

# SPOTLIGHT ON INCLUSION

**MEC SEMINAR SERIES  
2024-2025**



Summaries and Synthesis of Themes



Music is vital...

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INTRODUCTION

Between spring 2024 and autumn 2025, the Music Education Council (MEC) hosted six seminars exploring equity, inclusion, and diversity in music education. Each seminar brought together practitioners, researchers, and advocates with lived experience to interrogate barriers in the sector and propose ways forward. The conversations reveal not only systemic challenges but also a remarkable degree of consensus about the role music can play in enabling all children and young people to flourish.

The seminars mainly took the form of chaired panel discussions with panellists with lived experience of barriers and challenges in the music education sector. They shared what they had experienced, how they found ways through or around those barriers and challenges and some inspirational stories about how they've found a way to thrive in their practice. There are many learnings for us to take away as a sector in our efforts towards genuine inclusion for all in music education.



## MEC SEMINAR SERIES

### SYNTHESIS OF THEMES

#### Introduction

Across seven in-depth discussions, the Music Education Council's Inclusion & Equity seminar series has illuminated a defining question for the sector: what does genuine inclusion look like when we move beyond rhetoric and towards structural change? From race and disability to curriculum, assessment, intersectionality, and the rise of artificial intelligence, the series has challenged music educators to re-examine the assumptions underlying ambition, quality, and access in twenty-first-century learning.

Chaired and curated by a range of MEC Trustees and sector leaders, the conversations have built a mosaic of perspectives that collectively point to a new paradigm — one in which quality is not a static measure of excellence, but a dynamic process of ensuring that every learner's voice can be heard, developed, and valued.

#### Reframing Ambition and Quality

The series began with the question, "Ambition for whom?" It was a provocation that resonated throughout every subsequent discussion. Race and Music Education highlighted how definitions of quality often reflect entrenched cultural hierarchies rather than the breadth of musical experience. Natasha Hendry argued that the sector must confront whose ambitions are being prioritised: "We often assume ambition means aspiring upwards to an established model, but true ambition might be about broadening the base — creating space for many different kinds of excellence."

In the Curriculum and Assessment Review discussion, Michelle James, Barry Farrimond-Chuong, and Sharon Jagdev Powell examined how the metrics used to define progress can exclude the very creativity they seek to measure. Sharon Jagdev Powell observed that "assessment becomes a mirror of our own biases if we're not constantly asking who gets to decide what progress looks like."

#### Disability, Design, and Leadership

In Disability Taking the Lead and Instrument + Musician = Music, the lens shifted towards access and agency. Kris Halpin, using his MiMU gloves to perform live, challenged perceptions of what constitutes an instrument — or indeed a musician. His performance underscored a central theme of both Disability seminars: technology, when designed inclusively, can liberate creativity rather than constrain it.

**"...THE FUTURE OF MUSIC EDUCATION WILL DEPEND ON OUR ABILITY TO HOLD TWO TRUTHS AT ONCE: THAT INNOVATION AND INCLUSION MUST EVOLVE TOGETHER, AND THAT AMBITION, IN ITS HIGHEST FORM, IS NOT ABOUT REACHING THE TOP — IT'S ABOUT WIDENING THE CIRCLE...."**

Barry Farrimond-Chuong built on this, emphasising that "assistive technology shouldn't be about fixing the disabled musician; it should be about fixing the disabling environment." The panels collectively urged the sector to move away from a deficit model of disability and towards one where disabled artists are recognised as innovators leading cultural change.

The discussions also questioned the ethics of representation: who tells the story of disability in music education? As Sorchá Pringle noted, authentic representation "means disabled people not just being included, but being the ones who set the agenda."

#### Intersections and Identities

Race, Disability & Intersectionality explored what happens when multiple forms of marginalisation intersect — how, for instance, race, gender, class, and disability shape the opportunities young people have to participate and lead. Speakers including Elle Chante, Miss Jacqui, and Jason Dasent shared experiences of navigating multiple identities in creative spaces that are not always designed for them.

A recurring theme was emotional labour: the effort required to repeatedly justify one's right to belong. Hillary Juma reflected that inclusion often stops at surface-level representation: "We're seen, but not always listened to. True inclusion means being part of the decision-making, not just the poster."

#### Challenging Norms Through Story and Voice

The Book Launch with Nate Holder expanded this narrative through authorship and language. Nate's work foregrounds the importance of who gets to write music history and whose voices become canonical. "We've got to keep asking who benefits when we tell stories in a certain way," he said. "If young people don't see themselves in the curriculum, they learn that music belongs to someone else."

This theme linked directly to Wizdom Layne's reflections in later sessions on cultural ownership in the age of AI: that feeding culture into digital systems without community consent risks replicating historic patterns of extraction and erasure.

**“...EQUITY IN MUSIC EDUCATION DEPENDS ON CONSTANT SELF-EXAMINATION. WHETHER WE ARE DESIGNING INSTRUMENTS, WRITING CURRICULUM OR USING AI, WE MUST ASK WHOSE STORY IS BEING TOLD AND WHOSE REMAINS UNHEARD...”**

### Technology, Bias, and the Future of Inclusion

The AI and Unconscious Bias seminar, brought the conversation squarely into the present — and the future. It examined how artificial intelligence, already influencing composition, analysis, and education, mirrors the same inequities that human systems perpetuate.

Sharon Jagdev Powell framed AI as an “algorithmic mirror”: a technology that reflects our existing biases back to us. Barry Farrimond-Chuong added, “AI doesn’t fix bias; it scales it.” Yet there was also optimism about its potential. Michelle James envisioned AI as “a creative assistant that could adapt to each child’s voice and curiosity,” provided educators remain aware of how these systems are trained.

Helen Hines warned that without critical understanding, teachers could inadvertently reproduce bias through automated tools. The panel agreed that bias cannot be eliminated, but it can be mitigated through transparency, diverse datasets, and ethical literacy.

### Towards a More Inclusive Ecosystem

Taken together, the seven seminars reveal that inclusion in music education is not a single initiative but a systemic culture — one that recognises difference as a resource rather than a challenge. Across every discussion ran a call for co-design, ensuring that those most affected by barriers are integral to shaping the solutions.

The series also highlighted the importance of intersectionality — acknowledging that inequities compound when identities overlap. Addressing bias, therefore, requires an integrated approach across policy, practice, and pedagogy.

Equity, the speakers agreed, cannot be achieved by goodwill alone; it requires redesign. From the accessibility of digital platforms to the framing of assessments, from teacher training to curriculum storytelling, inclusion must be built in, not added on.



## CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Several ideas surfaced repeatedly across the series, revealing deep structural patterns. One was the notion of **“voice”** — who has it, who is heard, and how the sector can move from inclusion as participation to inclusion as authorship. Leadership by lived experience was another: every seminar demonstrated that meaningful change happens when those most affected by exclusion are shaping, not simply receiving, the response.

