

Building teacher capacity to bring diverse music into UK classrooms

Prepared by: Amna Smith, University of Southampton

Partner Organisations: EQUALIZE is delivered by Young Sounds UK; The Black Music Research Unit (BMRU) at the University of Westminster (academic lead Dr Mykaell Riley), Punch Records (Birmingham), Bradford Allstar Entertainments, and Bradford Music & Arts Service.

Problem Statement

Music education in the UK does not foster an inclusive or participatory approach to diverse forms of music. This policy brief presents realistic options for the EQUALIZE project to facilitate and support music education in the UK and mitigate potential barriers to learning and accessing provision.

Context

Current music education in mainstream schools displays a nexus of representation and diversity¹. There are vast socioeconomic disparities amongst provision, with only 15% of state school students accessing musical tuition². Music has the highest GCSE attainment gap for access, inclusion and SEND³. Black and Asian communities are severely underrepresented in the Arts, which is exacerbated by lack of pipelines to employment in the sector.⁴ Whilst uptake of musical tuition from young Black and Asian people is significant, Black British musicians are severely underrepresented in the employment sector⁵. The evidence therefore points to a stifled and inaccessible music curriculum, which prevents pipelines to careers in music⁶.

Challenge

Music education does not currently reflect an inclusive range of genres, particularly, at GCSE level. The main constraint is teachers' capacity and confidence, while engagement is driven by pedagogy; specifically, genre choice, learner autonomy, and a facilitative teaching style

¹ Arts Council England. (2021). *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. A Data Report*. Arts Council England Report. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-data-report-2020-2021>

² Department for Education. (2025). *Curriculum and Assessment Review*. HM Government report. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf

³ UK Music. (2026). *Black Music Means Business 2026*. UK Music Report. <https://www.ukmusic.org/research-reports/black-music-means-business/>

⁴ Arts Council England. (2021). *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. A Data Report*. Arts Council England Report. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-data-report-2020-2021>

⁵ Arts Council England. (2021). *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. A Data Report*. Arts Council England Report. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-data-report-2020-2021>

⁶ UK Music. (2026). *Black Music Means Business 2026*. UK Music Report. <https://www.ukmusic.org/research-reports/black-music-means-business/>

⁷. EQUALIZE is well positioned to mitigate this, as the project works with young people in Birmingham and Bradford, to engage them in making forms of electronic music.

The EQUALIZE project aims to address the core issue of access to inclusive electronic and Black-British music education for young people⁸. Research indicates the popularity of electronic and Black-British music amongst young people, attendees of live events and supporters of grassroots venues⁹. EQUALIZE brought electronic music workshops to young people in the Bradford and Birmingham areas, collaborating with school partners, music hubs and expert researchers in music education¹⁰. This facilitated learning opportunities and made young people feel seen and heard¹¹.

Current guidelines state-maintained schools must include music up to age 14, with a requirement of 1-hour minimum provision per week¹². This is often unattainable for all schools, due to funding, music teacher recruitment, timetabling or other factors. Music hubs provide additional opportunities for music education outside of mainstream schooling and are currently engaged with 15,000 schools nationwide¹³. The core aim of the music hub is to ensure every child has access to learning a musical instrument. Unfortunately, there was a decline in uptake of GCSE music between summer 2024-2025¹⁴. There is a call for music as a core subject to continue to be funded and facilitated in schools¹⁵. With the planned National Centre for Music and Arts Education¹⁶, opportunities for music tuition, as well as teacher training are to become a priority¹⁷.

Key Findings

EQUALIZE's evaluation highlights a single core finding: the main barrier to bringing electronic and Black British music into secondary classrooms is not student interest, but teacher capacity, skills, confidence, time, and funding¹⁸. While teachers recognised these genres' potential to boost engagement and self-expression, many felt unprepared to teach them, reflecting a wider system where music remains unevenly provisioned and often

⁷ Williams J. (2024). Digital DJing in the GCSE Classroom: Art or instrument? *Organised Sound*, 29(2), 151-161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771824000086>

⁸ Young Sounds UK. (2025). Young Sounds UK and Black Music Research Unit to 'EQUALIZE' music education with new partnership. Young Sounds UK. <https://www.youngsounds.org.uk/equalize-launch/>

⁹ CGA & NIQ. (2025). *A fan-led review: A preliminary music fan-led review of the live music industry, aimed at giving music fans a voice within the sector*. Music Fan Voice Review. <https://musicfansvoice.uk/results-2025>

¹⁰ Robinson, J. (2026a). *EQUALIZE Interim Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

