

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mind the gap: Barriers to high-quality music provision in English special schools

Caroline Waddington-Jones 

University of York, York, UK

Correspondence

Caroline Waddington-Jones, University of York, York, UK.

Email: caroline.waddington-jones@york.ac.uk

Funding information

Paul Hamlyn Foundation; Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research

Abstract

Whilst music education is recognised as a fundamental right for all children in England, pupils with learning disabilities in special schools face persistent barriers in accessing high-quality musical opportunities. This study provides a post-pandemic examination of music provision in special schools in England, updating earlier research while offering new insights into why implementation challenges persist despite policy commitments to inclusion. The lived experiences of music provision for pupils with learning disabilities were examined through interviews with 21 special school educators across three key groups (generalist teachers, music curriculum leads and visiting music specialists). Two key barrier types emerged: resource challenges (budget constraints, limited resources and staffing limitations) and staff-related factors (narrow ideas about music, low confidence and gaps in specialised knowledge). Using ecological systems theory, how these barriers operate across multiple levels—from individual teacher confidence to national funding decisions—was analysed, revealing interconnected patterns resistant to simple solutions. The findings demonstrate how seemingly individual barriers are in fact products of broader systemic issues that reflect fundamental mismatches between policy intentions and special school realities. Multi-level intervention strategies are proposed that focus on leveraging generalist teachers' existing pedagogical strengths, reframing how music is conceptualised, and reconsidering how policies are framed.

KEYWORDS

ecological systems, learning disabilities, music education, policy enactment, special education

Key points

- High-quality special school music provision faces two main barrier types: resourcing challenges (budget constraints, limited access to instruments, staffing and training limitations) and staff-related factors particularly affecting generalist teachers who are increasingly responsible for music teaching (narrow conceptualisations of music, low teacher confidence, gaps in music-specific pedagogical content knowledge).
- These barriers operate across interconnected ecological system levels, from individual teacher confidence to national funding decisions. This creates self-reinforcing cycles that resist simple solutions and explain why piecemeal improvements may be ineffective.
- The UK government's current policy vision, the National Plan for Music Education 2, takes an 'additive inclusion' approach that attempts to fit special schools into mainstream frameworks rather than reconceptualising music education for pupils with learning disabilities, creating mismatches between policy intentions and practice.

- Effective intervention requires multi-level strategies, potentially including: valuing generalist teachers' existing responsive teaching expertise as foundational for music teaching, expanding narrow definitions of music to include technology and sound exploration and creating specialist music teaching resources and mentoring programmes designed specifically for special education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Music education is recognised as a fundamental right for all children in England, with the National Plan for Music Education 2 (NPME2; Department for Education, 2022) articulating a clear policy vision for inclusive, high-quality music provision for all pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. The value of music for children and young people with learning disabilities has long been recognised within special education settings. While this understanding was initially based primarily on practitioner observations, the past two decades have seen substantial research documenting both the impact of music on these learners and how to map and support their musical development.

The present study focuses on special schools for pupils with learning disabilities in England, with relevant literature spanning research on profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), severe learning disabilities (SLD), and either in combination with autism (for reviews with specific foci see e.g. Johnels et al., 2021; Rushton et al., 2023). Despite the terminological and focal challenges surrounding learning disabilities research, synthesis of existing literature reveals consistent impact categories across populations. For individuals with learning disabilities, music offers multiple pathways for engagement and development: self-expression through sound exploration (e.g. Rushton & Kossyvaki, 2020), social skills development through turn-taking and interaction (e.g. Thompson & Elefant, 2019), increased self-esteem (e.g. Pavlicevic et al., 2014) and emotional regulation (Bosch et al., 2017). The breadth of these documented benefits, spanning emotional, social, cognitive and personal domains, indicates that music has a unique capacity to support holistic wellbeing for individuals with learning disabilities, likely contributing to their overall quality of life and human flourishing.

Beyond these developmental benefits, research has demonstrated the strong musical potential of individuals with learning disabilities (Ockelford, 2008). Studies document both the sophistication of their musical responses and their capacity for musical progress when provided with appropriate support and opportunities (e.g. Ockelford & Welch, 2018). Together, evidence of music's benefits and learners' musical capabilities challenges deficit-based assumptions about disability and underscores the importance of providing consistent, high-quality musical experiences for these learners. Yet as the following sections explore, substantial barriers

persist in translating this understanding into practice and a significant gap remains between policy aspirations and the lived realities in special schools.

The current state of music education in English special schools

Special schools in England cater for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), offering smaller classes, higher staff ratios and integrated specialist support. The present study focuses on the largest subset of special school, those for pupils with learning disabilities. Music tends to be represented in each school's leadership structure by a designated 'music lead' who oversees the music curriculum and delivery. Music may be taught by the music lead if they are a music specialist, by a visiting music teacher, by generalist class teachers, or by some combination of these professionals. Music therapists also work in some schools, but their work is separate from class music lessons and tends to focus on extramusical outcomes.

At the start of the millennium, landmark research by Ockelford et al. (2002) documented substantial challenges in special school music provision, noting that most music leads lacked formal music training, there was no music assessment framework appropriate to the needs of pupils with learning disabilities and provision varied widely between schools. Whilst Welch et al.'s (2016) follow-up study noted some improvements in staff qualifications, resource access and technology use, findings suggested some persistent gaps in curriculum resources, staff development and funding remained. The development of *Sounds of Intent* (Ockelford, 2008; Welch et al., 2009) as a music assessment framework specifically for pupils with learning disabilities was noted as a substantial positive step, but its use was not yet widespread. Though these studies suggest an encouraging trajectory of gradual improvement in music provision, the scope and consistency of progress across special schools remains unclear, and our understanding of the underlying barriers that may be constraining progress remains limited. Moreover, given the significant disruptions and pressures schools have faced since 2020, there is a need to update our understanding of the current state of music provision in special schools.

The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in music provision, with pupils with learning disabilities typically experiencing even greater disruption to their musical opportunities during and after lockdowns

compared to their mainstream peers (Ofsted, 2020). Visiting music specialists were not able to come into special schools even after they re-opened and classes tended to be taught in separate ‘bubbles’, so the responsibility for music teaching was suddenly given over to class teachers (usually generalists). Post-pandemic, schools now face increased pressures on funding with difficult decisions about how budgets are spent and which resources to prioritise (Savage, 2021). For special schools, this may potentially reverse some of the progress documented in relation to music provision by Welch et al. (2016) and further widen the gap between policy aspirations and implementation realities.

