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Voices from Southwark: Reflections on a collaborative music teaching project in London in the age of COVID-19

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Abstract

Situated in the context of current examinations of inequality and underrepresentation in music education in the United Kingdom, this article offers perspectives on a community music school and outreach initiative based in Southwark, London, where King's College London music students, mentored by an experienced local teacher, facilitate small group music-making for primary school children who would not otherwise have opportunities for collaborative performance. Due to COVID-19, the project shifted to fully online delivery, and later to a hybrid model, combining virtual and in-person interaction. Based on ethnographic research amongst pupils, parents, teaching assistants and coordinators, we invoke the collaborative ethos of the project and explore its social and affective impact on participants at a time of great challenge and change.

Keywords: participatory music, online teaching, COVID-19 lockdown

Introduction

Music education in the United Kingdom stands at a critical moment. The long history of neo-liberal rhetoric in educational policy – the capitalist expectation that education should be designed to lead to income-generating work or, as Paulo Freire put it, ‘the pedagogical pragmatism of the technico-scientific training of the individual’ (1998: 113) – has negatively affected the funding and prestige of music education in the United Kingdom throughout recent decades. And yet, despite the tide of funding cuts and humanities bashing, some forms of music education have been able to survive and even thrive, often in the form of community-based efforts sustained through a precarious combination of earned income, donations and government funding (Higgins 2012: 109).

One might rightly wonder if these tendencies will continue or even worsen during the COVID-19 crisis reconstruction,^[1] even though community music-making has been shown to be a helpful coping activity in lockdown (Martínez-Castilla et al. 2021) in a range of settings, from people collectively singing, playing and listening to music together from their balconies to live music concerts offered in social media and ‘pandemic playlists’ by way of those learning an instrument online during lockdown. Yet existing social, ethnic and gendered structures of inequality and the ways in which these are exacerbated by lack of access to the internet, or a safe home, are frequently overlooked in the more ‘digitally optimistic’ narratives of the moment. As this article shows, these aspects have a significant impact on how participants inhabit the new community music/music education spaces and how some experience them more as ‘home’ than others.

This study is based on ethnographic research amongst the members of what is known as the King’s/St George Academy, or ‘KSG Academy’, a collaborative educational partnership between primary state schools in Southwark, in the London Borough of Southwark, the Church of St George the Martyr, Southwark (‘St George’s’) and the Music Department at King’s College London.^[2] Our article shows the complexities faced by not just the KSG Academy school students (called ‘pupils’) but also by other participants in the project: the university music students who mentored and taught the pupils (referred to here as ‘the KSG teachers’), the supervising teacher Jonathan Pix and other adult musicians and academics involved in delivery. Latterly, a further participant has come into play, a small charity called Water City Music,^[3] which had been working for some years at St George’s with the same schools as the KSG

Academy schools. Water City Music provided vital continuation funding for the current year from Arts Council money previously allocated to it for face-to-face events that were cancelled due to the pandemic.

Through our ethnographic work, we have identified:

1. The myriad of virtual, hybrid and physical spaces that are involved in online music delivery, and the often invisible barriers that separate and shape these spaces.
2. The affective transformations that these community music participants tend to experience as a response to the in-person and online music lessons.
3. The value of a collaborative-participative approach in music education, and the different dimensions of this collaboration, such as pupil/teacher, teacher/teacher and community/institution.

To contextualize the reasons why the KSG Academy was formed in September 2017 and has continued throughout the pandemic, we begin by examining the current literature on inequality and access to music education in the United Kingdom. Then, we thematically analyse and discuss the experiences of pupils, teachers, parents and coordinators before and during the pandemic and the move to online teaching. Inspired by phenomenological models that enquire into the lived experience of individuals (Smith et al. 2009), this investigation shows how – by voicing their emotions and experiencing the challenges of learning, the pandemic and educational decolonization – the members of the Academy themselves generate valuable knowledge.

We do so from a variety of perspectives. The first to sixth named authors of this article are or were graduate students at the Music Department of King's College London and teaching assistants at the Academy. They have all contributed to the elaboration of

annual evaluations of the Academy's work, conducting interviews, surveys and participant observation over the course of three years. Through examination and analysis of these materials, Javier Rivas created this article with Esther Cavett's close involvement and feedback. Esther Cavett, co-founder of the Academy and senior research fellow at KCL, coordinated the original and online forms of the project, conducting ethnographic work and providing guidance and support to the teaching assistants. The process was collegiate, iterative and reflective.⁴

