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UNIVERSAL MUSIC EDUCATION IN POLAND AS VIEWED BY CULTURAL ANIMATION STUDENTS*

Introduction: The study described in this paper was inspired by the willingness to draw more attention to the condition of music education, its challenges and related issues.

Research Aim: The aim of the study was to learn the views of former school pupils, currently being university students, on music education they had received at schools of general education. The analysis of collected reports allowed to diagnose its current condition.

Research Method: The author conducted a qualitative study. Students reported on their experiences in the form of written recollections, opinions and proposals. In total, 129 student reports encompassing nearly 500 pages of typescript were subject to inductive and interpretative content analysis.

Results: Results of the study disclosed a fairly dramatic picture of universal music education. On their basis, it can be stated that in terms of the learning content and form, music classes are not acknowledged and approved by former school pupils, they fail to differ much from other school classes, they are primarily focused on transmission of theoretical knowledge, whereas practical activities are associated with stress of presenting one's musical skills in front of the entire class.

Conclusion: Universal music education needs to undergo radical changes.

Keywords: music education, schools of general education, views on music classes, music activities, music classes

INTRODUCTION

The social and practical context

Music education, or more broadly arts education, has come to play the marginal role in the system of education, which is not only true for the Polish system, and

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not as late as nowadays (*Edukacja artystyczna i kulturalna w szkołach w Europie*, 2010; Robinson & Aronica, 2020). In Poland, the situation in this respect has been largely unfavourable. For more than 40 years, education has been based on the so called “Polish concept of music education” which was a real breakthrough four decades ago, as it introduced numerous forms and types of content, and strongly shifted the teaching course to the understanding and experiencing of art music. Questions do arise whether it can still be valid in view of such enormous social, cultural, economic transformations, and whether we are able to develop interest of our children and adolescents in the transmitted content?

The *status quo* of universal music education got additionally more complex following the latest higher education reform implemented by Jarosław Gowin in 2018, referred to as the “Constitution for Science”. It has substantially altered the functioning of music education and music pedagogy institutes. Their educational and artistic profile has been transformed into solely artistic, which disturbed their development and changed their focus. Undoubtedly, these transformations have significantly impacted the process of professional training of future music teachers, organisation of research, discussions, reflections. What follows from my experiences and observations, is that academia engaged in music education has been dwindling away, there has been less research and fewer papers, conferences, scientific meetings.

What is more, policy makers appear to show no understanding of the problems and key issues for this field. In fact, music education has been continuously and systemically marginalised. Different government representatives have declared to appreciate and realise the gravity and significance of arts activities, yet in practice we have seen a reduced number of arts classes, no response to simple and obvious claims of interested teachers and academic circles, such as one that music classes as part of the early school education should be conducted by musically trained individuals, or one that music teacher’s workload should include direction of school choirs and other musical ensembles. While searching for relevant arguments confirming the need to implement profound changes in the education system, the study presented in this paper has investigated the views of former school pupils currently being university students.

The research context

Numerous studies conducted over many years now have confirmed inefficiency of music education offered at school. Satisfactory outcomes were essentially recorded in the 1970s and 1980s during experimental studies and implementation of programmes and textbooks based on the Polish concept of music education. In the years that followed, positive teaching outcomes measured using different indicators were primarily obtained by independent movements, circles centred around some higher education institutions, as well as foundations and associations pro-

moting concepts originated by Dalcroze, Kodaly, Orff and Gordon, specialising in some areas of musical performance, e.g. playing the recorders or string harmonics. “Śpiewająca Polska” [Singing Poland] programme has been a great success until the present day, just like many other successful initiatives taken by such foundations as “Muzyka jest dla wszystkich” [Music Is for All], or Stowarzyszenie Nauczycieli Muzyki [Music Teachers’ Association]. Statistical, quantitative studies based on educational achievement tests and placement tests have consistently shown that schools in Poland fail to form musical competences, and their levels among pupils of all school tiers have been low for many years now (Białkowski & Grusiewicz, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Bonna, 2015; Grusiewicz, 1999, 2007, 2011; Jankowski, 2002; Jaworska, 1997; Kamińska, 1997; Parkita, 2005; Rakowski, 1986, 1990; Smoleńska-Zielińska, 1997; Szubertowska, 2003; Waluga, 2016; Weiner, 2010).

