?
3. Is there anything that would make your music lessons more enjoyable?
 - a. Why would they be more enjoyable as a result of this?
4. Do you enjoy your music lessons now just as much as you did when you started secondary school?
 - a. Why do you think this is?
5. Do you enjoy music more so inside of school, outside of school, or both?
 - a. Why is it you enjoy music more [inside/outside] of school?
6. Do you think enjoyment of music lessons is enough of a reason for someone to study it at GCSE?
 - a. Why do you think this?
 - b. If you enjoyed music lessons more, would you consider taking it at GCSE?
7. How important do you think it is to study music in school compared to other subjects?
 - a. Why do you think this?
8. What is important to you when you think about choosing your GCSEs?
 - a. Why is this important?
9. Why do you think students choose to study GCSE music?
10. Why do you think some students don't choose to study GCSE music?
11. Do you feel you know enough about GCSE Music to choose it?
12. What could schools do to encourage more students to study GCSE music?
 - a. Would making lessons more enjoyable encourage more students to take GCSE music?
 - b. Why?
13. Before we finish, is there anything further you would like to add that you haven't already mentioned or any points you would like to discuss further?

Appendix B Illustrative quotes from the 28 sub-categories

No.	Sub-category	Description
1	<i>Career-oriented GCSE subjects</i>	<p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S2: I think like, if you wanted a job like a sound engineer or something like that or you wanted to be a musician, then you'd probably want to take music for your GCSE's but, if you wanted any other job it's like, music wouldn't really help you towards it unless it was specifically like a music-related job.</p> <p>School C, Y7</p> <p>S3: I think it depends on what you want to do when you're older cus, say you wanted to be like a musician then it's really important but if, if you didn't want to, if you wanted to do something else like it wouldn't be very important.</p>
2	<i>Lack of music career opportunities</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S1: ... you can't get anything like out of it, there's not that many careers that you can take from music.</p> <p>School A, Y8</p> <p>S4: ... it's more of just like an extra subject, there's some people who will use it but then the music industry is quite a competitive one it's quite hard to become famous in it so you might be trying for years and just not get any recognition for it.</p>

(Continued)

(Continued)

No.	Sub-category	Description
3	<i>Enjoyment – not enough to counterbalance future study and employment options</i>	<p>School A, Y8</p> <p>S1: Honestly I couldn't be bothered whether or not I enjoyed it or not. Obviously enjoying it gives you the motivation to do it but then, I'd rather do something that I know is gonna help me in life and that, when I'm older, I could have a job that I actually want to do so that I'm not ... stuck ... if I chose a music job. I know this sounds really horrible but I feel like it's hard to do jobs in music, obviously you can be a teacher but in the music industry, you either make it or you don't.</p>
4	<i>Importance of core subjects</i>	<p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S1: I don't think it's as important because like with English and Maths and Science you need those to get a real job ...</p>
5	<i>As important as other optional subjects</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S4: I think music is quite as important as other subjects like technology and food because, if you get a good grade in it, goes on your CV and that gives you a boost in a way.</p> <p>School A, Y9</p> <p>S2: I think it's just as important as like because we do Art and Computing and stuff and they all kind of at GCSE they fall in like the same band to pick from so they're all as important as each other but I think it's just what you'd prefer to do, so if you're musical you can pick music but if you prefer art then you can pick art.</p>
6	<i>Optional subjects are less important – offered for enjoyment</i>	<p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S2: I think it might not be as important because you don't really have to take it it's just optional and ... if you were doing your GCSEs and you didn't have a lot of time left to revise you'd probably want to focus on like English, Maths and Science cause they are the really important ones and ... if you wanted to be an Engineer or something, having music would be good but, it wouldn't really help you get the job.</p>
7	<i>Importance of Enjoyment</i>	<p>School B, Y9</p> <p>S3: I think enjoyment is a good enough reason to take a subject. Because you have multiple subjects to choose from, like you can have multiple subjects to take at GCSE so it's probably better to have one that you enjoy to balance out with the ones that are probably more logical to take.</p> <p>School C, Y7</p> <p>S2: I think it's like 50/50 cause, if you enjoy a subject, you want to carry on, whereas if you didn't enjoy it and you just took it because you thought it was like ... easy/ then you're just like oh, I have to go and do music now, if you enjoy it as well then it just makes you want to learn more and practise more.</p>
8	<i>Music as a release</i>	<p>School C, Y7</p> <p>S2: Music is good. You can express yourself more, so if you're stressed, then you know you've got a comfort in music and you can just, express yourself through music/so you feel calmer.</p> <p>School C, Y8</p> <p>S4: I feel like if you enjoy it, then it can be kind of a bit of a stress reliever if you have all the heavy academic stuff it's nice just to come in and do something creative and, not writing, something a bit more free.</p>