Hidden inequalities in music education

In the United Kingdom, the lack of access to and participation in higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds has been a growing concern amongst researchers, teachers and policy-makers (Bekhardnia 2003; Kettley 2007; Tight 2012). The terms 'widening access' and 'participation' in this context are understood as efforts to attract certain groups – women, ethnic minorities, mature adults and working-class students, among others – into higher and further education that have previously, for systemic reasons, been under-represented (Tight 2012). A considerable body of work in educational research has drawn attention to persistent inequality in the policies and initiatives designed to encourage widening participation in British institutions and communities (Bibbings 2006; Kettley 2007; David 2010; Thompson 2012; Weedon 2016; Connell-Smith and Hubble 2018). The most effective initiatives often take the form of collaborative working arrangements between universities, local communities, further education colleges and other institutions (Dhillon 2012).

The situation regarding access to music education in the United Kingdom is particularly acute. Formal music education in the state system is increasingly uneven and

limited, with most state schools lacking music specialists and strong music programmes. As a result, the number of young people who opt to study music at both pre-university and university levels has experienced a significant decline (Daubney et al. 2019). Furthermore, this is a racial, gendered and class gap: the music sector, including conservatoires and university music departments, is still predominantly White, middle class and overwhelmingly male regarding positions of authority and prestige (Scharff 2015).^[5] This divide inevitably shapes what we understand as music worth being studied and what we conceive as music literacy.^[6] Some have suggested that at the heart of this gap is the so-called two-nation educational culture (Trust cited in Bibbings 2006: 76) of private and state schools, where private schools perform, on average, better in GCSE and A level due to offering better facilities and a steady increase in music provision, as opposed to the dramatic 12 per cent decrease amongst state schools between 2014 and 2019 (Caizley 2019). The report *Music Education: State of the Nation* reveals the concern that, within a decade, ‘music education in England will be restricted to a privileged few’ (Daubney et al. 2019: 2).

As funding and resources are increasingly limited in state schools, it often falls to community-based programmes to offer music education alternatives to those who cannot afford private schooling or music tuition. Indeed, a defining feature of community music practices in the United Kingdom is their strong inclusive ethos, ‘based on intentions like “access”, “participation” and “partnership” with an ambition to focus on disadvantaged groups in British society’ (Veblen and Olsson 2002: 22). But how does this ethos work in practice? Deanna Yerichuk and Justin Krar (2019) observe that, despite ‘inclusion’, ‘participatory music’ and ‘widening access’ being perceived as cornerstones of

community music practice, there are few accounts of what these terms mean and how they are achieved and experienced by community music practitioners. Furthermore, existing literature has tended to focus on certain formats, such as choral settings, community bands and lifelong music-making (Rohwer in Dieckmann and Davidson 2019), neglecting, to a certain extent, hybrid forms of community music engagement such as educational collaborations between society and institutions. This article responds to the current impetus in the field of community music scholarship to redefine the boundaries of community music, situating it beyond its traditional spaces and practices (Dieckmann and Davidson 2019). Thus, we conceive of community music as something that takes place outside of formal educational settings and involves different communities engaging in some kind of reciprocal, participatory learning.

Against this background, this article aims to identify the underlying realities and experiences of a community-based, participatory music education project in the age of COVID-19. Who gets to be part of the project, and what motivates them? What are the challenges that coordinators, teachers, parents and students face in a day-to-day basis? Which of these challenges are specifically local, and which are global? Which are class-, gender- or ethnicity-related? And how do the participants *feel* about the project, their learning processes and their collective music-making?

Answers to these questions take a very different turn in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the series of lockdowns that the United Kingdom has experienced since March 2020. This was a moment of sudden change, when the interactions between participants became digitally mediated and activities had to be adapted to the different levels of lockdown restrictions. Given the lack of research on ‘experienced subjective

processes of change for individuals’ (Perkins et al. 2020: 2) in participatory music settings, we set out to investigate the changing lived experiences of the participants before and after the pandemic. Focusing on the experiences of community music participants allowed us to track how collective and collaborative music-making impacted them over time. This impact, however, is rarely uniform across the different social groups that might participate in community music-making. The pandemic has dangerously exacerbated existing social inequalities (Ahmed et al. 2020) – and therefore *learning inequalities* (Engzell 2020) – and unveiled some of the hidden struggles that vulnerable communities already experienced before COVID-19, such as the so-called digital divide or mental and emotional distress. As Alison Daubney and Martin Fautley point out, those inequalities have always been there, but the pandemic ‘is bringing this inequality more sharply into focus’ (2020: 108–09). Concerned with the impact of this unspoken side of the pandemic on musicians and music students in the United Kingdom, we present how the collective experiences of a community music project have changed over the last months, and what these changes can tell us about broader issues of digital inequalities and music education.