In comparison to the extensive literature presenting research on pupils’ musical knowledge and musical skills, the literature presenting views about school and music education has been rather scarce. Such research has not been particularly popular in Poland, in fact it has only been developed in the 21st century by Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [Public Opinion Research Centre] and Krajowe Biuro ds. Przeciwdziałania Narkomanii [National Bureau for Drug Prevention] (Młodzież 2003, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2016), as well as international PISA, TIMSS, PIAAC, TALIS research (Nowakowska & Przewłocka, 2015; Przewłocka, 2015). A significant contribution to this research has also been made by Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych [Educational Research Institute] and Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego [Polish Teachers’ Union] (Jakubowski et al., 2017).

Research fully focused on learning the views on music education at schools of general education in Poland emerged in the second decade of our century. Previous diagnoses of music education in the research determining pupils’ abilities and competences would include issues and questions addressed to pupils and teachers about how they viewed music activities. This was done in the studies by Hoffman-Lipska and Żychowska (1993), Przychodzińska and Białkowski (1998), Szubertowska (2004, 2008), as well as Białkowski and Grusiewicz (2010) – the last authors would primarily collect teachers’ opinions.

An opinion survey on music education in 2013 was conducted by Bonna (2014). Using a self-prepared questionnaire, she asked elderly people about music activities they pursued in their childhood and adolescence, about the functions music had in their lives and about their recollections of music education at school, from which most of them graduated before the 1962 reform.

At exactly the same time (2013–2014), Krajewski and Schmidt (2014) conducted extensive research devoted to music and visual arts classes offered at primary schools and lower secondary schools. They obtained data for the study by analysing schools’ websites, web portals and teacher and pupil discussion forums, as well as based on a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with teachers.

In their final report, they failed to analyse pupils' reports for, as they concluded, they found them subjective and biased.

In 2014–2017, research on music education offered at school was conducted by Labiak. In 2014, he analysed opinions of lower secondary school pupils (Labiak, 2015), and in 2017 opinions of female students of early school education (Labiak, 2017). His research was very interesting and valuable, however it included small groups of respondents.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

Previous studies, including those referred to above, indicate that outcomes of music education in schools of general education have been far from the assumed ones, and educational practices, except for single examples, still leave much to be desired.

The aim of this study was to learn the detailed views of former school pupils about music education they had received, and based on these, to determine the condition of music education offered by schools of general education, to present its positive and negative aspects, and to learn the ways in which music classes were organised a number of years ago.

The main research problem emerged as the question, how former pupils view school and music education? And whether their opinion is different for different levels of education? More specifically, research questions concerned things respondents liked the most about the classes and things that raised their highest discontent, the teaching content they found the most useful or completely useless, what they would expect of music classes taught at school, what difficulties teachers are facing, why music classes look what they look like, and why certain facts take place.

RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

In the study, the authors used the interpretative paradigm (Kubinowski, 2010). Answers to the problems put forward in the study were searched for in free reports of university students. The students were requested to complete just one open-ended task:

Based on your experiences, please present your views on music education in Poland. Please describe briefly what it looked like in your case, what were your teachers' requirements, what was their teaching style and what content they transmitted. Also, please refer to what you enjoyed and what not, determine usefulness of this learning content and write what you think should be changed. If you were musically trained outside the compulsory system of general education, please mention this as well and give your opinion about it.

The study was conducted from 2018 to 2024 on a group of 129 cultural animation students of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, MSCU, and was related to music education they had pursued in the two initial decades of the 21st century. The students freely wrote about their experiences and impressions, which fitted into the model of narrative research (Krawczyk-Bocian, 2019). For purposes of the study, highly diversified material of substantial volume was collected.