(Continued)

(Continued)

No.	Sub-category	Description
9	<i>Enjoyment of practical work and performance</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S1: I quite enjoy doing practical music. I don't enjoy theory as much but I really enjoy practical.</p> <p>School A, Y8</p> <p>S1: I like the practical areas of music, when we actually physically try playing the keyboard.</p>
10	<i>Composing and being creative</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S3: I like creating songs because I think it lets you be more creative than you can be in other lessons.</p> <p>School B, Y7</p> <p>S3: I think it's more enjoyable than when we started cause when we started I didn't really know much because at our primary school, all we did was singing, so at the start we were just doing the basics and now we're writing compositions and things, I find that more fun.</p>
11	<i>Enjoyment due to peers</i>	<p>School B, Y7</p> <p>S2: I feel like when we do a group activity we have to work with the people we're on a table with but since we've been doing more group activities we kind of like bonded with the people on our table so it's easier to do a project. In the first project we did it in groups it was kind of hard cause we didn't know a lot about each other but now at the end of the year we know the skills that other people have.</p>
12	<i>Link between musical involvement in and out of school</i>	<p>School C, Y7</p> <p>S2: I enjoy it the same because, I have a keyboard at home and, when you learn something in class, sometimes I remember it and I can go back home and say aw I learned this piece.</p> <p>S1: You learn it in school and then you can improve it at home and you can show it to other people that might like what you've done.</p>
13	<i>Increased learning through enjoyment</i>	<p>School B, Y9</p> <p>S2: It's important that I've got at least one enjoyable subject because I think it would be very difficult if you had all academic subjects, so I chose music then I chose business, and then I kept all the other options . . . If you take up something you enjoy you'll do better in it and I suppose, if you don't enjoy it as much, you might struggle with it.</p>
14	<i>Technology</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S5: I can play my instrument which is guitar which I do play in school at my lesson, but I do it with my way of sort of learning picking things up like, I do it off my iPad and I can choose what songs I learn and stuff. . . There's like a certain YouTube channel, I can't remember what it's called and sometimes I use this website which is also an app.</p> <p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S3: When I have my guitar lesson, the teacher brings his I-pad and there's GarageBand . . . I enjoy that.</p>
15	<i>Felt informed about GCSE</i>	<p>School A, Y9</p> <p>S1: It is similar for me. When I went to parents' evening I was still a little bit unsure on what I wanted to do, but then when my teacher talked about it with us, we understood more what was required of us and I just thought that I wanted to do that.</p>

(Continued)

(Continued)