Study context: Southwark, the KSG Academy and COVID-19

We locate these questions in the ethnically diverse borough of Southwark in London, an income-deprived neighbourhood where 40 per cent of children are living in households in poverty (Trust for London 2020). At the heart of the borough is the ancient Church of St George the Martyr, where the lessons of the KSG Academy were held in the beautifully modernized church crypt. The Academy was conceived to offer small group face-to-face teaching of a kind no longer provided in English state schools. The first term of lessons,

in September 2017, consisted of a ten-student pilot. Teaching was then scaled up to approximately 30 pupils attending around ten lessons per academic term. An average of seven KSG teachers have been involved each academic year.

The pupils were children aged 7–11 years from local state schools in the London borough of Southwark. Most of the pupils and parents were from Black and Asian working-class communities and therefore disproportionately affected, educationally and socially, by the pandemic and the lockdown measures (Roach 2020). The KSG teachers ranged from second-year undergraduate students to final-year Ph.D. students at the King's Music Department. These included White English, Welsh and Irish students and international students from Canada, Spain, Vietnam, Singapore and China. The supervising schoolteacher, Jonathan Pix, is half Latino. Given these patterns of ethnicity and class in the Academy, we strive to understand the structural inequalities that have led to this place and reflect on ways to tackle them.

The in-person format of the Academy ran from September 2018 to March 2020 with pupils allocated to one of three groups. These groups would spend twenty minutes in each of the three classrooms, referred to as 'workstations', situated at the front, middle and rear of the church crypt. The rationale for the workstation format, which had been proposed by Jonathan Pix in light of his extensive classroom teaching experience (rather than being co-created with the pupils), was that it allowed pupils who would not otherwise have the opportunity in school to focus in detail on performing, respectively, keyboards, recorders and percussion. Groups of approximately six pupils moved from one workstation to the next in three 20-minute sessions delivered over the course of an hour. Two KSG teachers provided teaching support at each workstation, so the

staff/student ratio was 1:3. Some teachers taught throughout the year, others for one or two terms. To provide pupils with another perspective on collaborative music-making, professional and student musicians – some from Water City Music and others from King's Music Department – visited St George's to perform with and for the pupils. Additionally, the pupils and their parents and carers visited King's several times a year to perform with and for King's music students. The journeys to King's allowed pupils and parents to witness university life in action and also to experience singing with the King's chapel choir, an extraordinary aural experience for the pupils. The project also provided valuable, supervised teaching experience for the KSG teachers, several of whom have continued into postgraduate teacher training courses.

In March 2020, as the global COVID-19 pandemic took over, schools, churches and universities started to close. King's students, including KSG teachers, were asked to go home. Planned face-to-face teaching ended abruptly; so as a response to the first lockdown, in March 2020, the Academy planned an online infrastructure whereby KSG teachers would teach approximately three pupils each week in individual, twenty-minute solo recorder lessons on Microsoft Teams. The online version of the project involved approximately seven KSG teachers and twenty pupils. Jonathan Pix allocated repertoire appropriate for pupils' ability and experience, based on their previous performance at the Academy. He provided a resource book to KSG teachers that included CD accompaniments, though we quickly found few households had CD players, relying instead on streamed music. During the online term, each KSG teacher generally taught three pupils from different ages and groups. Siblings were sometimes taught together, even if they were at different stages of learning. To help pupils have a clear goal for

progression, the prerequisite for progressing to new pieces was to play a piece of music three times, with the correct notes, in time and without additions, hesitations and assistance from their teacher.

In September 2020, schools were allowed back to face-to-face teaching, but pupils were required to keep in class ‘bubbles’, so a hybrid model of teaching was implemented. The online aspect carried on largely unchanged, while the in-person aspect was restricted to socially distanced recorder lessons of two school bubble groups, extended from twenty minutes to one hour, at the St George’s Church. Since the crypt was in use as a food bank for socially isolated people who were either shielding – so could not be visited by their normal network of friends – or homeless, the main part of the church, which is very large, was taken over for teaching. Government regulations allowed Jonathan Pix to be assisted by just one KSG teacher. The KSG teacher was acting in their personal capacity as a volunteer to St George’s, because Water City Music took over funding the project from King’s College London at this stage.

The teaching at the Academy differed slightly from what is widely recognized as non-formal, community music practice. Despite the emphasis on collaborative learning, participation and negotiated decisions with the local community, the content and structure of the lessons was mostly chosen or suggested by the teaching supervisor, Jonathan Pix. However, KSG teachers were encouraged to experiment pedagogically, sometimes introducing improvisation and flipped learning into their lessons, as discussed further below.

