

Arts and Music Education: Proving it should be a core subject

This paper includes a summary of a presentation of research findings at the Music Mark conference on 18 November 2025, with some additional detail of the impact and progression frameworks underpinning the research and how they can be used for teacher CPD for nurturing pupils' emotional wellbeing alongside delivery of the arts curriculum in primary schools.

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The value of music education

The value of music education is the contribution it makes to the development of children and young people. There is plenty of evidence on the impact of music and the arts, but arts subjects are often marginalised because there is a gap in knowledge of how to realise and measure those impacts in a school setting.

Evidence for a framework to analyse impact

Using an evidence base of research from different perspectives on the protective factors for children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health, a creative and cultural learning impact framework was created to describe how artistic processes can provide those protective factors and be used as a therapeutic tool. There are five dimensions with descriptors. A survey based on those dimensions was trialled across multiple arts programmes.

- The scores provided insights into different programmes.
- The testimony provided insights into young artists' individual journeys.

Research findings from an intervention supporting vulnerable young people include:

- Before and after Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores showed improvements with a reduction of 44% for emotional symptoms and 28% for behavioural difficulties.
- The impact framework enabled analysis of how the intervention caused those changes by addressing the risk factors associated with serious youth violence.

The next step is a research project for replicating that impact through school arts provision. Implementation will require the same strategic approach to arts education as there is to science education in the National Curriculum. A strategic approach can include these related developmental strands from the Education Endowment Foundation toolkit:

- Oral Language Interventions
- Social and Emotional Learning
- Metacognition and Self-regulation
- Collaborative Learning Approaches

A Nurturing Emotional Wellbeing Manual has been written for primary schools to adopt this approach through CPD for classroom teachers. Two elements have been trialled:

- Cross arts collaborations in the classroom to enable choice
- Using the arts to enhance Relationships and Health Education

Replicating the impact through school arts provision will provide compelling evidence that understanding the human world through artistic processes is as important as understanding the natural world through scientific processes.

Creative and Cultural Learning Impact Framework for Artistic Engagement

These descriptors for classroom practice provide protective factors for emotional wellbeing. Telling a story in the arts can be used therapeutically as a safe space to explore personal and social issues.

- **Engagement and Enjoyment**
 - Enjoying creative play
 - Having fun interacting with artist / teacher and others
 - Discovering their interests and talents
 - Enjoying success
- **Learning and Progress**
 - Mastering new skills which have been demonstrated or explained by artist / teacher
 - Demonstrating an understanding of their own mastery
 - Taking pride in their achievements
 - Understanding the next steps in making progress
- **Decision Making**
 - Being given options and making choices about their involvement
 - Making artistic choices about their contribution using suggestions from others
 - Suggesting artistic choices for themselves and others
 - Understanding the reason for decisions
- **Expressing Themselves**
 - Displaying an emotional response to an artistic communication
 - Communicating an emotion artistically
 - Imagining a story to reflect what they are performing or creating
 - Creating an artistic response to tell a story
- **Connecting to Others**
 - Exploring and taking part in artistic practice from own heritage
 - Exploring and taking part in artistic practice from other cultures
 - Collaborating with others when performing or creating
 - Sharing their art with family and friends

Key descriptors for supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities:

- *Enjoying creative play* especially using artistic forms to communicate when other forms of communication are impaired.
- *Discovering their interests and talents* and *being given options and making choices about their involvement* means they can build on their abilities.
- *Mastering new skills* and *enjoying success* can happen at all skill levels.
- *Collaborating with others when performing or creating* is possible through co-creation and inclusive practice where the contributions of all are valued.

Key descriptors for supporting cultural inclusion and celebrating cultural diversity:

- *Exploring and taking part in artistic practice from own heritage* helps to create a secure cultural identity.
- *Exploring and taking part in artistic practice from other cultures* helps to build cultural capital.
- *Collaborating with others when performing or creating* helps build cultural understanding and cohesion across different communities.
- *Making artistic choices* when creating art which crosses genres mirrors the way the arts continue to develop and enrich all our lives.
- *Creating an artistic response to tell a story* can be used to explore injustice and change attitudes.

