



Evaluation Report:

A Note Weavers programme
within a Children's Centre
Autumn 2018

Supporting practitioners in providing
a musically rich environment for children

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With many thanks to the setting managers, staff and children who
participated so enthusiastically in this project.



Background and Context

This Note Weavers project was inspired by a previous Youth Music funded initiative for a local music service. Running for a year this earlier project was targeted at hard to reach families in three different Children's Centres in the same area. Music sessions took place at drop off and pick up times and parents and carers were invited to join the children in these groups. There was good engagement from the children with varying degrees of take up from parents. As well as engaging children and carers there was an aim to embed the work of the music practitioners with the Children's Centre staff, so that music became a day to day part of the Centre's life.

The manager of the three Children's Centres was impressed by and supportive of this first project and when later there was an opportunity to be involved in another music project she was keen to be involved.

Introduction and Aim of the Project

This report presents the 12-week programme of work Note Weavers undertook at a Children's Centre in an area of multiple deprivation in the North West of England in the Autumn of 2018. This project was undertaken by a single music practitioner over a short, 12-week time scale, it heavily involved setting staff and was targeted at small groups of children where there was identified need. The aim was to support

setting practitioners in providing a musically rich environment for children and their families which they could continue when the practitioner's visits ended.

Background

The Children's Centre in this project was selected as it is in an area characterised by high unemployment, poor housing and low income (Universal Credit). The Centre manager had been involved in the previous project and is a passionate believer in the value of musical engagement in the Early Years. The majority of children entering the nursery have a significantly lower attainment level than their age would suggest and 37% are on a plan of some sort for their individual needs. The children's home life is often chaotic with little routine and security. The main cause for concern highlighted by nursery staff is the increased access to and constant use of technology by the children at home, with many parents and carers viewing iPads, TV and phones as free babysitters. As a result of this practitioners have recognised a growing problem as a large proportion of children entering nursery are presenting with problems such as lack of concentration and interaction, short attention span, delayed speech, inability to listen and respond, impatience, tiredness, communication problems, non-receptiveness, difficulty in regulating emotions, eyestrain and other problems in their personal, social and emotional development.

Why Music?

Music has been part of the offer in many Children's Centres since their inception in 1999 but with funding cuts and closures of Centres, over 500 closing between 2011-2017 with 170 of these in the poorest areas (Source: Institute of Fiscal Studies, *The Health Effects of Sure Start*, 2019), many of these music groups have ended and not been replaced. It has been found in previous research that family music groups held at Children's Centres had beneficial effects on children and families and that 'music groups in early childhood... should be regarded as essential to increasing the social, cultural and emotional capital of those who may not be able to...pay for music.' (Pitt, 2017). So, what is it that music provides? Music is a leveller, accessible to all it overcomes language, mental, physical and emotional barriers and enhances understanding between people (Wigram & Elefant, 2009). It has also been found that music engagement impacts positively on different areas of children's learning, such as language, literacy skills, fine motor skills and some aspects of mathematics (Hallam, 2010).

Participant information

In all there were 19 participant children, 10 male, 9 female, four with English as an additional language, all were between 0-5 years of age. 13 were recorded as having a background of challenging circumstances.

Adult Participants: One Lead Early Years Music Practitioner

4 Setting practitioners

Support from the Children's Centre manager.

Methods

This collaborative programme of work was led by a single lead music practitioner. This practitioner ran 12 weekly sessions with small groups of children in the Children's Centre and advised, supported and left resources for setting practitioners to use in their own daily music intervention sessions.

- **Weekly Session**: The music practitioner visited the centre once a week and delivered sessions introducing a repertoire of songs and musical activities to small groups of children. The children were able to use instruments, drums, bean bags, scarves etc... Purposely the sessions were adult-led but the practitioner was reactive and sensitive to the children and adapted the session according to their responses and levels of participation. Many of the songs and activities were repeated over subsequent sessions in order that the children could recognise and feel a routine, gain trust in the practitioner and become familiar with the material.
- **Daily Session** The music lead practitioner provided support to the setting practitioners by providing notes, resources (including a CD) and modelling during her own sessions. The setting staff then ran daily music interventions which were available to children with particularly significant needs.
- **Music Sacks**
As well as practitioner visits and setting staff music interventions there were also music sacks left at the Centre for the children to use within the setting and to take home. In the previous project music sacks had been successfully used and it was felt that this may be something which would work in this programme too. Each music sack contained a variety of items ie: two drums, beaters, activity sheets and props such as toy animals and scarves.

The Children's Centre in this case did not send them home with children but instead children were encouraged to use them within the setting. The 'Geo' team (outreach), who visit different centres in the area leading 'song and rhyme' time and baby massage groups also used these sacks in their work.