**Technology**, particularly AI, emerged as both a bridge and a barrier — capable of democratising creativity yet equally capable of embedding bias if left unchecked. The discussions underscored the importance of cultural literacy in navigating these shifts, reminding us that the tools of the future must be guided by human values. Collaboration across disciplines — education, technology, community arts, and research — will be essential in ensuring that progress in one area doesn’t create new exclusions elsewhere.

**Ultimately, the cross-cutting insight was this: equity in music education depends on constant self-examination. Whether we are designing instruments, writing curriculum, or using AI, we must ask whose story is being told and whose remains unheard.**

### Conclusion: Responsibility and Possibility

What emerges from these conversations is a shared vision of music education that is as socially conscious as it is creatively ambitious. The challenge is not whether the sector can change, but whether it can do so intentionally — questioning its inherited definitions of excellence while harnessing new tools responsibly.

Artificial intelligence, like every other system discussed in the series, offers both risk and opportunity. Its integration into education is inevitable, but its impact is not predetermined. Understanding how AI generates content, what data it draws from, and what biases it carries will be essential if educators are to use it ethically.

In the end, the Inclusion & Equity series suggests that the future of music education will depend on our ability to hold two truths at once: that innovation and inclusion must evolve together, and that ambition, in its highest form, is not about reaching the top — it’s about widening the circle.



## DISABILITY: SEMINAR 1

### DISABILITY TAKING THE LEAD

#### CHAIR: KRIS HALPIN

'Disability Taking The Lead' was MEC's first fully disabled led Seminar in partnership with Drake Music Scotland. Our seminar was hosted by an artist best known for his live performances using MiMu Gloves. Kris is also Artistic Director of Sense, and was one of the Mastercard Brit Awards Trailblazers of 2024. Joining Kris on the panel were musicians and artists who work with Drake Music Scotland.

#### PANELLISTS:

**BEN LUNN:** a Composer and Inclusive Ensemble Curator. Multi award winner, Ben is also Associate Composer for Drake Music

Scotland leading on the Disabled Artist Network, and Associate Artistic Director for Hebrides Ensemble.

**CLARE JOHNSTON,** a professional teacher and composer who takes a keen interest in the development of digital technologies and music. Clare is Associate Musician with Drake Music Scotland, and is most recently known for "Call of the Mountains", a collaboration project with Drake Music Scotland and Kazakhstan's Egeru Ensemble;

**SORCHA PRINGLE,** is a disabled activist, community musician, composer and creative facilitator. Sorcha is Associate Musician and Creative Access Advisor for Drake Music Scotland.

## REFRAMING REPRESENTATION, ACCESS AND LEADERSHIP IN MUSIC EDUCATION

The **Disability Taking the Lead seminar** shone a vital spotlight on what authentic disability leadership looks like in music education, asking not just how we include disabled people, but how we ensure they are leading and shaping the sector itself.

Panellists Kris Halpin, Sorcha Pringle and Ben Lunn – all distinguished disabled musicians and advocates – shared deeply personal and political insights into navigating a system still too often designed without them in mind. Kris, known for his work with the Mi.Mu Gloves, opened the discussion by challenging the language of deficit. "Disability isn't a tragedy," he said. "The real barrier is the environment that disables us." His use of technology exemplifies the creative possibilities unlocked when we remove those barriers and reimagine musicianship itself.

Sorcha spoke about the dual challenge of being both a musician and a disabled woman in spaces that prize endurance and conformity. She described her work leading inclusive choirs and workshops as a form of quiet activism: "I'm not here to inspire people by existing – I'm here to make music on my own terms, and to make sure others can too." Her reflections illustrated how leadership emerges through lived experience and community practice, not just through formal positions of power.

**"...DISABILITY ISN'T A TRAGEDY. THE REAL BARRIER IS THE ENVIRONMENT THAT DISABLES US..."**

Composer and conductor Ben Lunn added a structural perspective, arguing that inclusion policies too often focus on participation rather than leadership. "If we want a truly representative sector," he said, "we can't just open the door; we have to hand over the keys." He called for funding models, commissioning processes and education frameworks that embed disabled voices at every stage, from classroom to conservatoire to boardroom.

Throughout the conversation, the panellists returned to the importance of moving beyond tokenism. True equity, they argued, lies not in fitting disabled people into existing systems but in reshaping those systems entirely. The seminar revealed that accessibility is not a single adjustment but an ethos – a creative redesign of how music is taught, shared and valued.

As one participant summed up, the future of music education depends on "seeing disability not as something to accommodate, but as something that leads." This conversation marked a powerful step towards that future: one where leadership in music is as diverse and dynamic as the sounds it creates.



musical instrument + musician  
= MUSIC

## DISABILITY: SEMINAR 2

INSTRUMENT + MUSICIAN = MUSIC

### CHAIR: KRIS HALPIN

The Instrument+Musician=Music seminar explored the evolving relationship between the musician and their instrument, and how technology, design and inclusive thinking are reshaping what musicianship means today.

Chaired by Kris Halpin, the conversation brought together panellists, Claire Johnston, Alessandro Vazzana, Jessica Fisher and Rhona Smith—each offering unique perspectives on how instruments can be reimagined to enable more people to create, perform and express themselves.

### PANELLISTS:

CLARE JOHNSTON: is a disabled composer and music technologist. Clare is a composer, writing primarily works for iPad instruments and music technology, which she has performed at Celtic Connections, the Just Festival, DadaFest and Cryptic Nights. Clare is an Associate Musician with Drake Music Scotland, delivering music education in additional support need schools and elsewhere, supporting disabled musicians in musical projects. One of Clare's pieces "Call of The Mountains" was performed in 2023 during the Edinburgh festivals and won an RPS award in 2024.

ALESSANDRO VAZZANA: is the leading player of The Clarion in the country and is the first to take the instrument into a mainstream community concert

### REDEFINING VIRTUOSITY AND ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH INNOVATION

orchestra. Together with 2 NOYO musicians he has formed a new Trio showcasing inclusive ensemble music. He collaborates with organisations such as ABRSM, Harrison Parrott Foundation and the BSO in advancing inclusive music and knowledge of The Clarion as a new instrument.

JESS FISHER: is a digital music artist who uses Cmpsr as her instrument she also is passionate about disability, inclusivity and making sure every disabled person has a voice. Jess is a pioneer for the Able Orchestra and has been involved from a very young age and that's where her music passion began. Jess also does work for inspire music and has recently been involved with Craig Vear working with him on a project called Jess +

RHONA SMITH: is a digital harp player. She plays using a system of physical switches and music software. Rhona first played digital harp in 1998 at a Drake Music Scotland workshop, and knew she had found her instrument. Her love of the harp became even more apparent when she met Catriona McKay and the harpist Amy Moar and with whom she formed a traditional band called Equilibrium. Since then Rhona has continually developed her instrument through collaborations with other artists and also as a founding member of Digital Orchestra at Drake Music Scotland. Rhona has composed and played music in collaborations with The Edinburgh International Harp Festival, Mr McFall's Chamber, and took part in a Distill Residency in April 2025.