Music education policy vision

The ambitious vision for music education set forth in the NPME2 (DfE 2022) further underscores the timeliness of examining current barriers to music provision in special schools. The NPME2 has three goals: (1) all children and young people receive a high-quality music education; (2) all music educators work in partnership, with children and young people's needs and interests at their heart; (3) all children and young people with musical interests and talents have the opportunity to progress. While these aspirations apply to all pupils, their implementation in special schools presents challenges. For pupils with PMLD for example, ‘high-quality music education’ might look very different from mainstream expectations, requiring true pupil-centred teaching and perhaps incorporating multimodal and/or play-based approaches, rather than traditional instrumental skill development (Bremmer et al., 2021; Mommo et al., 2025). Similarly, the ‘partnership’ described in goal two requires specialists who understand both musical possibilities and the complex learning profiles of pupils with learning disabilities.

While these practical challenges might appear to be implementation issues, a ‘What is the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) analysis of the NPME2 (Bacchi, 2023) suggests they may stem, at least partially, from fundamental assumptions underpinning the policy text. Two of Bacchi's insights seem particularly relevant to special education contexts. First, the NPME2's conceptualisation of inclusion tends to be additive, focusing on adding excluded pupils (such as those with learning disabilities) to existing arrangements. Such an approach to inclusion here might mean that rather than reconceptualising what high-quality music education looks like for pupils with learning disabilities, these learners may be included through adjustments and adaptations of mainstream-centred resources and provision. Second, the NPME2 appears to prioritise the professional development of specialist music teachers, which Bacchi argues suggests an underlying assumption that specialist musical literacy is the ideal for delivering music education. This emphasis may inadvertently exclude and disempower generalist

teachers, who are often responsible for delivering music education in special schools.

While these policy insights illuminate potential structural barriers to inclusive music education, understanding how they manifest in practice requires moving beyond theoretical critique to examine the real-world experiences of practitioners. This knowledge gap is addressed by using an ecological approach to examine the barriers encountered by special school staff and their systemic and structural roots. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which provides a comprehensive model for conceptualising how environments and systemic factors interact to influence provision, is applied. The model has been applied successfully in music education contexts (e.g. Gaunt & Hallam, 2016; Leu, 2008) and in relation to special education policy and practice (e.g. Richards, 2021). The original model rather than a later version (e.g. Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) is used due to its focus on structural and systemic barriers, which is most appropriate for the present study.

An ecological framing has been advocated for in relation to educational policy and research (e.g. Anderson et al., 2014; Lenhoff et al., 2022) because it draws attention to interconnectedness, context and complexity, rather than assuming that improving provision is a matter of improving what goes on in classrooms alone. The barriers teachers experience may be influenced by processes and systems outside of schools, and what it might take for policy to address these to improve music provision for pupils with learning disabilities can then be considered.

The present study seeks to update and extend previous research by understanding the classroom realities of music provision from the perspectives of frontline staff—music leads, generalist teachers and visiting music specialists—and to frame these realities within the larger systems that shape them. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What barriers do staff encounter that prevent high-quality music provision for pupils with learning disabilities in special schools?
2. How do these barriers operate across different Bronfenbrenner ecological system levels?

METHOD

Participants

Six generalist teachers ($m=3$; $f=3$), eight special school music lead teachers ($m=3$; $f=5$), and seven visiting music teachers ($m=5$; $f=2$) participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences of music provision for children with PMLD, SLD and/or autism. The teacher participants represented 13 different special schools across the North West, North East, London and the

Midlands in England, with pupils across the whole range of ages (2–19), and from urban, rural and suburban contexts.

Inclusion criteria required that participants had at least 1 year of experience working in special school settings. Generalist teachers were required to have responsibility for delivering music activities as part of their regular teaching duties and to identify as having no specialist musical background. Music leads needed to hold formal responsibility for coordinating music provision within their schools. Visiting music teachers were required to be currently working in at least one special school setting.

Participants were recruited via a combination of the author's professional contacts, a music outreach charity and snowball sampling to ensure diversity of experiences and settings. The recruitment approach aimed to capture perspectives from professionals in a broad range of settings.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the research questions and existing literature on music education in special school settings. The protocol contained three main sections: (1) current music provision and practices; (2) challenges and barriers to effective music teaching; (3) perceived impacts and value of music for pupils. The interview schedule was piloted with a participant from each of the three categories to check clarity and flow. No adjustments were needed, and the pilot interviews were included in the final sample.

Procedure

The semi-structured interviews were conducted one-to-one via Zoom or phone by the author between March and August 2022. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 min and was audio-recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised by removing all identifying information and assigning participant codes (GT1-GT6 for generalist teachers, ML1-ML8 for music leads and VM1-VM7 for visiting musicians), then sent to participants for review. No changes were requested.

Analysis

Interview data were analysed inductively in *NVivo 12* using Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Each transcript was read multiple times to ensure familiarity, and initial codes were generated based on semantic and latent

content. Codes were collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined iteratively. Transcripts were initially analysed in separate groups according to professional category; however, since the different categories tended to provide multiple perspectives on the same themes in which different aspects were emphasised more or less strongly according to role and expertise, rather than conflicts or disagreements of themes, it was considered that a collective analysis was most meaningful to develop comprehensive themes reflecting the experiences of all participant types.

Following the inductive analysis, themes were examined deductively using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Using a matrix approach, each theme was analysed to determine: (1) the ecological system levels at which it operated; (2) bidirectional influences between system levels; and (3) resulting theoretical insights. This approach preserved the integrity of the inductively-derived themes, as these were firmly grounded in participants' experiences, and allowed an examination of the structural contexts in which implementation occurs.

All coding was undertaken by the author, who is a lecturer in music education and has worked as a visiting music specialist in special schools. Systematic data collection and analysis procedures were followed (as above) and multiple coding passes were taken during both phases of the analysis. To recognise and interrogate my role in co-constructing and interpreting the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I engaged in reflexive journaling after each interview (recording initial feelings and impressions, perceptions of my relationship with each participant and any interruptions or distractions during the interview itself) as well as throughout the data analysis process (acknowledging my expectations, related experiences and assumptions at each stage).

RESULTS

Inductive analysis of the interview data generated two key themes: Resourcing Challenges and Staff-Related Factors.