When analysing and interpreting the material, it should be borne in mind that cultural animation students constitute a group displaying higher than average community and cultural engagement, they are most often socially and artistically involved and interested in numerous fields of art. Some of the respondents were fond of music and they were able to assess music education not only from the point of view of their experiences at schools of general education, but also at music schools, classes at community centres or participation in other institutional and non-institutional activities. What should be stressed, is that the vast majority of university students approached this task very seriously, and frequently, instead of recommended two or three pages, they submitted much more elaborate reports. Their subjective, miscellaneous written reports, their views and proposals were analysed in terms of their meaning and contexts. The description and interpretation were based on qualitative inquiries (Kubinowski, 2010) and inductive reasoning (Mroczko, 2014). Bottom-up reasoning was employed to analyse student reports, descriptive codes, standard and interpretative codes were created on an ongoing basis during text analysis and on their basis, research problems were particularised. Ultimate descriptions refer to the most often appearing statements that build up specific theses. Due to an extensive volume of the material and the need for synthetic presentation, this paper fails to quote specific student reports, but only presents conclusions that can be drawn from them.

RESULTS

General notes – views concerning all stages of education

The collected material reveals a non-homogeneous picture of music education, not because students viewed similar situations in a different manner but because they described different practices, which shows that music classes offered in the system of general education were implemented in a highly diversified manner. Based on the most frequently encountered descriptions and views, it can be concluded that there appeared positive opinions, however critical and highly critical ones clearly prevailed, therefore they shall be focused on in this text.

Overall, university students viewed universal education in a quite favourable manner. However, music classes they attended at school failed to constitute pleasant memories. The descriptions often included traumatic memories where fear,

stress, fright associated with the presentation of their vocal or instrumental skills in front of the entire class were the prevailing emotions.

Also, the responding students often mentioned dullness of the school routine related to systematic study of theoretical material contained in the school textbooks. According to the students' subjective views, music education offered at school is not attractive at all. Many respondents paid attention to the not particularly enjoyable and relevant instructions on how to play the recorder and read notes. This form of music activity was enjoyed by only few respondents.

Another recurring issue and common statement was having no memory of music classes at all. Students rather often concluded that they did not quite remember their music classes, that they cannot remember what exactly they were doing and what they were learning during these lessons. This is quite meaningful, the more so that when realising this, the students wrote about this with certain emotion.

The strongest resentment, criticism and discontent however, was expressed in relation to the fact of them being graded by the teachers. This problem was addressed in relation to all educational stages, to a slightly lesser extent to early school education, yet as a whole, this issue needs to be redefined and it requires brand new practical approach. In students' opinion, grading was very often unfair. They recalled the need to play an instrument or sing in front of the class under compulsion in order to get a grade as a mind-boggling experience. And such situations many a time discouraged them from pursuing music.

A quite often recalled issue was also the lack of self-determination, subjectivity, possible impact on things happening at school. The students reported that they could not express themselves at school, that nobody listened to them, they had nothing to say on their own development, nobody considered their interests, expectations and needs.

Music before commencing formal education

Majority of respondents attended music classes in preschools, and they mainly had the form of games, hopping and dancing combined with singing of different songs with piano accompaniment. They would recall these classes with great delight. What is interesting, the students had more memories from this stage of education, they could say more about what they were doing, what songs they were learning at that time, than about music classes during early school education.

Another type of music activity pursued at preschools and viewed in a favourable way were preparations for different kinds of performances and shows for parents and friends, in which music played a significant role.

In general, it can be concluded that opinions about music education implemented at preschools were positive; this period was remembered with great delight by the responding students.



Early school education

The initial school period should be associated with positive sensations. Children expect to face new challenges, they are awaiting what they are about to encounter. A teacher is trusted by their pupils and children look at him or her with confidence, performing his or her instructions. This is the picture rendered in numerous publications (Brzezińska et al., 2012; Kizeweter, 2016; Krzyżanowska, 2018; Murawska, 2014).

Therefore, it could be assumed that music education in this period will receive more favourable opinions than in the higher stages of education. But was it actually true? Surely, it received better opinions than in the period of lower secondary school, the latter being the most criticised period of all. Yet, students often made negative statements about early school education, as well as about later years spent at primary school.

What follows from their descriptions is that learning in that period had little to do with fun, pleasure, and possibilities to express oneself. According to their reports, it would primarily consist in learning about elements of music, musical notation, including playing the notation on school instruments. Pupils had to learn some material to obtain a grade.

