

The importance of music in supporting the development of children with learning disabilities

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Music can be used both to foster musical development in children and young people with learning difficulties whilst, at the same time, promoting their emotional, social, cognitive and physical wellbeing.

The most important issue in music education today is the lack of understanding shown by policy makers, school leaders, local politicians, and governments of the value of systematic and successful music learning across the lifespan, especially for our children and young people. Engaging in active music learning over a sustained period generates measurable physical, psychological and social benefits (as well as cultural benefit) that are long-term for the individuals and groups involved. The scientific evidence of music's value (from clinical science, neuroscience, and social science) is increasing every day. Although we do not yet understand clearly all the mechanisms of how music learning can promote long-term benefit, there can be no doubt that music can make a powerful and positive difference to health, whilst supporting different aspects of intellectual functioning (such as literacy) and fostering social inclusion and cohesion amongst and across diverse groups. Investing in high quality music education should be a priority for all, not just the lucky few, because music can transform lives for the better, across the lifespan.

MUSIC AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

According to the latest UK Government statistics (DFE, 2014), approximately 18% of the pupils in schools in England have special educational needs (SEN) (1.5m children), of whom 3% (232,000) have a formal 'statement' of the kinds of educational provision that they should receive. Within this latter group, 130,000 have moderate learning difficulties and 42,000 have severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties. The SEN ratio of boys to girls is approximately 2:1

without statements and 3:1 with statements. Within the youngest age group, 2.7% of children aged two and under are recognised as having learning difficulties of some kind, with 0.5% of these having a formal 'statement'.

For children with a disability, engaging in appropriate musical activity demonstrates that the benefits of education in music are interwoven with an education through music, and available to all, not just some. For example, one current research project is investigating the use of singing to improve hearing-impaired children's hearing abilities and voice use in the first years of schooling. An initial twenty-week hourly music programme in a London Primary school across two school terms from January to July led to improvements in children's singing accuracy, vocal range and, significantly, general pitch perception (Welch et al, 2014).

In terms of the use of music with SEN children, the PROMISE (Provision of Music in Special Education) research investigated the provision of music in special schools in England undertaken at the turn of the century (Welch et al, 2001). The findings of two national surveys of 52 schools, supplemented by case study visits, demonstrated that many of those working with children with learning difficulties and autism regarded music as an essential ingredient in the children's lives, both as a worthy focus of attention and source of pleasure in its own right, as well as a means of promoting wider learning and development. Teachers and parents reported significant non-musical benefits as one of the outcomes of their children's participation in musical activity, including heightened interpersonal communication skills, more focused, attentive behaviour, sensory and cognitive development, physical development

and intensified social participation (Ockelford et al., 2002; Welch et al, 2001). However, at that time, despite the positive attitudes towards music in special schools, there was very little research-based evidence available for teachers and parents as to what might count as an appropriate music education for children with learning difficulties.