Theme 1: Resourcing challenges

Senior leadership prioritisation and budget allocation

School leadership's perception of music's value emerged as a critical factor determining resource allocation, particularly amid current financial constraints in education. Music leads and visiting musicians consistently identified leadership prioritisation as foundational to provision quality:

The threat of cuts to funding in schools means that things seen as less essential might be cut first... My school values music, but how long would it be before funding gets so threatened that something has to go and it is seen as less essential?

(ML1)

This financial decision-making creates substantial disparities in provision between schools, as observed by a visiting music teacher who works across multiple settings:

I work for the Hub, so I have to contact special schools and ask them if they would like music provision... or training... Some schools deliberately put money in place for music. Other schools prioritise money somewhere else, and don't leave much or enough for music - sometimes not any of it.

(VM7)

These quotations reveal how, despite national policy aspirations, local leadership decisions create an uneven landscape of provision, with some schools maintaining music provision while others reduce or eliminate specialised music teaching entirely.

Material resources

Access to instruments and technology

Beyond staffing, participants across all roles highlighted inadequate access to musical instruments and technology as a barrier. Generalist teachers particularly emphasised how limited instrument variety constrains the musical experiences they can offer:

One of the big barriers is always instruments... We don't have a lot here... It's not like in a mainstream school where they might have violins or a piano.

(GT2)

For pupils with learning disabilities, music technology can provide crucial accessibility options (Samuels, 2019), yet visiting musicians reported resistance to investing in these resources:

They think: 'It's very expensive... I could get 10 violins for that'.

(VM1)

They'll buy iPads but they won't buy a five-pound app.

(VM5)

These perspectives suggest that investment decisions may reflect not only budget constraints but also limited understanding of how technology can make music more accessible for pupils with learning disabilities.

Availability and distribution of resources

Even when schools possess adequate resources, participants across all roles reported challenges with availability and distribution. In many settings, resources like percussion instruments are shared across numerous classes, creating practical barriers to regular music activities:

It's making sure that they are available when you want them, because obviously we've got 19 classes across school.

(GT3)

The unpredictability of resource availability led some visiting musicians to develop independent solutions:

It led me to buy some of my own instruments, so I knew I always had some things with me that I could fall back on.

(VM2)

This distribution challenge highlights how even better-resourced schools may struggle to provide consistent access to materials needed for regular, high-quality music experiences.

Curriculum and assessment resources

Music leads and generalist teachers identified an important gap in specialised curriculum resources appropriate for their pupils, who are working below age-related National Curriculum expectations:

If the government is publishing guidance on how you would teach music in the curriculum, you're not going to find anything that I'm really going to be able to apply to my students.

(ML6)

Financial constraints often limit access to specialised resources designed for this population:

We're using [a particular SEND music resource] at the moment, and it's quite expensive.

(GT6)

Many teachers reported relying on free online resources of varying quality as a pragmatic solution:

We don't actually buy into anything in terms of musical interactive activities, but they might play along with some activities on YouTube.

(GT4)

You can find your SLD pupils... generic dance videos on *YouTube*, but there's very little [that would be appropriate] for a complex group of children.

(GT3)

Assessment presented additional challenges, with specialised music assessment frameworks requiring subject knowledge that many staff lack:

We've reshaped the [*Sounds of Intent*] levels, so they're a bit more accessible for all the [staff] in the room. So 'I can do this' or 'I can do that', so that the staff know what they're looking for.

(ML2)

Attempts to integrate specialised assessment frameworks like *Sounds of Intent* could lead to further implementation barriers:

We used to use *Sounds of Intent*... I wanted [senior leadership team] to let us drop the [generic assessment framework] for music, and just use *Sounds of Intent*, but they wanted to keep both. And obviously the teaching staff were not happy with doing two lots of assessment for music, so [*Sounds of Intent*] unfortunately got kicked out.

(ML5)

This quotation highlights how competing assessment requirements can undermine implementation of specialised frameworks designed for tracking musical development in pupils with learning disabilities.

Staffing and professional development

Access to specialist music staff

Budget constraints have also impacted schools' ability to maintain specialist music teaching positions, as one generalist teacher explained:

A few years ago we had a music teacher and that worked really well because staff confidence is not always great when it comes to music... But then with all the cuts that all schools had to make, the music teacher moved on and we weren't able to replace her... For us, in an ideal world, we'd have a music teacher again.

(GT1)

Even when specialist staff are available, several participants reported that access is often limited due to timetabling constraints:

We have (visiting) music tutors... they deliver a session a week. Next year there'll be 13 [classes], so we have to unfortunately have a rota basis. With six half terms you'd probably get four where you've got the tutor in, and when you don't have the tutor the class teachers are responsible for delivering the music lessons.

(ML5)

This rotational model represents an adaptation to resource constraints that reduces pupils' consistent access to specialist teaching and places responsibility for music on non-specialist staff.

Professional development opportunities

Participants identified mentoring from music specialists as the most effective professional development approach. Generalist teachers valued learning through observation and modelling:

We've got a full-time teacher in school who is a music specialist and who is a great learning tool to help us out with what we need and anything we need to work on. That sounding board has been really great for us to have.

(GT3)

I'm a big fan of someone show me, and I can learn really well like that. Lesson plan outlines... Someone to say, 'you could start with this' and maybe give a couple of examples 'and then move on to this and then finish with this.'

(GT2)

However, formal training sessions encountered barriers related to timing, accessibility and sustainability:

It was an after school thing and the school couldn't pay the [teaching assistants] to come, so it was just a teachers thing... Hopefully they'll still be passing things on and it will filter through.

(VM6)

The trouble with training days is they're nearly always at the end of a term. So we'll do the training, get really good ideas and some understanding of music and then it might be weeks... before we then go and teach a music lesson.

(GT1)

These challenges highlight how structural factors like training timing and staff availability undermine the transfer of specialist knowledge to classroom practice,

creating barriers to sustainable improvement in provision quality.

Challenges of knowledge transfer

Visiting musicians reported attempting to share practice with school staff, but encountered logistical barriers:

We tried email communications for quite a while and it didn't really work out. I think lots of them didn't really have access and didn't really have the time to think about things outside of sessions, so I've been trying to do everything within sessions.

(VM6)

This integration of practice-sharing into active teaching sessions represents an adaptation to time constraints that enables some transfer of expertise but may limit the depth of professional development possible.