No highly traumatic memories related to music education were recorded in this study period, and it can be said that stress was not the prevailing emotion, yet no instance of enchantment, delight, memories filled with emotions was reported. Also, a bitter conclusion is a statement that music in early school education has left the poorest memories; it was the least remembered period of music education.

Upper primary school grades

The first reflection drawn from the analysis of student reports is the fact that many of them failed to observe any clear-cut differences between the earlier stage of integrated primary education and an autonomous subject taught by a professional musician. They wrote that the music curriculum actually failed to differ at all from the curriculum developed for early school education. They kept on learning how to sing, how to play the recorder and glockenspiel, and methods and stages of the lessons were similar. They would not find any differences in vocal teaching, in conducting the classes. It is hard to view this fact in positive terms. Early school education should involve different teaching methods than education in upper grades; for the fact that it is not like that, I would primarily make responsible early school education teachers. Maybe they copy teaching patterns valid at the time when they were at school, they try to copy subject teachers thinking that in this manner they will act more professionally. But these observations also do not show in a good light at least some teachers of upper grades of primary school. These statements reflect teachers' attachment to old methods and curricula that used to be valid many years before.

Some students drew attention to the fact that the music curriculum for upper primary school grades was extended in terms of the volume of theoretical knowledge. The students recalled that they were mainly acquiring knowledge about history and theory of music. They wrote that these were “textbook-based lessons about great musicians and composers” that reminded history lessons summed up by shorter or longer tests checking pupils’ knowledge of composers’ biographies and lists of their musical works. These statements also render the dull nature of music classes, the fact that they failed to differ much from other classes in which knowledge was the prevailing component. Reducing music classes to transmission and checking knowledge may be approached as complete misunderstanding of their functions and goals.

Students also paid attention to instances of teachers neglecting their duties, making low demands of themselves and of the pupils. They wrote that lessons were conducted in a formal style, the teachers were not interested in what pupils were into during the lessons and in their development, which consequently made pupils approach these classes carelessly. Music teachers were not always able to control the pupils. They wrote that despite teacher’s warnings, the pupils were occupied with other things during the lesson, they were playing with their smart phones, chatting or doing homework from other subjects.

Just like in the case of early school education, majority of critical opinions referred to grading. This is clearly a problem for music education. Unfair – according to former pupils – grading results in their discouragement to the subject, to music and it has a demotivating effect.

Secondary schools

In the presented study, secondary schools primarily included lower secondary schools that for some time corresponded to grades 7 to 9. As already mentioned, music education offered in lower secondary schools received the poorest opinions, however assessment of the teaching process at lower secondary schools is the hardest task. Student reports show that music classes at this stage of education highly varied in terms of methodology, the learning content and demands made of pupils. They were different in every school, teachers paid attention to different things. In some schools, pupils were only singing songs, in others they only studied topics included in the textbooks, and there were schools that would not offer any music classes at all, or at least that’s how the situation was presented by the students.

At this stage of education, the problem with maintaining order and discipline emerged in a much clearer way, just like the problem of teachers allowing pupils to do homework from other subjects, doing what pupils would like to do, teacher’s inability to control pupils’ behaviour. These statements correspond to the thesis that music classes in lower secondary school were a waste of time. The respondents could not find any meaning, intention or purpose.

Some students recognised teachers' competences, engagement, passion, ambition and effort to develop pupils' interest in music and transmitted content. And based on the obtained material, it may be concluded that some teachers managed to do it; more frequently however, we received reports that despite these efforts pupils remained uninterested in the classes. This reveals an important problem which induces significant practical implications for universal music education and signals the need to implement radical changes.

Numerous critical opinions very often referred to unattractive repertoire, excess knowledge and theory detached from pupils' interests. The respondents pointed out that very often music classes were conducted by teachers of other subjects, having no proper qualifications to teach music, and not always showing proper engagement. Based on student reports, it can be stated that this stage of education is dominated by the transmission of knowledge but also high variety of teacher approaches to the taught subject. Many teachers would attempt to persuade pupils into and develop their interest in some content and activities in a variety of ways, but often to no avail.

Extra-curricular arts activities

Extra-curricular activities primarily include participation in science, language and sports related clubs. However, arts activities also comprise an important element of school's operation. According to the respondents, the most popular forms of extra-curricular arts activity they took part in were choirs and vocal ensembles. A considerable number of respondents also wrote about drama class during which they pursued their musical and drama passions.