Stars Progression Framework for Artistic Development

Children's artistic development starts with creative play in the early years. During key stage 1 they continue to develop their performing and creative skills and learn some artistic language to describe and explain their involvement. The Stars framework describes progression steps for children's development as young artists from key stage 2. There are five strands:

- **Performance**
 - developing control through artistic practice to be able to communicate expressively
- **Creativity**
 - generating, organising and refining ideas through artistic practice to be able to create own original artistic work
- **Conceptual Knowledge,**
 - understanding the elements, devices and structures which underpin and derive from artistic practice to be able to communicate and realise artistic intentions
- **Evaluation,**
 - understanding own artistic role and making judgements to embed and deepen artistic learning across other strands
- **Personal Development,**
 - outcomes through children applying their learning through artistic and cultural engagement to find their own artistic voice and develop a secure cultural identity

The framework has five levels to the end of key stage 3. Stars 1 and 2 are suitable for key stage 2 children, with Star 3 (and above) achievable by those attending additional activity.

Progression in **performance** is achieved through mastering simple skills then adding complexity through artistic devices and structures. This can be through contrasting and graduated responses (e.g. light and shade in visual arts) or combining skills for an effect (e.g. physicality and sound in drama) or sustaining performance for a whole work (e.g. song or painting).

One aspect of progression in **creativity** is through making choices from the increasing range of artistic skills, devices and structures which have been learnt. Another is communicating or enhancing emotions. This can be stimulated by other art (e.g. dancing to music, artwork for a drama set) through to storytelling and exploring personal and social issues.

Conceptual knowledge elements have three categories for each art form:

- Starting points for communicating artistically
- Artistic qualities which can be varied to enhance communication
- How a work of art is structured to tell a story.

Performance, creativity and conceptual knowledge have subject specific criteria for each Star level.

Evaluation and **personal development** are common across all art forms with criteria for independence, teamwork and cultural learning at each Star level.

Teachers can use criteria in the Stars framework for preparation, planning and assessment, and for providing feedback to children on their artistic progress and personal development. Subject leads can map the subject specific criteria to their scheme of work. The framework can be used for monitoring progress, reporting to parents and carers and passing on profiles to the next teacher.

Full details are in the Nurturing Emotional Wellbeing Manual for primary schools.

Children's Development through Arts and Culture

Emotional wellbeing is supported when activity includes:

- Arts activity where children discover and develop their own preferred ways of artistic expression, learn how emotions can be expressed through artistic communication, are encouraged to use their own artistic voice when collaborating with others, and have their contribution and progress celebrated.
- Cultural activity where children explore their family heritage, understand how embracing different traditions enhances artistic development, and develop a secure cultural identity.
- Social and emotional learning through using the arts as a safe space to explore and discuss emotions in Relationships and Health Education.

The **Impact Framework** is used to develop activity. It describes the features of artistic practice which support children's wellbeing alongside delivery of the curriculum.

The **Progression Framework** is used to support the artistic and personal development of children. Art form specific criteria can be used for celebrating the development of young artists through certification.

The therapeutic value of the arts is amplified through using both frameworks. The better children are at expressing themselves artistically, the greater the impact there will be when they are using the arts as a tool for exploring issues.

A CPD Programme for Primary Classroom Teachers

Complementing the Role of Literacy, Oracy and Arts Leads

Implementation is through development steps for classroom teachers. This approach does not create an additional burden on busy teachers or on a crowded curriculum.

- Teachers can build on their expertise in literacy and creative writing, using the impact framework to develop their practice.
- Teachers can use their own artistic interests to understand the structure of the progression framework. They can then apply that understanding to art forms where they feel they have less expertise or confidence.
- Teachers can use co-creation, making use of expertise children have gained through additional arts activity in and out of school to model activity for others.

The programme can be implemented by school literacy, oracy or arts lead. The Music Hub could provide them with support through professional discussions about using the manual. After an introductory session classroom teachers have sessions across a year, implementing their learning between sessions. The focus is on classroom practice and pupil development. Schools do not have to change their curriculum content (but may wish to over time). Sessions include discussions on supporting children's emotional engagement through artistic communication alongside the development of artistic skills and knowledge. Over the course of the year teachers are supported to deliver three "Learning through the Arts" projects where artistic communication is used to support social and emotional learning in Relationships and Health Education.

A survey based on the impact framework provides scores and testimony which describe the impact of activity. This can be used to develop practice as well as provide evaluation evidence. For schools in the research project, SDQs will be used to measure the impact on pupils who are vulnerable, for example with unmet learning needs, unresolved trauma or struggling with identity and belonging.