Methodology

Our thematic analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, exploring the experiences of those who participated in the Academy, particularly how those experiences evolved during the pandemic. Exploring lived experience through research inevitably led us to some familiar topics in the field of phenomenology such as the significance of the ways in which people 'become aware' and 'make sense' of everyday events, and the processes of 'reflecting, thinking and feeling as they work through what it means' (Smith et al. 2009: 2). While this article does not aim to be a phenomenological analysis, it resembles one in several ways. As researchers, we are engaged in a 'double hermeneutic [...] trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them' (Smith et al. 2009: 3). Like the diversity workers in Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included*, who generate knowledge about institutions by coming up against the 'brick walls' of institutional racism (2012: 27), KSG teachers generate knowledge by teaching and, in the process of teaching, becoming aware of the complexities and inequalities of running a collaborative music project in the age of COVID 19.

The main question that framed our analysis was: In what ways did the shift to online learning impact the lives of the participants? The data for our analysis was derived from 2017–20 evaluations, pupil, parents and KSG teacher surveys and interviews, as well as the 2020 KSG teacher reflective notes in the form of brief autoethnographic essays written during the pandemic. The data was imported to the software NVivo, where we generated a series of initial codes. After several processes of reviewing, recoding and collective discussion, we determined three themes concerning our original research question: the physical and digital spaces of learning, the affective impact of the lessons and the processes of collaborative learning. These are discussed next.

Findings

The following themes were identified from the data collected.

Physical and digital spaces of learning

The KSG Academy originally offered two places of learning: the crypt of St George's and the Strand Campus of King's College, in the centre of London, where pupils visited the Music Department and the Chapel. Aspects of the pre-COVID physical spaces such as 'performing together', 'sitting in regularly on Academy sessions', 'visiting King's' or the 'atmosphere in the sessions' were valued by pupils, parents and teachers as 'enriching and inspiring' (Evaluations 2017–18, 2018–19). In the 2019–20 academic year, King's students who were members of various student music societies at King's performed for and with the pupils and their family members. Pupils and parents/carers who attended these events reported how these interactions 'expanded their view on music' (Evaluation 2019–20). Parents noted that the visits had inspired their child to think that they would go on to study at higher education. One of the KSG teachers reported that several pupils referred to the visits with enthusiasm in subsequent lessons.

The shift to online instruction created a deterritorialized form of music education (Cremata and Powell 2017), with the computer or phone screen mediating between teachers and pupils in their respective home environments. Pupils all lived near St George's, often in high rises and in cramped accommodation. KSG teachers were scattered across London, Wales, Canada and Spain. As a result, we faced a hybrid ethnographic field (Przybylski 2012), where the online, offline and in-between realities were at play. In their reflective notes, teachers speak about both positive and negative aspects of the new virtual environment:

I learned how to use the internet to my advantage as a teacher [...] how to establish a productive and meaningful teacher-student relationship through online meeting software [...] Students sometimes did not appear equipped or could not access the software required to learn, despite parents being reminded.

(Teacher B)

The software was managed well by the parents with very few of the students having an issue with [Microsoft] teams. Although navigating the software did take a fair amount of guidance from myself, the parents adapted swiftly to the issues involved.

(Teacher A)

This week, the parent reported an issue with the link, so I had to resend the invitation to the parent. The camera angle through the lesson was not always best placed to provide the most informative feedback.

(Teacher A)

Online tuition makes it impossible to physically manipulate students' hands and arms to teach certain concepts. Teacher F explains how in person they rely mainly on 'kinesthetic methods' and 'imitation and repetition', while online tuition offered only 'oral and visual methods of communication'. They acknowledged that 'it is way easier, as a teacher, to physically put a student who is not playing the recorder with the correct hand or fingering, to physically put them in the right position'.

A new weekly virtual space was created on Teams to hold meetings between the KSG teachers, the teaching supervisor Jonathan Pix and the KSG co-founder and coordinator Esther Cavett. These meetings provided practical, subject-specific mentoring as well as support and pastoral care in the face of the pandemic and the abrupt shift to online teaching delivery. Teacher E observed that

[online teaching] was something that the vast majority of the people hadn't done before and there was a kind of comradeship [...] we were all depended on to help shape how the teaching was going to be, there was that sense of feeling valued and pioneering.