Ongoing Evaluation

Discussion and Zines

Throughout the project there was a process of ongoing discussion and reflection between music lead and setting practitioners and all practitioners involved recorded their observations, thoughts, feelings and reflections in a personal and informal 'zine'.

See appendix 1 for extracts.

In order that the setting practitioners, who were not music specialists, might be able to recognise, support and facilitate music play in the centre they were given a copy of Musical Development Matters (Burke, 2018) and some questions to use as a starting point and aide memoire on what to look out for:



At the end of the project the setting manager was interviewed by the lead music practitioner for her thoughts and observations and setting practitioners recorded their final thoughts in their zines.

Case Studies

Six children identified as having significant areas of need were chosen to be observed in greater detail from the beginning to the end of the project. Setting practitioners gave their thoughts and reflections on these children to the lead practitioner at the end of the process.

Analysis

Go Small

The children selected for inclusion in the project were all identified as having specific areas of need, and the needs were varied, for example, challenging behaviour, having English as an additional language or being non-verbal. The sessions with the practitioner were therefore delivered in five small groups of four and five children in

order that the practitioner could really focus on individuals and give them the attention they required. These groups took place in a small, intimate space with few distractions. Although small group work in the Early Years is viewed as important it has been relatively little used (Wasik 2009), however that is now beginning to change. In smaller groups the adult can more easily respond to the interjections of the children and use their input to make the session more meaningful to them (Bruce, 2005) and so it proved with the children in this project who responded well where the space was more intimate and the lead practitioner more able to give time and attention to individuals. It is not simply enough however for the group to be small, the adult practitioner must be a very sensitive guide, thoughtfully planning and reacting within the session so that this 'co-operative learning' has meaning and purpose for each child enabling them to reach their academic and social goals (Tal, 2018).



Less is More

Repeat, repeat, repeat: Early Years music sessions need not be crammed full of different songs and activities. Young children enjoy repetition of known tunes and develop a repertoire of favourites, they particularly enjoy songs with strong beats and simple, predictable melodies with which they can easily join in, and which become familiar to them (Pound & Harrison, 2003). The children in these sessions did not experience the stability of routine in their home lives and through the lead practitioner extending the use of songs and activities so that they became known to the children she was able to gain their trust and in turn they became more comfortable and confident around her.

At the beginning of the project almost all the children in the case studies were unsure of the music group and the Note Weavers practitioner and yet by the end of the project every case study child was engaging to some degree in the sessions and many were observed using the musical material outside the group in other areas of play in the setting.



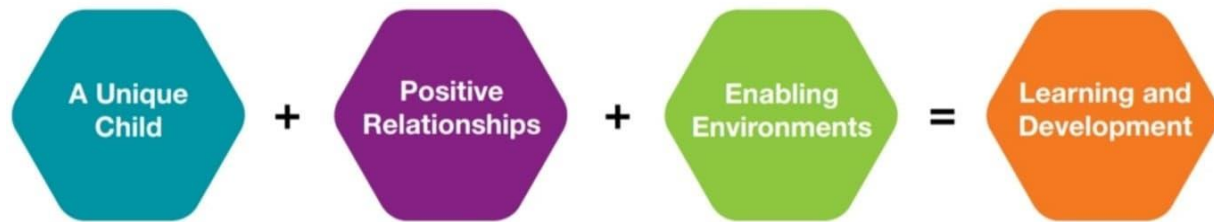
Building Relationships

'Interesting and creative ideas... all very keen to think about different ways to use drum and beaters and have everyone copy. Amazing focus and creative attention!

This with the 'least able' of the three groups... things I've never thought of doing with drums and beaters – and I've done this song for years!'

(Lead music practitioner notes)

At the centre of this project was a sensitive, reactive and skilled practitioner who built up a strong relationship of trust and in so doing, empowered the children to flourish creatively. Quality time with children is vital if they are going to grow up to be emotionally secure in the future. The qualities of a good close relationship (including parent-child), are those of listening and acknowledging, responding to feelings and being able to make someone feel positive by some sort of contact whether that contact be touch, a look or verbal (Gerhardt, 2015). By taking time and listening, providing resources and encouragement, the children in this project were able to exceed the expectations of the adults around them.



(Development Matters in the EYFS, 2012)

Outcomes

Overview: The provision of quality music sessions was found to have a positive impact on all participant children. When the lead practitioner began her visits there was reluctance, incomprehension and a lack of focus and trust on the part of the children. By the end of the project however, all the children were positively engaging both with the lead practitioner herself and throughout her sessions, continuing their music play in free play time on their own, with their playmates and with setting staff. The following were areas where the music sessions were found to have particular impact:

Vocalisation: Children who had little or no speech began to vocalise with sounds and words during the sessions. The daily music intervention with setting staff further built on this and it was recorded that children were accessing the setting's musical instruments more regularly than before the project began.

