

# the **SLD** experience

For professionals, parents and those working to support children and young people with severe and profound learning difficulties

## Issue 43

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# Mapping musical development in children with PMLD: the Sounds of Intent project

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Evangelos Himonides

The Sounds of Intent project is a joint initiative of the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) and the University of London Institute of Education. It was set up in 2001 to investigate the musical development of children and young people with PMLD, growing out of earlier research that examined the provision of music in special schools in England for children with complex needs (Welch *et al.*, 2001). At the time, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority had just published a music curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties (as part of the P-scales) (QCA, 2001). However, it seemed that this work was not based on music-developmental research, and that the references to music in the 'Performance Descriptions' were largely anecdotal. Moreover, music and sounds were often treated as a means to different ends, such as encouraging movement or promoting communication. Although the Sounds of Intent team would be the first to argue that music can play an important role in fostering wider development (see, for example, Ockelford, 1996; 1998; 2000), it remains our view that a curriculum for *music* should principally be concerned with how children develop *musically*. Of course, once this is established, it almost certainly would be beneficial to 'read across' from music to other areas of learning. However, in our opinion such transfers would be more securely founded and, ultimately, more helpful to teachers, therapists and carers if music development in its own right were better understood.

Accordingly, our first step was to take a fresh look at the children themselves, largely through the eyes (and ears) of a group of practitioners who were active in the field – both specialists

and non-specialists in music. The team observed each other's work in school and analysed videorecordings of their pupils in detail. The children's actions, responses and interactions were carefully noted and attempts were made to gauge which were representative, exceptional or indicative of musical attainment or progress. Emerging ideas were used to form a new developmental model which quickly went through a number of iterations and continues to evolve (rather more gradually!) today in response to new findings and suggestions from the group and others as it is more widely disseminated.

The findings of the research team were contextualised in two ways. Firstly, we considered contemporary research as to how musical development 'typically' occurs – which we acknowledged may (but need not) be the same as or similar to the development of children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (Welch, 1998; 2005a; 2005b). Secondly, we took into account how we all typically 'make sense' of music, using a new theory from the field of cognitive science, and considered to what extent this may be relevant for young people with PMLD (Ockelford, 2004; 2005a; 2005b).

On the basis of all this evidence, our current thinking is that the key stages in the recognition and understanding of musical structure by children with profound and multiple difficulties are as follows:

- a) a developing awareness of sound (including musical sound)
- b) a developing awareness of the *variety* of sounds that are possible
- c) a developing awareness of simple patterns within sound brought about through repetition or variation, whereby sounds seem to form coherent clusters or streams ('groups')

'a curriculum for music should principally be concerned with how children develop musically'



- d) a developing awareness that groups of sounds may themselves be repeated or varied and thereby have a sense of connectedness

As far as their emotional response to music is concerned, it seems likely that children with PMLD will typically react to the basic qualities of sound (high/low, loud/soft, quick/slow, and so on) in much the same way as children who are chronologically in the first few months of life – reactions which seem to stem from features of maternal vocalisation (Malloch, 1999/2000). However, as the children's awareness of how sound is structured in music develops, as in (c) and (d) above, we believe that their capacity to respond to it may evolve too. So, for example, young people with PMLD may be able to anticipate changes in loudness, tone-colour or pitch based on their knowledge of previous hearings and relish the feeling that having their expectations fulfilled can bring.

In more detail, the Sounds of Intent team have been able to chart musical development in the domain of profound and multiple learning difficulties as follows:

- a) First, children encounter sounds with little or no understanding of what these sensations mean, how they are caused or how they may be elicited; interactions with others in the domain of sound and music may occur, but only by chance.
- b) Second, there may be an emerging sense of awareness of sound and silence, and intentionality in the production of sound, which may be made in response to external stimuli or, in turn, used to stimulate a response.
- c) Third, children may attend and respond to a *variety* of sounds; they may be able to make a range of different sounds (or cause them to be made) and they may take turns without copying what is heard or noticing if their own sounds are copied.
- d) Fourth, children may recognise and respond to simple *patterns* in sound – straightforward repetition and variation that may enable them to anticipate what is coming next. They may produce simple patterns by deliberately repeating or varying the sounds they make, and they may take turns, copying individual sounds that they hear and relishing their own sounds being copied.

- e) Fifth, children may respond distinctly to familiar short pieces, fragments or features of music and may be able to anticipate clearly delineated contrasts within them. They may be able to repeat short groups of sounds which may incorporate recognisable fragments or features of music that they have heard. They may take turns in copying short patterns in sound and anticipating their own short patterns being copied.