As most KSG teachers recorded in their reflective notes, the home environment was decisive in the success or failure of the lessons, particularly regarding the noise level of the room and its impact on student engagement. According to Olsen et al., the 'shift to online instruction may lead to a loss [...] of connection with the class and material when sitting alone in a room' (2020: 559–60). This loss of connection was evident to the teachers, but not typically because the student was sitting alone in a room. On the contrary:

My main concern for these students was the atmosphere at home. Not that there was any suggestion of a safeguarding concern, but the students have two younger siblings who were vocal in the background of the lessons, and often provided some distraction to the lesson [...] There was some background noise as the room where B was taking the lesson was also being used by the parents to watch TV [...] both C&D were highly distracted through the intrusive background noise from the environment. This became particularly severe when D left the lesson to attempt to silence the other in the room as D could not hear the discussion in the lesson.

(Teacher A)

I noted the impact of the socio-economic background of certain students using inefficient and slow internet connections, not being able to print the music sheets or taking the lessons in noisy environments with other members of their family.

(Teacher D)

These findings support the existence of a socio-economic and digital divide among London communities. The digital divide is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood solely in terms of 'haves' and 'haves-not' (Underwood 2007); rather, it

translates into a lack of digital literacy – ‘students sometimes did not appear equipped or could not access the software required to learn’ (Teacher B) – and the inadequacy of the home environment for teaching – ‘the child is distracted by their environment and was not able to focus during the lesson’ (Teacher C) – either due to lack of space, noise levels or a lack of understanding by parents/carers of what was needed to create a viable environment for online music lessons. Even if schools provided tablets several months after lockdown, there was sometimes just one available to a family of three children of different ages, all needing to learn. Similar issues were identified by Pamela D. Pike in her study of online music teaching to underprivileged teenage students. In that study, trainee teachers observed ‘attrition and punctuality issues’ and ‘lack of family support’ and those teachers ‘struggled to make meaning of how a parent would not take advantage of an opportunity that meant so much to his child’ (2017:114). These matters reflect Teacher A’s experience: ‘I found this [the punctuality issues and absenteeism] particularly frustrating as the students show high enthusiasm to learn, however, something keeps going awry which means that they consistently miss their lessons’. Pupil attendance had been an issue raised in previous evaluations of the in-person KSG Academy, with the number of pupils who attended each session differing significantly from week to week. This reflected a similar pattern of attendance in their mainstream schooling.

Despite these issues, or in fact because of them, Pike and others strongly advocate for ‘the potential of using synchronous online music instruction with underserved populations at isolated sites’ (2017: 109). Similarly, Teacher G points out that ‘[the pupils] still get the same quality access to music tuition, which I feel, certainly at this

time, they would not [otherwise] get'. It seems clear that online tuition presents benefits, but, at present, there are structural issues that can downgrade the educational impact.

Lastly, and in line with the impulse observed above to mediate and connect spaces of learning, we found a significant interest expressed by parents and pupils in bringing together home and school music experiences. In early evaluations (Evaluation 2017–18), pupils and parents expressed an interest in including music in the Academy curriculum from Somalian, Eritrean and Caribbean traditions alongside church singing and popular music. It was clear that pupils were motivated to connect their pre-existing musical knowledge with the skills they have learnt at the KSG Academy. This interest manifest itself into online enquiry: KSG teachers recorded, for instance, how pupils had looked online for 'easy versions of songs and tried to work them out on her own, for instance [songs by] Camila Cabello' (Evaluation 2017–18) or watched 'YouTube tutorials on popular music for recorder' (Teacher A). Most of the KSG teachers were trained principally in classical, notated music, so they were required to adapt and experiment so as to enter into dialogue with the pupils and other family members.

Affective impact

Studies have demonstrated that participatory and collaborative music-making activities have the potential to support emotional, psychological and social well-being (Perkins et al. 2020), particularly in the cases of marginalized populations (Lenette et al. 2016; Chatterjee et al. 2020). The evidence collected here supports that assessment. The voices of pupils, teachers and parents confirmed that participation in the KSG project engendered enthusiasm for music, confidence, concentration, enhanced interactions with their peers and family members and a reduction in anxiety.

In 2017–18, several parents noted a strong increase in enthusiasm for music that they attributed to their child attending the Academy. The Academy, explained one parent about her daughter’s experience, ‘has shaped her love for music’. Another parent said of their child that when she is playing music it ‘gives her joy. It’s like she’s alive. She loves it’. Several KSG teachers mentioned how much they loved the pupils’ enthusiasm for the music-making and the project. Enthusiasm was intimately linked with music-making, as the 2017–18 Evaluation reflects: ‘Those children who were perceived by their parents to feel more enthusiasm for the sessions were also those who were perceived by them to improve the most’.