Connie and Debra 'completely silent twins, initially shy, Debra was the first to vocalise – inadvertently in the middle of a familiar song...she now offers words which are recognisable...' (case study)

Social skills, in particular the following:

Concentration

Many of the children initially found sitting in the music session and waiting their turn frustrating, but as the term went on and they became familiar and relaxed with the practitioner, the songs and the routine, concentration improved:

Anna - Beginning of programme: 'initially very short attention span, easily frustrated and distracted'

End of programme : 'showing increased concentration and ability to wait her turn' (case study)

Ben – Beginning of programme: 'Initially wouldn't even come to join the group... crashing and banging around'

End of programme: 'attention and involvement has grown and his enjoyment in the sessions is great.' (case study)

Interpersonal Engagement

The Children's Centre manager noted that one of the greatest causes for concern to the nursery was the increased use of technology as a 'babysitter' and therefore children were suffering from a lack of interaction both with adults and peers. She stated that 'the activities and songs were able to engage those hard to reach children as they are an indirect engagement activity.' Over the course of the project the children did begin to engage with the lead practitioner in the sessions, and also with staff and other children.

Anna - 'With familiarity of the songs and activities and the routine of the music session she is more involved and stable during the sessions...she is now showing the ability for participation in structured activity and social interaction.' (case study)

Self-Regulation

Some of the children struggled with controlling their behaviour, and through the programme became better at managing their feelings, waiting their turn and engaging positively. The Children's Centre manager acknowledged that the music sessions were successful in this regard because they were non-threatening, they invited but did not demand responses and that the singing of songs rather than spoken instructions was a softer approach.

Eric - 'Initially was so full of frustration and incomprehension that he was often in tantrums...he has absolutely loved the music activities and songs and has over the period of the term become better at taking turns and waiting.' (case study)

Adult collaboration: In their final summaries, the setting manager and practitioners acknowledged the impact of the music programme:

'the value and benefit of the music sessions was recognised by the practitioners who would like to see these activities as standard rolled out to all Children's Centre, nurseries, schools across the board, so much was their potential and success.' (Children's Centre Manager)

However, it was also the ongoing observations and reflections of an enthusiastic, committed and keen staff which were also key to the success of this project.

Suggestions for future projects based on this 12 week programme:

Booster sessions: One of the practitioners mentioned in her zine that she would appreciate a 'booster' session of new material to keep her sessions fresh. Regular 'top up' sessions would ensure that music was continued in the long term post-project and the music practitioner could address any issues or queries that staff may have.

Inclusion of parents: The aim of this project was to create a musically rich environment for the children within this particular setting. A follow up project may include receptive parents who could be invited in to share some of the activities with their children, perhaps to record their own 'zine' of musical activities and songs at home.

Rollout in the area: This thoughtful, reflective project was viewed by all adult participants as valuable and there were suggestions that should be rolled out as standard in Early Years settings. Perhaps there is scope for shorter six week projects across more nurseries in combination with regular booster sessions across the year.

Music Sacks: Simple and effective, these sacks are still in use in the Children's Centre. A roll out of music sacks across nurseries in the wider area with a practitioner visit to launch them would reach a greater number of children and families and introduce

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APPENDIX 1

a) extract taken from the 2-3 year old practitioner's zine



5.10.18 [redacted] gave lots of eye contact when singing peek-a-boo. He laughed and vocalised and waited for adult to take the scarf away.

b) extract taken from the 3-4 year old practitioner's zine

12/10/18 During the week a variety of things have been noticed.
■ walking around banging the pan lids together.
Children are all engaging in the tapping/clapping rhythm of cheeky cheeky boom boom.
We have introduced bean bags & bean bag song, this is proving very popular and the children are ~~are~~ starting to follow the actions, including balancing, stretching bending etc.

c) extract taken from the Geo (outreach) team zine

27/09/18
1 child 1 adult attended.
Child appeared to enjoy the music activity. She took the fish out the bag and initiated an action song with the fish.
She then explored with the musical instruments after the music activity was coming to an end.



d) extract taken from the lead music practitioner's zine

Songs are familiar now and the children start to lead and sing the songs on their own in nursery.

Looking forward to the session
or at least as I walk through the room
running to me and greeting me!
running to the little room where the sessions are held
grabbing my hand, hugging my legs
one grabs a drum and offers it to me
one sings 'Aye yi yi' as we enter the room
happy familiar and safe associations