**Will’s story**

**Will** is currently studying towards his Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD), focussing upon the values and practices of young people’s music education, their perceptions of modes of musical engagement at different sites, and how it impacts their practice and identity as musicians. The 2016 education reforms were a catalyst for Will’s Master of Arts (MA) study, at a time of huge budget cuts for schools. Research was a way to explore Will’s frustrations with the education system at the time. However, he felt that his MA had ‘opened a can of worms’, leaving unfinished business. Through his research, Will had the aim of ‘developing [his] own practice as a music educator and to share that with the broader education community.’

Will has previously worked as a secondary school teacher and progressed to Head of Department for music. At his school of employment, he noted ‘very little engagement in music in the curriculum’ at first, and worked to get it to a place of ‘vibrance’. The school was a mixed comprehensive, with few orchestral players. Then the education reforms ‘decimated the music department’. Will could only run one course at Key Stage Four and Five (KS4 KS5), and redundancies were made within the department. For KS5, the music department stuck with facilitating a Rockschool qualification, with three students studying for a music A level in partnership with another school. Will confirms this was ‘not ideal’ because of logistical difficulties across the two sites. The department chose to run a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) music route for KS4, but by this point, Will had already handed in his notice to leave. The second in department was going to be made redundant ‘if [he] didn’t leave’ – a decision that was also driven by family circumstances. Will’s colleague chose to run GCSE music at the school, despite Will preferring Rockschool, but the decision was made due to senior leadership pressures, the status of GCSE over Rockschool and perceived hierarchy - which Will completely understood. Will believes that moving from GCSE to Rockschool is smoother transition than GCSE to A level, but acknowledges this will be specific to individual school contexts. Will says that Rockschool at KS5 ‘suited the skills of the cohort, [was] flexible [for modules which could be decided in dialogue with students]’. Rockschool was ‘a more musical course’, which ‘accommodated orchestral players as much as contemporary players or producers’. Will predicted that A level would have led to turning students away.

Despite receiving instrumental music lessons as a child, it was not choir or piano lessons (experienced from age seven to eight) in primary school ‘that really did it’ for Will’s musical motivation, but the ‘musical camaraderie and relationships in secondary school that solidified [his] idea of music being a lifelong pursuit’. Will was involved with forming bands and was self-taught on the guitar and drums (receiving lessons from age 14). Will experienced musical ‘negotiation’ between his instrumental lessons and musical experiences with friends – flipping between his formal skills and informal experiences. Will says: ‘I was very much aware then that there was these two parallel streams where what was valued in school, on one side I was a classically trained pianist, and then the other was playing in pop, rock and jazz bands’. For school recitals, Will recalls asking ‘can we do this [popular music]?, but remembers being told to ‘stick with piano, do one of your graded pieces’. Will found this frustrating, at it pushed him away from music in school.

Will began to study for a music technology degree, but concluded that it didn’t match his interests. He spent five years as portfolio musician, facilitating school workshops and transition projects, whilst teaching guitar and drums. Will notes that ‘teaching was always there … in community settings’. He valued this teaching element, leading him to study for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in music education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Throughout his degree, Will continued to be involved with community music projects and was part of summer schools teaching English through music and drama. Such experience had ‘pushed [Will] into teaching’, ‘where [he] wanted to be’. Will undertook teaching supply work, completed his Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year in a secondary school, and became Head of Department when a colleague left the school. Will stayed at this school for nine years. Notation was ‘definitely not a strength’, although Will learnt this in his piano lessons. Will was drawn to ‘playing by ear, chord charts’. Learning to read music was ‘one of many ways of learning to play and engage with other musicians’ – it was important, but just one of others. In Will’s own practice, traditional notation was ‘not [his] go-to way of being musical’, Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) ‘is [his] notation’. Will taught pupils about chord charts, lead sheets, hooks, notation, and tab – a suite of means to communicate music. Musical theatre was the main cross over in lessons.

Will reflects that in school, ‘aspects of my musicality were being othered’ – attributed to the formal, traditional identity of his music teachers. Will believes the role of the teacher is to act as a facilitator to support young musicians, and that teachers ‘can’t be expected to have technical ability in every facet of what it means to be musical.’ When seeking a second music teacher in his school of employment, Will sought contrasting skills to widen the experience of pupils.

The self-determination theory and Musical Futures played a bit part in Will’s training, which worked well in his school context. Will acknowledges that this approach would not work everywhere, but it was his informed choice to apply for that in his teaching. At Key Stage Three (KS3), Will’s approach was about getting the class performing and composing, appraising, and participating in whole class ensembles. For KS4/5, there was a strong emphasis on co-curricular links, and Will ran half-termly open mic nights and themed termly shows (pupils were also involved with sound and set up). Such activities fed into the curriculum (for example, recordings for coursework), fed engagement, and strengthened the curriculum. Will had the freedom to do this, although for the first few years, he ‘had to prove [him]self, that it was possible’, but was not permitted to take pupils out of lessons for rehearsals.