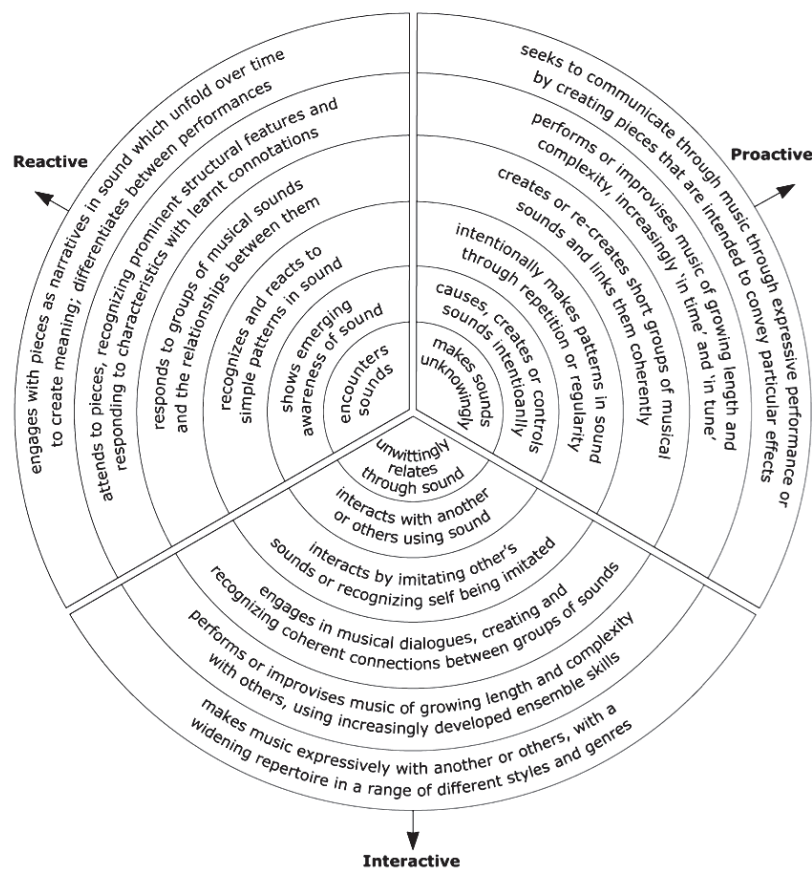
SOUNDS OF INTENT

This absence of evidence led to the development of the Sounds of Intent (SoI) research project (<http://soundsofintent.org>) which provides an extensive and powerful example of how music can be used both to foster musical development in children and young people with learning difficulties whilst, at the same time, promoting other aspects of development and wellbeing (Ockelford & Welch, 2012; Ockelford et al, 2011; Welch & Ockelford, 2010; Cheng et al, 2009; Welch et al, 2009). Based on an initial set of systematic observational data collected over the past decade of over 250 children with severe and profound learning difficulties (including over 2000 case study observations in different settings), the project has resulted in a specially designed website for teachers, parents, carers and—by implication, should they need evidence of the power of music—policy makers. Since its launch in 2012, the SoI website has had over 4,000,000 visitors, with over 400,000 resources

opened, streamed or downloaded. Currently, there are 400+ registered users and over 200 practitioners who are actively employing the SoI package to improve the quality of education in music and through music for disabled children. In addition to the hundreds of video clips on the main SoI website that demonstrate examples of impactful musical activities, a group of young people with special needs have made a longer video of how the project supports both musical and wider development—see Sounds of Intent Young Champions (<http://vimeo.com/54212707>). Furthermore, it was noted that the SoI framework had an application for children in mainstream settings, and this has led to the development of a version to support education in and through music for young children in mainstream settings, including those with moderate or specific learning difficulties. The Sounds of Intent in the Early Years project is about to be launched and resource materials are being made available online for schools and parents across England.

MUSICAL BEHAVIOURS

In order to understand which kinds of musical activities are likely to be most impactful, the research data suggest that children’s musical behaviours fall into three broad categories: reactive (children react to an increasing variety of sounds), proactive (children explore and make sounds



for themselves), and interactive (children enjoy interacting with others through sound). Children can be encouraged to respond to and create patterns in sound, to enjoy hearing their sounds being copied, and to imitate the sounds of others, thus creating simple musical conversations. In so doing, children learn that ‘music’ has shape and pattern, and that it is made up of distinctive groups of notes and tone colours that can be explored and combined in different ways.

Considering the broad evidence base about the wider benefits of music and applying such findings to children with Down’s Syndrome (Lynn, 2014; Bennett, 2009), for example, it is likely that they will enjoy making and exploring patterns in sound—a feature that can be exploited by teachers and carers through an emphasis on repetition and rhythm in musical play. Singing simple sequences from existing or made up songs can also support hearing acuity and language learning; combining music with movement can help with motor coordination and promote more active physical behaviour (see soundsofintent.org).

The online SoI framework is designed to enable users to map observed musical behaviours, but also to extend these in various ways by drawing on the provided audio-visual examples. The three broad categories of musical behaviour (reactive, proactive, interactive) each extend across six levels that have been designed to capture musical behaviour from its simplest manifestation (neurotypically in the first months of life) through to complex and relatively sophisticated aspects of musical performance.

Music is increasingly being recognised by enlightened policy-makers and educators as a core component of provision for children with learning disabilities, not least because making music is therapeutic, especially when this engagement is fostered by a sensitive adult (teacher/parent/carer) who is able to use music’s inherent features to promote a child’s awareness, attention, engagement, emotional expression, language skills, fine and gross motor coordination, social interaction and social development. Making music with others provides a sense of community, of belonging and of sharing.

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