**"...WHEN THE INSTRUMENT AND THE MUSICIAN MEET EACH OTHER AS EQUALS, THAT'S WHEN MUSIC TRULY HAPPENS."...**

**Kris Halpin opened the Seminar** with a striking statement: "When the technology fits the body, the music becomes limitless."

Demonstrating how motion-capture gloves allow him to manipulate sound through movement, he explained that the aim isn't to replace traditional instruments, but to extend the possibilities of performance for disabled and non-disabled musicians alike.

Alessandro Vazzana spoke about the creative potential of adaptive design, noting that too often innovation in instrument-making is framed as a form of "special provision." "We shouldn't design from deficit," he said. "We should design from creativity." His words resonated with the group's shared belief that inclusion and innovation are inseparable.

Rhona Smith emphasised that the educational system has a crucial role to play in normalising a diversity of instruments and playing methods.

"If we only teach one model of what a musician looks like, we teach children to see limits," she said. "But music isn't about sameness—it's about connection."

Jessica Fisher described how working with bespoke and digital instruments has influenced her own creative process: "It changes the relationship between thought, sound and action. It's a feedback

## REDEFINING VIRTUOSITY AND ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH INNOVATION

loop that invites more play, more risk-taking, and more empathy.”

The discussion also tackled the power dynamics within music technology. Claire Johnston cautioned against tech becoming a new gatekeeper, accessible only to those with financial or institutional backing. “Innovation must serve equity,” she said. “Otherwise, we risk building new barriers in place of old ones.”

Throughout the seminar, a unifying message emerged: that the act of making music is a dialogue between the body, the tool and the imagination. Whether through strings, sensors or digital soundscapes, what matters is the agency and artistry of the musician.

As the panel concluded, “When the instrument and the musician meet each other as equals, that’s when music truly happens.”



### Short Key Takeaways:

- **Lead with the social model:** Design environments/instruments/assessments so the system flexes, not the student.
- **Legitimise multiple pathways:** Embrace inclusive frameworks (Arts Award, Sounds of Intent / Count Me In) and alternative evidence of progression.
- **Cut the bureaucracy drag:** Reform DSA/ Access to Work processes so support doesn’t become an exhausting second job.
- **Invest in culture & allies:** Where leadership values music for all (e.g., strong services/schools), inclusion becomes default and talent thrives.
- **Aim higher than access:** Build routes where disabled excellence is expected—and resourced—from school to stage.
- **Instrument + Musician = Music** is not just a slogan but a redefinition of what counts as an instrument and who counts as a musician.
- **Digital and accessible instruments** carry myths of being “easier,” yet they demand deep practice, memory, and artistry.
- **Virtuosity should be reframed:** precision, collaboration, and musicality matter more than speed or dexterity.
- **Collaboration:** between musicians, facilitators, and technology—is central, not secondary, to virtuosity.
- **The future of accessible instruments** lies in both personal identity and wider recognition: they must be validated as instruments in their own right while also empowering many more people to make music.



## COMBINED SUMMARY: DISABILITY

### Redefining leadership, musicianship and access through creativity and design

- **From inclusion to leadership:** Both seminars called for a shift from “including” disabled people to enabling them to lead, design, and define the future of music and music education.
- **Social model of disability:** Speakers such as Kris Halpin challenged deficit-based language, arguing that the disabling factor is the environment, not the individual.
- **Technology as empowerment:** Kris Halpin’s use of Mi.Mu Gloves illustrated how assistive technology can expand musical expression, enabling new modes of performance rather than compensating for limitation.
- **Adaptive design as creativity:** Alessandro Vazzana and others highlighted that inclusive design should be driven by imagination, not charity—seeing adaptation as a source of innovation.
- **Breaking the ‘special needs’ frame:** Both sessions rejected the idea that adaptive or accessible instruments are niche or exceptional. Instead, they should be seen as part of mainstream musicianship and artistic development.
- **Education as culture-shaping:** Panellists like Rhona Smith stressed that schools and teachers play a vital role in normalising diverse instruments, bodies and ways of making music, reframing what musical excellence looks like.
- **Redefining virtuosity:** The conversations questioned traditional ideas of technical perfection, arguing that virtuosity lies in creative connection, not conformity.
- **Systemic change:** Speakers including Ben Lunn urged that accessibility must be embedded across funding, commissioning, training and governance, ensuring disabled leadership throughout the ecosystem.
- **Beyond tokenism:** True equity means redesigning systems, not adding adjustments to existing structures. Representation must come with real authority and agency.
- **Collaboration between design, pedagogy and art:** Both seminars demonstrated the power of cross-disciplinary thinking—artists, educators and technologists working together to create tools and opportunities for all.
- **The shared message:** When instruments, environments and leadership are designed for diversity, music itself becomes more inventive, equitable and human.



## CONFRONTING INEQUITY AND REWRITING THE NARRATIVE



**"...FOR MANY OF US, INEQUALITY IS VERY VISIBLE. THE EXTRA PAIN IS THAT IT IS INVISIBLE TO OTHERS..."**

The **Race & Music Education seminar** opened an honest and urgent dialogue about racial inequity within music education, confronting how deep-rooted structures and unconscious biases continue to shape who gets to make, teach and lead music in the UK.

Speakers Natasha Hendry, Sooree Pillay, and Roger Wilson explored what it means to move beyond diversity statements and towards real systemic change. Natasha Hendry opened with a reminder that the conversation about race is not new—but the appetite for accountability must be. "We've been having these conversations for years," she said, "but talking about race isn't the same as doing something about it."

Sooree Pillay reflected on how racialised experiences can limit access long before a young person reaches higher education or professional pathways. "The gatekeeping begins early," she noted, describing how cultural bias can quietly shape which musical forms are valued, which teachers are visible, and whose voices are legitimised. Her words underlined that equity work begins in the classroom, not just in policy rooms.

Chair Sharon Jagdev Powell steered the discussion towards action: What would it take for the sector to see anti-racism as a shared professional responsibility rather than an optional agenda?

She highlighted the need for teacher training that recognises music's cultural plurality and the psychological safety required for honest reflection. "We need to make it possible for educators to get it wrong, learn, and try again," she said.

The panellists agreed that systemic reform must tackle representation at every level—from curriculum content to leadership appointments and commissioning. Natasha challenged institutions to examine their own cultures: "If your team all looks the same, sounds the same, and thinks the same, you're missing the creativity that diversity brings."