¹¹ Robinson, J. (2026a). *EQUALIZE Interim Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

¹² UK House of Lords. (2025). *Music Education in State Schools*. UK Parliament Report, 2025 <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/music-education-in-state-schools/>

¹³ James, D., Nicholson, P. & Atkins, D. (2023). *Music Education in Suffolk Mapping provision and moving towards music for all*. University of Suffolk Report. <https://www.musicmark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Music-Education-in-Suffolk-July-2023-FINAL.pdf?x75833>

¹⁴ Department for Education. (2025). *Curriculum and Assessment Review*. HM Government

report. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf

¹⁵ Department for Education. (2025). *Curriculum and Assessment Review*. HM Government

report. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf

¹⁶ Independent Society of Musicians. (2026). *Government Announces National Centre Funding and Releases Music Hub Evaluation*. <https://www.ism.org/news/new-national-arts-education-centre-funding-announced>.

¹⁷ UK House of Lords. (2025). *Music Education in State Schools*. UK Parliament Report, 2025 <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/music-education-in-state-schools/>

¹⁸ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

deprioritised¹⁹. The project also showed that pedagogy matters more than technology: learner choice and agency strongly drove engagement, confidence, and creativity²⁰. Genre-authentic, reverse-engineered Ableton templates proved especially effective, offering accessible entry points for beginners and progression for more experienced students²¹. Crucially, most participating teachers believed the approach could translate into classrooms with appropriate adaptation²². Overall, the findings suggest that targeted, genre-authentic, Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) based teacher training is the most effective way to widen access²³.

Recommendations

- A nationwide electronic music training model for music teachers and facilitators.
- EQUALIZE as a model for inclusive and culturally responsive teaching.
- Enhanced representation of electronic and Black-British music in schools and educational settings.

Feasibility

EQUALIZE ran electronic music workshops in Bradford and Birmingham, which evidenced engagement from participants and shifts in teacher confidence²⁴. If further funding was secured, EQUALIZE could run similar workshops elsewhere in the country. Young Sounds can share the digital resources UK-wide, providing opportunities for knowledge exchange with partner organisations, and potential to increase the evidence base²⁵. Other similar projects have saved families and public services over £100,000,000²⁶. Thus, the long-term financial impact and reduction of strain on public services outweighs the commitment to further and consistent government funding.

Conclusion

EQUALIZE shows that the main barrier to diversifying secondary school music is not student demand, as interest in electronic and Black British genres is high, but teacher capacity, confidence, and support²⁷. Even where teachers valued these genres, many felt unable to teach them, pointing to a workforce rather than a demand issue²⁸. Encouragingly, the gap is

¹⁹ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²⁰ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²¹ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²² Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²³ Robinson, J. (2026a). *EQUALIZE Interim Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²⁴ Robinson, J. (2026a). *EQUALIZE Interim Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²⁵ Young Sounds UK. (2025). Young Sounds UK and Black Music Research Unit to 'EQUALIZE' music education with new partnership. Young Sounds UK. <https://www.youngsounds.org.uk/equalize-launch/>

²⁶ Glenister, S. (2023). Evaluating Well-being Outcomes of the Social Enterprise Noise Solution: Digital Approaches to Outcome Capture. In Dale, P., Burnard, P. & Travis Jr. R. (Ed.) *Music for Inclusion and Healing in Schools and Beyond: Hip Hop, Techno, Grime, and More*. (online edition 335-360). Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197692677.003.0018>

²⁷ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

²⁸ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

bridgeable: genre-authentic templates and learner-led pedagogy drove strong engagement, and most teachers saw scope for classroom use with modest adaptation²⁹. The priority now is to scale this through practical, Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) flexible teacher training and resources³⁰. With the National Centre for Arts and Music Education launching in September 2026³¹ and renewed policy focus on the arts³², there is a timely opportunity to embed culturally relevant provision so that the next generation of creators can thrive within the school system.

²⁹ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

³⁰ Robinson, J. (2026b). *EQUALIZE Final Report, 2026*. Young Sounds UK, University of Westminster Black Music Research Unit Report, 2026.

³¹ Independent Society of Musicians. (2026). *Government Announces National Centre Funding and Releases Music Hub Evaluation*. <https://www.ism.org/news/new-national-arts-education-centre-funding-announced/>.

³² Department for Culture, Media and Sport. (2026). *Annex 6: Arts investment around the world: Policy, paper and philanthropy*. UK Government Report. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodge/annex-6-arts-investment-around-the-world-policy-place-and-philanthropy>