A few reports addressed the question of shifting music education found in the curriculum to extra-curricular activities. There are schools and teachers for whom musical ensembles they direct – mainly choirs – are a priority and all school activities are centred around it. They even use compulsory classes to recruit new members, prepare the existing choir members, e.g. to work on the current repertoire or prepare them to perform in public. It can be stated that extra-curricular music classes in the form of various activities are highly demanded and their implementation has a positive impact on the learning outcomes, not only in the field of music (Grusiewicz, 1999). Students, however, were describing completely different instances: of instrumental treatment of pupils and music classes, the compulsory and extra-curricular ones. From their reports, it can be clearly inferred that for teachers directing the musical ensembles, the priorities failed to include children's well-being, creation of artistic renditions or a fixed line-up that would carry out numerous educational functions; instead, they only intended to satisfy their own short-term specific goals.

Reports related to participation in extra-curricular musical activities varied. Negative opinions were primarily related to in-house school ensembles. It is also clear that the level of satisfaction and joy from participation in a given ensemble

unequivocally increases along with its reputation. However, with regard to extra-curricular music classes implemented at school it is hard to determine whether the presented picture is actually reliable. In total, such classes were attended only by a small number of respondents. The majority of students pursued their musical interests outside schools of general education, which to some extent indicates a not particularly favourable cultural impact of schools on the pupils.

SUMMARY

When responding to the main research problem, it should be concluded that the majority of former school pupils, currently being university students, wrote about their schools in a rather positive way, sometimes expressing ambivalent opinions, but they were fairly critical about music education they had offered. The highest criticism was expressed regarding music education implemented in lower secondary schools (upper grades of primary schools), but the differences were not particularly significant. As regards other posed problems:

It is hard to conclude what students liked in music education the most. In their miscellaneous views they focused on criticism, and the very few opinions expressing satisfaction were highly diversified, they pertained to many different issues. It is much easier however, to list issues that raised their highest discontent. Critical comments pertained to the learning content, excess theoretical information and not particularly interesting list of musical works for singing and listening. The second group of critical comments was related to unfair grading of pupils, inappropriate methods of verifying and assessing their school achievements. They also expressed very critical views about lessons during which teachers failed to demand much of the pupils, allowed them to be busy with other activities, including doing assignments related to other subjects.

Single student reports pertained to detailed learning content in the context of its usefulness in further education and life in general. The vast majority of reports offered very general statements that music classes did not contribute much to their development. Upon completion of the entire study cycle, they concluded that they were not able to sing, play the glockenspiel or the recorder, they were not familiar with musical notation and they were not able to read it, they did not know the works of great composers, music at school was of no relevance and they did not find it important. This pessimistic note prevailed in various reports. Students wrote that it would be better not to offer classes like that at all, for they only dissuade young people from music, that school fails to provide children and adolescents with possibilities of their musical development, it fails to form their musical competences.

A considerable number of reports addressed the question of respondents' expectations of the music classes offered at school. They expected these classes to

contribute to their development, make them learn the arcana of music and help them gain new competences and skills. Students also hoped for music classes to introduce some ease, pleasant atmosphere and joy into the school regime. And this, according to respondents' views, happens rather rarely.

The last investigated problem was related to difficulties faced by music teachers. The study allowed us to find that the biggest challenge for teachers is to develop pupils' interest in the subject. The shape, form and content of the curriculum currently proposed by the ministry fails to attract pupils' interest. For this reason, teachers have considerable problems with implementation of different music activities, which consequently induces them to focus on transmitting knowledge, making music education a subject with no specific character.

DISCUSSION

The conducted analysis focused on critical views expressed by the students, for they prevailed. It should be clearly stressed however, that there appeared positive opinions as well that there were schools and teachers who received positive opinions from former pupils. What follows from student reports is that such opinions were given of teachers having their original ideas, departing from the transmission of textbook-based knowledge; pupils appreciated lessons during which practical activities matched pupils' needs and expectations, including their specific reception of musical culture.