Throughout the seminar, there was a powerful sense of collective will to re-imagine music education as a space that celebrates multiplicity. Rather than focusing solely on inclusion, the conversation turned to liberation—removing the structures that sustain inequality and re-centering the joy, artistry and innovation that emerge when all voices are valued.

As one participant summed up, "This isn't about political correctness; it's about musical truth." The call to action was clear: to embed anti-racism not as a project or policy strand, but as a fundamental measure of quality in music education.

## RACE: SEMINAR 1

### RACE AND MUSIC EDUCATION

#### CHAIR: SHARON JAGDEV POWELL

Why are so many people still talking about the same issues around race and music education that they were 10 years ago? In this Seminar we explored and celebrated good working practice and attempted to debunk the myth that 'we are all on a journey' when talking about race. "If we want to think of it as a journey why is it taking so long for us to reach a destination?"

We asked how can you ensure accountability for improving issues around race and make a real difference in music education? How can we do this together and move the story on?

#### PANELLISTS:

SHARON JAGDEV POWELL - Panel Chair (MEC Trustee)

NATASHA HENDRY - Music and Research Psychologist

SOOREE PILLAY - Orchestras Live - Regional Producer - Midlands (MEC Trustee)

ROGER WILSON - Director of Operations Black Lives in Music



## RACE: SEMINAR 2

### BOOK LAUNCH WITH NATE HOLDER

#### HOST: SHARON JAGDEV POWELL

**'If I Were A Racist'** is a thought-provoking book that explores the issue of racism in music education. Based on the 2020 poem by Nathan Holder, this book explores the complexities of this important topic through the use of personal anecdotes and academic research. This book is an essential read for educators, students, and anyone interested in understanding and addressing issues of racism in our schools.

Sharon Jagdev Powell sat down with Nate to have an online conversation about why he wrote the book.

PROF NATHAN HOLDER is an award winning author, international speaker, musician and education consultant. With over a decade of experience, Nate has been advocating for inclusive and diverse music education globally through speaking engagements, writing, and consultancy.

As an experienced public speaker, Nate has led numerous CPD training, workshops and lectures for schools, universities, and hubs to tackle issues including pedagogy and critical perspectives in music classrooms, departments, and boards. His collaborations

## REWRITING THE STORY OF MUSIC EDUCATION WITH NATE HOLDER

include working with top artists such as Ghetts, KOKOROKO, Emeli Sandé and Arkells, as well as with leading companies and organizations like BBC, Hal Leonard Europe, Oxford University Press and Harper Collins.

Nate's contributions extend beyond his consulting work. He currently serves on the board for F-flat books, Association for Popular Music Education (APME), City of London Sinfonia and the Black Country Music Hub. In addition to this, his band Between Worlds have been featured on BBC Radio and he has performed at events across the world.

As an author, Nate has written twelve books, including 'I Wish I Didn't Quit: Music Lessons' (2018), 'Where Are All The Black Female Composers' (2020), and the award-winning 'Listen and Celebrate' (2022). His work aims to inspire and empower learners and educators to embrace inclusive and diverse music education.

<https://www.nateholdermusic.com>



## "...THE WAY WE TEACH MUSIC TELLS YOUNG PEOPLE WHAT'S WORTH KNOWING..."

**The Book Launch with Nate Holder** was more than a celebration of new writing; it was an invitation to rethink who music education is for, whose stories it tells, and how those stories shape what—and who—we value.

In conversation with Sharon Jagdev Powell, author, musician and educator Nate Holder discussed the ideas behind his latest publication, exploring how books can act as tools for inclusion, representation and systemic change. Nate's work has become known for challenging dominant narratives in music education, particularly around race, colonialism and power.

"The way we teach music tells young people what's worth knowing," Nate said. "If they never see themselves or their cultures reflected, we're not just excluding them from lessons—we're excluding them from the story of music itself." His words resonated strongly with attendees who recognised the gap between good intentions and practical change.

Sharon reflected on the impact of representation in her own classroom, noting that authentic resources can help children "feel seen and validated." She added, "It's not about tokenism—it's about truth. When we broaden our curriculum, we're not diluting it; we're enriching it."

## “IT JUST GAVE ME SPACE TO THINK, TO REFLECT... IT’S NOT A ONE-STOP SHOP, BUT A VALUABLE PERSPECTIVE”

Nate also addressed the publishing process itself, pointing out how gatekeeping in the education and publishing industries affects whose voices reach schools. “We need to support diverse authors and illustrators,” he said, “not just to write about inclusion, but to define what good writing and good teaching look like.”

The conversation broadened into a reflection on what it means to decolonise music education—not as an abstract theory, but as a daily practice of listening, questioning and co-creating knowledge. Nate reminded the audience that change happens incrementally but intentionally: “You can’t flip a switch and have an inclusive curriculum. But you can start today, with one song, one story, one conversation.”

Sharon agreed, emphasising that real progress relies on teachers feeling empowered to begin, even when the path is uncertain. “It’s about courage and curiosity,” she said. “We don’t need to know everything before we start—we just need to be willing to learn.”

As the session closed, Nate captured the essence of the event: “Representation and equity aren’t side projects—they’re the curriculum itself.” The launch ended with a collective commitment to rewriting music education so every child can recognise themselves in its pages.

## Short Key Takeaways:

### Instruments, Exams & Belonging

The prioritisation of European instruments (piano, violin) over others (steel pans, didgeridoo) marginalises students. Nate linked this to structural barriers such as qualifications and UCAS points.

### “Great Composers” & Representation

Nate questioned the label of greatness - he called for broadening definitions of composers and recognising diverse contributions beyond the European canon.

### Context & “African Songs”

Naming specific countries or cultures affirms identity and belonging: “Those little moments of recognition can make all the difference to a child.”

### Tuning & Standardisation

Western tuning systems dominate, yet they are not universal. Nate urged embracing other systems and avoiding fixation on perfection.

### Notation

Western notation should be one of many systems, not the sole gatekeeper: “Insisting children learn Western notation alone is an embodiment of white supremacy.”

### Representation Beyond Tokenism

Nate cautioned against shallow fixes: “Adding black and brown faces is one thing, but the pedagogy might be exactly the same. Then we haven’t changed anything.”

### Future of Anti-Racist Music Education

Nate envisioned teachers as facilitators, not knowledge-hoarders: “Teachers become vessels for information to pass through, pointing to others who can teach in their own way.”



## IF I WERE A RACIST - NATE HOLDER

The book emerges from Nate’s widely shared poem *If I Were a Racist*, written in 2020. The launch combined a live reading, discussion of the book’s themes, and reflections on music education practice.