Theme 2: Staff-related factors

Conceptualisation of music

Narrow definitions and traditional approaches

Music leads and visiting musicians consistently identified how generalist teachers often conceptualised music in narrow terms that were likely to limit their teaching approaches. Many staff held traditional views of what constitutes 'real music', particularly regarding music technology:

The ongoing challenge is the use of music technology. Its place and its value as a real instrument..., because we're so used to... people learning traditional instruments.

(VM1)

Another visiting musician described encountering resistance to improvised or non-traditional approaches to music-making:

'We can't do music without any instruments'... Go get something from outside, cut it in half, you've now got two sticks. Hit a chair. You're now making music. I think class teachers are really smart at thinking of ways to engage the kids, but they might think: 'we have to have this instrument to do this activity'. It's like: 'no, you've got a table. Just hit a table'.

(VM5)

These perspectives reveal how conventional understandings of music may create artificial barriers to musical engagement, particularly for pupils with learning

disabilities who might benefit from more flexible, inclusive approaches to sound creation and exploration.

Perceived value of music for pupils with learning disabilities

Music leads reported that staff understanding of music's developmental value was crucial for engagement and implementation:

If they don't understand why it's happening and they haven't seen the effects of it it's very difficult to get [teachers and teaching assistants] on board. That's the main challenge really is linking it to the curriculum and the skills that children need to be covering.

(ML2)

Unfortunately, we feel more and more that we have to justify music making to other staff.

(ML7)

Participants across all roles identified several key value domains for music with pupils with learning disabilities:

Many participants emphasised music's role in developing fundamental social and communication skills:

For our pupils music is so powerful. It's a huge tool that we can use to develop their communication, their social skills.

(GT5)

There are all the other kinds of social things that you learn through doing music. You learn to kind of take turns, to improve your listening skills, to engage with other people that you're making the music with, communication, self-expression.

(ML1)

Participants noted music's value for emotional regulation and wellbeing:

Watching someone become relaxed and happy, and then... their anxiety generally has dissipated and they're ready to learn.

(ML4)

For a child who's feeling very angry or angst-ridden and has had a really bad day, they can get a lot of value from just banging on a drum.

(VM7)

Music was also valued for improving motor skills and processing speed:

I will [include], as much playing as possible... because for those children, the development of their motor skills is a really important thing.

(VM7)

Things like boomwhackers... improving processing speed through familiarity with melody.

(ML4)

These diverse perspectives on music's value illustrate how staff understanding of music's broader developmental benefits can motivate engagement despite resource constraints or confidence issues. However, the need to continuously 'justify' music suggests that these benefits are not universally recognised within schools, creating an additional implementation barrier.

Teacher confidence and self-efficacy

Musical identity ('I'm not musical')

Low musical self-efficacy was also considered a barrier across settings and participant groups, with many non-specialist staff identifying as 'not musical' or lacking musical ability:

I still think a lot of teachers think they can't teach music because they don't know how to play an instrument... I do think teacher confidence is probably one of the biggest [barriers].

(GT4)

Yeah, I think it's just a confidence thing. People just sort of go, 'I'm rubbish at music, I can't sing'. And it's like, well, the children here don't care whether you can sing in key. They're not bothered.

(ML5)

There's always a learning support person who says 'I'm rubbish at music. You don't want to hear me singing'... It's trying to somehow plant those seeds: 'listen, there's loads of things within music, and you can do lots of this'.

(VM1)

These testimonies reveal how binary self-categorisation as 'musical' or 'not musical' creates psychological barriers to music teaching, even though, as ML5 notes, the pupils themselves may have different expectations about musical 'correctness'.

Performance anxiety in classroom settings

The special school classroom environment, which typically includes multiple staff members supporting pupils

with complex needs, created unique challenges for staff confidence:

I think teacher confidence is a massive one, because in our classes there are four adults and the children. So I think sometimes it can be quite daunting to use your singing voice, singing in front of three other adults in the room.

(ML3)

Generalist teachers and visiting musicians recognised this barrier too. GT2 noted that it is not just that they have to sing but that they must also lead and encourage their colleagues and the children themselves in this situation:

It was uncomfortable and I still don't feel entirely comfortable with it, but if I don't do it, the kids won't do it. It's trying to get the rest of your staff to join in, because they feel they can't sing, or they feel like, that doesn't sound right or they've played something wrong. It's like: 'we can all learn together. It doesn't matter if you make a mistake'.

(GT2)

These perspectives highlight how the collaborative teaching environment in special school classrooms can paradoxically create barriers to musical engagement.

Music-specific pedagogical knowledge

Adapting responsive teaching to musical contexts

Participants described a tension between generalist teachers' existing pedagogical expertise in responsive teaching and their limited music-specific knowledge. Special school teachers already excel at pupil-centred approaches:

What you've got to do is see each child as an individual, which you can do when you've only got eight in a class.

(ML1)

I quite often just get the instruments out so we can have a feel, have an explore, but it was too much for him... I had to figure it out. He likes sensory play like rice, so I started putting rice on drums and just leaving it somewhere in the room. And all of a sudden I turned around and he's by the drum touching the rice.

(GT5)

However, music leads and visiting musicians noted that this existing expertise does not always translate to music teaching contexts.

I don't like somebody putting a shaker in a child's hand, holding the shaker and shaking it with them because how do you know that they want that shaker? How do you know that they like the sound of it and it's not getting on their nerves?

(ML5)

This comment reveals a key gap in music-specific pedagogical content knowledge (PCK; Wilson et al., 1987). While generalist teachers in special schools possess sophisticated responsive teaching skills, they may lack the specific PCK needed to translate this expertise effectively to musical contexts. This creates a barrier not of a lack of knowledge, but a gap in the kind of knowledge that bridges responsive teaching and musical learning.

Supporting musical progression

In a further example of lack of music PCK, generalist teachers reported particular difficulty in supporting pupils' musical development beyond initial engagement:

I might get them to a point where they can do a simple call and response. What do I need to do to develop them musically to make further progress? That's what I don't know how to do.

(GT2)

This candid admission highlights a crucial gap in music PCK that was expressed by all generalist teachers in the present study: how to support learning to support musical progression for pupils with learning disabilities.

Differentiation challenges in mixed-ability classes

The diverse learning needs within special school classes created additional challenges for differentiation in music:

You've always got like three distinct groups within your class: ...a PMLD group, a group that communication's their real focus and they're symbol users, and then higher [ability] students... So it's really hard as a teacher.