These patterns persisted during the shift to online teaching. According to Teacher A,

[a pupil] expressed that the Academy was giving them much needed relief from the talk of the virus and their schoolwork. The mother had expressed that playing the recorder was providing them with more enthusiasm to engage with their schoolwork.

Teachers also found that the one-to-one format, for instance, led to deeper connections between instructor and student:

Student A was extremely engaged and enthusiastic throughout the lesson and was eager to demonstrate what they had practiced throughout the week [...] this was the final lesson with A and they expressed some real sadness over finishing lessons and leaving the Academy this year.

(Teacher A)

It was both musically and emotionally exciting to see the progress that a child can achieve with just a few lessons. Moreover, when a child starts to open up to me more and express their view in their playing.

(Teacher C)

On the emotional level, the students showed their engagement in very different ways. All the students appeared more happy, comfortable, and engaged as the weeks went forward and they got used to the teacher and the online method – again, as they knew ‘what to expect’ [...] I experienced a similar process as a teacher.

(Teacher D)

Jonathan Pix mentioned that some parents said they did not want online teaching to stop, whilst others suggested an ongoing hybrid model.

Perhaps the most recurrent theme across this category of the data is the growth in confidence among pupils and KSG teachers. In the 2018–19 Evaluation, parents observed an impact in terms of confidence in their children:

[The school] gave my daughter a confidence boost [...] The teachers say, I’m surprised, her writing has become more fluent. And it’s all because of her confidence. You know if she’s good at something she’s looking forward to doing something. It’s just wonderful progress and I’m very grateful.

She’s become not so concerned about people not talking to her because she was a very shy and not so confident child and now in the school council and she’s gained more friends and she’s got things to talk about. I’m going to concerts, I’m in a choir, and she’s feeling like she’s got something to talk about, she’s feeling confident, and her sleeping patterns are way better.

The theme of confidence emerges again during the pandemic and the online term. Phrases such as ‘the student’s confidence seemed to grow since the start of the online Academy, and this was evident this week in their confidence in correcting my intentionally poor technique’ (Teacher A) or ‘once the children became familiar with the structure of the [online] lesson, they showed more confidence and engagement with the activities’ (Teacher D) point to a growth in self-assurance.

In the KSG Academy context, parents and pupils gained insight into the world of higher education both through their visits to the campus and the interactions with King's students. A parent points out that

for myself, with King's, I really thought it was hard to enter, but the more you go and the more you talk with the students [...] she [a KSG teacher] worked hard and is now at the level that she wants to be at for a King's second-year student.

(Evaluation 2018–19)

In 2020, 75 per cent of the parents stated that, since the beginning of the KSG Academy, they felt it was more likely that their child would continue to higher education. A parent reports that their child is 'hoping to continue studying music into the future and they have been really influenced by the Academy'. In another case, the parent not only said that they think their child is more likely to progress on to musical higher education, but also, due to seeing their child's enthusiasm at the KSG Academy, the parent was inspired to begin studying a university course in business management. In the 2019–20 Evaluation, 75 per cent of parents stated that their children did not engage with music regularly before attending the KSG Academy this year whereas now they do, and a further 25 per cent of parents said that their child has started to engage with music more seriously since joining the KSG Academy.

The development of confidence is a well-known outcome of participatory music-making (Hallam 2010). We acknowledge, however, that raising aspirations and confidence, notwithstanding valuable achievements, might give the false impression that the lack of access to music education is solved, obscuring the material conditions that pupils from vulnerable communities still face. In addition, having more Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) role models in the classroom and the curriculum than is

currently the case would probably have a positive impact in terms of confidence for BAME pupils.⁷ As Holder (2020) asks, ‘if there are very few black musicians being studied, and even fewer black music teachers, who can these intelligent and confident black boys look up to in their music lessons?’ (2020: n.pag.). Despite all these issues, the testimonies of KSG teachers, pupils and parents show that participatory music-making can offer the personal growth, motivation and trust in one’s abilities to overcome the difficult time in lockdown and awaken future aspirations and goals with music.

Collaborative learning

Teaching in a community music setting, argues Constantijn Koopman, takes places at several levels (2007: 160). Teachers act as facilitators, guiding the pupils in acquiring basic music skills; but teachers are also *learners*, learning how to set up and run a community music project, how to adapt their teaching to a non-institutional, participatory context and potentially learning from the embodied knowledge that pupils bring to the classroom. The line that separates student and teacher is even more blurred in the case of the KSG Academy, where teachers are at the same time music students at King’s *and* teachers at the Academy, all teaching music online for the first time in their lives. KSG teachers learned from Jonathan Pix and the visiting professional musicians, but also by interacting with the pupils. As the 2017–18 Evaluation shows, ‘KSG teachers learned a lot about the process that primary school aged children go through when they are learning music [...] the logistics of running this type of project and reflected on their own teaching abilities and methods’. As a result of this, several KSG teachers have decided to pursue training as a teacher of music in state schools, which in turn could feed the pipeline of

school students who go on to study music in higher education, one of the main goals of the KSG project.