### The Poem & Its Impact

Nate read the poem aloud, with its provocative refrain “If I were a racist...” highlighting systemic inequities in music education: privileging Western classical traditions, erasing historical contexts, tokenistic diversity, and exclusionary teaching practices.

### Examples included:

- “If I were a racist, I’d teach that the great composers were Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and Bach. Not Miles Davis, Florence Price, Coltrane...”
- “If I were a racist, I’d standardise everything. Either you’re in tune or you’re out.”
- “If I were a racist, I’d make you think that including one brown face is enough. Diversity. Inclusion.”

Nate explained the poem arose from condensing years of thought into a creative form during lockdown: “It was a moment of realising that putting something like this out into the world has been of more benefit to folks than harmful to myself.”

Teachers and lecturers have since used the poem widely in schools and universities, and it has been cited in dissertations.

### The Book: Format & Purpose

The book expands each line of the poem into short reflective chapters. Nate emphasised it is deliberately accessible rather than academic, designed as a stepping stone:

“It’s not exhaustive... I hope it becomes one of these texts that are used as a starting point. You don’t have to consume the whole thing at once.”

Each chapter includes reflection pages, prompting readers to pause, think, and return to ideas:

“It just gave me space to think, to reflect... It’s not a one-stop shop, but a valuable perspective.” (comment from audience)

## COMBINED SUMMARY: RACE

### Take measurable action for change. Embed EDI structurally and be accountable.

**Mandatory frameworks:** Racial literacy and anti-racism should be “part of good practice” and potentially mandatory.

**National action plan:** “We need a national action plan for EDI in music education... with milestones, accountability, and mandatory training.”

**Embed EDI into project design:** Always ask, “Who is this for? Who is around the table? What are we hoping to achieve?”

**Amplify global majority voices:** More platforms, stories, and lived experiences must be central.

**Move from conversation to measurable change:** Tracking outcomes, listening to children, and aligning policy support.

**EDI is not optional:** It must be embedded structurally, not treated as an add-on.

**Belonging is central:** Representation without true belonging is insufficient.

**Lived experience matters:** Authentic voices expose invisible barriers and microaggressions.

**Music education is lagging:** Race and ethnicity are absent from national guidance, despite EDI growth in other sectors.

**Accountability is missing:** Without milestones, evaluation, and leadership, progress stalls.

**Consequences of neglect:** Marginalisation, psychological harm, and cultural loss.

**Action required:** Mandatory training, national frameworks, measurable goals, and elevating children’s voices.

## COMBINED SUMMARY: RACE

### Recognition and progression pathways:

More recognition and grading systems for diverse musical traditions.

**Becoming Allies:** Broader authorship of anti-racism work beyond Black and brown voices.

**Scholarship & research:** Greater global perspectives in scholarship, not just American sources.

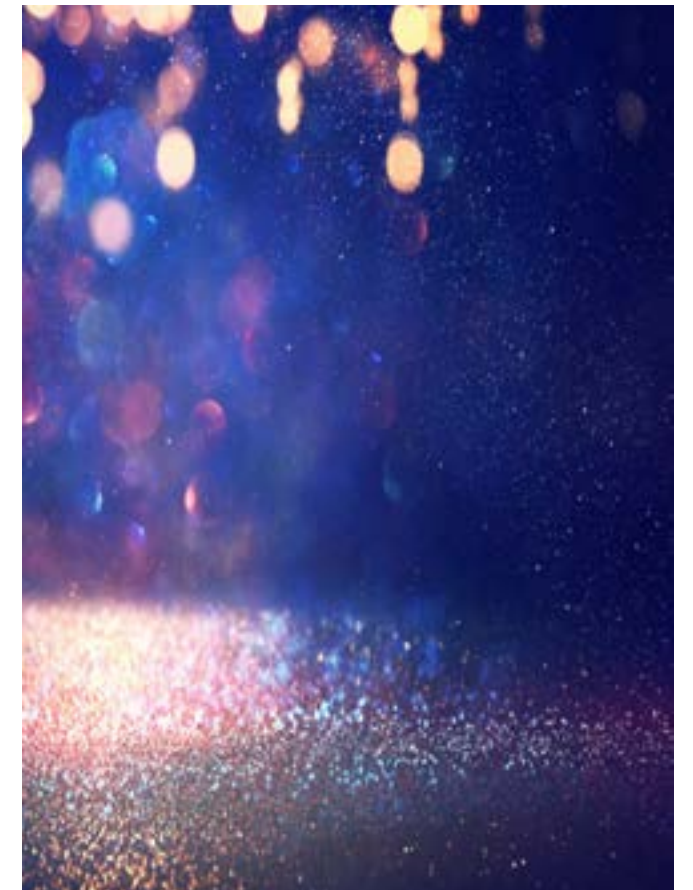
Reduced economic barriers to accessing and disseminating research.

**Belonging Matters:** Recognising instruments, genres, and cultural contexts fosters genuine inclusion and opportunities for progression.

**Beyond Tokenism:** True representation requires deeper pedagogical change and material impact, not just adding diverse faces.

**Systemic Links:** Racism in music education connects with capitalism, colonial legacies, and broader social inequalities.

**Future Vision:** Teachers as facilitators, learners connected to global expertise, multiple notations and tuning systems valued, and young people’s diverse music



## UNDERSTANDING LAYERED IDENTITIES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

**"EQUITY ISN'T ABOUT LOWERING THE BAR. IT'S ABOUT REALISING THE BAR WAS NEVER IN THE SAME PLACE FOR EVERYONE."**

### PANELLISTS:

**ELLE CHANTE:** a musical self-expressionist from the West Midlands, UK, weaves her experiences with mental health and disability into her music. She began producing in 2020 to bring authenticity to her tracks and released her debut EP, "Into The Night," in September 2022. Besides her music, Elle advocates for disabled artists as a co-ambassador for Attitude is Everything and the Featured Artists Coalition.

**HILLARY JUMA:** (Chair for the panel): Hillary is passionate about improving access for Deaf, Disabled, and Neurodivergent artists in live music. As Artist Development Manager at Attitude is Everything, she leads the Next Stage Network and collaborates with industry partners to remove barriers. Her work has been recognized by Women in Voice Tech, Arts Council England Develop Your Creative Practice, and Youth Music Next Gen Fund. Hillary is also a nu-Jazz musician.

**JASON DASENT:** has over 25 years of experience in recording and music production. He founded Studio Jay Recording in Trinidad in 2000, serving the advertising sector and top Caribbean artists. Jason has worked on music scores, dialogue replacement, and post-production for films and documentaries. As a visually impaired producer, he overcame early accessibility challenges in mainstream music software.