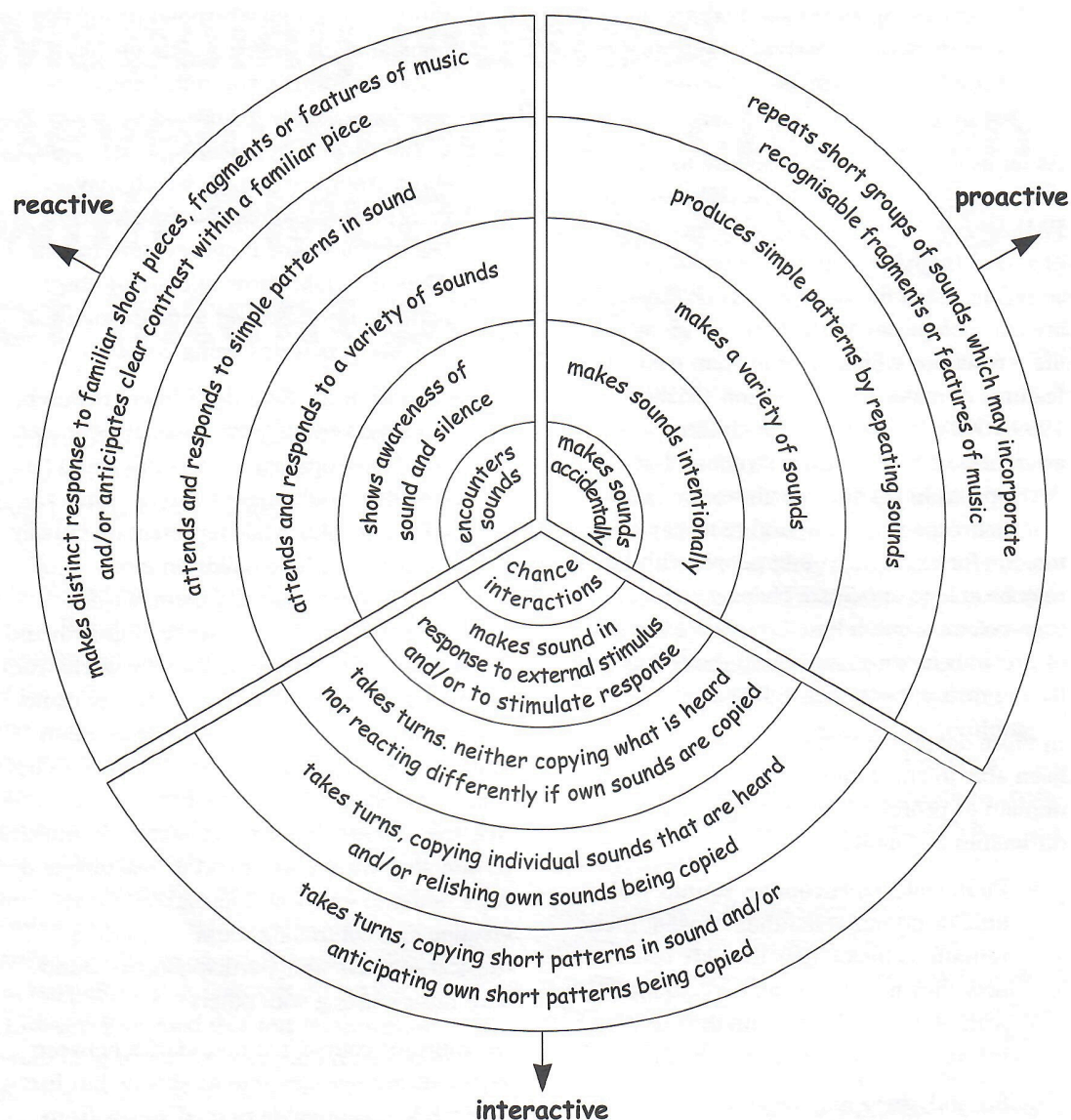
In the course of the Sounds of Intent research, we considered various ways in which proposed patterns of development such as this could be illustrated that would make them both quickly and easily accessible while representing visually the idea that one phase builds on those preceding without replacing them. We also wanted the model to give a sense of growth and expansion – of moving 'out' into the world from an inner core. After several attempts, we came up with the following form of representation that uses concentric circles (see Figure 1). The phases are divided into three distinct sectors: 'reactive', 'proactive' and 'interactive'. In musical terminology these correspond to 'listening and responding to sound and music', 'causing, creating and controlling sound (including musical sounds)' and 'participating in sound and music-making with others'.

In reality, of course, the boundaries between segments are not clear-cut as shown, but fuzzy. And while it is possible to read across from one sector to another to segments that are in some sense equivalent (for example, 'encounters sounds', 'makes sounds accidentally' and 'chance interactions'), it is quite possible that a child's profile of development will not evince this symmetry; in the experience of the Sounds of Intent team, 'reactivity' is likely to lead to 'proactivity', which in turn is likely to occur before 'interactivity'. Clearly, further work is required to see what form 'typical' profiles of development may take.

The framework illustrated in Figure 1 has a number of possible uses and we are actively exploring these among the research team with some initial funding from the QCA. The aim in the longer term, for which a grant has recently been obtained from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, is to create an interactive version on a 'tablet' PC which will be available in the classroom or elsewhere. It will be possible to use this:

*'further work is required to see what form 'typical' profiles of development may take'*





**Figure 1: Framework of musical development in the domain of profound and multiple learning difficulties**

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- as a tool to assess the musical development of children with PMLD
- to promote further development through providing suggestions of 'what next' through appropriate resources and teaching strategies
- to enable children's progress to be recorded directly using a small digital video camera and microphone attached to the PC

It is expected that interaction with the framework will be via touchscreen technology. Teachers, therapists and carers (who may be, but need not be, music specialists) will be able to access further information from each segment, including written material and video clips; they will be able to print out or listen to a range of musical resources; and they will be able to record the child concerned to monitor and celebrate his or her achievements and

progress. In due course, the programme may be web-based to facilitate communication between schools and the research centre, to enable resources that are found to be useful to be shared easily and to ensure that the ongoing evolution of the framework is relevant and responsive to real-life developments in the classroom and elsewhere.

If you have any comments or suggestions about the ideas contained in this article, or if you would like to join our research team, please do get in touch – we would be delighted to hear from you.

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