This co-learning process seems to have fostered an atmosphere of creative and empathetic collaboration. Teacher C says that he ‘will be definitely using the various techniques Jonathan Pix have taught us when I work with children in the future. It was very effective and have made me also understand how children approach and think about music’. The underlying ethos of self-discovery as well as an effort to understand the pupil’s way of thinking that has always been in evidence in the face-to-face iteration of the KSG Academy translated into a more individualized attention in the online mode of delivery: ‘I found myself repeatedly thinking about the best “next step” for each of my students and their particular learning curves, which had never happened to me in the in-person lessons’ (Teacher D); ‘I spend more time thinking how I can effectively communicate with students’ (Teacher F). Sometimes, a new teacher would shadow a more experienced one, which led to a form of flipped classroom: ‘I asked C [the pupil] to teach the trainee [the new KSG Teacher] “the song” as a learning exercise, this appeared to really help C consolidate the technique’ (Teacher A). The internal staff lead Katherine Schofield acknowledged that the KSG Academy has been ‘a marvelous learning opportunity for our own undergraduate and postgraduate students, and also for me’. The collaborative learning ethos is nicely synthesized in Jonathan Pix’s review of the KSG Academy: ‘It is lovely to see the different age groups, the children, the graduates from King’s, the season teachers, beginners, people along different stages of their musical education journey, all mucking in together’.

The collaborative practice presented itself in various dimensions of the Academy such as flipped classroom with pupils ‘teaching’ the teachers, participation of peers and family in the music-making process, or the current attempts to integrate the student’s home and city sonic environment in the lessons, among others. Indeed, the partnership between King’s Music Department, Water City Music and the community and schools at Southwark is in itself an example of the possibilities of a collaborative approach to music education.

Discussion

In this last part of the article, we review our findings in relation to current literature and our original research aims. We have argued for the value of a close dialogue between students and teachers, and between participants, institutions and communities, to enable social justice in music education. This has been already widely discussed in educational research (Freire 1998; Walsh 2013) and in music education (Feichas and Narita 2016). As the project evaluations show, regular engagement between KSG teachers and pupils makes the pupils more aware that higher education is an achievable goal while critically engaging the KSG teachers with the world – and the social and ethnic inequalities – they inhabit. It also fosters a critical reflection amongst the participants on the need for these initiatives in the first place. As McQueen points out:

The educational landscape in England is messy but well-intentioned, propped up by instrumental tuition and external organisations, both of which can be costly. There is no national, systematic approach to teaching music in place. There are some excellent examples of practice in schools although the provision remains patchy.

(2020: 41)

The reliance on private and peripatetic teachers, as well as community-based efforts such as the KSG Academy, to ameliorate the ‘messiness’ of the current educational landscape is dramatically needed but does not address the causes of that need. Judith Butler (2018) has warned how the emergence of ‘Christian-left alternatives’ that ‘make sure that those abandoned by forms of social welfare are taken care by philanthropic or communitarian practices of “care” [...] often supplement and support [...] the decimation of public services’ such as music education and social well-being (2018: 12). The KSG Academy has been very aware of this risk and, since its inception, it has tried to address this risk in its democratic approach to learning, as well as naming this issue as a risk factor in its annual evaluations and public activity.

The annual evaluations show that, from the Academy’s inception, a shared concern of the coordinators was the evaluation and ethics of the project, both in terms of creating a safe space for participation and in dealing with personal data. In a parallel effort to this article, we are working on what we hope will be an open-access piece, where we share the infrastructure that allowed the KSG Academy to exist.