**MISS JACQUI:** is a multi-talented artist known for her powerful poetry and soulful music. As a Spoken Word Artist and Songwriter, she blends words and melodies to inspire and provoke thought. A wheelchair user, she has overcome many challenges and advocates for people with disabilities. Through her art, she challenges societal perceptions and breaks down barriers, encouraging others to embrace their differences confidently. Additionally, she facilitates workshops on diversity, inclusion, and disability rights, creating safe spaces for discussion. Miss Jacqui is a true artist, activist, and advocate, using her talents to inspire and make a difference.



## INTERSECTIONALITY SEMINAR

### RACE, DISABILITY & INTERSECTIONALITY

#### CHAIR: HILLARY JUMA

This Seminar, hosted in partnership with Attitude is Everything, was dedicated to the exploration of intersectionality within music and music education, with a particular emphasis on race and disability. This seminar provided a platform for voices from the global majority with lived experiences of disability to lead the conversation on how these intersecting identities have influenced their own musical journeys and the music education landscape as a whole.

Disabled people from the Global Majority face unique challenges in music education. Yet, it's

essential to explore not only these barriers but also the rich potential and distinct identities that fuel their musical expressions. The panel discussion addressed how these intersecting experiences shape our journey in music. In the words of those who navigate these challenges, panellists shared not only their struggles but also their successes and the profound impact of their cultural and personal identities on their musical creativity.



## UNDERSTANDING LAYERED IDENTITIES IN MUSIC EDUCATION

**The Race, Disability & Intersectionality seminar** brought together voices whose lived experiences challenge the sector to think beyond single-issue inclusion. By exploring how race, disability, gender and other identities intersect, the discussion revealed both the complexity and the urgency of building a genuinely equitable music education system.

Panellists Hillary Juma, Elle Chante, Jason Dasent and Miss Jacqui—each an artist and advocate in their own right—spoke candidly about the realities of navigating a profession that often compartmentalises identity. Juma set the tone early: “You can’t separate my Blackness from my disability. Both shape how people perceive me before I’ve even sung a note.”

Chante reflected on the pressure to present a simplified or “palatable” version of oneself in professional spaces, noting how this expectation erases the richness of intersectional experience. “When I perform, I bring all of me,” they said. “If we want authenticity in music, then the industry has to be ready for that authenticity in people too.”

Dasent, a producer and accessibility consultant who has worked with major UK organisations, highlighted how systemic

**“YOU CAN’T SEPARATE MY BLACKNESS FROM MY DISABILITY. BOTH SHAPE HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVE ME BEFORE I’VE EVEN SUNG A NOTE.”**

design failures perpetuate exclusion. “Accessibility isn’t just ramps and captions,” he explained. “It’s about recognising that people experience barriers differently depending on race, class, and disability. If you design for one, you risk excluding another.”

Miss Jacqui, a poet and musician, spoke of the emotional labour involved in constantly educating others about intersectionality. “I’m tired of being the only one in the room raising these points,” she said. “Representation matters—but it’s not enough. We need structural change and shared responsibility.”

Throughout the conversation, the panellists discussed how music education often perpetuates narrow definitions of excellence, rooted in Eurocentric and able-bodied traditions. They argued for an expanded understanding of musical achievement—one that honours different ways of making, hearing and experiencing sound.

Hillary Juma summed up the collective sentiment: “Equity isn’t about lowering the bar. It’s about realising the bar was never in the same place for everyone.” The session concluded with a call for intersectionality to move from the margins of EDI policy to the heart of curriculum design, leadership training and funding priorities.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS:

The takeaway was: to create a truly inclusive music ecosystem, we must see identity as a composition of overlapping rhythms—not separate tracks. When the sector learns to listen to that full harmony, music education will finally reflect the diverse world it serves.

**Intersectionality is structural:** single-issue fixes miss overlapping harms; policy, funding, and pedagogy must reflect compounded realities.

**Access is labour and cost:** without baseline venue/promoter responsibility and funded access lines, disabled (especially Black and mixed-heritage) artists are priced and pushed out.

**Partnership moves industry:** collaboration with tech/industry teams is unlocking mainstream accessible tools—an approach worth emulating.

**Education shapes confidence:** inclusive practice—and resisting identity pigeonholes—creates agency; exclusionary habits shut talent down early.



**“WHEN WE TALK ABOUT UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE CONTEXT OF AI, WE’RE REALLY TALKING ABOUT WHO TRAINS THE SYSTEMS, WHOSE DATA THEY’RE BUILT ON, AND WHOSE PERSPECTIVES ARE MISSING.”**

As artificial intelligence moves rapidly into classrooms, rehearsal rooms, and creative industries, questions around bias and representation are becoming impossible to ignore. This discussion in the Music Education Council’s Inclusion and Equity seminar series explored how AI might both challenge and reinforce inequalities in music education — and what the sector can do to ensure that new technologies amplify inclusion rather than entrench discrimination.

Chaired by Sharon Jagdev Powell, the session brought together Barry Farrimond-Chuong, Michelle James, Wizdom Layne, Nate Holder, and Helen Hines for a far-reaching conversation on ethics, creativity, and the human role in a digital future.

Discussions around AI in music often focus on IP and copyright, but the issue of bias is potentially even more far-reaching. As Sharon Jagdev Powell reminded the audience, “When we talk about *unconscious bias* in the context of AI, we’re really talking about who trains the systems, whose data they’re built on, and whose perspectives are missing.”

Every dataset carries traces of human preference — from the accents represented in voice recognition software to the musical genres prioritised by recommendation algorithms. If left unexamined, those biases become baked into the systems that schools and cultural organisations increasingly rely upon.

Barry Farrimond-Chuong argued that inclusion cannot be an afterthought. “If we don’t have disabled and neurodivergent creators inside the system from the start, we’ll build tools that unintentionally exclude them,” he said. “AI doesn’t fix bias; it scales it.”

From the perspective of a music-education leader, Michelle James described AI as both a liberating and a limiting force. “AI could give every child a creative assistant — a tool that adapts to their voice and their curiosity,” she said. “But it could also narrow what counts as a ‘good’ voice if it learns from limited data.”

Her message was clear: educators must act as ethical interpreters of technology, not passive adopters. “If our tools don’t make children feel more seen and heard,” she added, “they’re not serving the purpose.”

Helen Hines echoed this warning, pointing out that many AI systems are trained primarily on Western, English-speaking, male-dominated datasets. “The danger is that AI reproduces a single cultural narrative,” she said. “In music education, that has real consequences for how young people perceive belonging.”

Nate Holder turned the conversation towards assessment, asking how bias already shapes what counts as “good” music. “If the dataset thinks Chopin and Coldplay are the gold standard,” he



## AI & UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

### WHEN DATA MEETS DIVERSITY

#### CHAIR: SHARON JAGDEV POWELL

AI learns from existing datasets and then replicates knowledge from those in its responses. This means it is drawing on data likely to have bias already built into it. How can we teach AI to be inclusive so that it doesn’t further entrench bias and inequity of opportunity in music education? How can we prevent our own unconscious bias from becoming welded into the datasets AI is using?