(GT1)

What something looks like for PMLD students looks different to what it looks like in my ASD class... it would be helpful to have some suggestions about what it might look like for these students and what it might look like for these kinds of students.

(GT2)

These comments illustrate how the diversity of learning needs in special school classrooms demands

sophisticated differentiation skills in music to understand how the same musical concept or activity might be meaningfully adapted across diverse learning profiles. This specialised knowledge represents a key challenge for generalist teachers already navigating complex differentiation requirements across the curriculum.

Ecological systems analysis

Following the inductive analysis presented above, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was applied deductively to each inductively-derived theme to understand how the identified challenges operate across different system levels and interact with each other.

An ecological systems model of the challenges surrounding special school music provision is presented in [Figure 1](#) below. The analysis revealed that barriers stem from complex interactions between individual, interpersonal, organisational and policy-level factors.

Microsystem: Immediate environment

Within the immediate learning environment of the classroom and direct interactions, barriers arise from staff-related factors. Generalist teachers often hold 'Narrow definitions and traditional approaches' to music, sometimes resisting the use of music technology or non-traditional music-making. This is compounded by low 'Teacher confidence and self-efficacy', as many staff identify as non-musical (experiencing the 'I'm not musical' barrier), leading to 'Performance anxiety in classroom settings' when teaching and singing. A lack of 'Music PCK' further hinders their ability to apply existing responsive teaching expertise, specifically regarding 'Adapting responsive teaching to musical contexts', 'Supporting musical progression' beyond initial engagement and addressing 'Differentiation challenges within their classes'. While some staff recognise the 'Perceived value of music for pupils with learning disabilities', the need to continuously justify music suggests this understanding is not universally consistent, adding to micro-level implementation barriers.

Mesosystem: Interactions between microsystems

The connections between various immediate settings within the school environment create further barriers, particularly concerning resource management and professional development. Challenges with 'Material resources' manifest as difficulties with 'Access to instruments and technology' and problems with the 'Availability and distribution of resources' across

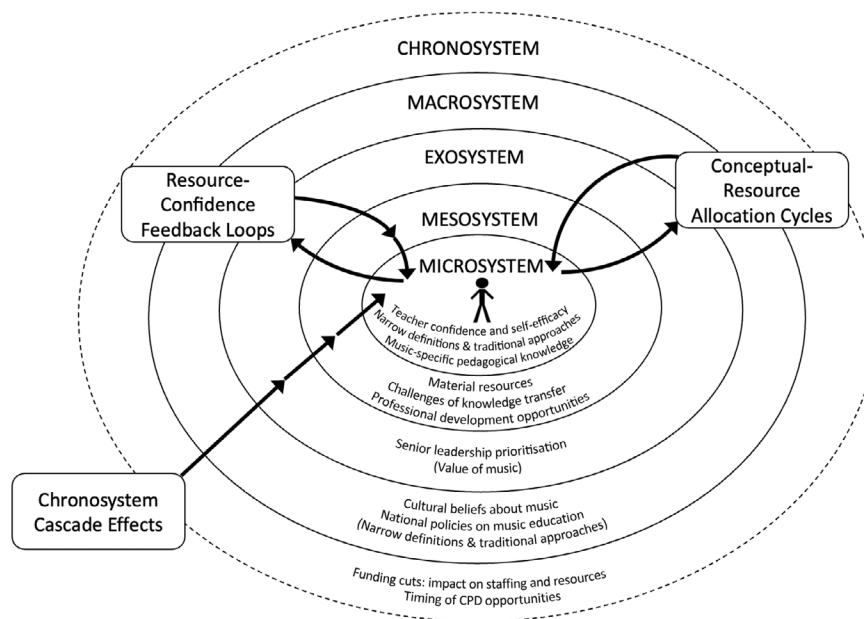


FIGURE 1 Ecological model of how barriers may operate across systems.

numerous classes. There is also a key gap in ‘Curriculum and assessment resources’ for pupils with learning disabilities, with specialised frameworks sometimes encountering implementation barriers due to competing assessment requirements. In terms of ‘Staffing and professional development’, limitations in ‘Access to specialist music staff’ (e.g. rotational models) and barriers to ‘Professional development opportunities’ impede consistent ‘Knowledge transfer’ from specialists to generalist classroom practice. These issues highlight disconnects between school-level resource provision and its effective utilisation in daily classroom teaching.

Exosystem: Indirect influences

Decisions and policies made at an administrative level have a substantial impact on music provision. A critical barrier is ‘Senior leadership prioritisation and budget allocation’. Leadership’s perception of music’s value directly determines the financial resources available, leading to disparities in provision. These decisions directly affect ‘Material resources’ (e.g. instruments or music technology) and may also impact staffing, such as the ability to maintain specialist music teacher positions or provide training.

Macrosystem: Cultural beliefs and ideologies

The broadest level of influence, the macrosystem, encompasses overarching societal values and national policy expectations that shape the educational system. Barriers here include deeply ingrained ‘Narrow definitions and traditional approaches’ to music, reflecting

broader cultural norms about what constitutes ‘real music’. This level also includes a pervasive cultural narrative that categorises individuals as musical or not, which contributes to low ‘Teacher confidence and self-efficacy’ among generalist staff. Despite consistent national policy expectations, societal pressures on education funding or differing interpretations of curriculum importance can lead to an uneven landscape of music provision, as ‘Senior leadership prioritisation and budget allocation’ is influenced by these wider societal values.

Chronosystem: Historical and socio-historical context

The temporal dimension, or chronosystem, highlights how changes over time influence barriers. Key socio-historical events, such as periods of funding cuts, have directly led to challenges in ‘Senior leadership prioritisation and budget allocation’, resulting in the loss and difficulty in replacing specialist music teacher positions. Additionally, the timing of ‘Professional development opportunities’ (often at the end of terms) creates delays in applying new knowledge. This undermines the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of improved music provision, showing how historical and ongoing systemic realities impact educational practice.

Cross-system interactions

The analysis identified three cross-system interactions that may create self-perpetuating cycles resistant to conventional interventions. Understanding these reinforcing

patterns may explain why improvements in one area often fail to produce sustainable changes.

'Resource-Confidence Feedback Loops' demonstrate how material constraints (mesosystem/exosystem) and individual confidence issues (microsystem) reinforce each other. When teachers uncertain about their musical abilities encounter inadequate resources, these limitations heighten anxiety and reinforce self-perceptions of inadequacy. This diminished confidence may then influence exosystem decision-making, as school leadership observes staff discomfort and concludes that music provision investments are unlikely to be effective. The result is a downward spiral where reduced resources undermine teacher confidence, which may justify further resource reductions.