Further, the findings also suggest a series of timely questions, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the reignited global movement of Black Lives Matter. Pre-COVID research on online music education has explored virtual environments only as a support for and supplement to in-person education (see, e.g., Kennedy et al. 2017; Cremata and Powell 2017). The move to a virtual format in 2020 was sudden and complete and unveiled an unevenly digitally connected studentship, where students could not be assumed to have printers, large screens or even tablets, and in some cases had no option but to access lessons through WhatsApp on a parent or sibling’s mobile phone. In this

regard, Shzr Ee Tan has offered some of the most cogent critiques of digital inequalities in music. Tan calls attention to the fact that, in a complex global net of digital ‘asymmetries within asymmetries’, internet and therefore digital musicking still remain subject to ‘huge disparities in the control of infrastructure, the economics of connectivity and the distribution of skillsets [...] market forces, political manipulation and – most basically – access’ (2021: 256). In a COVID-19 context, as our testimonies have shown, some enjoy the privilege of ‘pressing pause’ and ‘taking stock’ in lockdown, a privilege that others cannot afford. Tan and Kiku Day enjoin us to

share teaching, research and musicking resources [...] [to] build physical music communities into virtual spaces with offline as well as livestreamed performance pacts across the globe’s different time-zones [and to] rethink musical performance, syllabi and research for public health and virality.

(2020: n.pag.)⁸

It is our hope that the Academy is contributing to these efforts.

Moreover, many of the pupils are from a BAME background, a group particularly affected by psychological distress during the pandemic and the racism following the police killing of George Floyd in the United States (Flowers and Wan 2020; Jaye 2020). These events will have been very much in the minds of the pupils and their families, as – perhaps – will be the fact that the majority of KSG teachers are not BAME, even if some of them – like the majority of pupils – are from economically underprivileged backgrounds. Notwithstanding these aspects, our thematic analysis suggests that participatory music lessons during COVID provided ‘a relief from the pandemic and the schoolwork’, as one of the teachers puts it, as well as a sense of agency gained through shared music-making (Lenette et al. 2015). We argue that, despite the challenges faced by

the participants, or rather because of those challenges, initiatives like the KSG school are instrumental in widening the participation in music *and* providing a safe haven for a vulnerable part of British society in the midst of a pandemic, racial trauma and economic crisis.

Conclusions

The voices of pupils and teachers in this study provide important perspectives for a series of timely discussions on epistemic decolonization and the value of music education in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Perhaps what is so inspiring about these voices, including those of teachers and coordinators of the Academy, is the fact that they emanate from sustained and embodied knowledge – from sitting weekly in a virtual classroom in lockdown, establishing a musical and social dialogue and exchanging uncertainties, inexperience, anxieties and ways of learning and unlearning together. We draw attention to these testimonies to make wider points about the hidden social and digital inequalities in the music classroom and the many possibilities – and limitations – of participatory music projects like the KSG Academy.

And so, what now? After a period of blended teaching – a combination of online and in-person tuition and performance at St George's – the KSG Academy has returned at the time of writing (May 2021) to a full in-person model, where pupils can meet in groups that preserve their 'existing' class bubbles at school. As we approach the end of the academic term, conversations are taking place to further the existing collaborations with institutions like Water City Music or King's College London itself. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we hope our reflections and analysis can facilitate deeper insights on the state of music education in London and elsewhere during COVID-19,

inspire similar initiatives elsewhere and encourage us to think more compassionately, creatively and collaboratively as music educators and learners and acknowledge the messiness of its boundaries.

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Notes

[1] As an example of this, at the time of writing, the Office for Students (the independent regulator for higher education in England) is proposing a permanent cut of funding by 50 per cent to a range of arts and humanities subjects, including music; these subjects are 'not among its strategic priorities' (Office for Students 2021: 17).

[2] For more information and images of the KSG Academy, see <https://www.stgeorge-themartyr.co.uk/page/59/st-georges-kings-music-academy>. Accessed 31 July 2021.

[3] See Water City Music, <https://watercitymusic.com>. Accessed 23 July 2021.

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George's and music teacher and mentor, whose dedication and imagination brought this project into existence.

5. As shown by the National Skills Academy for Creative & Cultural (2011), 93 per cent of the entire music sector in the United Kingdom is White and 61 per cent is male. For a detailed discussion on the presence of BAME individuals in orchestras, see McClure, Kokot and Scharff cited in Scharff (2015).

6. As Hilary McQueen puts it, there seems to be a clash between two conceptions of widening participation and social justice in music education:

‘[T]hose who view education as an opportunity to go beyond personal experience and preferences (bearing in mind that the current education system works best for those with experience of, and preference for, Western Art Music, even though they are in the minority) and those who seek to base music education on personal experience and preferences (which at secondary level tends to be more popular music).

(2020: 86)

7. Consider, as an example of this under-representation, the case of the British jazz musician Courtney Pine, the only Black composer included in a popular A-level music exam, who was dropped from the syllabus on the grounds that ‘the volume of work was too high’ (Adams and Clifford 2021).

8. Several of these key themes were discussed in the webinar ‘Orchestrating isolation: Musical interventions and inequality in the COVID-19 fallout’, organized by Tan and Day (2020).