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Headteachers' perspectives on the In Harmony programme

National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)



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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of comments from seven headteachers who attended a focus group on 13th October, 2015. [In Harmony](#) is a social and music education programme modelled around an immersive experience, where children play instruments together several times a week from an early age, within a whole school and/or community-based approach. The programme aims to inspire and transform the lives of children and families in deprived communities through the power and disciplines of orchestral music-making. It is inspired by the Venezuelan El Sistema, the goal of which is to change the lives of children in exceptionally deprived circumstances. In Harmony is funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and Arts Council England (ACE), and is currently being piloted in six areas in England.

This paper is part of the national evaluation of In Harmony, which is exploring the impact of the programme on children, families, schools and the wider community. The study is addressing eight research questions through a series of pupil questionnaires, an analysis of provision and participation data, case study visits and an analysis of national performance data. In order to understand more about how In Harmony is working in schools, Arts Council England arranged a roundtable discussion of headteachers, facilitated by NFER.

About the schools

The headteachers who contributed to this paper represented schools taking part in In Harmony in five of the six areas: Leeds, Newcastle, Nottingham, Telford and Stoke and Liverpool.¹ Discussion focused on the following topics:

- The distinctive features of In Harmony
- Evidence and examples of impact
- In Harmony pedagogy
- In Harmony sustainability.

1. What are the distinctive features of In Harmony?

The headteachers said the following features distinguish In Harmony from other programmes and initiatives: its whole school approach; the intensity and quality of provision; the importance of public performance; and opportunities for progression.

¹ Headteachers from schools in Lambeth were unable to attend on the day, however they were invited to take part in a telephone interview or email discussion.

Whole-school approach to In Harmony

The headteachers asserted that In Harmony is at the heart of their schools. Visitors can expect to hear music and singing throughout the building and to see music-orientated visual displays in prominent locations all around the school. Several headteachers suggested that In Harmony effectively 'becomes the school' – bringing together children, school staff and In Harmony staff. Some described a seamless interchange between school and In Harmony activities – see integrated approach in Section 3. Whole-school participation includes: teachers learning alongside their pupils; children learning in a range of groups and ensembles; and all pupils being offered the opportunity to represent the school in public performances (unlike sport for example, where headteachers feel that often only 'the best' are chosen).

Intensity and quality of provision

The headteachers said that In Harmony differs from other programmes because of the regular and intensive nature of the provision on offer. As one headteacher explained:

It is completely immersive in the whole school. Everything is about the In Harmony project. It has changed the nature of the school.

The contribution of professional musicians and orchestras is a key element in the distinctiveness of In Harmony that brings new dimensions to children's learning experiences:

For us the key elements are the calibre of the tutors, the teaching artists, who are just fantastic. For children to hear what it should sound like, in their hall, is incredible.

Centrality of performance opportunities

Headteachers identified the regular musical performances as an essential element of In Harmony's approach to raising the aspirations of pupils and families. Performances were described as 'the glue that binds In Harmony together' through providing a tangible focus and location (in time and space) to bring the whole school and parent community together. These performances are a source of pride amongst the parent and wider communities. (One school had taken the decision to arrange free transport for families to attend every In Harmony performance.) Headteachers also said that live performances in front of 'authentic audiences' heighten the profile of the events and help motivate pupils, as the following quotes illustrate.

The key thing for the success for us is the opportunities to perform because learning an instrument is one thing, but having that opportunity to share that on a large scale is another.

Either in a big hall or in Sainsbury's, giving the children the opportunity to have an audience to listen to something that they have produced is a powerful thing.

There is something incredibly powerful about seeing, being part of, and playing alongside professional musicians.

Opportunities for progression

The structure of In Harmony programmes supports pupils' continued participation in music making outside of school hours (e.g. after school and in some cases at weekends). These

orchestras, bands and clubs provide tangible (in some cases merit-based) routes for children to develop their instrumental playing further. In many cases, these after-school In Harmony orchestras also connect with wider systems of music provision, for example, through music hub activity.

2. What difference has In Harmony made to schools, pupils, parents and the wider community?

Headteachers said that evidencing and developing clearer understandings of the difference that In Harmony makes will take more time and deeper ‘forensic analysis of data’ to unravel the complexities. Attributing causality is particularly challenging because In Harmony does not operate in isolation from other initiatives focused on disadvantaged areas. Nevertheless, headteachers identified a range of perceived impacts on schools, pupils and parents as a result of In Harmony.

2.1 The difference that In Harmony has made to schools

Cultural change in the school

Headteachers said that their schools feel like different places since the introduction of In Harmony and had benefited from a ‘cultural uplift’ that has underpinned both musical and non-musical developments throughout their schools.

Our deputy says that – you might not be able to physically evidence it – but the difference would be in the feel of the school, in the way the children interact with each other and the way the staff and the parents interact. The whole place is different. There is no data in that, you just have to have been in the school before and after.

The culture of our school is transformed since we started... In Harmony has definitely contributed and enhanced some of the great things that happen at school.

It has become a real culture that you learn to play an instrument and you take that instrument home and practice.