'Conceptual-Resource Allocation Cycles' reveal how narrow understandings of music (microsystem) interact with organisational priorities (exosystem) to create mutually reinforcing limitations. When staff conceptualise music through traditional performance paradigms, they may express preferences for conventional instruments over music technology. School leadership, interpreting this as evidence that staff are unprepared or uninterested in innovative approaches, may allocate resources toward traditional equipment and training, reinforcing existing conceptual limitations. This cycle perpetuates both narrow musical definitions and resource allocation patterns that fail to support inclusive practice.

'Chronosystem Cascade Effects' as a result of temporal changes ripple through all system levels simultaneously. Historical funding cuts (chronosystem) have restructured the entire ecological landscape: they have reduced specialist positions (exosystem staffing decisions), which has increased reliance on generalist teachers who lack specialist music training (mesosystem resource coordination), who then experience heightened confidence barriers (microsystem anxiety), all within a cultural context that already questions who can be 'musical' (macrosystem beliefs). These temporal patterns not only influence individual system levels but also reshape the relationships between them, creating new barriers that did not exist before.

DISCUSSION

Research question 1: Barriers to high-quality music provision

This study provides a post-pandemic examination of music provision in special schools in England, confirming the persistence of challenges documented in earlier research by Ockelford et al. (2002) and Welch et al. (2016). Crucially, it provides new context and rich qualitative data to explore the complex implementation issues in the current educational and economic climate.

While Welch et al. (2016) noted improvements in specialist staffing and resources, this study reveals how current pressures threaten that progress. Local leadership's perception of music's value has become a primary determinant of financial prioritisation, creating an uneven provision landscape that directly impacts specialist retention and resource allocation. The presence of resources does not guarantee consistent or high-quality engagement. Music technology is a key example, with resistance to investing in specialised applications stemming in part from traditional music conceptualisations and budget constraints, in line with previous research (e.g. Farrimond et al., 2011; Förster, 2022). This may prevent staff from fully leveraging technology for accessibility. Practical barriers, like shared resources across multiple classes, create logistical access challenges. Additionally, specialised curriculum and assessment gaps persist, with teachers reporting reliance on adapted mainstream materials and free online resources. Although *Sounds of Intent* was positively acknowledged, some teachers reported logistical complexities and knowledge gaps in its use.

Staff-related barriers operate at multiple levels. Moving beyond previous research on music lead qualifications, this study reveals a pervasive low musical self-efficacy among generalist teachers. The prevalent 'I'm not musical' self-categorisation and performance anxiety, particularly around singing in front of multiple adults, create key psychological barriers. These confidence issues gain importance as budget constraints shift music teaching responsibility from specialists to generalist staff. The challenges extend beyond confidence to music-specific PCK gaps. While generalist teachers excel in responsive teaching, this expertise does not automatically translate to musical contexts. Key challenges include adapting responsive approaches for musical interactions, supporting progression beyond initial engagement and differentiating across diverse abilities. Despite a general belief in music's benefits, the ongoing need to justify music suggests an inconsistent understanding of its developmental value across school personnel.

Research question 2: Ecological systems insights

The application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory reveals that these barriers are not isolated deficits, but the product of intricate interdependencies across individual, interpersonal, organisational, policy and temporal levels. This holistic perspective is a key contribution of the present study, moving beyond previous enumerations of challenges to interpret the mechanisms by which they are perpetuated. The ecological analysis highlights how barriers at different system levels mutually influence each other, creating reinforcing cycles of constraint. 'Resource-Confidence Feedback Loops'

demonstrate how inadequate materials may deepen teacher self-doubt, indirectly justifying further disinvestment. ‘Conceptual-Resource Allocation Cycles’ propose that narrow conceptualisations of music may lead to traditional resource decisions that reinforce the very limitations constraining inclusive provision. ‘Chronosystem Cascade Effects’ are a particularly important example of multi-level reinforcement of barriers, demonstrating how historical events and ongoing temporal shifts create a cumulative legacy that impacts all layers of the ecological system simultaneously. This interconnected deterioration across levels may explain why challenges persist and why piecemeal interventions often fall short.

NPME2 implementation analysis

Having identified key barriers and their cross-system interactions, these can be mapped against NPME2's three goals to explore whether they may represent implementation challenges, conceptual limitations in the policy, or both. A policy vision like NPME2 undergoes multiple transformations as it moves from text to practice and is reinterpreted and adapted by school leaders and teachers (Ball, 1993; Braun et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010). For special schools, this process is particularly complex given their pupils' specific needs. Consequently, and as the ecological systems analysis suggests, the NPME2's intentions may produce diverse outcomes in practice.

NPME2 goal 1: High-quality music education for all

All participants identified resource and staff-related challenges (summarised under Research Question 1 above) during interviews that prevent consistent implementation of high-quality provision. Some of these implementation challenges stem from fundamental conceptual limitations in how NPME2 approaches SEND provision. In particular, the curriculum gaps participants described exemplify additive inclusion approaches within NPME2 (Bacchi, 2023). While mainstream contexts benefit from resources like the Model Music Curriculum (DfE 2021), no equivalent framework exists for special education contexts. This disparity reflects how SEND provision remains a secondary consideration within policy frameworks, forcing teachers to rely on adapted mainstream materials, expensive specialised resources, or generic online content of variable quality (e.g. *YouTube*).

NPME2 goal 2: Partnership working

All participants consistently identified implementation barriers to partnership working, including professional

development and music confidence (see Research Question 1 above). Partnerships with Hubs are also likely to be undermined by the school budget constraints that participants reported, reducing or removing visiting specialist input. In terms of conceptual limitations around partnership working within the NPME2, the low music confidence generalist teachers reported may reflect mainstream-centric assumptions about specialist-generalist partnerships—another example of additive inclusion. While the policy emphasises professional development for visiting specialists, these frameworks assume mainstream contexts where specialists transfer musical knowledge to generalists who teach neurotypical pupils. In special schools, both generalists and visiting specialists require additional expertise: generalists need music-specific knowledge of responsive teaching for learning disabilities, while specialists need a practical understanding of complex learner profiles. This double layer of additive inclusion fails to reconceptualise partnership models for special education contexts, instead attempting to overlay mainstream professional development frameworks onto fundamentally different learning contexts.