Will adopted elements of Musical Futures and was influenced by Green’s work. Will says that it ‘made sense to me, and that’s all you could hope for’, but was not an exclusive approach – it contributed towards a more balanced approach. For Will, ‘Young musicians need to be equipped with certain skills, knowledges, understandings, before the Musical Futures approach can reap the rewards it’s capable of’. ‘In at the deep end’ was not suitable for Will’s context: ‘for my students who didn’t have extensive musical experiences … very few had private music lessons out or in school’ – it wouldn’t work. ‘Ownership was a huge deal’ but can be facilitated in other ways, for example through a choice of repertoire. Will points out that in community settings, ‘that’s how we did it, we dived right in’, although there was very different logistics – children were in small groups, had self-selected to be there, and had an expectation of what they want to do. Will approached teaching differently in the classroom compared to the community settings.

For Will, the role of music educator is for ‘personal, social and musical development’, as ‘music is a world-facing provision’ and not just about exam results. In Will’s school of employment, ‘the musical department was a sanctuary for many young people’, perceptions of some pupils were different to other staff around the school [some pupils engaged with music but not other subjects]. Will believes that school music should be ‘inclusive’, will opportunity for all to engage with. Over time, Will has developed a more balanced view of music education – being about young people finding their place in the world and local environment. ‘All subjects should have that capacity’, but school music lends itself to that capacity more. There should also be a crossover to out-of-school experiences – being inherent in perceptions of music as a subject, how it’s enacted in school, and how it’s presented to young people. ‘As a practitioner, you don’t have the time to do the reading and the depth of research that I’m able to now’. Looking back, Will would do things differently, but didn’t have the capacity at the time to engage with academic writing and thoughts about how music education could be developed. Research-informed teaching is ‘massively’ important for Will, but he states that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for music teachers ‘is very very hard’ due to time pressures on music teachers. ‘Opportunities for music-specific CPD were really few and far between, too narrow in focus, and the quality of it was far too based on exam board curricula’, about how to get better student grades. Barriers to CPD include access ‘in all its terms’. Will believes that ‘networks are so important’, as ‘a lot of the time, it’s those informal conversations with other teachers that have the most valuable impact’.

Will describes the discourse of music education, pre-National Curriculum (NC), where there was a lot of discussion on the contrasting conceptions of what it means to be musical’. ‘The one thing that seems to be consistent [still] is that any policy document doesn’t sum it up in the way that the full spectrum of music teachers’ views think it should’. The ‘greatest worth [of policy] is the generation of discussion’, for example, discussions prompted by the Model Music Curriculum (MMC) and National Plan for Music Education (NPME). But policy ‘isn’t enough’, it ‘doesn’t capture what it is to be musical’. Will questions ‘what is it that’s valued?’ – ‘I think those differences in opinion is always going to be there, I think policy documents always choose a side and lay their foundations solidly with them’. For Will, the MMC goes ‘the other way’, compared to Green’s work that inspired his earlier pedagogy. Will comments that ‘tension is lived in all policy document iterations that there is’. Furthermore, ‘the way knowledge is presented in the curriculum and the MMC is an issue, for [Will]. The way Western classical traditions are valorised and placed above other modes of musical engagement is an issue.’ ‘The rhetoric is often removed from the implementation. There’s a constant constant drive for inclusion, access and diversifying music education, but the policy doesn’t always align with that rhetoric.’ Will aligns himself with the aims of overarching music education policy, but not the practical guidance on how to implement the policy. Will believes that the ‘singular focus on academic rigor assessed through final qualifications at the end of the year’ is an issue. The process of music education is limited in the Ofsted Research Review for Music (ORR) and MMC policy documents.

Will’s most rewarding musical experience was ‘seeing the music department grow … to the point where we didn’t have enough space in the open mic nights to accommodate all of the performances’. Markers of success included concerts, large KS4 uptake from one to three GCSE classes of 25 pupils. Having a KS5 Rockschool class of thirteen pupils was regarded as a success. However, the 2016 curriculum reforms consultation and resulting conversation with his Head Teacher about reduced curriculum time and redundancy for a second music teacher within the department was painful for Will - especially after having spent six years building up the department.

Will hopes for ‘a more pluralistic conception of what it means to be musical and [for all] to have a music education’. Music should been seen ‘more broadly as being more than a grade and that there are more opportunities for partnerships with external music agencies, concert trips’. Will says that all that has become squeezed out of music departments due to the focus on the curriculum and knowledge, and volume of exam content. Will would like for assessment not to be the driving feature of policy, but for it to value personal development and include scope for ‘more local ideas of what it means to be musically educated’. The ability of offer Rockschool has been marginalised and has become more challenging to justify in the current policy rhetoric. Will notes that musical identities and what it means to be musically educated is dynamic, shifting, and that ‘policy documents have a hard time in capturing it’. Will is hopeful that such changes could come to fruition - ‘there’s so much great discussion, dialogue, of course it’s plausible.’ ‘Things are incrementally getting better … in spite of policy intention’. Although Will believes he would ‘approach that question differently if [he]’d been teaching and not researching’, and that there needs to be more alignment between research and teaching for the discipline area to improve. There’s ‘always a chance’ in policy, and ‘the more discussion there is, the greater chance there is for that’. The agency lies between teachers and researchers having dialogue and discussions about music education and what it means to be musically educated.