Headteachers expressed the view that In Harmony’s ensemble music making approach promotes cooperation and cohesion through staff and pupils working together to achieve ‘a culture that you’re all in it together’.

In addition to these intrinsic benefits, headteachers identified In Harmony as a key factor in making the school distinctive in its local area, enhancing its reputation in the community and attracting new pupils to attend. One headteacher referred to this as the ‘marketability’ impact of In Harmony.

In Harmony gave us a fresh direction and made us stand out from other schools in the area.

2.2 The difference that In Harmony has made to pupils

Attainment

Some headteachers reported improvements in National Curriculum Assessment results that coincided with the introduction of In Harmony. In one school, boys' academic performance has shown 'huge improvements', which the headteacher attributed, in part, to them learning to persevere in the face of challenges (such as learning a musical instrument).

Social skills, participation and engagement

Headteachers said that In Harmony can act as a leveller that 'shifts the hierarchy' and facilitates the inclusion of all pupils, especially those who may not excel in other areas of school life such as academic performance or sporting prowess. In Harmony also promotes social cohesion through interdependence, as everyone has a vital role to play in orchestral/group music making.

Patience, perseverance, concentration discipline

Headteachers suggested that pupils have developed enhanced concentration skills through orchestral music making. They said that children have developed better self control during rehearsals and performances: they realise that there are times when they will not be playing their instruments and that they will have to wait, quietly and respectfully, for their turn to participate. This development of patience and deferred gratification was seen to be a good way of counteracting the children's expectation of immediate gratification reinforced through their experience of using digital media such as smart phones and gaming platforms.

What we have seen is an improvement in their discipline in rehearsals and on stage – it has improved dramatically because they know how to sit. Dare I say it; they know how to be bored, having patience during rehearsals and knowing why that is important.

Communication skills and emotional response

Headteachers said that In Harmony enhances pupils' communication skills through providing them with an opportunity to expand their musical vocabulary. They also said that it enhanced pupils' emotional expression, and suggested that some children were better able to understand and articulate their feelings as a result. One headteacher described how playing an instrument provided a therapeutic release for one child:

[We have] a child who struggled massively with emotional and behavioural problems for several years and would throw things around the room in anger when they get cross... We'd had an incident and I'd been called down to deal with this particular child – when I got down there I found they had gone to the cloakrooms and taken their violin out of the pigeon hole in the fury of the moment and taken [it] into the toilets. They were sobbing but playing their anger out with their instrument but not in any way that was aggressive. That is typical of the things you would see in our school community.

Musical progress

All the headteachers reported significant musical progress and attainment amongst pupils, including success in graded examinations. In one case this was said to represent an 'incredible uplift in musical qualifications across the city':

This year we had 31 children who got a Grade One or Grade Two [in graded music exams] which has gone up from zero. It is incredible the work that they have done.

2.3 The difference that In Harmony has made to parents and the community

Headteachers identified three main ways in which In Harmony had made a positive contribution to their schools' relationships with parents and the wider community: greater parental engagement with school; enhanced aspirations; and providing positive activities.

Engagement with school

Headteachers said that In Harmony is an essential element of their drive to develop positive relationships with parents. In particular, it has helped to combat a 'them and us culture'. Parents are more likely to engage with the school because of In Harmony events and this interaction is beginning to filter into other areas of school life. For example, one school offered sessions for parents to make music alongside their children. Parents then took up an offer of a phonics workshop designed to support children's reading. In this way, the In Harmony approach can act as a gateway experience, as the headteacher explained: 'We are now doing that for other subjects and it has had an impact'.

Enhanced sense of aspiration amongst parents

Headteachers recognised that most parents already have strong aspirations and hopes for their children's futures. In Harmony builds on these by providing tangible opportunities for parents to support their children's musical development.

There is something about the sense of aspiration, and we have very high levels of deprivation, and watching people play an instrument does change them.

Headteachers also noted that In Harmony has helped 'open up new worlds and experiences' for parents themselves through exposure to classical music. Some suggested this has encouraged an enhanced sense of pride in the community through parents attending cultural venues they would not otherwise have had the confidence or inclination to visit.

Availability of positive, productive activities

Headteachers stressed that In Harmony provides meaningful opportunities in their communities which can help divert pupils from potentially destructive or risky behaviours.

It has changed the community massively in our area and there are children who are a lot more productive as a child because they have a focus and it gives them something to do outside and they are proud of it.

3. What are the main features of In Harmony pedagogy and delivery?

Researchers asked headteachers to comment on the way in which In Harmony was delivered in their schools and to identify specific features of effectiveness.

Evolution and tailoring of the In Harmony approach

Headteachers noted that over the years of operation, In Harmony has changed and modified to reflect the changing needs and contexts of schools – in response to curriculum, availability of space, and the needs of the learners. This has happened in two main ways. Firstly, in some cases, In Harmony teaching has moved away from separate instrumental, theory and ensemble teaching sessions, to an integrated music teaching approach.

Consequently, In Harmony has adopted a more integrated curriculum whereby music theory, music history and instrumental tuition is approached through whole class ensemble playing. Several headteachers felt this approach played to In Harmony staff strengths – ‘doing what they are good at’ which is teaching instruments.