NPME2 goal 3: Supporting progression for all

Participants identified progression support challenges, particularly around implementing *Sounds of Intent* effectively due to training barriers and dual assessment workload demands in practice. Despite *Sounds of Intent* being recognised as a robust framework for supporting special school music provision (Ofsted, 2012), its implementation is undermined by interconnected barriers across NPME2's three goals: the absence of recommended curriculum frameworks means schools must independently identify and source such tools (Goal 1), while the specialist pedagogical knowledge required for effective implementation remains constrained by problematic assumptions about specialist-generalist partnerships (Goal 2). The resulting dual assessment burden demonstrates how policy silence on specialised progression support forces schools to layer additional systems onto existing frameworks, creating unsustainable workload demands. This pattern suggests that NPME2's additive inclusion approach operates systemically. Rather than reconceptualising progression pathways for pupils with learning disabilities, the policy creates conditions where unresolved curriculum, partnership and assessment challenges compound to undermine the ‘progression for all’ commitment.

Insights for practice and policy

These findings are timely given current Labour government policy developments. Whilst the NPME2 remains

this government's policy vision, the Curriculum and Assessment Review (DfE 2025) may offer some opportunity to address the additive inclusion limitations identified in this study. The review's acknowledgment that special school curricula 'may need significant appropriate adaptation' (p. 20) aligns with this study's findings about mainstream-centric policy assumptions; however, the review provides limited guidance on how such adaptation should occur, risking continued additive inclusion approaches. The planned National Centre for Arts and Music Education (launching September 2026) represents an opportunity to rethink partnership working and CPD content and approaches for special schools. To avoid perpetuating the same inequitable support structures, these initiatives should explicitly address the conceptual limitations in NPME2's approach to special education contexts rather than simply providing additional resources within existing frameworks.

With this in mind, the following insights are offered in response to the experiences described by participants. They indicate immediate practical needs and propose longer-term systemic changes to address the implementation challenges and conceptual limitations of the NPME2's policy vision.

Short-term school-level opportunities

Expanding conceptualisations of music

Modelling activities for staff that embrace technology and found sounds could extend NPME2's Goal 1 'high-quality music education for all' beyond traditional performance paradigms, addressing constraints participants described (Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Cross-role collaborative planning

Co-creating musical activities between visiting musicians, music leads and generalist teachers would challenge NPME2's Goal 2 assumption of specialist-to-generalist knowledge transfer, and facilitates bidirectional knowledge exchange (Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Medium-term development

Collaborative partnership Programmes

Sustained mentoring programmes facilitating bidirectional knowledge exchange could challenge NPME2's Goal 2 hierarchical partnership model by synthesising generalist responsive teaching expertise with specialist

musical knowledge, generating missing music-specific PCK (Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Professional learning communities

Establishing special school music networks where teaching staff in all roles can share practice could complement NPME2's Goal 2 partnership working by providing alternative collaboration spaces (Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Practical teaching resources

Flexible music teaching resources, for example, video-based online libraries featuring authentic activities with pupils with learning disabilities could complement NPME2's professional development goals and address the Goal 1 and 3 curriculum and assessment resource gaps (Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Longer-term system-level changes

Partnership working (Hubs)

Targeting funding streams could extend NPME2's Goal 1 universal provision aspiration by addressing implementation inequities between schools with and without Hub access (Macrosystem/All levels).

Reconceptualising musicality in policy language

Policy guidance centred on pupils with learning disabilities could challenge NPME2's mainstream-centric assumptions across all goals, moving from additive inclusion toward transformative approaches (Macrosystem).

Valuing pedagogical expertise

Explicitly recognising generalist teachers' expertise as foundational (Johnston, 2023), would challenge NPME2's Goal 2 specialist-generalist hierarchy by positioning context-specific responsive teaching knowledge as equally important to musical knowledge (Macrosystem/Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Assessment framework integration

Guidance on integrating *Sounds of Intent* with school assessment systems could complement NPME2's Goal 3

progression commitment by providing missing practical implementation support (Exosystem/Microsystem).

School leadership engagement

Resources that help school leadership understand music's developmental value beyond traditional performance measures could complement NPME2's Goal 1 aims by addressing the variable leadership prioritisation that determines music provision quality that participants identified here (Exosystem/Mesosystem/Microsystem).

Limitations

While data was collected in 2022, prior to the full implementation of the NPME2, the findings are indicative of persistent implementation challenges. The identified systemic barriers transcend specific policy iterations. However, this research cannot assess the impact of more recent NPME2-specific initiatives. The recruitment strategy, while achieving diversity in some senses, may have overrepresented settings with stronger music provision. Consequently, schools with minimal or non-existent music provision may be underrepresented, potentially creating an overly optimistic picture of current provision. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews introduces the potential for biased or inaccurate recollections.

Future research directions

Building on this study's insights, future research should focus on three key areas. First, it is crucial to capture the perspectives of pupils and their families on music provision, as their voices represent a crucial missing element in understanding provision effectiveness here. Second, longitudinal intervention studies are needed to track how new practices influence cross-system barriers, providing valuable evidence for sustainable improvement. Finally, research with both teachers and leaders would offer a deeper understanding of the identified challenges, including how understandings of barriers are formed during training and how school leaders perceive music's value.

CONCLUSION

In addressing the research questions, this study identified two primary barrier categories—Resourcing Challenges and Staff-Related Factors—that operate through complex ecological interactions to constrain high-quality music provision for pupils with learning

disabilities. Understanding these patterns explains why increased policy attention and resource investment have not translated into consistent improvement over the last decade. For practitioners and policymakers, these findings validate that implementation barriers are systemic rather than individual failures. The multi-level recommendations provide strategic leverage points where interventions can disrupt reinforcing patterns, while the ecological framework suggests that effective transformation requires reconceptualising policies rather than simply improving their implementation.

These findings are particularly relevant in the current policy landscape under the Labour government. Whilst NPME2 remains the current policy framework, parallel initiatives, particularly the Curriculum and Assessment Review and the planned National Centre for Arts and Music Education, provide new opportunities to address the systemic barriers this study has identified. However, these initiatives risk perpetuating the same 'additive inclusion' approaches unless they explicitly centre the needs of pupils with learning disabilities from the outset.