Results of the presented study correspond to other earlier mentioned findings. Student reports on concentrating music classes on the preparation of musical setting for school events converged with results presented in the 2014 report (Krajewski & Schmidt, 2014), from which it also follows that in many instances music classes were reduced to the preparation of the musical background for roll-calls and school ceremonies. According to the report referred to above, music teachers were aware of what music education can and should look like, they realised its significance for the development of children's competences and growth, yet this awareness failed to translate into practical activities.

Student reports obtained during the study correspond with findings of other described research, including that of Szubertowska (2004, 2008) or Labiak (2015, 2017). The latter clearly pointed out the problem of insignificance of music classes. He begins one of his papers with a statement by a female student: "Music at school? – it is there supposedly but somehow not there..." and she ends with a similar thought: "I can't quite remember music classes at school – and this may be the reason why this should be changed" (Labiak, 2017, p. 171, 185). These statements also correspond to opinions of students participating in our study:

The most accurate picture of music education in my case is, I believe, reflected by the fact that I have absolutely no memory of what it looked like and I am not able to say what I have learnt from these lessons. I might have learnt a bit to play the recorder but what has left for sure is my fear of signing and performing in public, I am scared of being criticised.

CONCLUSION

Results of the study indicate the need to introduce radical changes in universal music education. Music teachers, consultants, scholars investigating the issue have repeatedly applied for the introduction of systemic, organisational and curricular changes. They have received an extensive coverage in the *Wychowanie Muzyczne* [Music Education] magazine. Recently, in 2024, Music Teachers Association has addressed an open letter to the Minister of National Education Barbara Nowacka on the proposed changes in the music education curriculum (Grusiewicz, 2024). Proposed amendments were focused, among others, on having all music classes from the first grade of primary school conducted by musically trained individuals, on departing from typical school classes intended to transmit knowledge, as well as turning to various musical practices and in this respect give more freedom to schools and teachers, and on giving pupils the ability to decide what arts classes they would like to attend. Similar proposals were put forward at the conference entitled “Dodajmy uczniom skrzydeł” [Let’s Give Pupils Wings] organised by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education held in October 2024.

Student reports and views obtained in the presented study confirm the need to treat teachers’ proposals seriously, and the need to introduce significant changes in music education.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The presented study investigated views of 129 students of one degree programme. Notwithstanding the extensive material, the applied interpretative paradigm must be taken into account. Student reports constitute their subjective perceptions of school reality, therefore, it is hard to generalise study results. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that the presented analyses were part of a larger project examining views of current and former pupils that confirm the theses included in the paper and lead to exactly the same conclusions.

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POWSZECHNA EDUKACJA MUZYCZNA W POLSCE W OPINIACH STUDENTÓW KIERUNKU ANIMACJA KULTURY

Wprowadzenie: Impulsem do przeprowadzenia badań będących podstawą tego tekstu była chęć zwrócenia uwagi na stan edukacji muzycznej, na problemy jakie jej dotyczą.

Cel badań: Celem badań było poznanie opinii byłych uczniów, a obecnie studentów, na temat odbytej przez ich w szkole ogólnokształcącej edukacji muzycznej. Analiza zebranych wypowiedzi posłużyła do diagnozy stanu tej edukacji.

Metoda badań: Badania miały charakter jakościowy. Studenci wypowiadali się w formie pisemnych wspomnień, opinii i postulatów. W sumie analizie o założeniach indukcyjnych i interpretacyjnych zostało poddanych 129 wypowiedzi studentów zawartych na blisko 500 stronach maszynopisu.

Wyniki: Wyniki badań pokazują dość dramatyczny obraz powszechnej edukacji muzycznej. Na ich podstawie można stwierdzić, że lekcje muzyki w zakresie treści i form nie znajdują zrozumienia i akceptacji ze strony byłych uczniów, niewiele różnią się od innych szkolnych zajęć, dominuje w nich przekazywanie treści teoretycznych, a działania praktyczne kojarzą się ze stresem prezentowania swoich umiejętności muzycznych na forum klasy.

Wnioski: Konieczne są gruntowne zmiany w powszechnej edukacji muzycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja muzyczna, szkolnictwo ogólnokształcące, opinie dotyczące lekcji muzyki, zajęcia muzyczne, lekcje muzyki