#### PANELLISTS:

**Barry Farrimond-Chuong:** Co-Chair of MEC and CEO of Open Up Music

**Helen Hines:** PhD student, University of Edinburgh, researching the future of instrumental learning in a digital society.

**Nate Holder:** Musician, Music Education Consultant and author

**Sharon Jagdev Powell:** MEC Trustee, Education leader, Director - Brent Music Academy

**Michelle James:** Co-Chair of MEC and CEO of Sing Up

**Wizdom Layne:** Musician, MEC Trustee, Co-Director of Sound Connections, MOBO Artist Development Programme

## “THE GOAL ISN’T TO AUTOMATE CREATIVITY BUT TO AMPLIFY EMPATHY. IF OUR TOOLS DON’T MAKE CHILDREN FEEL MORE SEEN AND HEARD, THEY’RE NOT SERVING THE PURPOSE.”

said, “the algorithm will reward conformity. What happens to a student drawing on drill, Afrobeat, or grime influences?”

Wizdom Layne brought an artist’s perspective: “AI is trained on what’s popular, not necessarily what’s powerful. We need systems that recognise authenticity, not just analytics.” He called for culturally responsive datasets and for transparency about how musical material is sourced and labelled — especially when technology draws on the creative labour of under-represented communities.

The discussion repeatedly returned to ethics and empathy as the twin pillars of responsible innovation. Barry Farrimond-Chuong proposed that AI tools should undergo “diversity testing” in the same way that websites undergo accessibility testing: “We run screen readers to check accessibility; we should run cultural readers to check representation.”

Helen Hines suggested that educators need dedicated training not only in how AI functions, but in how it can unintentionally reproduce social inequality. Without that critical understanding, she warned, teachers could perpetuate bias through automated lesson planning or content generation tools.

Michelle James agreed, linking the debate to Dove Beauty’s campaign to reduce the risk of AI-generated images of women perpetuating

stereotypes and damaging the mental wellbeing of women and girls. She argued that educators must remain the ethical interpreters of technology, not passive adopters, and that music educators have a unique responsibility to model diversity in creative outputs as well as in teaching methods.

The panel also explored how algorithmic bias intersects with issues of race, disability, gender, and class. Wizdom Layne highlighted cultural ownership: “If we’re going to feed culture into the machine, we’ve got to own the rights to our culture. Otherwise, the system profits from our stories without giving back.”

For Nate Holder, the antidote lies in critical literacy — equipping young people to question how algorithms shape what they see, hear, and value. “Understanding bias isn’t about blaming the tech,” he said. “It’s about empowering young people to decode it.”

The seminar closed with a collective acknowledgement that artificial intelligence is here to stay — and that, used wisely, it can be a powerful ally in education. Yet, as the speakers made clear, the sector must approach it with both curiosity and criticality: understanding how AI generates content, questioning the data that feeds it, and recognising that bias is built in. Only by taking active steps to counteract that bias can educators ensure that technology serves inclusion rather than undermines it — helping all young people to see themselves, and their creativity, reflected in the tools of the future.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS:

#### 1. Build Ethical and Inclusive AI Literacy

- Provide training for educators on how AI systems generate content and what data sources they rely on.
- Develop teacher CPD modules that explore algorithmic bias, representation, and ethical technology use in creative learning.
- Embed critical AI literacy into student curricula — helping young people question how algorithms shape what they see, hear, and create.
- Encourage schools and hubs to create “AI ethics champions” who can model responsible use and share best practice.

#### 2. Diversify Data and Design

- Partner with AI developers, music organisations, and communities to diversify training datasets used in music-related AI tools (e.g., expanding cultural and linguistic representation).
- Advocate for open, transparent datasets that credit creators and include global, intersectional perspectives.
- Support participatory projects that involve disabled, neurodivergent, and under-represented artists in shaping AI music tools from the outset.
- Apply “diversity testing” to AI systems, in the same way accessibility testing is applied to digital platforms.

#### 3. Strengthen Representation and Ownership

- Ensure creators from marginalised communities are paid contributors to any dataset or training library that draws on their work.
- Promote co-authorship and rights awareness so that communities feeding cultural material into AI systems retain recognition and agency.
- Support inclusive commissioning and research partnerships that centre lived experience in the development of new technologies.

#### 4. Align AI Use with Inclusion and Wellbeing

- Evaluate new tools against an equity and empathy checklist: does this technology make learners feel seen, represented, and empowered?
- Avoid automating tasks that depend on human relational judgement — for example, pastoral feedback or creative evaluation.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS:**

- Use AI to extend creative access (e.g., adaptive composition tools for disabled pupils) rather than to replace human musicianship.
- Prioritise projects that demonstrate how AI can amplify empathy and cultural understanding, not just efficiency or novelty.

**5. Embed Policy and Accountability**

- Include AI ethics and inclusion criteria in funding, commissioning, and procurement processes.
- Require music-tech suppliers to publish statements on diversity and bias mitigation in their products.
- Create a sector-wide code of practice for AI in music education, building on existing accessibility and safeguarding frameworks.
- Establish cross-sector partnerships (education, academia, community arts, and tech) to review AI's impact on inclusion annually.

## CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT REVIEW

**CHAIR: MICHELLE JAMES**

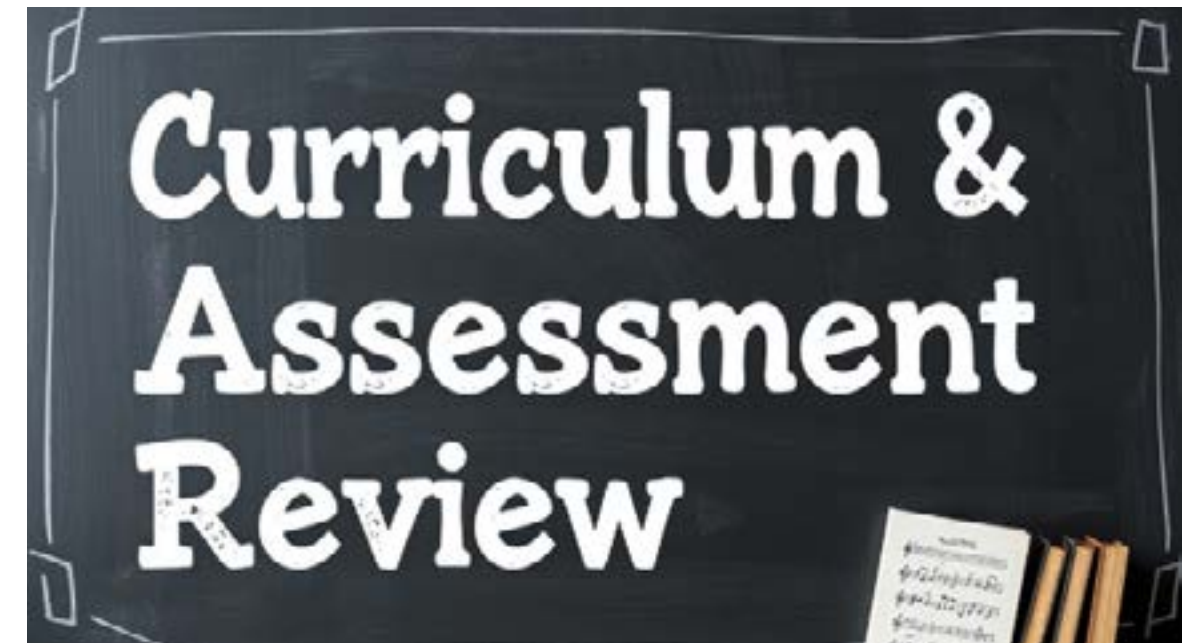
This seminar, chaired by Michelle James, convened to discuss MEC's collective response to the Department for Education (DfE) consultation on curriculum, assessment, and qualifications (ages 5–19). The focus was on barriers to progress for disadvantaged and marginalised learners, particularly in music education. Participants shared professional and lived experiences, examined systemic inequities, and proposed recommendations for policy and practice.