As one participating teacher observed, pupils with learning disabilities 'deserve the best music education too'. Fulfilling this principle requires moving beyond well-intentioned reforms that address symptoms to systematic approaches targeting root causes. This means challenging narrow definitions of musical participation, recognising generalist teachers' pedagogical expertise as foundational to music teaching, and creating policy frameworks that support rather than constrain inclusive practice.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Caroline Waddington-Jones: Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; project administration; formal analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Live Music Now for their assistance in connecting with potential participants, and Dr. Liz Haddon for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was jointly funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and a Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research (SEMPRE) 50th Anniversary Award.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data for this study cannot be shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study obtained ethical approval from the University of York's Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

ORCID

Caroline Waddington-Jones  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3943-1214>

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J., Boyle, C. & Deppeler, J. (2014) The ecology of inclusive education. In: Zhang, H., Chan, P.W.K. & Boyle, C. (Eds.) *Equality in education*. Rotterdam: SensePublishers.
- Bacchi, C. (2023) Bringing a 'What's the problem represented to be?' Approach to music education: a national plan for music education 2022. *Music Education Research*, 25(3), 231–241. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2023.2223220>
- Ball, S.J. (1993) What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 13(2), 10–17.
- Bosch, K.A., Andringa, T., Peterson, W. et al. (2017) A comparison of natural and non-natural soundscapes on people with severe or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 42(3), 301–307.
- Braun, A., Ball, S.J. & Maguire, M. (2011) Policy enactments in schools introduction: towards a toolbox for theory and research. *Discourse (Abingdon, England): Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 581–583. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.601554>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2022) Toward good practice in thematic analysis: avoiding common problems and becoming a knowing researcher. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 24(1), 1–6. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>
- Bremmer, M., Hermans, C. & Lamers, V. (2021) The charmed dyad: multimodal music lessons for pupils with severe or multiple disabilities. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 43(2), 259–272.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The ecology of human development: experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. & Morris, P.A. (2007) The bioecological model of human development. In: Damon, W. & Lerner, R.M. (Eds.) *Handbook of child psychology*. New Jersey: Wiley. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114>
- Department for Education. (2021) The model music curriculum. HM Government.
- Department for Education. (2022) The power of music to change lives: a national plan for music education. HM Government.
- Department for Education. (2025) Curriculum and assessment review final report: building a world-class curriculum for all. HM Government.
- Farrimond, B., Gillard, D., Bott, D. & Lonie, D. (2011) Evidence Review: Engagement with technology in special educational & disabled music settings. Youth Music. https://www.youthmusic.org.uk/sites/default/files/SEN_Review_web.pdf
- Förster, A. (2022) Accessible digital musical instruments in special educational needs schools: design considerations based on 16 qualitative interviews with music teachers. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 39(4), 863–873. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2022.2049141>
- Gaunt, H. & Hallam, S. (2016) Individuality in the learning of musical skills. In: Hallam, S., Cross, I. & Thaut, M. (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of music psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 463–477.
- Johnels, L., Vehmas, S. & Wilder, J. (2021) Musical interaction with children and young people with severe or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities: a scoping review. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 69(4), 487–504.
- Johnston, A. (2023) Evaluating the impact of a skills-based intervention on the readiness of generalist teachers in a special school to teach music. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Reading]. <https://doi.org/10.48683/1926.00114851>
- Lenhoff, S.W., Singer, J. & Gottfried, M. (2022) Thinking ecologically in educational policy and research. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 97(1), 1–5. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2022.2026715>
- Leu, J.C.Y. (2008) Early childhood music education in Taiwan: an ecological systems perspective. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 109(3), 17–26. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3200/AEPR.109.3.17-26>
- Lipsky, M. (2010) *Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mommo, O., Sutela, K. & Mononen, R. (2025) Inclusion and pedagogical support for students with special educational needs in music lessons: a systematic review. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 47, 403–423. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X251342143>
- Ockelford, A. (2008) *Music for children and young people with complex needs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ockelford, A. & Welch, A. (2018) Mapping musical development in learners with the most complex needs. In: McPherson, G. & Welch, G. (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of music education*, Vol. 4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 7–27.
- Ockelford, A., Welch, G. & Zimmermann, S. (2002) Music education for pupils with severe or profound and multiple difficulties. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 49(1), 71–95.
- Ofsted. (2012) Music in schools: Wider still and wider. Ofsted.
- Ofsted. (2020) *COVID-19 series: Briefing on schools*. Ofsted.
- Pavlicevic, M., O'Neil, N., Powell, H., Jones, O. & Sampathianaki, E. (2014) Making music, making friends: long-term music therapy with young adults with severe learning disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 18(1), 5–19. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629513511354>
- Richards, H. (2021) EHCP implementation in the early years: constraints and possibilities. *Support for Learning*, 36, 204–221. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12351>
- Rushton, R. & Kossyvakis, L. (2020) Using musical play with children with profound and multiple learning disabilities at school. *British Journal of Special Education*, 47, 489–509. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12334>
- Rushton, R., Kossyvakis, L. & Terleksi, E. (2023) Music-based interventions for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities: a systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 27(2), 370–387. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/17446295221087563>
- Samuels, K. (2019) The drake music project Northern Ireland: providing access to music technology for individuals with unique abilities. *Social Inclusion*, 7(1), 152–163. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i1.1706>
- Savage, J. (2021) Teaching music in England today. *International Journal of Music Education*, 39(4), 464–476. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761420986213>
- Thompson, G.A. & Elephant, C. (2019) 'But I want to talk to you!' Perspectives on music therapy practice with highly verbal children on the autism spectrum. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 28(4), 347–359. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2019.1605616>
- Welch, G., Ockelford, A., Carter, F.-C., Zimmermann, S.-A. & Himonides, E. (2009) Sounds of intent: mapping musical

- behaviour and development in children and young people with complex needs. *Psychology of Music*, 37(3), 348–370.
- Welch, G.F., Ockelford, A., Zimmermann, S.-A., Himonides, E. & Wilde, E. (2016) The provision of music in special education (PROMISE) 2015. In: Boal-Palheiros, G. (Ed). *International Perspectives on Research in Music Education*. London: SME/SEMPRE/iMerc, pp. 292–303.
- Wilson, S.M., Shulman, L.S. & Richert, A.E. (1987) “150 different ways” of knowing: representations of knowledge in teaching. In: Calderhead, J. (Ed.) *Exploring teachers' thinking*. London: Cassell, pp. 104–124.

How to cite this article: Waddington-Jones, C. (2026) Mind the gap: Barriers to high-quality music provision in English special schools. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 26, e70052. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.70052>