They [In Harmony tutors] started off with many types of teaching: class teaching [of] musicianship where the theory of music is taught to the whole class on a rotation basis; individual lessons; full Key Stage 2, full key stage choirs. Gradually all these different things morphed into what we have now.

Secondly, In Harmony has become more integrated into schools’ curricula – see below.

An integrated approach

Headteachers described the integrated approach that has developed in their schools through In Harmony, in a number of ways including: In Harmony staff and school staff working together; school staff and pupils learning from each other; an inclusive approach; and crucially, and possibly distinctively from other music ensemble activity in schools, a cross-curricular approach. These are outlined below.

As already noted, headteachers saw the integration of In Harmony staff into the life of the school as a key element of the success of In Harmony’s teaching approach. In Harmony staff have become embedded in the school, sharing practice with, and learning from school teachers.

Headteachers mentioned that In Harmony had provided valuable opportunities for school staff to learn instruments alongside their pupils. This helped pupils to develop deeper relationships with their teachers and reminded staff of what it is like to be a learner again, as one headteacher explained: ‘To get that feeling and emotion about how they [pupils] feel is priceless’.

Headteachers saw whole class teaching as a highly effective means of delivering In Harmony because it promotes inclusion, participation and social cohesion. Whole class ensemble teaching was said to be ‘having a massive impact on the quality of the music’ through making all pupils responsible for the standard of their playing. One headteacher contrasted In Harmony with peripatetic instrumental tuition:

I think that [the high quality of music making achieved through In Harmony] is because it is not small groups or children having one to one tuition squirreled off in a room.

Headteachers said that coordination and joint planning between In Harmony and school staff helps to ensure that In Harmony is a cross-curricular approach, and that music is embedded and woven into other areas of the school curriculum and is not just a 'bolt-on' activity. In one case, staff cooperated to plan a lesson relating to the First World War: In Harmony staff taught children to play The Last Post which they performed while their classmates planted poppies in the school field.

The role of professional musicians

Headteachers said that In Harmony teachers bring something special to the way they deliver sessions. They adopt an intrinsically musical approach to teaching, for example by singing instructions and using rhythm in their speech patterns when addressing the class. They embody the discipline of the orchestra in their pedagogy.

Professional musicians add value to teaching by demonstrating their musical skills. One headteacher suggested that pupils were 'star struck' every time In Harmony staff came to the school.

The calibre of the people coming in – they lived, breathed, slept... they were charismatic, passionate, and it wasn't a Monday to Friday job; it was what they do. They believed that every moment they are there they were there to make a difference. The teachers that we've got coming in are just so far beyond the peripatetic approach of one-to-one. The whole brain, whole body, whole child approach [makes for] something really creative in the way they are working.

4. How do headteachers see the future development and sustainability of In Harmony?

Headteachers expressed concern about the longer term viability of In Harmony in the absence of further grants to support the work. Some felt that In Harmony needed to be 'all or nothing' because the intensity of provision, levels of immersion and integration of professional musicians are central to its success. They felt that the programme would not achieve comparable results if it were 'diluted'. Despite these concerns, headteachers expressed a strong desire to continue the programmes in each area and had taken some steps towards spreading its influence, through internal capacity building and working in partnership with others.

Internal capacity building

Headteachers mentioned that they were involved in internal capacity building through providing training and development opportunities to facilitate school staff to deliver In Harmony content alongside professional musicians. They hope this will help to sustain the influence of In Harmony in their schools in years to come.

Evolution of delivery models and integration into music education hubs, schools and the community

Headteachers identified alignment with music education hubs and developing relationships with other local schools as the main strategies for spreading the influence of In Harmony. They noted a tendency for pupils to drop out of musical participation after transferring to secondary schools, but several suggested that parents and pupils are becoming increasingly likely to consider the musical opportunities on offer when choosing a secondary school.

We have got parents going up there [the local secondary school] and asking 'what music are you going to offer my child?' and that is a massive shift. We have got two secondary schools which are our main feeders and they are realising that if they want the parents to go..... they will have to provide music.

In one area, In Harmony tutors also teach in the local secondary school. Pupils are allowed to keep their instruments as long as they agree to continue to attend the after-school music provision at the primary school. In another area, a primary school plans to donate a plot of currently unused land to be developed into a venue for In Harmony provision.

In one area, it was possible to make direct comparisons between the In Harmony project and a similar approach arranged with a local music provider. Attempts were made to mirror the In Harmony project in a nearby school sharing the same socio-economic, cultural and demographic contexts. This project tried to echo the curriculum, approach and delivery of In Harmony. However, according to the headteacher responsible for both schools, after two years the results were not comparable:

In essence, we provided the same thing, the same amount of curriculum time, the same overarching rehearsals and curriculum structure – but we weren't seeing the same outcomes – musical and social outcomes. We didn't see the magic.

For further information on the national evaluation, please visit:

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/AC1101>

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/AC1102>

The interim reports from year 1 and year 2 of the study are available at:

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/harmony/>.

A final evaluation report will be available in summer 2016.

Richard White, Pippa Lord and Caroline Sharp, November 2015

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