

## SCHOOLS TOGETHER

Peter Hatch (Director of Partnerships & Outreach and Head of Academic Music, King's College School Wimbledon; Chair of the Schools Together Group Research & Policy Committee) interviews Nicki Mattin (Principal of Spires Academy, Canterbury, and member of the Schools Together Group Steering Committee) about cross sector music partnerships



### What is the educational context of your school?

Firstly, we have the Kent context. In Kent 'normal rules' may not apply as the selective system distorts everything. The impact of selection is profound. It impacts on primary schools; it creates a hierarchy of secondary schools; it concentrates the academically able/affluent in some schools and concentrates the vulnerable, academically less able and less affluent in others, with predictable consequences on results and attendance. Approximately 33% of students are in grammar schools in East Kent.

Spires Academy is a secondary modern or high school. The students here have typically failed: they have either failed to be entered for the Kent Test, or were entered for it and failed. Almost 50% of the student population is identified as disadvantaged which is well above national average. It is therefore a school facing challenging circumstances, where aspiration and access to the 'cultural capital' that is so crucial to enabling confidence and self-esteem is often limited.

### Which music cross-sector partnerships are established at your school and how do these partnership activities take place?

Spires Academy is part of East Kent Schools Together (EKST), a group of three independent schools, five state schools and a local university. All members work together to foster the common aims of raising aspirations and widening horizons by enabling collaborative educational projects involving children from a variety of backgrounds, with pupil wellbeing at the centre.

Now in its third year, The Big Sing was made possible by a number of successful bids for grant funding. A choir director, Lemon Otter, was appointed to enable a joint choir to be established made up of pupils and staff from all EKST schools. The aim was not to attract the best singers, but instead to help those students who were generally lacking in confidence by giving them the opportunity to sing together with a professional conductor.

The choir has performed at a number of events, including the Kent teacher of the year awards.

During lockdown, wellbeing was taken as a theme across EKST and a song was chosen every two weeks. Students and Staff from all the partner schools were encouraged to record themselves remotely and Sue Wood, the music teacher at Spires Academy, put the performances together and shared across our social media platforms. A whole range of pupils were involved, including boarders from independent schools who had had to return home, often far away from Kent.

### How did you go about setting up the Big Sing?

It was felt that a choir would be the perfect music project since it was something in which all could take part, with all of the benefits associated with group singing, which fitted perfectly with our joint aims. The professional conductor added another dimension, since sometimes if a teacher from one school is running a project it can feel one-sided. Initially, schools were asked for six students each and they rehearsed in independent – state school pairings before the whole group was put together. The number of participants was expanded as it grew. We even secured funding to purchase choir T-shirts.

The EKST is hoping to build upon the success of the choir and establish a joint orchestra in the future.

The schools together group was founded in 2016, both as a nationwide discussion group for individuals working in primary and secondary schools from the state and independent sectors who are responsible for running partnerships, and as a forum for those who are interested in creating cross-sector projects. The group organises termly events based on themes of interest to partnership coordinators, such as measuring outcomes and funding models. It aims to encourage partnership projects which are impactful, sustainable, and provide a mutual benefit for all involved and challenge disadvantage.

Pupils involved in the project said –

“Confidence is something that might not come easily to people but standing with people in the same situation, as one whole group, boosts our confidence and makes us want to perform to our best ability.”

*Kierney and Eva, Herne Bay High School*

“Although sometimes talking to people for the first time can be scary, when I sang with them it made talking so much easier! I also think it's a really non-judgmental environment, and so even if you are not the world's best singer...you have no reason to feel uncomfortable.”

*Eliza, The King's School, Canterbury*

### **What impact have these had on your pupils?**

One of the main differences between the sectors is the freedom which independent schools have in terms of the curriculum, especially in terms of the arts. State schools must prove various progress measures and therefore there is not always the time available to spend on these subjects. In fact there is a fear that the arts will disappear from the state sector altogether.

The pupils at Spires Academy have benefited greatly from music partnership projects. In addition to the Big Sing, the students have been invited to concerts and talks which have been really helpful in expanding the curriculum and widening their experiences.

The impact of all partnership work has been measured through research carried out by our university member, Canterbury Christ Church, which undertakes an annual study investigating parent, pupil and staff views of the collaborations.

### **Have there also been benefits for the independent schools taking part?**

Absolutely, this has given them a real opportunity to be involved with a project taking place across a range of schools with a professional conductor. Friendships were established across schools. There was also an added dimension for boarders who were far away from home and found themselves meeting the families of the singers from

different schools at concerts. Barriers between pupils from incredibly different backgrounds are really broken down in these situations.

Furthermore, the choir gives all pupils involved the opportunity to sing in a variety of locations. They also have the chance to meet student ambassadors from the university partner who look after front of house at concerts.

### **How have teaching staff from both sectors benefited from the project?**

Teaching staff have been actively involved, with some singing in the choir. Moreover, connections have been made so that on a regular basis different subject areas get together to share best practice and discuss the curriculum. This means that relationships have been established beyond the Head Teachers of the partnership schools and the co-ordinators of the projects. In terms of music, there is an opportunity to share best practice from co-curricular perspective as well.

### **What advice would you give to other state schools who are interested in working with the independent sector on similar partnership projects?**

Take the plunge, you never know where it will lead. There are huge advantages to be gained from these projects. Don't go into it feeling that your school is the poor cousin, you will be surprised at how partnerships can enrich the experiences of your teaching staff, as well as expanding students' horizons. A lot rests on the independent school too

and there must be respect from both sides so that clear aims are established which will lead to a mutual benefit for all, it certainly cannot be either condescending or elitist. My experience is that the independent schools involved in Canterbury never look down on students or staff. In fact, they go out of their way to be as welcoming to us as they are to any alumni or donors who may also be attending a particular event.

It is important that a staff member from your school accompanies your pupils to events; a passionate music teacher who attends and gets excited about sharing the experience, helping to increase cultural capital and giving pointers on conduct, is essential since it may be an unknown world for the pupils.

Music is such a quick win in terms of partnership work, helping young people from both sectors with mental health and wellbeing. It is just about finding something which is mutual and can be shared by all and choir is a perfect opportunity. I would recommend that you use outside professionals so that it is not an extra pressure for school staff and so that they can participate in it themselves. The sky truly is the limit.

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