The seminar was conducted under Chatham House Rules so comments are not attributed

to individuals who were present. A summary of the key recommendations was provided to the Department for Education.

**SESSION SUMMARY****1. Scope of the DfE Review**

Michelle James reminded participants that the DfE is seeking “evolution not revolution,” retaining GCSEs and A levels while addressing inequities. She referenced from the DfE consultation document ‘blocks to progress and good outcomes for children and young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with SEND, and otherwise ‘vulnerable’ learners.’ Participants questioned the vague “vulnerable” category, noting that race and other characteristics often get



### “RIGID STRUCTURES DISABLE PEOPLE... AN INFLEXIBLE CURRICULUM IS A DISABLING CURRICULUM.”

sidelined despite clear evidence of systemic disadvantage.

**2. Who is Being Left Behind?**

- **Race and structural omission:** ‘Race always gets left out... research shows racialised children are underperforming in school, they’re the largest group impacted by mental health and poverty. Yet they’re not named as needing attention.’
- **Universal disadvantage in music:** Lack of daily musical activity means ‘everybody’s being disadvantaged to some degree.’
- **Teacher training crisis:** ‘Our children are being failed because schools don’t always have a teaching force to provide basic music education.’
- **Assessment barriers:** Current GCSE/A-level design disproportionately disadvantages dyslexic learners, those with processing difficulties, and others for whom essay-based assessment is a barrier.

**3. Relevance of the Curriculum**

- **Primary experience:** Music can underpin all learning (Leonard Bernstein’s Artful Learning was cited). Yet opportunities to embed music across subjects are inconsistent.
- **Secondary experience:** Over-academisation and ‘culture of compliance’ limit creativity and differentiation. Pupils in private schools benefit from production facilities, while those in state schools often lack relatable or industry-relevant experiences. ‘We’re still teaching as if young people are preparing for orchestral seats—an unrealistic pathway for most.’
- **Pipeline breakdown:** Strong music provision in some primaries collapses on transition to secondaries, undermining progression.
- **Industry relevance:** Lack of alignment with the current music industry (e.g., DJing, music tech, lyric writing) means students feel alienated.

## “WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A MUSIC CURRICULUM IF IT DOESN’T HARNESS CHILDREN’S PASSION FOR MUSIC AND MAKE IT RELEVANT.”

### 4. Social Justice, Representation, and Inclusion

- **Curriculum irrelevance for Black and Brown children:** ‘They don’t see performers who look like them... it’s difficult to bring young people in when the curriculum isn’t relevant.’
- **Importance of decolonisation:** how history is framed matters (e.g., teaching blues while erasing the reality of enslavement).
- **Intersectionality:** ‘If you’re a disabled, global majority, non-binary young musician, your barriers are compounded.’
- **Teacher authenticity:** Teachers struggle to teach musics outside their own cultural expertise; CPD and partnerships with community musicians are essential.
- **Policy representation:** Calls for greater diversity among policymakers, exam writers, and curriculum framers.

### 5. Disability and Flexibility

- **Rigid systems disable:** ‘An inflexible curriculum is a disabling curriculum.’
- **Assumptions in schools:** Disabled children are sometimes excluded from music due to teacher misconceptions (e.g., hearing-impaired children moved out of lessons).
- **Lack of adapted instruments and training:** Expertise exists in organisations like Drake Music and Open Up Music, but knowledge is not embedded systemically.

- **Visibility and power:** ‘Bigger organisations need to give up power and spotlight disabled people.’
- **Social model of disability:** Barriers arise from structures, not impairments; adjustments should be tailored to individuals.
- **Need for consistent national guidance** so provision is not left to chance or individual goodwill.

### 6. Practical Recommendations and Solutions

- **Teacher training and CPD:** Investment in primary-level training and ongoing support; addressing regional inconsistencies in provision.
- **Assessment reform:** Consider alternative forms (e.g., project-based, industry-relevant assessments such as funding applications).
- **Curriculum breadth:** Ensure students see themselves reflected; move beyond Eurocentric and exam-driven models.
- **Extracurricular and hubs:** Strengthen connections between schools, hubs, and community/industry partners to expand relevance and opportunities.
- **Policy levers:** Rethink EBacc and Progress 8 accountability measures that marginalise arts; rebalance exams and coursework; free up time in overcrowded curricula.
- **Low-cost structural changes:** Increase flexibility, reduce unnecessary content load, allow teacher time for reflection and development.

## THANKS

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Barry Farrimond-Chuong & Michelle James (Co Chairs)  
Caro Cooke, Sharon Jagdev Powell, Wizdom Layne, Emma Lines,  
Charlotte Miller, Sooree Pillay, Craig West.

And to all our panellists, expert contributors and members.





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- **TO BRING TOGETHER AND REPRESENT ALL THOSE CONCERNED WITH MUSIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING**
- **TO REVIEW AND SHAPE POLICIES AT ALL LEVELS AND TO COLLATE INFORMATION AND PROMOTE ACTION**

**THE CHARITY HAS CONTINUED TO CARRY OUT THESE ROLES EVER SINCE, ALBEIT IN VARIOUS GUISES AND FORMATS.**

**OUR VISION IS A FUTURE WHERE MUSIC EDUCATION ENABLES EVERYONE TO CONNECT, GROW AND THRIVE...**

**OUR MISSION IS TO NURTURE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE EDUCATORS CAN SUPPORT EVERYONE TO CONNECT, GROW AND THRIVE THROUGH MUSIC.**

