



**YOUTH
MUSIC**



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Music Club – Springwell

Context

Considering the complex needs of the children participating in these sessions, it was necessary to rethink the music group as a more open activity planned entirely around the individual needs and preferences of the students (whereas in other music groups individual preferences interacted and nuanced an existing delivery framework based on a classical music theme). Following the initial sessions, it became apparent to us that a key outcome of this project would be to enable the students to find their comfort zone within the sessions. That involved not just the recurrence of specific activities, instruments and ways of playing, but also a consistent positioning and layout within the room. We completed a series of recording sessions within school facilities. We used a room mic linked to a laptop recording suite, operated from outside the workshop area (so it did not distract the students), in combination with a field recorder that we could move to pick up individual as well as group performance. The result was a collage that combined room/panoramic with more focused recordings.

The workshops were based on a flexible format that adapted to the needs of the students, as they engaged with music in different ways and had quite different preferences. Whereas some were happy to participate as a steady group, others could engage more fluidly when given the option to move around the room, work in a separated area next to the main group, or work in rotating sub-groups in specific parts of the room consistently associated with specific activities. As the sessions progressed, we naturally adopted a format that featured a few warm-up activities aimed at welcoming all individuals to the session while reinforcing group awareness. A set of more open activities were used to transition smoothly from the more prescriptive initial warm-ups, to the substantially student/group-led activities in the second half of the session. In this part of the session, we created a flexible circuit of instruments in different part of the room, so students could contribute in different ways. Our own playing was mainly supportive and interactive, but we also aimed to familiarise students with different rhythms and textures. Towards the end, the students were familiar with the structure of the session and work very well as a group. Not only did they actively engaged during warm up activities, they also used the second half of the session to explore their musical ideas, discover new preferences, and express themselves. To achieve this aim, it was vital that Iggy was supported by a skilful and experienced practitioner, Louis Duarte, rather than musicians that had little or no experience in workshop facilitation in SEN-D settings (as was the case in other music groups).

Participant Notes

J

J could remain curious and motivated during if we worked successfully around his preferences. He found it much easier to remain engaged in structured or spontaneous play when it was interactive. It was harder for him to remain engaged as a group member, alternating self-occupying with more interactive ways of playing. Eventually we found that J would keep his focus and interest for much longer (which, in turn, dramatically reduced some disruptive behaviours) when simple songs or counting games were associated with his instrumental playing. Towards the end, J was very familiar with warm-ups, and used the free-play part of the session to play interactively and to explore his play-sing activity, using a set of temple blocks, desk-bells or drums.

M

M presented more complex engagement needs, as his participation, at first, relied on 1:1 support or encouragement. He could easily become distracted by repetitive sensory habits when our facilitation was projected to the group as a whole. While he managed to remain in the main group for 15 or 20 minutes, at times he needed to move around the room, or find a different place to play. However, once he was familiar with the warm-up activities, he could play with the rest of the group, at times without adult support. He was also eager to explore different instruments and he made his preferences clear to us. Once we knew his preferences, we designed simple interactive games with each instrument based on his way of playing them, but we also gave him a lot of space to explore instruments and be part of the group in his own terms. At times, he expressed curiosity at what other children were doing, and played together with them, particularly L.

F

F loves music and can be very creative when he is motivated and has enough space to play freely. The session format worked for him, as the warm-up activities helped to get his attention and remain focused, and he could experiment with different instruments and ways of playing in the second half of the session. Unlike previous sessions in which I worked with him, he was always happy to be part of the main group. Towards the end of the project, when the sessions were more settled, he had more opportunities to try his musical ideas. We were very impressed to notice that Felix could intuitively formulate interlocking counter-rhythms. That is, he assimilated the basic structure of a rhythmic pattern and played a complimentary rhythm that 'filled the gaps' created by main rhythm – while maintaining consistency with the core rhythmic structure. Once he found an interlocking pattern that he liked, he played it consistently in different pitched and unpitched percussion instruments.

R

R was always motivated and curious in our music sessions and enjoyed being a part of a group. He regularly sought interactions and was particularly active during warm-up activities, as these often created the opening for spontaneous jokes or fast-paced cause and effect games that he found very funny. These could at times dominate R's attention, even after the activities were finished. For this reason, it was necessary to have number of consistent activities that guided him during the second half of the session, which was deliberately less structured, and more child/group-led. During these moments he could at

times become distracted or engage in repetitive play, especially when he was not interacting with an adult. As the sessions progressed, R was more independent and found ways to interact that did not rely on 1:1 support. In particular, he consistently played an overtone flute, which distinguished his input from the membranophone/metallophone-based sounds created by other students. Not least, as a wind instrument that sounds louder and higher the harder it is blown, it created plenty of opportunities to create theatrical or comedy effects, a consistent aspect of R's music-making.

L

L's musical engagement was similar F's in that he could develop and explore a wide range of musical ideas if there was a flexible frame that provided basic guidance but allowed plenty of space for him to experiment. It took us a few weeks to find this balance, as L's creativity flourished when he had the possibility to freely move between different playing areas. At times he was quite hyperactive, so we looked for group settings that gave him space to move (or run) while keeping him engaged in the music session. In fact, the final set up of the second half of the session was designed mostly with his (and M's) needs and preferences in mind. Having said this, L's hyperactive behaviours dramatically reduced once he found a consistent type of musical activity that were led by him while at the same time remaining part of the group.

As the sessions progressed, he knew the format of the warm-up games, and had a clearer idea of what could happen in the second half of the session (which eventually became his favourite). Even though L can be a very energetic and creative drummer, in the exploratory parts of the session he started to align desk bells and chime bars in different ways and playing them using speech-based rhythms. Eventually, he figured out a way of aligning bells to produce melodic types and played tunes and sung in rhythmic and pitch unison. It was unclear to me, by our last session, whether he was retrieving tunes and texts from memory, but it was clear that he was recreating them and re-arranging them (as he usually played a fairly consistent set of rhythmic patterns in different ways). Not only did this activity keep L actively engaged and focused for long periods of time, it also enabled him to share his playing with other children – especially M, who was curious about his playing and joined him in the 'bell section' of the group a few times. After a rocky start, I was very pleased to see how calm and engaged he was when he was given the right frame to explore his creativity.

N

N could only attend two sessions. This was partly because of behaviour episodes that occurred before the sessions, or, as in the last session, tension with the other participants. However, in the sessions that N attended he was very participatory and quick to understand and follow through warm-up activities. He was also particularly good at leading games, where specific actions determined or influenced what the rest of the group did. This opens several possibilities to work with Martin in the future, particularly if his behavioural challenges are related to control needs. Initially N would take part in a specific part of the session based on clear, fast-paced activities designed around his needs, rather than the full session. His introduction to less structured, exploratory playing (if appropriate) could be gradual, and supported by some 1:1 work. Another option could be for N to take part in parts of sessions for very settled students who can tolerate some disruptive behaviour without becoming anxious or disengaged.

Final Comments

The music group provided an opportunity for students to explore their creativity and express themselves, while supporting them to work as a group. They also created a flexible learning space where students can elaborate some of contents that they learn at school in tandem with the exploration of their creative ideas. While great results can be achieved with densely planned, themed projects with specific outcomes in mind, sometimes a more experiential and child-led approach is needed. While the former type of project can involve a wide range of musicians collaborating with the students, the latter requires that all visiting facilitators have workshop-leading experience in SEN-D settings – particularly if our participants have more complex engagement needs.