No.	Sub-category	Description
		<p>School C, Y8</p> <p>S4: I knew more about it than other subjects just because I do music outside of school so so I kind of knew . . . stuff that would be related to music, so I knew more about that than what we'd be doing in other subjects like PE or Drama, but I still feel like we should have known a little bit more.</p>
16	<i>Enjoyment Increased – Increased ability and advanced topics</i>	<p>School A, Y9</p> <p>S4: I think I enjoy it more now because I understand about it more. In Year 7, I used to struggle learning the notes and everything but now I know how to do it so I can do it myself.</p> <p>School B, Y7</p> <p>S4: I like it better now because now we're playing the keyboard and we know how to play it but at the start of the year we were just learning how to play simple notes and that.</p>
17	<i>Choice and Variety</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S4: They could say you can choose what song we play or you can choose like what song we listen to . . . to make it more of your choice.</p> <p>School C, Y7</p> <p>S5: Erm, I enjoy music because I feel like I can go in my own zone and be creative but you also get to choose our partners, and I feel that's important because we get to then talk about what we're doing and they can help you . . . expand on what you're doing.</p>
18	<i>Variety of Instruments</i>	<p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S5: Give us more variety of instruments so it gives more people a choice of what they get to do so they might enjoy it a bit more.</p> <p>School C, Y7</p> <p>S4: I would have liked to play other instruments like drums and guitar and all the other ones.</p>
19	<i>Group work</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S1: I find it more enjoyable when we perform in groups at the front of the classroom. I just find that fun, to watch other people and how they've interpreted it as well.</p> <p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S2: We were playing the keyboard at Year 7 and we kept on doing it till Year 8, and we haven't really changed anything since then and I think if we did like more instruments and did different things with the instruments and like, a group performance with the instruments or something.</p> <p>School B, Y9</p> <p>S2: I find the practices more enjoyable because I enjoy the group work – you get to play instruments with each other and it sounds quite good.</p>
20	<i>Dislike of Repetition</i>	<p>School C, Y8</p> <p>S4: I don't like some of the keyboard lessons cause I feel like sometimes it can get a bit repetitive and you can be doing the same thing for a couple of weeks . . . like if you're stuck on a certain piece, and you keep on doing this one piece that you know how to do. it just can get a bit repetitive.</p>

(Continued)

(Continued)

No.	Sub-category	Description
21	<i>Dislike of theory or written work</i>	<p>School B, Y7</p> <p>S1: When we're writing stuff out it can get quite boring but if we do practical on the keyboards, it can get really fun.</p> <p>School B, Y9</p> <p>S3: So there are multiple topics... so we're doing composition at the moment/and that's enjoyable, but when we're doing theory, it gets really boring and we tend to do it for longer periods of time.</p>
22	<i>Disruption effects enjoyment</i>	<p>School A, Y9</p> <p>S1: When teachers try to explain to the class something, we can't hear and people get interrupted when they are trying to play for the class and it, it makes it like a worse atmosphere to be in.</p>
23	<i>Mixed ability groups – detrimental</i>	<p>School B, Y9</p> <p>S3: I feel like if our classes were streamed earlier, because... our teacher has to go at the rate of people who find it most difficult all the time, but if it was streamed earlier then we'd be able to move faster with the topic. It's also the problem, it also causes a problem with practical work because it can be quite restrictive as to how much we're allowed to do.</p>
24	<i>Enjoyment decreased with time – increase in difficulty</i>	<p>School A, Y8</p> <p>S3: The techniques are hard to grasp. You have to use two hands... and you can't really put them together at the same time to start off with anyway so... I think the technique that they're trying to teach you in year 8 compared to year 7 it's like, different and it's harder.</p>
25	<i>GCSE music as elite/difficult</i>	<p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S2: I think you'd have to be already good at music and understand it well and enjoy it or you'd have to work hard to know everything else and enjoy it as well, cause some people have done music lessons in primary school and some people might not have so they might know more than people that hadn't done any music in primary school.</p> <p>School B, Y9</p> <p>S1: Maybe cos like they're not good at it cos we only get one lesson a week or twice a fortnight and erm so, they're not going to be really good at it, they're not going to choose it because they've got bad grades in it.</p>
26	<i>Limited GCSE Options</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S1: You might not get the choice to take it because with me I want to do art and music but obviously you can't do that, and I think it would be helpful if they could give us two other options instead of just one.</p>
27	<i>Time</i>	<p>School B, Y8</p> <p>S1: If the teachers tell us earlier about what's on the GCSE's, we will have enough time to learn the instruments and to learn the notes and basically just practice.</p> <p>S5: If we got more lessons of music, we'd have more time to practice everything we'd learned.</p>

(Continued)

(Continued)

No.	Sub-category	Description
28	<i>Little knowledge of GCSE music</i>	<p>School A, Y7</p> <p>S5: My sister was telling me that you can actually play an instrument and I think that they could explain a bit more about that cause if someone's really talented with another instrument, they might think that the keyboard is the only instrument you can do for GCSE, so they could explain it and say that there's different instruments other than the keyboard.</p>

Cite this article: Kokotsaki D and Whitford H (2024). Students' attitudes to school music and perceived barriers to GCSE music uptake: a phenomenographic approach. *British Journal of Music Education* **41**, 31–50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051723000426>